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Emily J. Orlando, *Edith Wharton and the Visual Arts* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007, $29.95). Pp. xiii + 250. ISBN 0 8173 5552 9.

In her autobiography, *A Backward Glance*, Edith Wharton has much to say about her love of books, such as her intellectual "Awakeners" Goethe, Walt Whitman, Charles Darwin, and Robert Browning, but she reveals little about her taste in painting and the visual arts. As Emily J. Orlando contends in her excellent study *Edith Wharton and the Visual Arts*, however, Wharton had an extensive knowledge of the visual arts, one she used in her fiction to reveal her culture's limited – and limiting – vision of women. Through allusions to art familiar to her audience, Wharton critiqued her culture's stifling idealization of women and created characters whose very existence served as a means of arguing against its limitations.

As Orlando demonstrates in a series of careful readings, Wharton's principal targets were the artists of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (PRB), especially Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Morris. Combining ostensibly spiritual themes with a decidedly sensual subject matter, PRB paintings such as Rossetti's *Beata Beatrix* focussed on women as fleshly objects whose passivity was part of their erotic appeal. In arguing against the "oversexed palette of the PRB" (60), Wharton challenges the idea that passive "sleeping women" (62) or a dying woman – from Poe's perspective, the best subject of all – should represent the culture's highest form of ideal beauty. In the process of being idealized, women are stripped of individuality and the power to resist; in effect, they are "killed into art" (81).

Wharton sought to counteract this process throughout her career, portraying it as a ritualized conflict in which male characters attempt to cast women as muses or objects of idealized representation and female characters try various strategies to avoid being enshrined into art. Although early stories show women as imprisoned by art, Orlando contends that later fiction features women who "use art to their advantage" (56). For example, in the frequently discussed *tableaux vivants* scene in *The House of Mirth*, Lily Bart places herself on display in a position that does not objectify but instead empowers her, as Orlando explains through a cultural analysis of the painting that Lily chooses to embody: Sir Joshua Reynolds's *Mrs. Lloyd. Mrs. Lloyd* is a defiant rejoinder to the supine, swooning beauties of the Pre-Raphaelites, a challenge to the PRB made all the more salient by their dislike of Reynolds and other academicians. As Orlando says, "Reynolds's Mrs. Lloyd is not sleepily stretched out for the hungry voyeur: her body is vertical and grounded" (64). That this strategy of resisting the PRB is purposeful, not accidental, is something that Orlando shows by tracing its presence in lesser-known stories as well as in well-known novels.

But all strategies have their drawbacks: Undine Spragg, who controls the manner in which she is represented, is an unsympathetic character, as is Bessy Paul of "The Temperate Zone," whom Orlando sees as a triumphant rewriting of the tragic Elizabeth Siddal, Rossetti's model and muse. Women who accept their position as muse and inspiration to a male artist, such as Mrs. Anerton in "The Muse's Tragedy" and Halo Tarrant in *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive*, are sympathetic but ultimately disempowered by their position. Even the act of being a

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caretaker or curator, which would seem to give women power over art, is less a position of control than one of being controlled, as the heroines of "The Angel at the Grave," "Mr. Jones," and even *Summer* demonstrate, for all are "female custodians" controlled by an enforced fidelity to men's words and men's works. Only Ellen Olenska, the subject of Orlando's final chapter, on *The Age of Innocence*, would seem to escape, for Ellen Olenska is "in fact the artist" (185) in the novel. Yet even Ellen's triumph is muted, for, citing Elizabeth Ammons, Orlando confirms that "there was, in Wharton's America, no room for the American woman as *artist*" (195 original emphasis) – unless, perhaps, her name was Edith Wharton.

Edith Wharton and the Visual Arts is an important book for reading Wharton's female characters as figures resisting disempowerment not only by their social milieu but also by the very forms of representation that male characters choose as a means to honor them. Through in-depth readings, especially of the lesser-known stories, and reproductions of the paintings being discussed, *Edith Wharton and the Visual Arts* provides a rich new context for understanding Wharton's fiction.

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