

“Dulce et Decorum”
Edith Wharton’s Great War

Edith Wharton, best known to most readers as the author of novels exploring the world of upper-class New York City in works such as *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence*, experienced the First World War both intensively and extensively. Wharton did not have a casual interest in the war as an event, nor did she take the attitude of an onlooker at a massive catastrophe; rather, she was engaged by and in the war as a partisan in what she saw as a conflict between the bastion of civilization, France, and a nation inimical to that civilization, Germany. “France and civilization,” Hazel Hutchison writes, “seemed indivisible, and Wharton was ready to defend both” (36). This partisanship in the cause of France characterizes Wharton’s writing during these years, writing that covers a variety of literary forms, and this variety of forms indicates the extensive nature of Wharton’s experience of the war as a writer: Wharton produced poetry, fiction, and journalism, and edited an anthology centered on the war.¹ The fictional narratives spring in part from Wharton’s attempt to explore and depict the emotional, experiential aspects of the war, which in turn are based on her direct experience of living in France during wartime. Wharton’s journalism is based on her familiarity with France, and especially with France during wartime. The anthology Wharton edited, *The Book of the Homeless*, emerged out of Wharton’s efforts to assist Belgian refugees that found their way to Paris following the German invasion of 1914. While Wharton was not a combatant, the war engaged her attention at least as fully as it did that of other American writers, including those who served in the military or the volunteer ambulance units.

But if Wharton’s war writing is less familiar than is *The House of Mirth*, it is not altogether different. As Wai-Chee Dimock notes about that novel,

¹ Julie Olin-Ammentorp’s, *Edith Wharton’s Writings from the Great War* documents Wharton’s efforts as a writer, while Alan Price’s *The End of the Age of Innocence: Edith Wharton and the First World War* documents Wharton’s efforts more generally, particularly her work providing relief for refugees.

“Wharton’s critique of the marketplace is essentially an aristocratic critique” (388). This “aristocratic critique” is rooted in “early pieties,” “grave enduring traditions,” and “inherited passions and loyalties,” phrases Dimock pulls from the novel, and that share with Wharton’s writing on the First World War an emphasis on continuity with a temporally distant but culturally proximate past. And yet, Dimock argues, in *The House of Mirth*, Wharton can never quite believe her own critique, or at least she cannot believe in its social basis: “even as she articulates her ideal,” Dimock writes, “she sees that it does not exist” (390). While Dimock does not comment on this, Wharton is right not to believe in the social basis of her ideal: the United States never had a real aristocracy, since it has no real pre-capitalist past apart from that of the Native Americans and perhaps the independent household producers of the pre-industrial era. It is as if Wharton realizes that her “old New York” of great families sometimes displaced by offensively *nouveau riche* plutocrats of the post-Civil War era was a product of mercantilist capitalism and to be differentiated only from industrial capitalism, not from capitalism as such. Any American aristocracy thus could be only an imitation of the European aristocracy, and not a real one, which would require a social basis different from that of the bourgeoisie.

Dimock argues that *The House of Mirth* “is fueled . . . by an almost exclusively critical energy directed at the marketplace Wharton disdains. She can only confusedly gesture at a redeeming alternative; for her, the house of mirth has no exit” (390). While this is true of *The House of Mirth*, Wharton’s First World War writing is somewhat different. As Dimock notes, Wharton casts around – even in *The House of Mirth* – for an alternative repository of value, an alternative to the world of generalized market exchange and reification. In her First World War writing Wharton feels she has found it in France. Thus, her writing in this period, while not utterly devoid of the ironist’s sensibility that we find elsewhere, is far more univocal and positive than her work that critics regard as her best, especially *The House of Mirth* and *The Custom of the Country*. And this largely explains the prevailing critical attitude with regard to her major work of war fiction, *A Son at the Front*. In 1966 Peter Buitenhuis noted that this novel appeared alongside a spate of books that viewed the war skeptically, including John Dos Passos’s *Three Soldiers*, E. E. Cummings’s *The Enormous Room*, and Ernest Hemingway’s *Three Stories and Ten Poems*; as a result, “*A Son at the Front* seemed irrelevant, as it has to critics ever since” (498). While several critics have attempted revisionary evaluations in the intervening years, *A Son at the Front* continues to be seen as a minor, if not

a failed, work because it lacks the ironic sensibility of Wharton's major works. And it lacks this precisely because Wharton has convinced herself that she has found the alternative she elsewhere seeks, an alternative largely spared her ironic, critical gaze.

Committed as she was to the defense of France from Germany, Wharton overlooks the major irony of the situation she confronts in her war fiction, the irony – or rather the dialectical nature – of history. Rejecting central elements of American, and more generally of industrialized, democratized modernity, Wharton endorses the Allied – especially the French – cause, and advocates American involvement in the war. Wharton sees in the war a defense of Old World culture embodied most fully in France, a culture in many ways opposed to – or at least an obstacle to – not only German military power, but also American economic, political, and cultural hegemony. David Clough notes that Wharton's conception of France as the guardian of civilization is "in many ways the old romantic myth of Europe" and that *A Son at the Front* can be read as "a kind of last desperate attempt to reverse the process" of the destruction of whatever truth that romantic myth contained. Correct to a point, Clough's assessment does not consider what was occurring around Wharton, or that she interpreted the war as a conflict between inimical civilizations. American intervention in the First World War was part of the project to establish the United States as the hegemonic global power, and the principles on which the United States set about the construction of this hegemony departed significantly from those of the conservative Old World that Wharton so vigorously embraced. The United States presented a progressive version of capitalism that endorsed national self-determination, made possible because "American capitalism expanded abroad by establishing an informal empire cutting across the existing division of the world into formal colonial empires" (van der Pijl 52; cf. Tooze 40–58). Wilson rejected the traditional great power politics of Theodore Roosevelt in favor of a universalist policy that provided a more positive reply to the political Left's alternatives to a capitalist world order.

But, as van der Pijl points out, this more positive reply was based in part on "a perceptive anticipation of the underlying social capacities of capitalism which would take the New Deal and World War Two to fully materialize" (56). In other words, American intervention into the First World War, probably decisive in determining its outcome – if only because the prospect of having to defeat a fresh, massive American army as well as the rest of the Allies proved daunting to the exhausted Central powers – was conducted as part of remaking the world, including its

developed capitalist core, along the lines of what has come to be called Fordism. While the construction of Fordism was far from complete in the United States at the time of the First World War, the basic terms on which the United States became directly involved in the war are clear. While Wharton’s France needed American intervention to resist the Central powers successfully, the cost of such intervention would be, in the long run, the ascendancy of American power and American culture over that of the Old World powers of Europe, Allied and Central alike. Wharton’s conservative critique of the emergent Fordist model of industrial capitalism – “a new kind of rationalized, modernist, and populist democratic society” (Harvey 125–26) – finds embodiment in a vision of the First World War as the result not of a contest for hegemony within the capitalist world order, but rather as a recurrence of a perennial conflict between Teutonic and Latin civilizations, with culture the driving force of history. Thus, a culturally determinist vision simultaneously explains, justifies, and glorifies the war to the public.

Wharton’s journalism and fiction demonstrate that ideological mechanisms similar to those I have examined in poetry in previous chapters also operate in prose. However, in the exact nature of her advocacy of American intervention in the war, Wharton was part of a larger bloc – part of its literary wing – composed of those who did not share Wilson’s vision of the war as intensifying domestically and extending internationally American liberal, democratic, proto-Fordist society. Her friendships with Theodore Roosevelt and Henry Cabot Lodge, Wilson’s nemesis in the struggle to get the Versailles peace treaty passed by the US Senate, indicate the position Wharton occupied in the political world of 1914–1920. Like Lodge, and more complexly, Roosevelt, Wharton adhered to a social and political vision in some ways less sophisticated than that of Wilson, unable or unwilling to grasp the adjustments rendered possible, perhaps necessary, by the “underlying social capacities of capitalism.”

Journalism: *Fighting France and French Ways and Their Meanings*

Wharton’s first book of war journalism was *Fighting France: From Dunkerque to Belpport*. In one characteristic passage written from the Lorraine, Wharton first describes the general atmosphere of the front in May 1915, then describes a routine episode of the war:

Wherever I go among these men of the front I have the same impression: the impression that the absorbing undivided thought of the Defence of

France lives in the heart and brain of each soldier as intensely as in the heart and brain of their chief.

We walked a dozen yards down the road and came to the edge of the forest . . . Suddenly, as we stood there, they woke, and at the same moment we heard the unmistakable Gr-r-r of an aeroplane and saw a Bird of Evil high up against the blue. Snap, snap, snap barked the mitrailleuse on the hill, the soldiers jumped from their wine and strained their eyes through the trees, and the Taube, finding itself the centre of so much attention, turned grey tail and swished away to the concealing clouds. (120–21)

In Wharton's account, the war, a modern event, reliant upon industrial methods of production and distribution of the various goods needed to conduct war on such a massive scale, and its application of recent scientific and technological advances to warfare, transforms this group of Frenchmen into an organic society – they have a “chief” – bound by the single-mindedness of their devotion to defending France. For Wharton, this unified France contrasts with prewar France, divided by the antagonisms, especially class antagonisms, of industrial capitalist society. Seeing the war as a healing or cleansing experience precludes seeing it as a point of historical rupture, since its effect is ultimately to make France even more French, as it concentrates on the fundamental characteristics it defends.

Consequently, there is no sense that the ordinary events of this war differ significantly from those of any other war at any other time: Wharton sees the Great War as fundamentally continuous with previous human experience. The airplane in her story could just as easily be a cavalry officer in the distance, and is in fact converted into an animal, one charged with a moral quality: “Bird of Evil.” Nowhere does one find the radical disorientation and estrangement displayed not only in the familiar American war writing of Hemingway or Dos Passos, but also in poems and personal narratives by far less well-known writers.

For example, Byron H. Comstock's “The Skyman” presents, in a series of internally and end-rhymed iambic hexameter lines, military aviation as a radically de-personalized and mechanized form of killing. One may conclude from the poem that aerial warfare may be “Evil,” but this is no mythicized “Bird,” and it knows no nationality:

I hover there in the sunlit air, and I watch the bursting shell.
I see men fall and that is all, I cannot hear them yell,
As I watch from the sky, like a god on high, our travesty on
Hell.

...

Supreme I soar, and the motor's roar sings the old blood lust.
I would not do the things I do, I swear not, but I must.

What is to me the earth's red sea and those specks in the
lowly dust?

(24–25)

While the "blood lust" of the speaker may be "old," the poem emphasizes the mechanized and distanced nature of this form of warfare, an emphasis heightened by the alienated form taken by the speaker's death:

A sickening crash, an oily splash, my God the tank is hit.
A crackling sound, I dare not look round, why does the plane
shake so?

In a burst of flame no hand can tame, the plane drops hard
and low.

A skyman lost, I pay the cost, from Heaven to Hell I go.

(25)

While his poems may lack sophistication, Comstock often manages to avoid the exalted diction and rhetoric of much wartime poetry, which allows him to register the war in terms of something other than the standard and anachronistic tropes through which aerial combat, in particular, was typically understood.²

Like Comstock, John Dos Passos recorded the conjunction of human flight and the industrialization of war, although in Dos Passos this conjunction takes on ironic resonance. Dos Passos records the birth of human flight in his biography of the Wright Brothers, "The Campers at Kitty Hawk," in *The Big Money*, the final volume of the *USA* trilogy. Dos Passos presents the fulfillment of the ages-old human desire to fly through the efforts of the Wright brothers as both testimony to the capacities of ordinary people – "practical mechanics" (295) – and as a wonder of human ingenuity and persistence. But the Wright brothers and the beauty of flight are soon overtaken by the realities of the military-industrial complex and the war it supplies:

In the rush of new names: Farman, Blériot, Curtiss, Ferber,
Esnault-Peltrié, Delagrangé;
in the snorting impact of bombs and the whine and rattle of shrapnel
and the sudden stutter of machineguns after the motor's been
shut off overhead,
and we flatten into the mud
and make ourselves small cowering in the corners of ruined walls,
the Wright brothers passed out of the headlines.

(297)

² A twice-wounded veteran of the war, Comstock wrote most of the poems collected in his 1920 volume *Log of the Devil-Dog* while recovering in France (Wisconsin Veteran's Museum).

In *USA*, the war concentrates the essence of industrial capitalism and the version of modernity it produces. Accordingly, it arrives in the text as an interruption of the story of Orville and Wilbur Wright, outstripping them and threatening to overshadow their human proportions. The wonder of flight transforms into the mechanized horror of being strafed.

To examine the difference between Wharton's depiction of an airplane and that of Comstock and Dos Passos is to emphasize that Wharton saw the war in terms of continuity – despite her statement that after completing *A Son at the Front*, she had “intended to take a long holiday – perhaps to cease from writing altogether. It was growing more and more evident that the world I had grown up in and been formed by had been destroyed in 1914” (*Backward Glance* 369–70). Whatever her thoughts on the matter when she wrote her memoir, published in 1934, from 1914 to 1923, when she published *A Son at the Front*, Wharton presented the war to readers as though the familiar world had *not* been destroyed in 1914, and her conviction that the war could be adequately understood in traditional and conventional terms underpins the political character of her depiction of it.

In *Fighting France*, the nature of the conflict in the First World War is unambiguous. Wharton alludes to the atrocity stories that circulated in the early days of the war: “burning homes and massacred children and young men dragged to slavery . . . infants torn from their mothers, old men trampled by drunken heels and priests slain while they prayed beside the dying” (34). These atrocities, shocking though they may be to the sensibility of the presumed reader, are unsurprising in that they spring from the deeper nature of Germany and the Germans as Wharton depicts them. The Germans are, among other things, enemies of Beauty. Wharton describes a destroyed town:

below and beyond us lay a long stretch of ruins: the calcined remains of Clermont-en-Argonne, destroyed by the Germans on the 4th of September. The free and lofty situation of the little town . . . makes its present state the more lamentable. One can see it from so far off, and through the torn traceries of its ruined church the eye travels over so lovely a stretch of country! No doubt its beauty enriched the joy of wrecking it. (61)

The last sentence is telling for Wharton's characterization of the Germans, and hence of the nature of the war throughout *Fighting France*.

Consistent with their status as enemies of Beauty, the Germans represent barbarism to France's civilization, and hate as opposed to the essentially life-affirming character of the French. The characterization of

Germany as barbaric is perhaps nowhere clearer than when she notes, while traveling through the Argonne that

On the way to Mousson the road is overhung by an Italian-looking village clustered about a hill-top. It marks the exact spot at which, last August, the German invasion was finally checked and flung back; and the Muse of History points out that on this very hill has long stood a memorial shaft inscribed: “*Here, in the year 362, Jovinus defeated the Teutonic hordes*” (108).

The present conflict between France and Germany folds into a perennial conflict between Latin civilization and Teutonic barbarism.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Great War becomes ultimately for Wharton a conflict between the principles of life and death. In *Fighting France*, Wharton walks past a school in which lace was being made before the approach of the German army. All the work had been neatly put down and covered with a handkerchief. Wharton takes this scene of arrested activity as a symbol of how,

in hundreds of such houses, in hundreds of open towns, 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. (157)

Germany is unceasingly *ugly*, and Wharton renders mythical the secular conflict of the war so that it becomes simultaneously this-worldly – a contemporary event, after all, for her readers in 1915 – and fantastic, resembling something out of J. R. R. Tolkien.³

In seeing and presenting the war in terms of a conflict between Latin and Teutonic, Roman and Germanic, Wharton is not unique, even within the limits of American literature. John Armstrong Chaloner – one of the odder figures of twentieth-century American poetry – also presents the war in terms derived from the Roman past, with the United States

³ In *Tolkien and the Great War: The Threshold of Middle-earth*, John Garth argues that much of the force behind the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy derives from Tolkien’s reaction to the war, whereby he renders the brutality of the war – the fascination with mechanized ways of killing characteristic of both sides – a property of the forces of darkness. Thus, he concentrates the nature of the war into a single principle and projects this onto a fantasized enemy; Wharton, as was common among supporters of the Allies, concentrates the nature of the war into a single principle and projects it onto Germany.

and the Allies presented as the successor to the Roman Empire.⁴ In the first quatrain of his Shakespearean sonnet, “Pax Romana I: The Allies,” Chaloner presents the empire as the guarantor of peace:

We are for peace – the deepest ever seen –
 The peace that shone in Gibbon’s “Golden Age”
 The age o’ th’ mighty Antonines I ween
 The grandest peace e’er seen upon world’s stage!
 (20)

But such a peace is not without its violence, as Chaloner freely admits in his gleefully archaic diction:

But how, fair reader, was said peace attained?
 By “Peace-Societies”? *I wot not well.*
 For the skilled Roman short sword swiftly stained
 In rebel’s blood did *Pax Romana spell!*
 (20)

In the third quatrain and the couplet, the United States, formally neutral when the poem was written early in the war (it is dated September 27, 1914), and the Allies are presented as successors to Rome, while Germany and Austria-Hungary are left to take the role of rebel:

Thus only may the world have peace to-day
 Thus surely History repeats herself
 The Heirs o’ th’ Roman Power must hold sway
O’er wicked nations whose pursuit is self
 By th’ Allies with Columbia combined
 The Pax Romana amply is defined.
 (20)

By framing the “wicked nations,” the rebels whose blood “the skilled Roman short sword swiftly stained,” as driven by “self,” Chaloner’s presentation resonates with that of Wharton and a number of other writers of the period. First, the Allies – unlike Wharton, Chaloner does not

⁴ Chaloner, who had changed the spelling of his last name from Chanler, was born into a family related to the Astors, Schylers, and other prominent families of New York, part of the social circle that included the Jones family into which Edith Wharton was born. Convinced he could communicate with the spirit world, Chaloner provided a striking description of Hell delivered to him by a deceased Confederate veteran. Chaloner was obsessed with his resemblance to Napoleon Bonaparte, particularly striking given that Satan also resembled Napoleon, according to his informant on Hell. When Chaloner divorced Amélie Rives, the settlement was deemed by his family to be wildly indulgent to her. They had him institutionalized in New York, but Chaloner escaped and fled to Virginia, where he was declared sane, although the ruling was binding in that state only (J. Bryan III; Lucy 246–49).

emphasize France – continue and revive Rome. Second, the First World War, from this perspective, emerges from untempered assertion of self-interest on the part of Germany and Austria-Hungary. The Allies and, if Chaloner had his way, the United States provide a normative check on this typically modern vice.

Wharton and Chaloner are not the only American writers of the era to draw on the Roman Empire as a precedent. Courtney Langdon in “Fuori I Barbari” presents Italy’s intervention into the war as a twentieth-century reprise of the ancient Roman role of guardian of civilization.

To thee was given the hardest task of all,
 Brave Italy, when Europe to her aid
 Summoned the nations centuries had made
 Prime guardians of the light which Rome to Gaul,
 And Gaul to Britain, passed, till o’er the wall
 Of western seas it shone, too bright to fade.
 For thine it was to challenge, undismayed,
 The eastern Huns who, with thy gates in thrall,
 Threatened thy garden; then, through gun-swept snows,
 Master each Alpine peak and torrent-bed,
 And fight, – by faint praise cheered, – till each redout
 Held as a threat by Rome’s transalpine foes
 Was Rome’s again, and Hadria’s watershed⁵
 Joined in the Latin cry: “Barbarians out!”

(17)

Langdon uses a slight variant on the Petrarchan or Italian sonnet – appropriately enough in the circumstances – in which the octave describes the task facing Italy, while the sestet, beginning halfway through line 9, commands the nation to reconquer “each redout/Held as a threat by Rome’s transalpine foes.” Italy’s intervention on the side of the Allies completes a somewhat faulty circle: the light of civilization passes from “Rome to Gaul/And Gaul to Britain,” and eventually to the new world, although the chief country of the new world, the United States, was not involved directly in the war when the poem was written. The date appended to the poem, August 18, 1916, makes it appear to have been written in the wake of the Italian victory in the Sixth Battle of the Isonzo, which ended on August 16.⁶ Langdon specifies that the Italians face

⁵ “Hadria’s watershed” appears to refer to the watershed of the Adriatic Sea, which takes its name from the commune of Adria, alternatively spelled Hatria.

⁶ While the Italians regarded the Sixth Battle of the Isonzo as their first major victory of the war, it cost them the lives of approximately 30,000 soldiers and 100,000 total casualties. Their

“the eastern Huns,” Austria-Hungary, because Italy had not yet declared war on Germany; however, buoyed by the perceived victory in the Sixth Battle of the Isonzo, they were to do so within weeks of the poem’s writing.

Langdon continues his Roman revival with “Alma Roma,” in which the lands of the former empire reunite to defend both its territory and its ostensible ideals:

Spirit of Rome, eternal Latin Soul,
 Remembered Mother of the South and West,
 Thine heirs are met again, to stand the test
 Set by Barbarians who would fain control
 By ruthless Might a world, whose ancient goal
 Was Peace through Justice! What the gods deemed best
 They gave through thee; hence, at their new behest
 Thy provinces reform their whilom whole.
 Caesar’s three parts of Gaul, Brittain’s strands
 And Lusitania join with Italy
 And Africa, to win the Alps and Rhine;
 While on the Danube, Trajan’s Dacia stands,
 And calls on Greece to set the Orient free;
 And only Spain forgets that she was thine.

(19)

While “Alma Roma” is another Petrarchan sonnet, Langdon does not make conventional use of the organizational capacity of the form, which hinges on the division between the octave and the sestet. The organizational scheme of the poem’s contents is rather 13/1, with the final line a rebuke to Spain as the only portion of the former empire not rallying to the ancient cause. This is not literally true, since reasonably large portions lay in areas that eventually became the Central powers. Such facts, however, are beside the point of the poem⁷: to conjure up a sense of the grandeur of the Roman Empire. Caroline Winterer notes that “[i]nvocations of imperial Rome increased as America itself became a world empire

Austro-Hungarian opponents, who ceded ground but preserved their troops, lost around half that number (Schindler 151–71).

⁷ Similarly, Langdon praises Belgium by alluding to Julius Caesar’s comment from *The Gallic Wars*, “Horum omnium fortissimi sunt Belgae” – translated as, “Of all these [Gauls] the Belgae are the bravest” – in his poem “Liège”: “Ah, little Belgium, that in Caesar’s age/Wast of Gauls the bravest” (7). Notwithstanding the appropriateness of applying a comment about a people of the 1st century BCE to a modern nation-state, Langdon disregards the fact that the Belgae were resisting the Romans when Caesar encountered them, and hence not a willing participant in the world of “Alma Roma.”

by the 1890s, evoking military and cultural might rather than arcadian republican simplicity” (143), which had been the point of emphasis earlier in US history. In “Alma Roma” Langdon bestows grandeur, not simplicity, upon the heirs of Rome.

Alan Seeger, also, saw the war as a conflict between Latin and Teutonic cultures. In a letter to his sister Elsie, he writes, “Latin and Teuton are again at grips, as it is quite in the course of Nature that they should be” (December 29, 1914). Similarly, he writes in the journal he sent to Harrison Reeves of “this old conflict between Latin and Teuton” (18). Seeger, however, refuses to make this a moral conflict between civilization and barbarism: the conflict “is not, as it is almost universally regarded, a conflict between right and wrong, but a conflict between two rights” (18). In the letter to his sister, he notes, “my temperament inclines me more to the Latin than to the Teutonic culture.” Because he saw Strife as elemental in human existence, Seeger viewed the war as inevitable and not as the product of an aberrant Teutonic barbarism. His preference for France was simply that, *his* preference. Significantly, these statements were edited out of the *Letters and Diary*, published by Scribner’s after his death.

Seeger, Langdon, and Chaloner, like Wharton, see the Great War in terms of continuity with the Roman past. Chaloner, furthermore, sees the war as originating in the assertion of self on the part of Germany and Austria-Hungary, which resonates with Wharton’s vision of the war as a rebuke to modern individualism. Thus, and in a way that one finds elsewhere in civic and political discourse of the day, for Wharton the war is good for France, awakening it to the essential in life. Alan Price accurately describes the “ambivalence between the horrors of war and the purifying crucible of war on human character” (41) in Wharton’s wartime writing. Despite the terrors and suffering – or because of them – the war cleanses, stripping the excess and individualism that flourished in peacetime. Wharton describes the effect that the presence of the war-wounded has and will have on Paris:

Day by day the limping figures grow more numerous on the pavement, the pale bandaged heads more frequent in passing carriages. In the stalls at the theatres and concerts there are many uniforms; and their wearers usually have to wait till the hall is emptied before they hobble out on a supporting arm. Most of them are very young, and it is the expression of their faces which I should like to picture and interpret as being the very essence of what I have called the look of Paris. 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 mature. 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. (40–41)

Wharton sees the war as morally cleansing, freeing modern society from the vices of modernity. While Wharton never renounces this view of the war, she will come later to see its cleansing effects as weaker than they are here, as wartime Paris reverts to some degree to its old ways in *A Son at the Front*.

As we have already seen, Wharton was hardly alone in viewing the war as a cleansing experience. Her friend and fellow old New Yorker, Theodore Roosevelt, displaying more positive enthusiasm for warfare than did Wharton, shared her sense of the good done by the experience of military service and warfare. Roosevelt's *The Great Adventure* begins:

Only those are fit to live who do not fear to die; and none are fit to die who have shrunk from the joy of life and the duty of life. Both life and death are parts of the same Great Adventure. Never yet was worthy adventure worthily carried through by the man who put his personal safety first. Never yet was a country worth living in unless its sons and daughters were of that stern stuff which bade them die for it at need; and never yet was a country worth dying for unless its sons and daughters thought of life not as something concerned only with the selfish evanescence of the individual, but as a link in the great chain of creation and causation so that each person is seen in his true relations as an essential part of the whole, whose life must be made to serve the larger and continuing life of the whole.

Therefore it is that the man who is not willing to die, and the woman who is not willing to send her man to die, in a war for a great cause, are not worthy to live. (1–2)

As a way of testing the resolution of men and women, war serves a socially hygienic purpose. Wharton, along with Seeger and other writers of the day, can be seen as offering the cultural apparatus to accompany Roosevelt's social and political program. War was imagined as the opposite of modern industrial capitalist society.

Among the benefits the war provides is that it seemingly builds character, seen most sharply when Wharton distinguishes between the Germans and the French. Wharton sees the French soldier to be characterized by an admirable single-mindedness, a determination that reveals what the war has done not *to* but *for* the French. As she passes among a group

of *chasseurs-à-pied* stationed on a mountain in Lorraine, she sees this determination captured in a look, and “that look followed us down the mountain; and as we skirted the edge of the ravine between the armies, we felt that on the far side of that dividing line were the men who had made the war, and on the near side the men who had been made by it” (135). Killing two birds with one stone, Wharton lays responsibility for the war at the feet of the Germans and asserts that the war, rather than weakening, has strengthened the French.

Not only is individual character built by the war, but social health, as we have already seen, improves and social conflict disappears. At the very opening of the war, Wharton sees the formerly divided French nation suddenly unified. As the crowd watches volunteers march down the street,

One felt something nobly conscious and voluntary in the mood of this quiet multitude. Yet it was a mixed throng, made up of every class, from the scum of the Exterior Boulevards to the cream of the fashionable restaurants. 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 sharpers, genuine people and showy shams, were all bumping up against each other in an instinctive community of emotion. (16–17)

Whereas the people of peacetime France had been “as alien as enemies across a frontier,” in wartime the frontier, and with it the enemy, has been redefined. War has made a unified community – “an instinctive community of emotion” – out of a nation previously riven by antagonisms. This new unity manifests itself most crucially in

the tie that exists . . . between officers and soldiers. The feeling of the chiefs is almost one of veneration for their men; that of the soldiers a kind of half-humorous tenderness for the officers who have faced such odds with them. This mutual regard reveals itself in a hundred undefinable ways; but its fullest expression is in the tone with which the commanding officers speak the two words oftenest on their lips: “My men.” (164–65)

The relationship between officers and enlisted men manifests the mutuality of connection that characterizes the ideal of organic society. Wharton’s perception of a deep solidarity across class lines was clearly important to her: it appears not only in *Fighting France* but also in *A Son at the Front*.

Wharton had earlier experienced – or thought she had experienced – a form of this highly stratified yet solidaristic society at her estate in the Berkshires of western Massachusetts, the Mount (Figure 4.1). For Wharton the Mount represented an alternative to American reality both in its physical



Figure 4.1. “The Mount from the Flower Garden,” photograph by David Dashiell. Used by permission of the photographer.

presence and in the miniature social order it contained. In its physical presence, the Mount was something like a rebuke to the thinness of American culture. Characterized by Jennie A. Kassanoff as “A new house designed to look like an old home,” the Mount’s “orderly spaces, its patterned gardens and its Arcadian views all embodied a utopian alternative to modern America” (120). The Mount provided not only a physical alternative to modern America, but also an alternative social order, one in which a pseudo- or quasi-feudal loyalty and craft-identity still dominated individual consciousness. This is embodied in the figure of Wharton’s gardener, who continued to work for Wharton even after being offered better pay elsewhere. Quoting from *French Ways and Their Meanings*, Kassanoff analyzes the significance of this gardener: “For Wharton, the Mount’s gardener was an ideal laborer. Like the medieval craftsmen of yore, he worked ‘Not for greed of gold, but simply from the ambition to excel in [his] own craft’ (Wharton, *French Ways* 56). His “indifference to pecuniary gain and his absence of class consciousness” (Kassanoff 120–21) make him the ideal and comforting opposite to the restive working class of Wharton’s own historical moment.⁸

Wharton’s antimodernism manifests itself also in her way of seeing French participation in the war, which she presents as utterly single-minded and clear-eyed. Crucial to this certainty and clarity is Wharton’s refusal to see the combatants, particularly the French, to be driven by anything other than a rational devotion to duty. Indeed, Wharton’s insistence on the French soldier’s consciousness of the meaning of his

⁸ Frederick Wegener’s observation that Wharton depicts her characters’ relationship to rural Western Massachusetts as analogous to that of colonizers to colonies makes Kassanoff’s comments on the Mount particularly telling.

own actions reads like an attempt to refute the alarmingly modern thinkers Freud and Marx, and their unsettling notions of thought and opinion typically being strangers to their own origins. Wharton refuses to entertain the notion that anything other than simple clarity underlies the actions of the French as they fight the war. Wharton watches conscripts called to service gather on August 1, 1914:

the steady stream of conscripts still poured along. Wives and families trudged beside them, carrying all kinds of odd improvised bags and bundles. The impression disengaging itself from all this superficial confusion was that of a cheerful steadfastness of spirit. The faces ceaselessly streaming by were serious but not sad; nor was there any air of bewilderment – the stare of driven cattle. All these lads and young men seemed to know what they were about and why they were about it. The youngest of them looked suddenly grown up and responsible: they understood their stake in the job, and accepted it. (11–12)

This becomes a major theme of the book: France fights in full consciousness. Such a vision of the nature of the confrontation between France and Germany permits Wharton to present the war as epic in character, but does not allow for the less wholesome and more ironic vision of the war emphasized by Paul Fussell that was to become increasingly predominant even before the war’s end.

Thus, for Wharton the war may remain heroic, the calamity great, but not without embraceable meaning, and not without a reasonably firm sense of control:

If France perishes as an intellectual light and as a moral force, every Frenchman perishes with her; and the only death that Frenchmen fear is not death in the trenches but death by the extinction of their national ideal. It is against this death that the whole nation is fighting; and it is the reasoned recognition of their peril which, at this moment, is making the most intelligent people in the world the most sublime. (238)

These words, fittingly, conclude *Fighting France*, emphasizing both national heroism and conscious awareness of the real nature of the war.

If *Fighting France* praises France and the French as it describes the nation at war, *French Ways and Their Meaning* examines the underpinnings of that which Wharton praises. The books are largely continuous, beginning with Wharton’s “Preface” to *French Ways and Their Meaning*. Here she offers that

one may safely say that a man’s view on most things in life depend on how many thousand years ago his land was deforested. And when, as befell our

forebears, men whose blood is still full of murmurs of the Saxon Urwald and the forests of Britain are plunged afresh into the wilderness of a new continent, it is natural that in many respects they should be still farther removed from those whose habits and opinions are threaded through with Mediterranean culture and the civic discipline of Rome. (ix)

Racial consciousness pervades this passage, with race marking “differences of European nationality as well as broad ‘color’ divisions” (Esch and Roediger 17). This has been emphasized as a feature of Wharton’s writing by Kassanoff, and more widely in the discourse of the war years by Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker. But as importantly, the lament for the brevity of America’s flirtation with civilization – characteristic of those writers Philip Rahv characterized as “Paleface” in “Paleface and Redskin” – sounds clearly.⁹ As in *Fighting France*, Wharton affiliates modern France with ancient Rome, an affiliation made again on the following page, where Wharton asserts, “It is an immense advantage to have the primeval forest as far behind one as these clear-headed children of the Roman forum and the Greek amphitheatre” (x). These inheritors of classical civilization are under siege, and attempt to repel the barbarian invader.

Thus for Wharton, quoting extensively from G. W. Kitchin’s *History of France*, as in late antiquity, so today:

the ground on which the future of the world is now being fought for is literally the same as that Catalaunian plain (the “Camp de Châlons”) on which Attila tried to strangle France over fourteen hundred years ago. “In the year 450 all Gaul was filled with terror; for the dreaded Attila, with a host of strange figures, Huns, Tartars, Teutons, head of an empire of true barbarians, drew near her borders. Barbarism . . . now threatened the world . . . If Gaul fell, Spain would fall, and Italy, and Rome; and Attila would reign supreme, with an empire of desolation, over the whole world.”

“The whole world” is a bigger place nowadays, and “farther West” is at the Golden Gate and not at the Pillars of Hercules; but otherwise might we not be reading a leader in yesterday’s paper? (33–34)

Wharton’s France is civilization imperiled by the barbarian invader from the East, but also civilization resistant to the encroachments of a culture to the west more fully commercialized, more fully subject to the imperatives of the market than befits a true civilization. Wharton’s account of France defends a continuous classical civilization – and continuity made

⁹ David Clough notes this same phenomenon, though he does not refer to Rahv, in “Edith Wharton’s War Novels: A Reappraisal,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 19.1 (1973): 1–14.

civilization possible. As Hazel Hutchison observes, “Meaning, for Wharton relied heavily on continuity, on a shared register, which was why war threatened the very basis of civilization by rupturing cultural and social links with the past” (223). This emphasis on continuity also expresses a powerful antimodernism. Thus, Wharton condemns material ambition and prosperity as well as the subordination of cultural values to the marketplace:

The requirements of the average Frenchman in any class are surprisingly few, and the ambition to “Better” himself socially plays a very small part in his plans. What he wants is leisure to enjoy the fleeting good things of life, from which no one knows better how to extract a temperate delight, and full liberty of mind to discuss general ideas while pursuing whatever trade or art he is engaged in. (93–94)

While premised, as Dimock notes, in Wharton’s case on her place in the old New York elite, her stance, typical, again of Rahv’s “Paleface” tradition in American culture, permits a critical perspective on America and the culture of industrial capitalism not readily available in the more populist and democratic tradition.

A Son at the Front

While it is a war novel that does not depict combat, *A Son at the Front* is deeply concerned with conflict. It combines elements of the *kunstlerroman* and the novel of divorce. As a *kunstlerroman*, the novel necessarily involves conflict since the artist, John Campton, must struggle with his own artistic consciousness, the refractory material of his art, and a public that may not understand his work. A less codified form than the *kunstlerroman*, the novel of divorce must also include conflict since there would presumably be no divorce were there no conflict. John Campton is an American who has forsaken the family business to become a painter in Paris. Like Henry James’s Daisy Miller, he comes from the provincial outland of upstate New York (Campton from Utica, Daisy from Schenectady). Unlike Daisy, Campton adjusts to the Old World and knows the value of its rich, inherited civilization. After many years of painting in obscurity, he has enjoyed several years of fame, following the “discovery” of one of his portraits of his son George.

Yet Campton finds that success, which he has desired, requires him now to paint pictures of the rich and famous, the painting of whom he finds boring. Campton’s desire for success springs largely from his desire to be

able to support his son, the product of his ill-fated marriage to Julia, who has since remarried a wealthy banker, Anderson Brant, in whose household George has been raised. Campton is jealous of Brant, who has had the expense and pleasure of raising George during the period of Campton's obscurity. As the novel opens, Campton waits impatiently to begin traveling in the Mediterranean with George at the end of July 1914. Campton finds the prospect of war unbelievable, and more unbelievable is the prospect of his son's involvement in it. Even though George is an American, he is liable to French military service because both he and his father were born in France. This coincidence provides the basis for the central struggle of the novel: Campton begins by seeing George's liability to French military service as a mere accident. As the novel progresses, Campton comes to see such service as a necessity, as service to the defense of civilization itself. However, this reconciliation does not in itself end the novel, for the *kunstlerroman* element in the novel requires that Campton be reconciled to the war not only as a father, but also as an artist. Through the course of the novel, Campton will move from indifference toward the war, through an abstract support of the French cause – support that does not require him to sacrifice his son – to personal, practical support of the French cause, and finally to a full individual and artistic reconciliation with the war. This final stage in Campton's development holds the key to the novel; consequently, the *kunstlerroman* provides the master narrative to *A Son at the Front*.

This central drama of *A Son at the Front* is played out through Campton's relationship with his son, a relationship complicated by divorce. As the novel opens, an impending trip to the Mediterranean presents to Campton the opportunity to develop a relationship that had been thwarted by his relative poverty. Campton's hard-won and recent success allows him to imagine making George independent of his stepfather Brant, and thus the prospect, as Campton sees it, of winning him back. The war thus encroaches on Campton at a point where he is particularly vulnerable and threatens to take from him the son he feels he never truly had, but with whom he now hopes to solidify his bond. Whether George is truly his son, and what precisely this means, concerns Campton throughout the novel. Thus, his immediate reaction to the prospect of war is: "There can't be war: I'm going to Sicily and Africa with George the day after tomorrow" (10). The illogic of this statement makes Campton's concern appear to be like that of so many characters for whom the novel has contempt: at this point Campton sees the world through his individual, subjective, concerns, and with little thought for the legitimate demands of society. Campton,

however, possesses greater self-consciousness than most of the other characters in the novel and rebukes himself: “He smiled inwardly, perceiving that he was viewing the question exactly” as do the most self-interested characters in the novel. “Yes – but his case was different . . . Here was the son he had never seen enough of, never till lately seen at all as most fathers see their sons . . .” (11). Campton, then, has strong reasons for feeling that his son should not be taken from him. The process by which Campton comes to recognize that the claim of France trumps all of his otherwise legitimate desires provides much of the matter of the novel.

For his part, George initially sees the prospect of war as unlikely and unwelcome, and considers his views to be typical of his generation: “I know French chaps who feel as I do . . . and lots of English ones. They don’t believe the world will ever stand for another war. It’s too stupidly uneconomic, to begin with: I suppose you’ve read Angell? Then life’s worth too much, and nowadays too many millions of people know it . . . People are too healthy and well-fed now; they’re not going to go off to die in a ditch to oblige anyone” (21). However, George comes to think differently once the war has begun. Reports of German atrocities¹⁰ drive George to banish Germany from the realm of the civilized. When Campton tries to argue that France has perhaps been looking for a fight with Germany ever since the disastrous Franco-Prussian war, George responds: “Haven’t the Germans shown us what they are now? . . . They’re not fit to live with white people, and the sooner they’re shown it the better” (51). George’s words here seem to betray a passionate conviction that Germany is in the wrong (as well as a racist conception that we may trace to Wharton herself). However, George’s family – a coalition of Campton and the Brants – connive to see that George is assigned to a headquarters unit behind the front, a posting he accepts uncomplainingly; Campton is relieved that his son is in little immediate danger.

¹⁰ Wharton’s use of these atrocity stories raises an interesting aesthetic/ideological problem. Since the stories were widely believed at the time, Wharton can be seen as simply recreating the contemporary atmosphere. However, by the time of the novel’s publication, many of the atrocity stories, especially the most sensational, had been exposed as fraudulent. Since nothing in the novel’s form or content acknowledges this, the effect is that the novel appears to simply reproduce and hence endorse these stories. Similarly, the relationship between the brutality the German army exhibited in Belgium and the general brutality of the war never becomes a thematic element in the novel, undoubtedly because the brutality is assigned solely to the Germans. For a recent investigation of this aspect of the First World War, see Alan Kramer, *Dynamic of Destruction: Culture and Mass Killing in the First World War*.

While at the opening of the novel Campton does not believe in the war, he comes to accept its necessity and the justice of the French cause, but still to reject the war's or France's claim on George. Campton had no "doubt as to the rights and wrongs of the case," yet he also "still refused to admit that France had any claim on George, any right to his time, to his suffering or to his life" (64). While Campton continues to feel this way, he eventually begins to question his son's apparent lack of desire to be at the front, actually fighting:

Campton found himself wondering at the perfection of his son's moral balance. So many things had happened . . . the issues at stake had become so glaringly plain, right and wrong, honour and dishonour, humanity and savagery faced each other so squarely across the trenches, that it seemed strange to Campton that his boy, so eager, so impressionable, so quick on the uptake, should not have felt some . . . burst of wrath. (74)

As it turns out, this passage reveals Campton's state of mind through irony, since George will indeed feel a burst of wrath sufficient to get him transferred to the front, even as he will continue to write to his parents as though he remained in the relative security of his post at the rear.

Campton's progress continues: whereas he was anxious to keep his son away from the front early in the novel, by Book Two he refuses to take any further steps to ensure his son's safety. His ex-wife, Julia Brant, asks him, "What's happened to you? Who has influenced you? What has changed you?" (99). Campton struggles to answer this question, even to himself, but comes to see his previous attempts to protect his son to be born of an instinct to protect his offspring, regardless of the claims of morality. Yet the example of those who, in Campton's mind, had gone into the war with a clear understanding of its cause and nature have convinced him that George does indeed have a stake in the war, and that France can make a legitimate claim on all those who stand for civilization against barbarism. Campton has thus moved from being an individual who sees the war in terms of resisting the encroachments of the social to one who comprehends the claims of the social world upon the individual:

Campton had never before, at least consciously, thought of himself and the few beings he cared for as part of a greater whole, component elements of the immense amazing spectacle. But the last four months had shown him man as a defenceless animal torn suddenly from his shell, stripped of all the interwoven tendrils of association, habit, background, daily ways and words, daily sights and sounds, and flung out of the human habitable world into naked ether, where nothing breathes or lives. That was what war did;

and that was why those who best understood it in all its farthest-reaching abomination willingly gave their lives to put an end to it. (99)

Campton comes to see the inextricably social nature of human being, a concept often associated in the twentieth century with socialist and Marxist thought – indeed, it is a central underpinning of George Lukács’ critique of modernism – but it also, with different points of emphasis, forms a central part of some kinds of conservative thought. And here again we see Wharton’s “Paleface” characteristics emerge, for the Paleface attitude toward American culture is, in whatever bad faith or operating on whatever false assumptions, a conservative critique of industrial capitalist modernity, of which an exaggerated and fragmenting individualism is a crucial component.

But also striking is the way that participation in the war is not only justified, but also made incumbent. Because of the horror of modern war, described elsewhere as “the insatiable monster” (87), war must be eradicated. Such a formulation comes remarkably close to those formulations popularized by supporters of Woodrow Wilson, for whom American justification for intervention was provided by the role of the war in preventing any future wars. Yet by the time *A Son at the Front* was published, it was apparent that the Great War had not ended war: the Russian Revolution was followed by foreign intervention, a brutal civil war, and the Polish-Soviet War; war broke out in earnest between the Irish Republicans and the British Empire; and the Greco-Turkish war demonstrated that even in the region where the Great War began much unresolved conflict had yet to play itself out. In *A Backward Glance* Wharton wrote, “The war was over, and we thought we were returning to the world we so abruptly passed out of four years earlier. Perhaps it was as well that, at first, we were sustained by that illusion” (362). Wharton’s inability or unwillingness to acknowledge the dismal spectacle of the post-First World War reality in *A Son at the Front* suggests the depth of her alienation and dislocation, as she allows her characters to remain confined to the thoughts and language of wartime propaganda.

The notion that precisely because war is so horrible *this* war must be fought produces the further consequence that Germany embodies the principle of war. War will be eliminated if Germany is defeated, a proposition that makes sense only if Germany is solely responsible for the war (and indeed, for modern war as a whole). This conception is consistent with Wharton’s view of the war as seen in *Fighting France*. Whereas the novels of Cummings, Dos Passos, Hemingway, and others present the war

itself as the enemy, as embodying that which is to be resisted, Wharton attempts to incorporate the reaction against the war by means of acknowledging its horror. She also assigns sole responsibility for the war – and thus the horror – to Germany. As a result, Wharton cannot depict the war with the power of many of her fellow writers since she cannot see any way in which the war is the product of the historical moment and its decisive forces, rather than the machinations of Germany. Assigning national blame allows Wharton to avoid confronting the nature of the world in which all nations acted, with none of them foreseeing the real consequences of their actions.

Glanced at intermittently early in the novel, the status of the individual becomes an explicit topic as Campton continues to wrestle with his feelings about the war and his son's role in it. In a passage that seems to be an attempt to paraphrase and refute Randolph Bourne's assertion that in an industrialized society the active consent of the people was not necessary to the conduct of war,¹¹ Campton attempts to defend what he takes to be his son's view: "The whole thing is so far beyond human measure that one's individual rage and revolt seem of no more use than a woman's scream at an accident she isn't in" (102). Campton, however, "knew he was arguing only against himself. He did not in the least believe that any individual sentiment counted for nothing at such a time" (102). Campton's skepticism about the significance of personal opinion in the face of the war is an aspect of his integrity; while he does not believe that personal sentiment counts for nothing, he is contemptuous of his own ability, seemingly, to contribute nothing else. Through her main character, Wharton proposes a view of the war in line with that of Bourne and those who follow in his wake in the postwar years, but does not permit Campton actually to believe this. Book Two of the novel ends with Campton increasingly concerned that George appears not to feel any call to be at the front, making his personal contribution to the defense of France and civilization against the "Powers of Darkness" (104).

This concern disappears from the novel in Book Three, which opens with Campton and Anderson Brant traveling by car to the field hospital where a seriously wounded George is being treated. George has been deceiving Campton and his mother and stepfather, having put in for transfer to a unit at the front some months earlier. This section, including

¹¹ Bourne in "A War Diary": "The kind of war which we are conducting is an enterprise which the American government does not have to carry on with the hearty co-operation of the American people but only with their acquiescence" (319).

the scenes at the field hospital itself, is probably the most successfully realized of the novel. Wharton explores the shock of Campton at his son’s danger, but also his increasing reconciliation with his rival and erstwhile nemesis, Brant. Book Three also fundamentally changes the problem of the novel, since Campton is undeceived as to his son’s exposure to danger and his attitude toward the war and his proper role in it. While Campton will still have to wrestle with the nature of George’s service and whether or not he ought to return to the front, increasingly the novel will focus on the attitude that Campton takes toward the war as an artist, an attitude influenced by but not identical with Campton’s attitude toward the war as a father.

As they drive to the hospital – their passage there, normally impossible for civilians, is made possible by the banker Brant’s influence – Campton’s mind is flooded with various memories, including that of the scene just recently past where he confronted his friend Adele Anthony, a fierce partisan of the French cause and a sort of unrelated “aunt” to George. Campton, having just learned that George has been serving at the front, and not at the rear, and that he has been seriously – perhaps fatally – wounded, accuses Anthony: “It was you who drove him to the front – it was you who sent my son to his death!” (143). Anthony denies that she has done so, but not in order to evade responsibility; rather, she refuses to take credit where it is not due: “Without flinching, she gazed back at him. ‘Oh John – it was you!’” (143). The family friend attempts to make clear to Campton that George is *his* son, that even in deceiving Campton, George behaves in a manner in keeping with his father’s deepest wishes, his deepest self.

Campton further remembers the story of young George, who when given a first edition of *Lavengro* – a nineteenth-century adventure novel – devours it, revealing for the first time his love of literature. George is given the valuable book by Brant, who has the means to be a collector. Brant leaves the price tag in the book, and tells George that the book will “be worth a lot more than that by the time you’re grown up . . . To which George was recorded to have answered sturdily: ‘No it won’t, if I find other stories I like better’” (146). This interchange had been reported to Campton by Adele Anthony, who was, once again, trying to make Campton see that George takes after his father, seeing the value of the book as intrinsic to it, in the pleasure its story brings rather than in the market price that it may fetch.

This problem of the identity of George’s real, “spiritual” father becomes further complicated when Campton sees George and fails at first to

recognize him, so changed is he by his time at the front; only the shape of George's hand convinces Campton that it is his son he looks at, not "a middle-aged bearded man" (149). In a nicely wrought paradox, Wharton has Campton think, "It was in the moment of identifying his son that he felt the son he had known to be lost to him forever" (149). Campton's relationship with George has been troubled by divorce and his ex-wife's subsequent remarriage. Now Campton finds that the gulf in experience produced by George's service at the front presents another, seemingly unbridgeable, distance between father and son, the "something" in the quotation from Whitman that provides an epigraph to the novel: "Something veil'd and abstracted is often a part of the manner of these beings" (ii). Since Campton cannot possibly share George's experience on the front, it would seem that his son, in his eyes never fully his, will now never be; only the *kunsterroman* narrative will fully unite Campton with his son despite, and to some degree via, George's experience of war.

After receiving immediate treatment for his wounds at the field hospital, George is evacuated to a hospital far from the front, where Campton learns that George feels himself to have been loyal to his father at the moment of deceiving him. "When I exchanged regiments I did what you'd always hoped I would, eh Dad?" (164). Campton is nonplussed at the statement, in part because it simplifies the complex course of development through which his feelings have gone, but eventually stammers a reply, "I . . . good Lord . . . at any rate I'm glad you felt sure of me" (164). When he tells George that he would have preferred to be let in on the secret of his transfer, George tells him that he deceived his father only because of his mother: "you see, there was mother. I thought it all over, and decided that it would be easier for you both if I said nothing. And, after all, I'm glad now that I didn't – that is, if you really do understand." Campton, seeing that he has regained his son, whom in a sense he has never lost, replies, "Yes; I understand" (164).

Yet, for Campton, regaining his son is a tortuous business, and so he wavers between the sense of loss of and ever more profound union. A rift again develops when George wants to return to his regiment at the front, rather than remaining in Paris to do staff work or traveling to the United States to assist the French cause there. As they argue, Campton looks at his son, until he recognizes in his eyes a look that puts him beyond Campton's reach: "He had been gazing too steadily into George's eyes, and now at last he knew what that mysterious look in them meant. It was . . . inaccessible to reason, beyond reason, belonging to other spaces, other weights and measures, over the edge, somehow, of the tangible calculable world" (189).

Something like the value that lies within a book but has no relation to its market value, what possess George are compulsions based on experience and values from beyond the world of getting and spending. Service at the front affirms the non-material values that Campton has wanted his son to embrace, yet his embrace of them endangers his life, and thus seemingly threatens to remove him from Campton forever.

When it actually occurs, Campton reconciles himself to his son's return to the front. He cannot express his feelings to George, but Wharton permits the reader insight into his thoughts: "he saw, with an almost blinding distinctness . . . the extent to which his own feeling, during the long months, had imperceptibly changed, and how his inmost impulse, now that the blow had fallen, was not of resistance to it, but of acquiescence, since it made him once more one with his son" (200). Campton's spiritual union with his son is threatened, however, when – simultaneously with news of America's entry into the war – word reaches Paris of George having been seriously wounded once again. This time George fails to recover, and dies, the word "Father!" virtually the last he utters. Campton, numbed by the blow, only fully experiences his sorrow three months later. Yet grief at the loss of George will be followed by Campton's final and truest moment of reconciliation, a moment that Campton experiences both as a father and as an artist.

Campton fully confronts his grief at the death of his son on the Fourth of July 1918, as the newly arrived American troops march – badly, Campton notes, because they have had so little training – through Paris. He mixes among the officers and soldiers, "His whole creative faculty . . . curiously, mysteriously engrossed in the recording of the young faces for whose coming George had yearned" (217). Campton returns to work the day after this experience. Even though George had provided his most important subject, Campton does not return to his late sketches of him; thus, it is an affront to his artistic inclination as well as to his fatherly pride when his young friend Boylston informs him that Julia would like for George to have a monument. Campton will not hear of it, whatever her wishes, or those of his stepfather, or Adele Anthony. Boylston tries to explain to Campton that while he may not need a monument, they do, precisely because George was Campton's son all along: "Well, that's just it, isn't it, sir? 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" (218). The problem of the monument joins Campton's function as father with

his function as artist. However, Campton will be unable to turn immediately to it, involving as it does a revisiting of his old work, studying photos, recalling his son, all of which is too painful for him to contemplate. And finally, paying for the monument raises the issue of money, which made him unable for so long to function as George's father in a practical sense.

Campton brings himself around to the idea of designing and overseeing the making of a monument to his son once he comes to accept the truth of what others have told him, that George was indeed his son, not his mother's and not Anderson Brant's. Once Campton accepts this, his own life seems to him to possess richness denied to others, as stark as his loneliness might appear to be. And though he remains troubled by moments of overwhelming grief,

through all these moods, Campton began to see, there ran the life-giving power of a 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. (222)

Campton sees that the George who has died is truly his son. The younger George and the George who has elected to die in the service of France are united in Campton's memory and consciousness, and awareness of this permits him to undertake the labor of designing the monument.

Striking here is the sense of peace and fulfillment with which the novel ends: George's death is part of "reality embraced and accepted"; it is *meaningful*. George dies because he has recognized that one cannot live for oneself only – the quality that makes him his father's rather than his mother's son. George has taught Campton the lesson he had originally learned from his father. Campton says to himself "The only thing that helps is to be able to do things for people" (221). And so Campton turns to his work, and can again look at his old sketches of George, his pain sublimated into purpose.

The basic logic of the novel, then, boils down to this: Campton, through George's instruction, comes to recognize that service to Art rather than Commerce is service to something greater than narrow self-interest, while America comes to recognize that service to civilization is service to something greater than national self-interest. In the familial discourse examined in Chapter 2, the family, particularly the mother, mediated the demands of the state, sometimes reproducing them, other times filtering them, adding an affective dimension otherwise absent. In *A Son at the Front*, parenthood provides a medium through which Wharton depicts a

variety of attitudes toward the legitimacy of the demands, not of the state, so much as of society, civilized society. Thus, the legal technicality that makes George liable to military service to France matters less than does the debt all owe to France as the exemplar of a civilized society. George and John Campton come to understand this; Julia does not. Here Wharton adds to the intricacies of matters internal to positional-existential ideology – for example, Campton’s agonizing over the significance of his bond with George – an argument concerning the proper relationship between the demands of the positional-existential and the inclusive-existential dimension of human being. However painful Campton finds it, relations based on one’s positional-existential being and status – father and son, most pointedly – must be subordinated to the inclusive-existential reality disclosed by the war. And that reality is that true, civilized social existence is under assault. The political nature of the demands of the state and the political nature of the war disappear amidst seemingly more fundamental matters. Such an understanding is of a piece with seeing the war as a conflict between Latin and Teuton.

Wharton, in *A Son at the Front*, shares Seeger’s disdain for the world of getting and spending and, as was common at the time, understands the war as a regenerative experience, opposed to commercial society (Leed, Losurdo). The large-scale irony here is that this war, which prepared the way for the United States to become the hegemonic power of the capitalist world-system is understood to be itself fundamentally about values non-economic and even anti-economic in character. Simultaneously, a war whose most distinctive characteristics derive from the thoroughly modern industrial economies that produced vast numbers of machine guns, artillery pieces, high explosive charges and shells, miles of barbed wire, tons of poison gas, and an extensive transportation network delivering all of these to the front is understood to concern and embody values whose roots lie in the pre-industrial, indeed, pre-capitalist, world. Thus, Wharton continues in *A Son at the Front* to understand the war in terms of continuity with the prewar past.

While Campton’s largely internal drama provides the primary narrative of *A Son at the Front*, several subordinate elements of the novel remain worth examining. First, the war in many cases cleanses those who experience it, something we see early in the novel. Before war is declared, Campton’s friend, the noted doctor Fortin-Lescluze, has become enamored of a “Javanese dancer” (32), an episode in the life of the frivolous prewar world. This world largely dissolves, however, upon the declaration of war, and when Campton ventures out to the family home of Fortin-Lescluze he is

greeted by the doctor, his wife, his aged mother, and his son, without a Javanese dancer to be seen: "Campton excused himself for intruding on the family, who seemed as happily united, as harmonious in their deeper interests, as if no musical studio-parties and exotic dancers had ever absorbed the master of the house" (39). Here Wharton illustrates in fictive form her apology in *French Ways and Their Meaning* for the French system of marriage: "Marriage in France, is regarded as founded for the family and not for the husband and wife. It is designed not to make two people individually happy, but to secure their permanent well-being as associates in the foundation of a home and the procreation of a family" (128). Love is taken seriously in France, but is understood to be too unstable to provide a firm foundation for marriage, which provides a foundation to society. Love is "the poetry of life," but they have judged that "the family and the state cannot be built up on poetry" (131). Love is accorded its place, but that place is minor compared to the place accorded the family, and upon the declaration of war in *A Son at the Front* we see the social and political centrality of the family assert itself.

If the war recalls the French to their deepest values, it has a more miraculous effect on and for the American couple the Talketts. Prior to the war, George has fallen in love with Madge Talkett, wife of Roger Talkett. Before going off to war, George wants to have an affair with Madge; she is reluctant but not entirely unwilling. But when he returns, wounded, from the front, George insists that Madge divorce Roger before they consummate their relationship. The war has proved to be "the making of him," as predicted by Adele Anthony, providing moral backbone and seriousness where it was lacking. But the transformation of George is as nothing to that of Roger Talkett, who, prior to America's entry into the war was utterly subservient to his wife, saying "Why, I don't believe in anything *she* doesn't believe in" (123). Talkett, like his wife, is a hanger-on in the vaguely bohemian artistic world, fond of mouthing hollow phrases about his supposedly subversive views. Talkett is Wharton's consummate wimp, whose one virtue lies in the honesty of his devotion to his wife. But so powerful is the regenerative effect of the war, that once America joins the fray, even Roger Talkett takes up a rifle, volunteering for duty and shipping off for America to undergo training. Madge follows him to America: "I mean to take a house somewhere near him. He's not well and he writes that he misses me" (220). In doing so, she says she is "only trying to do what I suppose George would have wanted" (220). George provides to all an example of the proper attitude, not only to the war, but to life generally.

Both the reassertion of the indissoluble nature of the French family and the conversion of Madge and Roger Talkett – characters openly mocked earlier – join with the renunciation of self-interest that forms part of Campton’s narrative as components in the deep anti-individualism of the novel. A number of other sub-narratives support this, none more clearly than the story of the family of René Davril, a young painter who dies of wounds sustained in combat. Davril admires Campton greatly, and the established painter goes to visit the young man in the hospital. Moved by his interview, Campton returns later to give Davril a study he made while working on the portrait of George that made him famous. Davril, however, has died, leaving behind him a destitute family. Campton sells the study and attempts to give the proceeds to Davril’s family, but they refuse to accept the money, proposing instead that it be shared out among painters, musicians, and authors whose livelihoods have been ruined by the war. The scheme laid before him, Campton

listened with growing attention. Nothing hitherto had been less in the line of his interests than the large schemes of general amelioration which were coming to be classed under the transatlantic term of “Social Welfare.” If questioned on the subject a few months earlier he would probably have concealed his fundamental indifference under the profession of an extreme individualism, and the assertion of every man’s right to suffer and starve in his own way. Even since René Davril’s death had brought home to him the boundless havoc of the war, he had felt no more than the impulse to ease his own pain by putting his hand in his pocket when a particular case was too poignant to be ignored.

Yet here were people who had already offered their dearest to France, and were now pleading to be allowed to give all the rest; and who had the courage and wisdom to think out in advance the form in which their gift would do most good. (93)

The Davril family provides Campton with instruction in living for something other than self, a principle that Campton realizes in his vocation as an artist, but which remains unconscious to him and not integrated into his being until the war and the crisis that it entails erupts.

On the whole, the war – despite Wharton’s description of it as “the insatiable monster” (87) – is good for people. One does not, of course, say this lightly, given Wharton’s real acquaintance with the suffering it entailed. Yet ultimately Wharton joins those antimodernists, like her hero Theodore Roosevelt, for whom the war presents the opportunity for moral and cultural regeneration. Antimodernism, however, is not a unified and coherent position, and one may find antimodernists among the major

figures of the reaction against the war, Hemingway and Pound foremost among them. Where Wharton differs from a fellow pro-war antimodernist like Alan Seeger is in her emphasis on allegiance to value systems and social institutions outside the self. Wharton fights a rear-guard action in defense of the social world that is supposedly being defended in the war, whereas Seeger imagined the war as part of a private drama of the self as a participant in the cosmic principle Strife, in which defense of anything enters only as a means of heightening the drama. Paradoxically, the *kunstlerroman* narrative makes this most evident and most central – paradoxically in that one version of the nature of the artistic temperament sees it as radically self-absorbed. But Campton's absorption in problems of art, a realm of value outside of and above the self, sets him apart especially from his ex-wife Julia, who never transcends the confines of self: her concern for her son remains at the level of taking care of her own. Thus, unlike Campton, she cannot reconcile herself to George's embrace of duty, and is the antithesis of the republican mothers I discussed in Chapter 2. Furthermore, as an artist, Campton does not *create*, but rather finds meanings. When the war arrives, he sees subjects who previously bored him transformed by their anxiety into worthy subjects: there is something to paint in them now. He does not, then, conjure up meaning where none previously existed.¹² In this, he operates in the way that Wharton would see herself proceeding in her war writing, revealing to the public the latent meaning of the war: the monument to George that Campton turns to at the end of the novel and *A Son at the Front* itself are at heart the same project in different media. Both are, along the lines discussed by Steven Trout in *Memorial Fictions*, memorials seeking to render meaningful what threatened to be a politically and socially destabilizing event were it to be understood, as it already to some degree was when the novel was published, to be devoid of meaning.

Adherence to a sense of one's obligations to the state, part of the novel's more general sense of the importance of fidelity to values that lie

¹² Maurice Beebe distinguishes two traditions in the *kunstlerroman*, the Sacred Fount and the Ivory Tower. The artist in the Sacred Fount tradition sees life and art to be closely linked and the value and richness of art to spring from that of life. The Ivory Tower artist, on the other hand, resents the interference of the demands of ordinary life on art and shuts out the world as much as possible. As Beebe notes, artists as portrayed in the *kunstlerroman* usually combine some characteristics from both traditions. Campton clearly belongs more powerfully to the Sacred Fount tradition: the central problem of the novel concerns his relationship with his son, and his artistic problems are secondary. Yet the ascetic nature of his preferred surroundings in his studio, which contrasts sharply with Julia and Anderson Brant's over-furnished interior, speaks to the partial attempt to withdraw from the world.

outside the self, becomes particularly clear and, given the context in literary history, poignant, when Wharton introduces the phrase “dulce et decorum” into the novel. The famous lines from Horace’s ode, “dulce et decorum est/pro patria mori” functions as shorthand in Wharton to describe the mentality of the men at the front in a conversation between Boylston and Campton:

Boylston’s round face became remote and mysterious. “We don’t really know – do we sir? – exactly how any of them feel? Any more than if they were – –” He drew up sharply on the word, but Campton faced it.

“Dead?”

“Transfigured, say; no, trans – – what’s the word in the theology books? A new substance . . . somehow . . .”

“Ah, you feel that too?” the father exclaimed. (205)

Boylston’s assessment is confirmed by Campton: “There’s something in all their eyes: I don’t know what. *Dulce et decorum*, perhaps – –” “Yes” (206). For Wharton, Horace’s words describe without irony how those at the front feel about their service. While the elliptical nature of the dialogue makes the full meaning a matter of inference, it appears that the sacrifice of self to the greater good of the nation has remade these men into creatures of a different and extraordinary kind. In Wharton it remains “sweet and fitting to die for one’s country.” The antimodernist subordination of self is part of the novel’s reassertion of Latin culture.

This contrasts sharply with the decidedly ironic use of the quotation in both Ezra Pound and Wilfred Owen. In *Hugh Selwyn Mauberly*, published in 1920, a kind of poetic self-portrait in context, Pound writes some of the most powerful lines written against the war by a non-combatant. His ironic use of Horace occurs as he describes the various states of mind and character in which different types of men went to war:

Some quick to arm,
 some for adventure,
 some from fear of weakness,
 some from fear of censure,
 some for love of slaughter, in imagination,
 learning later . . .
 some in fear, learning love of slaughter;

Died some, pro patria,
 non “dulce” non “et decor”

(187–88)

Pound does not simply negate the lines from Horace: some of those who fought died for their country, but he inserts “non” to deny that there was anything “sweet” or “fitting” about their deaths. Pound’s soldiers who do not die, “return home to a lie” (188). The lives of the dead are wasted; the countries they die for are unworthy of sacrifice. The world about which Wharton writes is perceived very differently: her soldiers engage in a virtually timeless act of sacrifice, reaffirm the nobility of dying for one’s country, and, despite occasional criticism from Wharton about life on the home front, it is never questioned that the war emerges from an inherent and ages-old conflict between Latin civilization, eminently worthy of sacrifice, and Teutonic barbarism.

“Dulce et Decorum,” supplies not only part of the lines for, but also the title to Wilfred Owen’s most famous poem, and as with Pound, the contrast with Wharton is striking. Owen is probably the most famous of English combatant poets (killed in action shortly before the war’s end), and his poem reflects both his close familiarity with the misery and suffering of those who served in the trenches and with the rhetoric of those who glorified military service. Describing the effects of a gas attack on one unfortunate soldier too slow to get his mask in place, Owen writes,

But someone still was yelling out and stumbling,
And flound’ring like a man in fire or lime . . .
Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

(55)

Owen then turns to the effect of seeing this,

In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

(55)

After sixteen descriptive lines to open the poem, Owen shifts to the predictive. The poem now is overtly addressed to an audience, presumably “Jessie Pope, etc.,” to whom the poem was originally dedicated [Jessie Pope was the pro-war author of *Jessie Pope’s War Poems* (1915)].

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil’s sick of sin;
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.

(55)

The poem retains the sharp detail of the opening, but now represents not the event itself, but the event as replayed in the dreams of the speaker, and with the added complication of being a conditional construction: “If in some smothering dreams . . . If you could hear.” If the addressee knew the truth about dying “pro patria,” there would be no talk of “dulce et decorum.” Ignoring for present purposes the poetic richness of Owen’s performance, the poem distinguishes between the truth of experience and the falsity of the ideology and rhetoric that led so many to have that experience.

The “dulce et decorum” that in Wharton’s novel explains the distance between combatants and non-combatants is for Owen “the old Lie.” These different uses of Horace indicate much broader differences in their evaluations of social reality: both Pound and Owen decry falsity at the core of the social world that underpinned the Great War; for her part, Wharton may have had her reservations about this or that aspect, but fundamentally she affirms the world that was simultaneously destroyed by and responsible for the Great War.