Journal of the Short Story in English
Les Cahiers de la nouvelle

58 | Spring 2012
Special Issue: The Short Stories of Edith Wharton

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Electronic version
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/1246
ISSN: 1969-6108

Publisher
Presses universitaires d'Angers

Printed version
Date of publication: 1 June 2012
Number of pages: 125-142
ISBN: 0294-0442
ISSN: 0294-04442

Electronic reference
William Blazek, « Reading the Ruins: “Coming Home,” Wharton’s Atrocity Story of the First World War », *Journal of the Short Story in English* [Online], 58 | Spring 2012, Online since 01 June 2014, connection on 22 April 2019. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/1246

Reading the Ruins: “Coming Home,” Wharton’s Atrocity Story of the First World War

William Blazek

1 Edith Wharton’s First World War short story “Coming Home” was presented to its original readers in 1915-16 as an atrocity narrative—a distinctly contemporary text within *Xingu and Other Stories*, a book collection whose general emphasis is on old upper-class New York, cosmopolitan marital affairs, and haunted pasts.[1] Early reviews of “Coming Home” placed it mainly as a well-constructed work that vividly depicts what had become in war propaganda commonplace themes of physical destruction and sexual trespass. Reviewers then and critics since have focused on the use of suppression and omission in the text. Yet this story of wartime atrocities in north-eastern France also enfolds within its layered focalization a meta-narrative containing some familiar topics in Wharton’s fiction, including the emergence of female agency, patriarchal recidivism, the transformation of social hegemonies, and hereditary degeneration. If the story addresses received ideas of violation and retribution common in the genre of war-atrocity publications, it does so not only to play upon readers’ anticipations of the unfolding plot, but also to explore deeper assumptions about social norms and gender expectations. Beyond that achievement, it poses questions about the reliability of language, thereby undermining the atrocity story genre itself and questioning the reliability of sources and the ability of any writer to represent the unfathomable nature of war. In this vortex of literary and philosophical complications, “Coming Home” adds a further existential complexity as it ultimately destabilizes the concept of home as a space of secure origins and grounded meaning.

2 Wharton’s reasons for adding a war-atrocity story to *Xingu* were in part commercial, to bring the anxious vitality of current events to bear on a collection whose seven other stories harken back to pre-war settings and concerns. (Indeed, the other stories were written before the start of the war.) Nevertheless, the inclusion of “Coming Home” reflects the author’s well-documented initial belief in the authenticity of war-zone atrocity events and her eager reporting of rumours about atrocities in her letters and

non-fiction writings, especially in the first year of the war. To one of her favorite American correspondents, Sara ("Sally") Norton, she wrote during the first month of fighting:

> The "atrocities" one hears of *are true*. I know of many, alas, too well authenticated. Spread it abroad as much as you can. It should be known that it is to America's interest to help stem this hideous flood of savagery by opinion if it may not be by action. No civilized race can remain neutral in feeling now. (*Letters* 335)

3 Her quotation marks around the word "atrocities" indicate both how the word was forced into people's wartime vocabulary and how it had to be treated cautiously, a special lexical case. While atrocity stories have a basis in hard evidence,[2] most readers do not have the ability to verify that evidence and the stories rely on readers' willingness to imagine brutalities that cannot be directly substantiated. At the end of September 1914 she again wrote to Norton, declaring:

> As to the horrors & outrages, I'm afraid they are too often true—Lady Gladstone, head of the Belgian refugee committee in London, told a friend of mine she had seen a Belgian woman with her ears cut off. And of course the deliberate slaughter of "hostages" in defenceless towns is proved over & over again. (*Letters* 340)

4 The substitution of "horrors and outrages" for "atrocities" is significant in that it highlights the ease with which euphemism and emotional shorthand can be employed to convey the beliefs lying behind the facts of wartime atrocities. And perhaps it reveals Wharton's intuition about how the overuse of "atrocity" would soon lead to complacency about the facts and feelings upon which her revulsion towards German military aggression was based. Seeing German militarism as an outrage against Western civilization's core values, Wharton could at first accept third-hand accounts and uncontextualized stories as hard evidence of culturally ingrained Teutonic barbarism, yet she soon saw how difficult it was to separate the truth from hearsay and rumour. As Trudi Tate suggests, "Many writers were aware that the stories they had read and heard during the war might be unreliable, misleading, or simply untrue" (43). Moreover, these ambiguities were compounded when writers such as Ford Madox Ford, H. G. Wells, Arnold Bennett, Arthur Conan Doyle, and Wharton herself wrote propaganda for the Allied war effort. "How can one bear witness when one's knowledge is so imperfect?" Tate asks. "How do people imagine themselves as subjects, or indeed as citizens, in a culture which is mobilised around rumours, lies, and official secrecy?" (43).

5 Wharton's despair at the United States' obdurate neutrality over the next two and a half years further provoked her to influence American public opinion in favour of joining the Allied cause. Her wartime journalism from 1915, collected in book form as *Fighting France* (1919), includes passages of propaganda based on general assumptions about German atrocities. In a portrait of Belgian refugees flooding into Paris, she reflects on how they have "nothing left to them in the world but the memory of burning homes and massacred children and young men dragged into slavery, of infants torn from their mothers, old men trampled by drunken heels and priests slain while they prayed beside the dying" (34). The sentence carefully builds the level of outrage from building damage and civilian casualties to more insidiously conscious acts of barbarism and cruelty. Elsewhere in the text, Wharton recreates scenes such as the once lovely setting of the little town of Clermont-en-Argonne, now ruined by the Germans, and she sardonically comments: "No doubt its beauty enriched the joy of wrecking it" (61). She records without documentation how "the martyr town" of Gerbéviller was first shelled, then each house set ablaze, and lastly any escaping inhabitant "neatly spitted on lurking bayonets" (99). (In a 14 May 1915

letter to Henry James, she gives a different version, retelling the acting-mayor's account of hiding with his wife and other women in a cellar, the house above in flames, "& the Germans shooting and torturing people all through the town [*Letters* 355].) From a motor-trip to Belgium, she describes the ruins of Poperinghe and the paralysis of the empty town, concluding that "wherever the shadow of Germany falls, all things should wither at the root" (157). In other sections *Fighting France* moves away from the specifics of German military ferocity to more rounded reflections on the meanings of war and the difficulties of comprehending it.[3] Her efforts to understand what she saw as a new barbarism infecting the progressive optimism of the early twentieth century are both complex and meditative. However, the partisan descriptions and insinuations concerning German brutality are clearly meant as propaganda, which the story "Coming Home" contains but also complicates and, as shall be argued, ultimately dissolves.

6 As a correspondent and journalist, Wharton refuses to acknowledge in her accounts of war atrocities that brutal acts in combat could produce angry retaliation and reprisals on both sides of the Western Front. Propaganda writing does not tend to present the enemy's point of view, after all, and neither a subtle turn of phrase nor a nuanced narrative voice is required to produce the designed effect of inciting soldiers and civilians to hatred. The key document that initiated much of the British and American reaction to atrocity stories during the First World War was the Bryce Report, published as *Report of the Committee on Alleged German Outrages* (1915) and *The Evidence and Documents Laid Before the Committee on Alleged German Outrages* (1915). Led by Lord Bryce, the popular British Ambassador to Washington from 1907-1913, the Committee based its findings on the statements of over 1200 witnesses, mainly Belgian and French civilians and soldiers, with collaborating evidence from diaries supposedly taken from captured German troops. The conclusions were clearly intended to stir up hatred against the Germans and to influence the United States to join Great Britain in the war (Quinn 34-37), and the publication gained momentum following the torpedoing of the *Lusitania* in April 1915.[4] The report contains stories of organized massacres, the killing of prisoners and the wounded, and deliberate destruction of property. The looting and burning of villages filled the testimony, along with accounts of murdered children, babies spitted on bayonets, and women raped and tortured. Peter Buitenhuis states: "The Bryce Report continued to exert a powerful influence on American opinion throughout the war. And yet the report, as is now generally acknowledged, was largely a tissue of invention, unsubstantiated observations by unnamed witnesses, and second-hand eyewitness reports, depending more on imagination than any other factor" (27). Invention being the writer's *métier*, Wharton would have been conscious of the need to temper emotional reactions to atrocity stories that reinforced preconceived opinions about imperial Germany. Nevertheless, the Bryce Report was widely accepted as valid among her circle of friends, and their reactions added to Wharton's store of *matériel* in writing "Coming Home." Daisy Chanler, an old family friend from New York, records in her autobiography: "We all read Lord Bryce's Report on the German atrocities in Belgium. Coming from him, the distinguished historian, the kindly and hospitable English gentleman whom we had known as Ambassador in Washington, this Report carried conviction and filled us with zealous indignation" (qtd. in Price, *End of Innocence* 193, n. 109). Sara Norton in Boston also had correspondence from her younger brother, serving with an ambulance unit on the Western Front, to support the official register of atrocity tales. Her anger found an unusual creative outlet in the publication of *New Nursery Rhymes on Old Lines*, a collection of anti-German verses based on the Mother Goose rhymes. Published anonymously ("by

an American") in 1916, the thin volume contains diatribes against the "Huns," Kaiser Wilhelm, German-American "plotters," and President Wilson. The rhyme "Ding Dong Bell" is transliterated into an atrocity scare:

> Ding, dong, bell—
> The body's in the well!
> Who put it there?
> Germans—have a care,
> Whisper low, for they may hear,
> Watch thy child, for they are near;
> Who?—'s-sh—I dare not tell.
> Ding, dong, bell. (II)

7 Wharton's critical opinion of the book is unrecorded, but her knowledge of this and other examples of and responses to atrocity propaganda is placed in "Coming Home" upon a conditional and reflective surface of the text. For characters absent from the events surrounding an atrocity, whose perceptions are coloured by the emotional and social investment of what they choose to believe, searching for facts to support their assumptions proves fruitless. Moreover, those characters most directly involved in the events may want to remain silent—"I dare not tell"—about the deeper implications and fuller truths of their experience.

8 Wharton experienced the dynamics of atrocity stories directly in her war-relief work when, in November 1914, a wealthy American woman made an unusual offer of funds to the *Foyer Franco-Belge*, a relief society for refugees that was closely associated with the American Hostels for Refugees that Wharton established. The large donation came with the gruesome stipulation that the *Foyer* produce a child mutilated by the Germans. Alan Price recounts how André Gide, working in the society's administration, was assigned the mission. But inquiries with journalists provided only false leads; Jean Cocteau could not fulfil his promise of an interview with a Red Cross nurse who supposedly knew about children who had had their right hands cut off; and when Gide was told about a similar atrocity in a Belgian village, a long wait for photographic evidence came to nothing. "Gide was finally forced to admit 'Not one of these statements could be proved,'" and Price concludes: "Like the contemporary legends told by 'a friend of a friend,' the stories of atrocities and mutilation could not be confirmed" (*End of Innocence* 31). To Gide's credit, the grim effort to produce the evidence that would have procured the financial reward for the charity went as far as it could, but no further, until arriving at its logical conclusion. Would another writer have been tempted to manufacture convincing proof for the sake of the good work that the donation could have ensured? The anecdote reads like a plotline worthy of Wharton's treatment. Working closely with Gide in the related war charities, Wharton would at least have considered the account of his pursuit as a cautionary reminder of the moral issues involved when humanitarian service, money, and war collide.

9 The odd condition imposed on the charitable offer also points to a psychological complexity in atrocity stories. Their grounding in partial truths, rumor, and myth suggests the role of the subconscious and the atavistic impulses at work in tales of mutilation, sexual violence, and pillage. In his study of popular fiction written under the influence of Allied propaganda, Patrick J. Quinn discusses one of the first American books to center its narrative on atrocities, specifically drawn from the Bryce Report. Frances Wilson Huard's memoir *My Home in the Field of Honor* (1916) relates what are framed as authentic scenes in which German soldiers loot and burn a village, kill children and

torture young women. "The details of the German barbarity are almost lovingly recounted," Quinn notes, "and the readers of these memoirs are made to feel that Huard was writing in an emotionally pent-up state and took pleasure in stirring up anti-German feelings" (40). This insight is reiterated in Trudi Tate's summary of how "both the propaganda of the Great War and some of the criticism which followed seem to articulate a *horror at pleasure of its own* of which the writing itself is unaware." She concludes: "This may be a further reason why atrocity stories were so fascinating, and so disturbing, and why they received so much attention" (61). Citing several examples from post-war investigations into Allied propaganda as well as propaganda texts themselves, Tate observes how the documents operate within a Freudian model of sexual repression and release, balanced between horror and fascination (48-50). Sado-sexual accounts of bodily mutilations, physical debasement, and domestic or somatic violations can be read as sensational routes to satisfy the public, whose restricted personal experience of warfare is enlarged by the insinuation and titillation of atrocity propaganda. Thus disgust and anxiety are paired with pleasure and temporary security in the psychic imagination.

10 In writing a war story based on the political, personal, and psychological foundations of atrocity discourse, Wharton relies on omission and related screening devices that refuse to make direct or explicit reference to the atrocities themselves. This reliance on suggestion and implication was noticed by the early reviewers of "Coming Home." "It is a grim story, vivid, of a kind which we know to have been only too commonplace, and with a tragedy the more appalling because it is only suggested, never fully told," observes the *New York Times Book Review* (Tuttleton 228)—with its "which we know to have been only too commonplace" serving to emphasize the way Wharton also uses the almost universally accepted truth of German atrocities in her manipulation of reader expectations. Similarly, the British perspective from the *Times Literary Supplement* proposes "There is no facility of sentiment here, and this grave and ominous little glimpse of provincial life, just revealed, immediately hidden, is unforgettable" (Tuttleton 229). The English *Spectator* follows this path in praising the author's facility with narrative reticence, declaring that "'Coming Home' is a painfully vivid story—all the more vivid for its suppressions and omissions," noting also how the plot turns on "a dreadful surmise" about a German atrocity and how "the act of vengeance in which the narrative closes wipes out the score but does not clear up the mystery" (Tuttleton 234). Francis Hackett in the *New Republic*, focusing more generally on Wharton's narrative style, asserts that the author "is dramatic hypodermically" (Tuttleton 235). Gerald Gould in the *New Statesman* follows a highly critical line with "Coming Home" but takes Wharton to task mainly for what he sees as the story's melodrama and use of "stage-property" and detailed description to cover the flaws in an inauthentic story. Tellingly, Gould zeroes in on a passage in which Wharton makes a passing reference to a youth being burned alive, an element that she probably included to both establish and deflect attention from the central—hypothetical—atrocity of sexual blackmail. Gould inserts a parenthetical query: "(Does Mrs. Wharton mean this case to be taken as authentic? If so, she would have done better to give her references: if not, she would have done better to omit the incident)" (Tuttleton 230). The question exposes atrocity stories' dual quality that turns partial truths into authenticated facts by appealing to an audience prepared and willing to believe. Because her readers were familiar with atrocity stories in the media and fiction and were prepared to accept voyeurism and scatology, the difficulty Wharton faced with "Coming Home" was in the development of a narrative that skilfully resists actually revealing an atrocity. While some contemporary critics appreciate the text merely for its

historical interest,[5] the structure of the narrative reveals something more compelling. By including subtexts that raise issues about women, class degeneration, patriarchy, and the nature of truth, Wharton found a way to produce an atrocity story and simultaneously challenge it as an established form and subject.

11 Concealing that aim from her readers becomes the unacknowledged aim of Wharton's use of layered focalization in the narrative. She frames the story with complex but precise perspectives and voices, guiding (or perhaps misdirecting) readers from the beginning through primary and secondary narrators who both see and tell of events as they unfold, so that the technique becomes part of the story and reinforces the epistemological questions it asks. Julie Olin-Ammentorp, in her comprehensive study of Wharton's war writings, gives the most thorough critical analysis available of "Coming Home." She describes the story as having "a Chinese-box sort of structure" (49), with its unnamed initiating narrator commenting externally about the American volunteer ambulance-driver H. Macy Greer, who in turn tells his story about the young French aristocrat Jean de Réchamp. The narrative technique might also be understood as archaeological layers of perspective, voice, and meaning, with an open structure beneath the third narrative layer, a fourth dimension containing stories of various civilians, relatives, soldiers, nuns, and others. Information is conveyed through speech, memory, letters, and the general hubbub of news, gossip, and guesswork. This refracted method serves to both conceal and distribute meaning, adding veils to already uncertain understanding.

12 The opening sentence of "Coming Home" signals how the imagination works on reality, and the first few paragraphs emphasize the hazards of trying to pin down what stories reveal: "The young men of our American Relief Corps are beginning to come back from the front with stories." The focus here is on the nature and function of stories and the way they contribute to the creation of what most people know about war and its most explicit effects. News from the battlezone for those far away from the front arrives fragmented and scattered, the narrator explains. All such information is unreliable on account both of its usually traumatic and uncertain origins and of its reinterpretation by eager, biased, and imaginative listeners. Wharton frames this core ambiguity carefully within the layered technique of the narrative. The secondary narrator, Greer, is neither sentimental nor falsely cinematic in his way of telling stories, but he "has the gift of making the thing told seem as true as if one had seen it" (26), the "as if" projecting both confidence and suspicion. The external narrator's criticism of Greer's "slovenly drawl" (26), characteristic of his generation of American youths, indicates that the style of the story will not be dramatic or sensational, but will depend instead on content and on what would become a key modernist technique of reader involvement in narrative construction, particularly through the use of omission. The atrocity genre is part of the framework because it too demands an imaginative contribution of readers. Thus, when Greer is complimented because "his eyes see so much that they make one see even what his foggy voice obscures" (26), the reader is invited into the obscurity as well as the light that surrounds this storyteller-guide. More accurately, the reader is reading a story about a story that tells a story about stories, as if listening in on the conversation that the unnamed (male) external narrator is having with Greer, who has been coaxed "to my rooms for dinner and a long cigar" (26). Having established the reader as eavesdropper and voyeur, Wharton can proceed to unravel the tale, with a complicit reader curious about a mysterious story, selected by an external narrator from Greer's otherwise inaccessible cache of frontline accounts.

13 The central plot involves Greer and the injured cavalry lieutenant Jean de Réchamp and their efforts to discover what has happened to Réchamp's family and to his fiancée, Yvonne Malo, after the Frenchman's village has been overrun by a German offensive. What thickens this plot is the steadily built presence-by-absence of the German officer Oberst Graf Benno von Scharlach, who (it is eventually confirmed after much hinting and foreshadowing) was in charge of the occupation of the village and occupied both the Réchamp château and at least the time and perhaps the bed of Mlle Malo over the course of two and a half days and three full nights. His surname is German for "scarlet" as well as "scarlet fever." Scharlach has a terrifying reputation as a ruthless commander, and pervasive stories about his brutality suggest infection and the threat German militarism poses for France and the United States. (His name is also too close to "Shylock" not to make the reader wonder what grisly payment he might demand.) When Greer and Réchamp eventually reach the village, isolated in the Vosges, their fears are heightened by the scenes of devastation that they have observed on their journey through the region and by war-shocked people relating their traumatic experiences, including the story noted above about the Germans burning a boy to death.

14 Much of this narrative is delivered through supposition and misdirection, and it becomes infused with imagery of ruin, connoting forces of change or new dilemmas to be faced. Réchamp's grandmother recounts how, when the enemy soldiers arrived bad-tempered on a hot day, they were given cooling cider and wine to drink by the servants on Yvonne Malo's instruction. "'Or so at least I was told,'" says the old lady (46). Applying standard tactics to confuse the enemy advance, the French had rubbed out the numbers on mile-stones and taken down sign-posts, so the region has become an open landscape that must be re-read and re-interpreted even by the locals. In the same way, wartime conditions create barriers to understanding, impose new standards of behaviour, and upset moral certainties. The church steeple of a nearby village no longer serves as a landmark, for the church, houses, and factory have all been flattened: the vanished church and gutted workplace represent the loss of moral compass, social routine, and class certainties that had previously ruled provincial life. An old woman known to Réchamp tells him what happened. "It was one of the most damnable stories I've heard yet," the listener Greer remarks: "Put together the worst of the typical horrors and you'll have a fair idea of it. Murder, outrage, torture: Scharlach's programme seemed to be fairly comprehensive" (41). Allowing for Greer's hardening from war-zone experience and his sardonic tone, the words nevertheless contain some slippery phrasing ("I've heard yet," "seemed") and formulaic blocks ("typical horrors," "murder, outrage, torture") that require completion by the reader. Further complication is added by the old grandmother when she remembers Scharlach's orderly showing her his silver-mounted flute and his paintbox and says, "before he left he sat down on my door-step and made a painting of the ruins" (41)—perhaps as a sadistic memento or as sign of war's destruction of the past, but certainly a vignette that jumbles expectations and invites analysis. Wharton relies on the effect of atrocity tales to create anxiety with the aid of the reader's imagination. As Greer and Réchamp travel closer to the Frenchman's home they must abandon their motor ambulance and move down the scale of human transport. On a horse-drawn cart driven by a half-crazed old woman, they are told "They're all like that where Scharlach's been," so that primitive fears are loaded in the space of the two-wheeled trap, a "crazy chariot" (41). Scharlach's name scrawled across a door-panel evokes terror through implication, as the journey is conducted following the "devil's traces" (32) towards what is assumed will

be the main exposition of his bestiality. The words are traced into the two observers' brains like horror itself, with enough evidence of actual destruction to encourage assumptions about evil motives, even though "scorched earth" military expediency and battlefield necessity—rather than malevolence or revenge—might be equally valid explanations for the ruins observed.

15 The psychological impact of the atrocity story within Wharton's text is built through this compression of imagined fears and on external details that suggest but do not confirm. The natural human desire to seek truth and the resulting failure to uncover it amid uncertainties is also emphasized in the background information provided about Yvonne Malo. Her gossip-filled history has parallels with the rumours that support the legends about Scharlach. Her father was a French painter and her mother was Polish, making her past doubly dubious. Left an orphan at the age of ten, she was placed in the care of a guardian, the Marquis de Corvenaire, who "really, as far as one knows, brought his ward up rather decently" (33) with the help of his maiden sister (who later went "dotty" [34]). Some scandal is attached to this arrangement. When the Marquis dies and leaves some money to Yvonne, gossip almost prevents Réchamp from obtaining parental permission to marry her. Wharton presents the scenario with dashes to indicate pauses and invidious inflections, and with ellipses to indicate silences and innuendo, "'Things in the air ... that blow about...'" (37). Réchamp's grandmother "unpacked her bag—a heap of vague insinuations, baseless conjectures, village tattle" that nevertheless forms "a slander built of adamant" (37). Ironically—considering he is the victim of presumptions later in the narrative—Réchamp disproves the rumours about his fiancée by discrediting a servant and housekeeper involved in the stories and ridiculing "the whole flimsy fable" (37), even though Greer's account provides no clear proof of the Marquis' or Yvonne's innocence. Thus Wharton implies a link between the power of gossip here and the impact of atrocity stories, although the reader may only subliminally make that connection.

16 Yvonne Malo also pulls the text into underground currents. She seems a risky choice for an heir to an old estate and title. After receiving her inheritance as a teenager, she went to Paris to study and play music, take up painting, and lead the life of an independent New Woman of outspoken views and bohemian airs. Yet, Greer's recounting of what Réchamp tells him about her takes on a fable-like quality: she is described as an ugly duckling in her youth who changes into the dark beauty Réchamp falls in love with because she is not "the traditional type" (35). Greer speculates: "think how she must have shaken up such a man's inherited view of things! [...] she turned his world topsy-turvey" (35). Wharton gives a sympathetic portrait of this young woman who "behaves with the independence of a married woman" (35) and holds advanced views on divorce, in particular when confronted with women with provincial, traditional outlooks. Yvonne could certainly embarrass the Réchamp family through her outspokenness, and in contradictory ways she is both silenced in the story's central atrocity motif and liberated from her in-laws' inherited prejudices.

17 The unanswered question at the heart of "Coming Home" is whether or not, in order to protect the Réchamp family and their estate, Yvonne slept with Scharlach. Greer summarizes the conclusion of his and Réchamp's enquiries: "There were little discrepancies of detail, and gaps in the narrative here and there; but all the household, from the astute ancestress to the last bewildered pantry-boy, were at one in saying that Mlle Malo's coolness and courage had saved the château and the village" (53). The "gaps" are the places in which atrocity narratives thrive, though, and Yvonne's reticence to

discuss the circumstances or disclose her role in subduing Scharlach and his men arouses Réchamp and the reader's suspicions. "What was it the girl's silence was crying out to me?" Greer asks himself, his silent listener-narrator, and thereby the reader. These suspicions are a form of titillation, since the subject of the enquiries is the stuff of pornography and so voyeurism.

18 Resorting to punctuation to obfuscate imagined sexual acts, Wharton inserts a hurried dialogue between Greer and Yvonne:

> "I don't want him [Réchamp] to hear—yet—about all the horrors."
> "The horrors? I thought there had been none here."
> "All around us—" Her voice became a whisper. "Our friends ... our neighbours ... every one ... " (51)

19 She could be protecting her fiancé from a darker truth, or perhaps only from a renewal of rumors about her and concealed sexual license. "'I know the stories that are about,' she tells Réchamp, '[...] since we had been so happy as to be spared, it seemed useless to dwell on what has happened elsewhere.'" His reply—"'Damn what happened elsewhere! I don't yet know what happened here'"—fuses external atrocities and inner fears, as "elsewhere" becomes "here," and what is known about Scharlach in other places becomes what he is expected to have been in Yvonne's company. Her chastity and his patriarchal lineage are the real possessions that Réchamp fears lost, as he says "'I'm blind with joy . . . or should be, if only . . . '" (52). The outspoken woman refuses to speak, turning aside assumption and rumor about Scharlach, despite Réchamp's insistence that "'the man's name is a curse and an abomination. Wherever he went he spread ruin'" (52). In Réchamp's eyes Yvonne's name is cursed by association and she responds: "'So they say. Mayn't there be a mistake? Legends grow up so quickly in these dreadful times. Here'—she looked about her again on the peaceful scene—'here he behaved as you see. For heaven's sake be content with that!'" (52). In these conversations, Wharton combines the themes of sexuality and heredity with the workings of the atrocity narrative, using gaps and uncertainty to explore hidden socio-psychological anxieties. Her story's layered narrative also opens up questions about how moral positions might shift in extreme conditions, and about the way truth is determined when opposing perceptions of already ambiguous facts collide.

20 The possibility of a relationship between Oberst von Scharlach and Yvonne Malo represents a threat to the continuation of the Réchamp hereditary line for two chief reasons. First, references to the decimation of "good local stock" confirm that the Réchamp genetic pool has become stagnant—"I never saw a completer ruin," Greer reports (39). Moreover, Jean de Réchamp's parents are described as "a grey-haired lady knitting with stiff fingers, an old gentleman with a high nose and a weak chin" (43), of whom their son explains "'there never were such helpless beings'" (31). Decay has set in, for the grandmother is still a "wonderful specimen" (45). Wharton's reading of Darwin and Spencer and her literary applications of genetic and racial theories have been well established by critics such as Elizabeth Ammons and Cecelia Tichi. In "Coming Home" the title suggests conflicting tensions at work in this context, in that the concept of home becomes as unstable as the mixed inheritance that Yvonne brings into the Réchamp family. The aristocratic line is in need of renewal and she can provide cross-breeding and rejuvenation. Barely holding on through hereditary ruin, the family relies on well-bred composure and manners. Greer observes how they "had the command of the grand gesture—had *la ligne*" (44), but they lack control of their destiny. "'We're very *province*,'" Réchamp admits, with generational inbreeding compounded by inactive intellects and

self-imposed confinement to their château (27). There, nothing new has happened for decades, until the war breaks out; and Réchamp imagines his father then repeating "'One must act—one must act!' and sitting in his chair and doing nothing" (32).

21 The only traces left by Scharlach are his name and the reports of his misdeeds. Yet he incarnates the dark sexual threat of war and thus constitutes a potential rival to Réchamp in Yvonne's reproductive line. Indeed, Scharlach and Yvonne are allied in several ways in the text. Both are described as "dark" on more than one occasion each (29, 40, 43, 55), usually a mark of racial otherness or foreign influence in Wharton's work, and probably a link to nocturnal intrigues here. She is called "proud" (38) and he is "basely proud" (55). They share musical talent, and in their first encounter she plays the piano—Stravinsky and Moussorgsky, suggesting lively inventiveness and modern sensibility—while he sings in a fine baritone (47). The grandmother's account of this partly follows one given to her by Réchamp's sister Simone, so the reader gets the story fourth-hand. This device makes the facts seem more elusive and obscures the subtext of sexual and racial transgression, but it also leaves its mark: the grandmother believes that the German captain's name is "Charlot," and while she notes the oddity of the French name she opines that "it probably accounts for his breeding" (48).

22 Having established Scharlach's suitability as a "man of the world" (48) in the grandmother's limited view, and implied his mating compatibility with Yvonne's foreign background and aesthetic temperament, Wharton packs sexual metaphor into her subtext concerning heredity. In the three nights that the Germans occupy the village, Scharlach and his comrades dine with Yvonne in the château and play (or rather have been "making") music with her afterwards "for half the night, it seemed" (54), with Wharton including the uncertainty of the added comment clause, "it seemed,"[6] and the silent invitation to wonder what they did for the other half of the night. Moreover, Greer observes, "By daylight, decidedly, Mlle Malo was less handsome than in the evening [...] Yes, she was less effective by day" (49), thereby opening up further conjecture about her sexual proclivity. She was not educated in a convent, and the grandmother admits "'there is something to be said for the new way of bringing up girls'" because "'The convent doesn't develop character'" (46)—the character necessary to make one's own moral choices, to adapt to urgent circumstances, and not to be ruined by guilt. Earlier in the narrative, Greer meets "some jolly Sisters of Charity" who have saved their hospice by facing down the Germans, thus adumbrating Yvonne's bold action. "'It's a pity those Sisters of Charity can't marry ... '" Greer asserts (31). Yvonne's fiancé is unfavorably compared to Scharlach, suggesting the sexual potency of the German, whom Yvonne has "placated and disarmed" (53). While Réchamp has a lame leg from a battle wound and is therefore *hors de combat* and relegated to driving an ambulance, Scharlach's facial scar indicates his warrior status. Greer and Réchamp's dangerous and unsettling journey into the disfigured Vosges landscape takes the form of an entry into Freudian carnal mysteries, and thereafter in the narrative Freudian symbolism accumulates. As a sign that Yvonne has protected the family line from external penetration, the steepled village church remains erect and the well-rooted old elm tree in the churchyard will shade future generations of Réchamps (42-43). Yet, family salvation has come at some cost, it seems, as Jean de Réchamp's question metonymically suggests: "'Do you see that breach in the wall, down there behind the trees? It's the only scratch the place has got'" (48). In the final section of the text, Scharlach lies wounded but takes his pain Spartan-like, with barely a moan (55). By contrast, in addition to the connotations of the Frenchman's leg

wound, Réchamp's impotence is further implied by the suggestion that it is he who has disabled the ambulance by creating a leak in the gasoline tank.

23 These sexual allusions and symbols underpin the meta-narrative about how war upsets established hierarchies of action and thought, and redirects social and psychic energies. Tropes of silence, opaque vision, and ambiguous speech contribute to a sense of confusion and possibility—also a feature of atrocity narratives, which, almost by definition, create new realities out of threadbare facts. These literary devices help Wharton to build multiple layers of meaning upon the atrocity-genre foundation of her text. In addition to exploring the potential of the new woman (possessing independence of thought and autonomous selfhood), repositioning women's sexuality within war, and challenging easy assumptions about national stereotypes, the text also questions the status quo of patriarchal inheritance, the worth of static traditions, and even the viability of fixed epistemological beliefs, as the reader comes to question not only the nature of truth but also the unreliable sources of knowledge.

24 The final section of "Coming Home might be interpreted as a retreat from such radical and ambitious aims. Réchamp's perhaps calculated subterfuge to take revenge by killing his rival could be seen as the re-establishment of aristocratic privilege and patriarchal control. Olin-Ammentorp interprets the (unproven) act as a symbolic reclaiming of Yvonne's chastity (53). In a neat twist, Wharton has Scharlach suffering "atrociously" (55) from an abdominal wound and therefore apparently paying in kind for his supposed atrocities and cruel appetites, while, after his enemy's death, Réchamp is restored "to a state of wholesome stolidity" (57).

25 However, the final dramatic scene relies on enigmas that cannot be solved, listed by Greer at the end. He has possession of the German's papers, so how could Réchamp have known it was Scharlach they were carrying in the ambulance? There is no evidence to prove that Oberst Scharlach did not die suddenly from his wounds while the Frenchman stayed behind alone with him during Greer's absence. Nor is there any proof that Réchamp knew that the tank was leaking before they set out from the frontlines. These elements are like the mysteries of a ghost story (the *Xingu* collection contains two)[7]—or like the untraceable facts of an atrocity story. Furthermore, the plot coincidences that "Coming Home" utilizes also suggest the artificiality of cinema scenarios or fantasy tales: Scharlach just happens to be the wounded soldier placed in the ambulance (55); Réchamp manages to be assigned to Greer's ambulance (30); they are delayed in the undamaged village because some newly wounded French soldiers could not yet be carried back with them (48); and on the way back to Paris they are diverted to the area of heavy fighting where Scharlach is found. These coincidences are in keeping with the exaggerations that propel all atrocity stories. In the final section of the text, the impression of Scharlach is likewise unreal. His body and his name become an unexplainable narrative, staring at the reader as Greer shines a pocket-lamp on Scharlach's face and, making no mention of the German's scar, finds that "his look was inscrutable." And a few minutes later, "I turned the light on him, but he lay perfectly still, lips and lids shut, making no sign" (55). With these words, the text acknowledges the depths and limitations of language, unable to speak to or see into a vengeful heart or past the border of death.

26 Wharton's surprisingly rich subtexts, then, playing with and beneath the atrocity narrative, are engaged with the shake-up in Western society and thought that were the result of the First World War. The subterranean narratives not only involve the new woman's reinvigoration of old class and gender structures, but also ask questions about

how new and old ways might be reconciled, and what problems remain. Within the ambiguities of atrocity tales and complexities of social reconfigurations, Wharton also asks moral questions about what is right and wrong when rapid change is imposed and choices must be made. She leaves her characters wondering how to return to the safety of home as a secure set of ideas. Her text also places the ruins of social and literary preconceptions before the reader and says—much as Henry James twirls perspective in *What Maisie Knew* or Melville poses his question about the enigmatic white whale —"Read them if you dare."

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NOTES

1. "Coming Home" was first published in the December 1915 issue of *Scribner's Magazine* and reprinted in *Xingu and Other Stories* the following year.

2. Niall Ferguson summarizes the current historiographical position: "Although the Entente press wildly exaggerated what went on in Belgium, there is no question that the German army *did* commit 'atrocities' there in 1914"—involving the execution of civilians, including women and priests, the use of civilians as human shields during battle, the razing of numerous villages, and at least one case of a young woman being bayoneted to death. There were also several cases of Germans committing rape in occupied France (246). A more specific study by Ruth Harris, focused on the conflicting imagery associated with French women and the children born from rape after the German invasion of France, examines some attributes of atrocity evidence and stories that closely relate to Wharton's text. Harris notes that French and Belgian women interviewed about their experience of brutality by German soldiers characteristically remained silent or obtuse about the details of that experience (178-179). German soldiers were depicted in testimony, media reports, and propaganda as two types of barbarians—either callous and calculating Prussian officers or bovine and rapacious Bavarian rank-and-file troops (182). Moreover, Harris argues, France's anxieties about how to deal with raped women and the so-called *enfants du barbare* expressed the shame of French males who could not protect their wives and daughters. An underlying crisis of masculinity, therefore, results from the threat of German territorial and bodily penetration, with its symbolic and genealogical challenge to French patrimony—especially if considered through contemporary updating of the theory of telegony, which asserted "that the German seed would remain within the vaginal mucus and would produce antibodies to retard or even prevent fertilization by French sperm" (196), and would thus produce a permanent reminder of French weakness and an indelible stain on French national ideals based on patrilineal authority, stable family bonds, and maternal care and devotion.

3. For a critical-theoretical analysis of this material, see William Blazek "Trench Vision."

4. Quinn highlights the irony in Germany's relative failure to match the success that Allied propaganda had in broadcasting convincing atrocity stories, considering how most historians conclude that atrocity tales began in Germany following the armed resistance of Belgian civilians and trained snipers. Mindful of similar tactics employed by their adversaries during the Franco-Prussian War, German soldiers in 1914 overreacted to this threat during what was intended to be a lightning advance through neutral Belgium (27).

5. See Price's "Edith Wharton's War Story" for an interpretation of "Coming Home" that accepts this kind of historical limitation.

6. Leech and Svartvik explain that comment clauses "are so called because they do not so much add to the information in a sentence as comment on its truth, the manner of saying it or the attitude of the speaker" (216-217).

7. "Kerfol" and "The Triumph of Night."

ABSTRACTS

« Coming Home » est une des rares nouvelles écrites par Edith Wharton sur la Première Guerre mondiale. Cette nouvelle explore les moyens mis en œuvre pour représenter la guerre et construire un récit de guerre en s’appuyant sur un type de texte bien connu, le récit d’atrocités. Dans une œuvre écrite plus tard, « Writing a War Story », Wharton fait la satire des publications populaires en temps de guerre à travers le portrait d’une femme de lettres sans envergure à qui le responsable d’une revue demande « une bonne histoire de tranchée bien émouvante, se terminant par un retour à la maison... et une scène de Noël, si vous y arrivez ». La nouvelle « Coming Home » est bien éloignée de cette caricature. Wharton y recourt à l’ellipse et au non-dit pour faire sentir les ambiguïtés de la violence et les horreurs de la guerre. En empruntant des éléments au récit d’atrocités et en introduisant dans son texte une multiplicité de perspectives et de voix, Wharton crée un texte lisible à plusieurs niveaux qui exige une interprétation active du lecteur. Cet article revient d’abord sur le récit d’atrocités comme genre et sur l’intérêt que lui accorda Wharton, puis il propose une analyse détaillée du texte. Une des conclusions majeures est la suivante : en insérant entre les lignes du récit d’atrocités des questionnements sur les femmes, la décadence, le patriarcat et la nature de la vérité, Wharton réussit à utiliser et à remettre en question le genre de la nouvelle d’atrocités.

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