The Dilettante and His Muse: The Idea of Female Authorship in Edith Wharton's "The Dilettante"

Yuki Watanabe

Edith Wharton's "The Dilettante" was published in *Harper's Magazine* in 1903 and collected in *The Descent of Man and Other Stories* in 1904. This short story is important in understanding Wharton's novels because it poses the essential theme that concerns her concept of artistic authorship: the relationship between the dilettante and his muse. In this paper, I use the term "authorship" in the modernistic sense of word, thus being the omniscient subject of representation and the impersonal artificer of reality, the concept that is associated with masculine notion of subjectivity. This little known story's importance cannot be overlooked because the characterization of Thursdale is a prelude to the dilettantes in Wharton's major works such as Lawrence Selden in *The House of Mirth* (1905), Ralph Marvell in *The Custom of the Country* (1913), and Newland Archer in *The Age of Innocence* (1920). Not only does "The Dilettante" offer one of the first portraits of the Whartonian dilettante male artist, a persona which is similar to "the bachelor," typical of the nineteenth century realist literature, but also it sets the archetype of an asymmetrical relationship between the dilettante male artist and the woman who is made into his work of art, which is the subject matter with which Wharton strives for the possible expression of female authorship. Using the imagery of conflict between subject and confining space, social appearances and sexual emotions, Wharton captures the misogynistic nature of authorship in the portrait of the dilettante, and poses questions about female authorship in relation to the dilettante.

The first part of the story provides a detailed portrait of "the dilettante" and his sense of authorship. Thursdale's actions are introduced into the story with the phrase "as usual," which is "his own qualification of the act" (139). To maintain the usual is to avoid the unpredictable and to keep everything under control, and this principle extends to his relationship with women. Thursdale desires to control women to remain on the superior level of observer without

having any substantial interaction with them. This notion is connected directly to his sense of artistic authorship, which is evident in metaphors he uses to explain his relationship with Mrs. Vervain that allude to artistic creation. Thursdale takes the "uncontrollable pride" of an artist in seeing Mrs. Vervain, who has been "the finest material to work on" for him. With Thursdale's training in "the rare art of taking things for granted," Mrs. Vervain learns to control her emotions thus to tame her "surprisingly crude" self that would risk of making "the most awkward inferences" or of "recklessly undressing her emotions" (139).

Satisfied with this woman, who took him "seven years to form" under the "discipline of his reticence and evasions" and who now is polished into "a work of art that was passing out of possession" (139), Thursdale works on young and innocent Miss Gaynor, whose "candor," "directness," and "lack of complications" is as "rejuvenating" as "a holiday in the Canadian woods" (140). In Miss Gaynor, Thursdale finds his muse, a relief for his "crumpled dignity." She is the source of inspiration and outlet for the "primitive emotions," which he did not invest in his "sentimental economy" practiced in the creation of Mrs. Vervain. Miss Gaynor tells Thursdale about Mrs. Vervain, "To be so kind to me, how she must have liked you!" (140). This comment is deeply satisfying to Thursdale's artistic pride for it means his complete success. He exploits emotional investment from Mrs. Vervain without giving anything in return, and his new muse gives confirmation to his artistic talent, as well as to the success of his sentimental economy.

Thursdale's misogyny is revealed when he reminisces that his commitment to women has been a "mistake," as tiresome as a "long walk back from a picnic when one has to carry all the crockery one has finished using." To avoid "the pitfalls of sentiment," he develops "a science of evasion" in which Mrs. Vervain is "a mere implement of the game." His notion of "getting out of high-colored season of youth" protects him from being questioned regarding his own identity. By controlling his space, and by avoiding the actual relationship with women, he can safely remain in the closet of "chiaro-scuro sensation where every half-tone has its value" (139). Masculinity in Thursdale is also apparent in the geographical sense of space and movement. His "usual" way leads him from his club, the space reserved for male companionship, to Mrs. Vervain's drawing-room, the place where his work of art is confined and to which he reserves the right to access "the main portal" open to him, while never being dismissed from "the back door" (139).

Yet it is obvious that Thursdale's authorship is presented as a false and fragile concept in the sense that it produces nothing—it serves only to blur his own identity, and however misogynic it is, its validity depends entirely on the existence of a woman who accepts her status as artwork and serves as his accomplice in order to conceal his impotence as a creator. The portrait we have seen so far is that of the false dilettante artist who confirms his authority over describing reality by controlling women. Thursdale is at the prime of his authorship when he is on his way to the space where his work of art is confined to give Mrs. Vervain the final evaluation as her creator, the evaluation that was inspired by the other woman.

In the latter part of the story the restrictions imposed by the dilettante upon his works of art are portrayed in detail from the women's points of view. The sentence that introduces Mrs. Vervain gives a clear picture of the asymmetrical relationship between her and Thursdale: "Mrs. Vervain was at home—as usual" (140). While Thursdale's "usual" assumption of his freedom includes the right to approach Mrs. Vervain's place whenever he wants to, Mrs. Vervain is always expected to be at home, waiting for Thursdale to show up at any moment.

This image of confinement leads to the typical Whartonian topos, the drawing-room. The drawing-room carries a special meaning for Wharton; indeed, this image makes her nonfiction account of her own figurative birth as author. In *A Backward Glance*, her autobiography published in 1934, Wharton introduces an episode from her childhood.

> My first attempt (at the age of eleven) was a novel, which began: "'Oh, how do you do, Mrs. Brown?' said Mrs. Tompkins. 'If only I had known you were going to call I should have tidied up the drawing-room.'" Timorously I submitted this to my mother, and never shall I forget the sudden drop of my creative frenzy when she returned it with icy comment: "Drawing-rooms are always tidy." (839)

This dialogue is often quoted as an example of the conflict between the artistic desire to express oneself and the restrictions that oppress it, a theme that Wharton would struggle with throughout her career.[1] The idea expressed in this episode, in which two women in a drawing-room are talking about two other women in a drawing-room, is that the greatest problem women face in the course of establishing artistic authorship is the social restriction imposed on the female gender. The moral given to young Wharton is that women are not

only prohibited to leave their drawing-room untidy, but also are not allowed to write openly about it.

At the same time we should take into account that this autobiography is highly fictional and that Wharton carefully selected the episodes that show her concept of authorship, and there is a clear sense of misogyny in her choice of the image of the mother as a hindrance. Throughout *A Backward Glance*, Wharton repeatedly reminisces about her mother and her governess's indifference, if not their hostility, to her creativity and intellectual curiosity. Even though she was opposed to confinement of any sort that interfered with her artistic creation, Wharton never wished her drawing-room to collapse, for her major and primal idea of authorship is as craft, with control as its principle. "The Beatrice Palmato Fragment" (Rpt. in Wolff 205-7), an unpublished piece that Wharton wrote "in order to articulate fully to herself the precise nature, feeling and history of [an] incestuous experience which was to lie behind and to color the actual narrative" (Auchincloss 544), explains her basic technique of constructing a narrative. In her novels Wharton shows the world beyond the tidy drawing-room by hinting of the vast world of feverish emotions that lay behind the action of the tale. The realm of emotion and senses should not be visible on the surface, however it should always be present beneath the narrative to add depth to the story.

Wharton's experiment to vivisect the dilettante continues in the latter part of the story, but now from the viewpoint of women, those who so far were only described by Thursdale. With Mrs. Vervain's "first false note" which breaks the "general harmony of circumstances" (140), Thursdale's authority starts to collapse. Mrs. Vervain ventures to explain Thursdale the "difference" which the "break in continuity" (141) in his visit created, hinting that he cannot control the situation any more. Even the sophisticated repartee they exchange "as usual" — "Isn't it my hour? [...] Unless it's some one else's?" [...] "Mine, merely." (140) — suddenly gains deep significance, for in this statement Mrs. Vervain regains control over her own time.

Even more, Miss Gaynor's letter, an actual piece of writing created by a woman who is supposed to be his source of inspiration, directly challenges his authorship. Although Miss Gaynor does not appear in the novel, her letter breaks the superficial harmony and rhythm that Thursdale tried to maintain, so that the asymmetry in the relations between Thursdale and women surfaces. Mrs. Vervain discloses that he is not in control over his "materials" any more: "There may be a letter at your rooms" (141). Miss Gaynor, whom he had seen

off at the station, had moved out of the space and time that Thursdale had assigned to her. Moreover, she had penetrated his space by actually visiting Mrs. Vervain, and by having her letter delivered to his personal address.

All the elements Thursdale tries to conceal under his controlled appearance start to surface. Thursdale loses his stability as he loses his sense of control over the space that used to be indistinguishable from its possessor, Mrs. Vervain, who shared an "atmosphere of tacit intelligence" (140) with furniture. He moves "nervously" around the room, from one chair to another, finally leaning against the chimney, cornered in confinement. Thursdale starts losing his words. He remains silent because his words and thoughts "clung together inextricably." He flounders, stammers, and cries "audaciously." He bursts out the direct query— "won't you explain what you mean?" (141). Thursdale is forced to ask the women to define his own identity. He is strained to beg for the meaning of a word from a woman who has been his source of inspiration, transmitted by his creation.

Miss Gaynor visited Mrs. Vervain, to find out the nature of the friendship between him and Mrs. Vervain. According to Mrs. Vervain, what Miss Gaynor wanted to know was Thursdale's "past," thus "if anything had happened" (141) between Mrs. Vervain and him. The issues of sexual and emotional oppression surfaces at this direct inquiry.

> The words were so much cruder than any that had ever passed between them that the color rose to her face; but she held his startled gaze.
> "You know girls are not quite as unsophisticated as they used to be. Are you surprised that such an idea should occur to her?"
> His own color answered hers; it was the only reply that came to him. (141)

Facing these "crude" words of Miss Gaynor that challenge his misogyny and by implication, his heterosexual identity, Thursdale and Mrs. Vervain's responses are not related in words, but in bodily reactions. The protagonists' corporeal reaction are carefully placed in the passage so that they attract the reader's attention to their bodies and the emotions that are hidden beneath their social appearances, as well as to the vast possibility that lies beneath the main narrative, stressing the depth and the importance of the event.

What occurs in this passage is the transition of authority from Thursdale to Mrs. Vervain. While Thursdale completely loses his words, Mrs. Vervain holds

"his gaze" and continues to speak in words created in the authorship of Miss Gaynor. Thursdale, losing control over the situation, "give[s] it up" (142) thus abandons his authority to Mrs. Vervain who speaks in Miss Gaynor's words. He holds his words and now waits for "the dawn of revelation in her gaze" (141). He is now the mere listener who waits for the disclosure about the truth and the "unpardonable offence" committed by him.

> "The exact truth. If I had only known." She broke off with a beseeching tenderness, "won't you believe that I would still have lied for you?"
> "Lied for me? Why on earth should you have lied for either of us?"
> "To save you—to hide you from her to the last! As I've hidden you from myself all these years!" She stood up with a sudden tragic import in her movement. "You believe me capable of that, don't you? If I had only guessed—but I have never known a girl like her; she had the truth out of me with a spring" (142).

"The exact truth" that Miss Gaynor had questioned was "clear outlines" and "definitions" (142) of Thursdale's self, closeted in "penumbra" which is maintained by his control of social appearances. Miss Gaynor insists on "a man with his past" and wants to make clear whether he ever felt "love or indifference" (143) towards Mrs. Vervain. Upon finding out that she only has been Thursdale's friend, Miss Gaynor condemns Thursdale's misogynistic identity, and thus his "self" which was to be saved and hidden from women. Miss Gaynor also condemns Thursdale's authorship, saying that what he believes to be his art is indeed selfish exploitation of women's emotion. Thursdale desperately tries to reestablish his authorship by claiming that "a man's past is his own!" a powerless claim compared to Mrs. Vervain's answers — "and not of woman's who shared it" (141) — it puts Thursdale's authorship in context and nullifies the authority of his words. Now authorship is in the hands of Miss Gaynor, who captures Thursdale in her words.

> "The truth that you and I had never—"
> "Had never—never in all in these years! Oh, she knew why— she measured us both in a flash. She didn't suspect me of having haggled with you— her words pelted me like hail. 'He just took what he wanted— sifted and sorted you to suit his tastes. Burnt out the gold and left a heap of cinders. And you let him— you let yourself be cut in bits'— she mixed

> her metaphors a little— 'be cut in bits, and used or discarded, while all the while every drop of blood in you belonged to him! But he's Shylock— and you have bled to death of the pound of flesh he has cut out of you.' But she despises me the most, you know— far the most— " Mrs. Vervain ended. (142)

As shown in the quote above, Mrs. Vervain carries these words out with hesitation, because she is forced to produce narrative for her creator who "had never asked her to explain anything" (142) and Miss Gaynor's condemnation is equally for herself who "would have lied" using herself as a work of art to protect Thursdale's authority. Mrs. Vervain knows that Miss Gaynor "hates" her for she had accepted to have a subjugated status in Thursdale's misogynistic authorship, and furthermore she worked as an accomplice who protected the dilettante from any women's invasion—that from this young girl as well as from herself.

The asymmetrical relationship between Thursdale and Mrs. Vervain resembles that of John Marcher and May Bartram in Henry James's "The Beast in the Jungle" (1903) the short story that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick examines in detail and gives the abundance of evidence of the homophobic nature in male authorship (182-212). Taking into consideration that "The Dilettante" was published just after "The Beast in the Jungle," this story can also be read as a form of Wharton's dialogical response to the James's work.[2] It adds a dimension to our understanding of both writers, for Wharton addresses the same matter James was concerned with and somewhat gives a clearer picture of misogynic nature of literary authorship.

Is "The Dilettante" a story about Miss Gaynor, a new-born artist who refuses to be a false muse, and establishes female authorship and achieves a triumphant victory over the false authorship of the dilettante and his accomplice, with the praise of the heterosexual morality as its implication? Wharton does not give a clear answer, since however the story has been driven forward by Miss Gaynor's words, evidence of the existence of her letter is never given in the narrative, and whether she actually visited Mrs. Vervain or not is never assented. When Thursdale leaves the room to face his "punishment," — the disclosure of his identity and the loss of his authorship — Mrs. Vervain makes a statement that gives the story another twist: "She shook her head with a slight laugh. 'There will be no letter'" (143). This statement throws the reader into a state of indecision, for it reverses the certainty that we will finish reading

the story as the story of Miss Gaynor's victory as the female writer.

Hildegard Hoeller also reads this story as "critical, even feminist, commentary on the ideal of an 'artistic economy'" (20) and referring to Wharton's autobiographical relationship to the "dilettantes" such as Walter Berry and Morton Fullerton, she argues that Mrs. Vervain's fate represents that of woman who is sacrificed herself to the dilettante's "sentimental economy," and Wharton expresses her own critique of Thursdale's dilettante art in the voice of Miss Gaynor. While I find Hoeller's argument very compelling, it seems to me that the female authorship represented in this story is not as definite as Hoeller says it is. What if there has been and will be no "letter" at all? If the young woman writing about a man does not exist in the first place, and if the whole story has been a fiction created by Mrs. Vervain, who remains defeated in confinement, then the story gains an entirely different outlook.

At this point, Mrs. Vervain surfaces as the woman who has gained true authorship. There is an intricately entangled sense of entrapment and freedom is in the nature of female authorship captured in the figure of Mrs. Vervain. Mrs. Vervain's would have created an account of her relationship with Thursdale, and in fact portrays herself not as a triumphant artist but as an accomplice who sacrifices herself to the dilettante's plan. The female authorship of Mrs. Vervain is doubly entangled with the sense of entrapment and with the oppression of the masculine authorship. She becomes a creator of Miss Gaynor as a woman writer, who is leaving by train—the woman who is escaping in artificial speed from the oppression of the dilettante, while she remains confined in the drawing-room. Moreover, she is begging the now powerless dilettante to punish her for going beyond her commission—by soliciting him to find out the truth about the letter, so that she herself "shan't be wasted" (143). As Thursdale, the defeated dilettante, declines this offer and leaves the room forever to read the letter, the woman who supposedly won authorship from him faces the "dreadful emptiness" (143) of her drawing-room. In this scene, female authorship is presented as something intertwined deeply with male authority and the confinement of female gender. Wharton thus blurs the question of whether Mrs. Vervain is a failed accomplice of the dilettante or the triumphant female author who refuses to be a false piece of art.

The indeterminable ending of this story shows that for Wharton the idea of female authorship could not have been one side of a simple binarism to oppose to conventional authorship; instead, she will struggle to find a way of coming in terms with female authorship in her novels, in examining the variations of

relationships between the dilettante and his muse.

Notes

[1] This scene is often quoted and discussed in connection with Wharton's idea of authorship. Cynthia Griffin Wolff interprets this scene as an example of a dysfunctional mother-child relationship that oppressed young Wharton's creativity (15). In *The Social Construction of American Realism*, Amy Kaplan analyzes this scene as Wharton's self-declaration as a professional author, rejecting of status the lady of leisure (69).

[2] Stanley J. Kozikowski examines "The Dilettante" and James's "Two Faces" (1899) focusing on the compositional affinity of two writers, and concludes that Wharton, frustrated with the charge of being an imitation of James, employed the narrative technique similar to that of James yet succeeded in revealing the scheming concealed in James's novel.

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