The Crisis of a Countess: Wharton’s “New Frenchwoman” and a New American Woman in *The Age of Innocence*

Corinne Viglietta

The French woman,” Edith Wharton declares, in her 1919 collection of essays, “is distinctly more grown up than her American sister.” Unlike the latter, the former enjoys “an education that extends to the whole of life...that forms speech, forms manners, forms taste, forms ideals, and above all forms judgment.” This nearly traitorous espousal of the ways of “the New Frenchwoman” guides the chapter of the same name in Wharton’s *French Ways and Their Meanings*, a text written chiefly “to instruct her compatriots in the ways of an exemplary civilization.” Yet, if *French Ways* is a Francophile’s lesson for her unsophisticated “American sister,” then Wharton’s 1920 novel, *The Age of Innocence*, is a test of the compatibility of “French ways” and the American woman. By positioning Countess Ellen Olenska at the intersection of French and American cultures, Wharton illustrates the problem of identity for the “new” American individual and the American nation itself. Furthermore, the puzzle of Countess Olenska reveals the defects in Wharton’s initial vision of “the New Frenchwoman” and her American counterpart, for Olenska’s example shows that cultural lines are not as fixed as the author of *French Ways* originally imagines.

In *French Ways*, Wharton sharply contrasts French and American attitudes and practices, but her later characterization of Ellen Olenska, a kind of cultural mixed breed, attempts to reconcile these differences. Wharton seems to abandon the very labels she has created, “French” and “American,” by overlapping them in this one woman and, thus, blurring conventional lines between “the most highly civilized” (French) and the “infant class” (American). Exhibiting the supreme maturity of the “cosmopolitan” woman, whose identity depends on this cultural overlap, Ellen Olenska substantiates culture critic Randolph Bourne’s argument that “pure” conceptions of culture—particularly American culture—do not always work. Because she adopts the languages, fashions, and ideologies of both France and America, Ellen Olenska emerges as either a “Europeanized American” or an “Americanized European.” It is this sort of *mélange*—what Bourne would call a “transnational American” identity—that endows its possessor with the sense of hybridity characteristic not of France but of America.

Although in *The Age of Innocence* Wharton reconstructs her “childish memories of a long-vanished America” through the lens of her old-fashioned, Anglo-American conditioning, she also seems to acknowledge this incipient transnational American-ness. After all, despite her
criticism of American modernity and modernism, Wharton manages to endow her female protagonist with a “modern” American sensibility. The foreign appearance of the Countess may suggest that she is the apotheosis of Wharton’s “New Frenchwoman,” but her maverick mélange of cultures and customs instead produces a model for the “new cosmopolitan ideal” that will come to define twentieth-century America. Ellen Olenska is neither a Salon lady of Belle-Epoque France nor a leisure class lady of Old New York. Rather, Ellen Olenska, who has lived and grown in both of these worlds, is made of the “unique sociological fabric” of Bourne’s “transnational America.” Therefore, I shall argue that although Ellen Olenska seems to embody Wharton’s “New Frenchwoman,” Ellen’s cultural hybridity and independence, in fact, make her a prototype for a new, culture-centered variety of the “transnational American”: a modern multicultural. Recognizing Ellen Olenska as a trans-cultural American is crucial, for it extends the subject of The Age of Innocence from 1870s New York to early twentieth-century, or modern, America.

On the other hand, to avoid overestimating the modernity—and multiculturalism—of The Age of Innocence, it is necessary to consider Wharton’s lifelong skepticism of American modernism and modern culture. It could, after all, be argued that a modern multicultural woman would not appear in the novel of such a nostalgic author—an author who, according to Elizabeth Ammons, seriously questioned American enthusiasm for the “New Woman” and the “new” culture of the twentieth century. In fact, as a product of a purebred, privileged Anglo-American society, Wharton criticized not only modernity, as she witnessed “the destruction of the society of Old New York as it was consumed by the appetite of a soulless materialism,” but also modernism. Referring to Wharton’s criticism of modernist literature, Frederick Wegener explains, “Wharton links the disappearance of ‘scruples’ to the vogue of ‘the new methods’ in fiction, considering those methods not only symptomatic of a larger moral crisis but somehow morally defective themselves.” Since Wharton perceived modern America and its literature in “moral crisis,” it seems improbable that her work would share similar “methods.” If one takes “methods” to mean forms, this is certainly the case, for Wharton herself called her narrative form “old-fashioned.” However, if one understands “methods” as not only aesthetic but also cultural approaches, Wharton’s work has something in common with modernist literature: an anxiety about identity—sexual, social, and, most important, cultural—in a rapidly changing international climate. In this context, a modern multicultural character such as Ellen Olenska has a place in an American novel of manners like The Age of Innocence.

In fact, some critics claim that it is the kind of cultural modernity represented by Ellen Olenska that occupies the center of the novel. For instance, Candace Waid calls The Age of Innocence “less an escape to a distanced past than a return to the present” since the novel evokes a post-war sense of loss and confusion. Others view Ellen Olenska, Ned Winsett, and M. Riviè re, who share complex and innovative cultural philosophies, as “transplanted harbingers of the modern.” This anachronistic quality emerges chiefly in the avant-garde Ellen, who inhabits at once Old New York and the “new” New York of modern artists and thinkers. Ellen attends the operas and dinner parties of Victorian society while making her home in a “strange quarter” in New York most often described as “Bohemian,” and later, in a “modern building” in Paris. This imagery is unmistakably modern, for “the term ‘Bohemian’ as applied to a denizen of lower New York suggests Wharton’s familiarity with the Greenwich Village intellectual scene that had gained notoriety by 1919.” Often, the newness of the ideas of this “Bohemian” circle, which included Randolph Bourne, centered on its dreams of multiculturalism. Thus, Ellen’s rhetorical association with this modern scene indicates her own modern cultural identity.
While a sign of modern American culture, Ellen also draws some modernity from her “Frenchness,” for her visible relation to Wharton’s “New Frenchwoman” seems to place her in an avant-garde European society. Though Wharton declares, “There is no new Frenchwoman; but the real Frenchwoman is new to America,” her observations as well as her audience are nonetheless of the twentieth century. The “Frenchwoman” might have “always been,” but Wharton’s experience has occurred more or less in a “modern” context. While this connection to twentieth-century “French ways” supports Ellen’s status as a modern, it complicates her status as an American multicultural. Her unorthodoxy seems to rely wholly on her European-ness: “She’s so different—at least on the surface. She takes up such odd people—she seems to like to make herself conspicuous. I suppose it’s the life she’s led in that fast European society.” Here, May Welland refers to a generic “European society,” but aside from vague connections with Poland (the country of her husband), Ellen Olenska derives her cultural distinction from the European sensibility she has absorbed in France: the very sensibility Wharton seems to promote in *French Ways and Their Meanings*.

In “Edith Wharton’s Higher Provincialism: *French Ways* for Americans and the End of *The Age of Innocence*,” Michael Nowlin acknowledges the connection between Wharton’s 1919 essays and her 1920 novel: “We can only surmise that [Ellen Olenska] finally found herself ‘at home’ in France, for, repeatedly associated with [France], she carries French ways with her throughout the novel, having gotten rid of bogies, cleared her mind of shams, and ‘gone up to the Medusa and the Sphinx with a cool and a penetrating question.’” By quoting Wharton’s preface to *French Ways* in his description of Ellen, Nowlin underlines the French presence in *The Age of Innocence*. Indeed, Ellen Olenska seems to typify the personal style, “intellectual honesty,” and cultural maturity that Wharton perceives in her French contemporaries. Moreover, she expresses this sense of sophistication and independence through the skills of “good conversation,” an art praised by Frenchmen such as M. Rivière as well as Francophiles like Wharton herself.

Though intending to refute the claim that Ellen Olenska is, in fact, a “Frenchwoman” figure, I must first consider the evidence that would support such a claim. After all, Ellen’s introduction is misleading. Wharton immediately presents the Countess as a “Frenchified” lady. In the first scene of the novel, Ellen emerges as a woman of Europeanized mystery, exoticism, and scandal:

> Newland Archer, following Lefferts’s glance, saw with surprise that his exclamation had been occasioned by the entry of a new figure into old Mrs. Mingott’s box. It was that of a slim young woman…with brown hair growing in close curls about her temples and held in place by a narrow band of diamonds. The suggestion of this headdress, which gave her what was then called a “Josephine look,” was carried out in the cut of the dark blue velvet gown rather theatrically caught up under her bosom by a girdle with a large old-fashioned clasp. The wearer of this unusual dress, who seemed quite unconscious of the attention it was attracting stood a moment at the center of the box.

Immediately, we see Ellen Olenska as a foreigner, for we do not meet her directly; rather, we catch a glimpse of this “dark,” nameless enigma through the eyes of curious observers. Moreover, she is foreign because she is “unusual.” She does not fit in 1870s New York. A cosmopolitan woman with a scandalous story, she challenges the stringent social rules of “those foolish Anglophiles of Boston and New York and Philadelphia.” Her style is, “by Old New York standards, both out of place and ahead of the times”: at once, the Countess imitates former
French Empress Josephine and “approximates the neo-Directoire fashions Paul Poiret introduced in 1908.” She is, as Vogue would describe, “retro avant-garde,” for she both adopts and predicts French style. She seems as “different as possible from the average American woman…more excitable, more emotional, more immoral.” Despite her seeming sophistication, Ellen Olenska nonetheless fails the test of culture in Old New York. With every nuanced understanding of “French ways,” every hint of décolletage, she reveals her ignorance of so-called American ways.

In addition, Ellen Olenska possesses a unique maturity, which is the distinguishing feature of the “New Frenchwoman.” “[The difference between the American woman and the Frenchwoman] is simply that, like the men of her race, the Frenchwoman is grown up.” In contradistinction to the women of Old New York, Ellen is, as Newland Archer observes, “the only ‘noninnocent’ woman he knows.” Carol Wershoven, who claims that “the focus of Wharton’s criticism in The Age of Innocence is the infantile quality of the [Old] New York world,” notes this exceptionality: “It is innocence that characterizes this society, a dangerous, destructive innocence, most apparent in the women of this world. [Like the little girl in the portrait, The Age of Innocence, by Reynolds,] the women of Wharton’s novel are all, with one important exception, little girls, never permitted to grow up.” The source of Ellen’s difference is her maturity, and since maturity is the trademark of Wharton’s Frenchwoman, Ellen seems to epitomize this cultural ideal. If May Welland and the ladies of her social set represent the “innocence” in the novel’s title, Ellen appears to represent the “grown-up” Frenchwoman.

As such, Ellen Olenska seems to meet Wharton’s criterion for “Frenchness,” but a closer look reveals that Ellen is not as “French” as her “grown-up” appearance suggests. Though Newland admits that “the smooth plump elderly faces” of the older women at the dinner table “struck him as curiously immature compared with [Ellen’s],” her behavior contradicts this observation. Her relationship with Newland—marked by intelligent conversation and emotional intimacy—seems to belong to the kind of “close and constant and interesting and important relations between men and women” that constitute maturity; but in the end, it is nothing more than an affair. However tender and sincere, the “relations” between the (technically) married Ellen and the betrothed Newland are fundamentally romantic, and, thus, barely evade complete adultery. Their objectionable relationship hangs on their lingering desire to “make love,” and thus cannot be categorized as a socially acceptable “friendship” advocated in “The New Frenchwoman.” Accordingly, Ellen Olenska cannot be categorized as “grown-up,” for her relations with men, albeit “close” and “interesting,” fail to imitate the purely intellectual camaraderie that Wharton sees in the French Salon.

Even more than her sexual relations, Ellen’s cultural status prevents her from epitomizing “the New Frenchwoman.” Unlike a “pure” product of either French or American society, Ellen Olenska possesses what Randolph Bourne calls “a dual spiritual citizenship”: Indeed, does not the cultivated American who goes to Europe practice a dual citizenship, which, if not formal, is no less real? The American who lives abroad may be the least expatriate of men. If he falls in love with French ways and French thinking and French democracy and seeks to saturate himself with the new spirit, he is guilty of at least a dual spiritual citizenship. He may be still American, yet he feels himself through sympathy also a Frenchman. And he finds that this expansion involves no shameful conflict within him, no surrender of his native attitude. He has rather for the first time caught a glimpse of the cosmopolitan spirit.
Like the expatriate in Bourne’s description, Ellen Olenska identifies with both French and American culture. But she is not, under any cultural circumstances, a Frenchwoman: however “in love with French ways,” Ellen is an American native. She may not be “wholly at ease with her English, which she often [speaks] as if she were translating from the French,” but she nonetheless calls the Mingott clan of New York “her kinsfolk.” And though she retains her European titles (“Countess” and “Madame”) as well as her relations with Frenchmen, her closest friend in Europe, M. Rivière, discovers “what [he had] never thought of before: that she’s an American.”

On the other hand, what is “American” to a forward-thinking Frenchman is not necessarily “American” to the Anglo-American purebreds of Old New York. While Ellen’s cultural mélange destabilizes her position as a “New Frenchwoman,” it certainly does not secure her status as an 1870s American. In fact, her mélange seems to prevent it. At once an insider and outsider to both French and American cultures (Nowlin calls her “a deracinated citizen of the world”), Ellen lacks full, undivided membership in one culture. Recently exiled from France as a result of her marital scandal, Ellen seems to be exiled, too, from the hometown she left as a girl, for its society refuses to accept such an oddity. Carol Wershoven, who identifies Ellen as one of Wharton’s “female intruders,” acknowledges the xenophobia of Old New York: “New York is threatened by an outsider, someone who is not of its own kind.” Ellen is ostracized by Anglophile society as a result of her “dual spiritual citizenship.” In the guise of respect for marital propriety, this fear of difference motivates the gossip and elitism of Old New York. For instance, Mrs. Archer justifies her contempt for Ellen by deeming her return to New York culturally insensitive: “Countess Olenska is a New Yorker, and should have respected the feelings of New York.”

Ellen is rejected because of her perceived disregard for American ways. This supposed disregard, however, is often genuine ignorance, a result of her mixed cultural background. One must not forget that Ellen lacks the social advantages of a traditional American education. “Her parents, continental wanderers, died and left her in the care of her eccentric Aunt Medora, another wanderer who let her wear black satin at her debut” and arranged her marriage to the Polish Count Olenski. Since birth, Ellen has been “living this cosmopolitan America” imagined by Bourne. Aware of her own peculiarity, Ellen even seeks instruction from Newland in American ways: “But you’ll explain these things to me—you’ll tell me all I ought to know.” Yet, like Bourne’s continental “immigrant,” Ellen Olenska is not suited for conventional “Americanization.” Despite early efforts to adapt to the customs of upper-crust New York, Ellen succumbs to the isolation produced by her otherness: “The real loneliness is living among all these kind people who only ask one to pretend!”

Ellen uses “kind” ironically, since she is lamenting her sense of honesty that ultimately drives her out of New York. In the end, she feels “too ‘different’ to care for the things it cared about.” Crippled by her own cultural diversity and sincerity, Ellen flees to Europe alone.

Her repeated transatlantic travel signifies her transatlantic spirit. As her body moves from country to country, so, too, does her cultural core. It is this sense of passage, this cultural elusiveness, that complicates the task of categorizing Ellen Olenska. Since she challenges, or perhaps transcends, traditional labels of “French” and “American,” she requires a new kind of cultural description. Though Newland longs for “a world where…categories…won’t exist,” a broader category for Ellen seems to emerge from what Janet Goodwyn calls “the self-conscious voice of the anthropologist which plays so important a part in The Age of Innocence.” This voice introduces the “new” cultural category of the “modern multicultural.”
This term conveys the newness of cultural discourse during the early twentieth century that Susan Hegeman explores in *Patterns for America: Modernism and the Concept of Culture*. In her study of American culture, Hegeman “shows how the term ‘culture’ changed from being a technical term associated primarily with anthropology into a term of popular usage [in concurrence with] the emergence of a distinctive ‘American culture,’ with its own patterns, values, and beliefs.”

Thus, as a culture-centered version of Bourne’s “transnational American,” the modern multicultural American possesses a kind of cultural heterogeneity that endows her with “the privilege of a cosmopolitan outlook such as the people of no other nation of to-day in Europe can possibly secure.”

This new category, by encompassing Ellen’s “mixed” nature (multicultural) as well as her avant-garde sensibility (modern), attempts to describe the qualities that occlude her full entrance into the French and Anglo-American traditions. Symbolic of the kind of hybridity that characterizes modern American culture, Ellen Olenska, then, is not a “New Frenchwoman” but a new American woman.

“Whatever American nationalism turns out to be,” Bourne declares in his 1916 essay, “we see already that it will have color richer and more exciting than our ideal has hitherto encompassed. In a world which has dreamed of internationalism, we find that we have all unawares been building up the first international nation.”

Since Ellen Olenska, a colorful and exciting woman herself, contributes to the “international” flavor of this country, it seems inconceivable that she would represent “French ways.” While her “Frenchness” is the misleading mark of her difference, her “internationalism” is its true essence. The very worldview that “sets her apart from all other Society women”—American and French—and helps her to “rebel from her social role and see through its conventions” is a sign of modern multicultural America.

Nevertheless, Ellen’s puzzling identity demands a closer investigation of her modern multiculturalism in the context of the Francophilia that Wharton conveys in *French Ways and Their Meanings*.

Wharton so admired the Old World that critics such as Wegener, pointing to her formal traditionalism, have called her “antimodernist.” However, her exploration of new American identities challenges this label. Her aesthetic preference for European ways did not preclude a social or political affinity with the United States. While *French Ways* and critic Nancy Bentley indicate that Wharton “embrac[ed] European empires as America’s opposite, as global orders that cultivated rather than destroyed the things [she] found most important,” *The Age of Innocence* shows that Wharton also shared the cultural anxieties of other post-war Americans and found value in their work.

In discussing this novel, Nowlin asserts Wharton’s involvement in the cultural discourse of the early twentieth century: “For all the evidence of Wharton’s enduring ties with the guardians of a besieged genteel tradition and Anglo-Saxon America, she took seriously the cultural yearnings of a host of younger, ‘new’ New York intellectual radicals who posed a crucial challenge to them.”

This confrontation between the “genteel tradition” and newer “cultural yearnings” occurred not only in Wharton’s mind but also in her writing, in the forms of Old New York and Ellen Olenska, respectively. As a result, we can identify Ellen as a manifestation of Wharton’s serious consideration of the multicultural visions of “new” culture critics like Randolph Bourne.

In this context Ellen Olenska becomes a kind of modern cultural experiment. Wharton seems to test the applicability of different cultural labels to the lady known simultaneously as the Countess, Madame Olenska, and Ellen Mingott. In particular, she uses Ellen as a means of testing the compatibility of “French ways” and “transnational America.” The results reveal a conflict: the aged “French ways” contradict not only Ellen’s multiculturalism but also her
transferred modern sensibility, for as Martha Banta reminds us, Ellen Olenska is both out of
place and “out of time.”

Still, critics such as Nowlin claim that “French ways” encompass not only nineteenth-century but also twentieth-century values: “Inconsistencies aside, Wharton’s ‘French ways’ are an exemplary synthesis of the conservative virtues of ‘reverence,’ standards of ‘taste,’ and ‘continuity,’ on the one hand, and the progressive virtue of ‘intellectual honesty’—the capacity to see one’s cultural condition as it really is and thus improve it—on the other.”

In other words, Wharton draws from the old and the new to present an ideal set of “French” values in French Ways. But if Wharton treats both sets of “virtues” with equal admiration in French Ways, why do the “progressive”—one could even say “democratic”—values become more favorable in the case of Ellen Olenska? Could the aged customs of France, namely taste, reverence, and continuity, fail to translate in a younger, more democratic, and more diverse nation?

In French Ways, Wharton uses these four ostensibly estimable features of French culture, “taste, reverence, continuity, and intellectual honesty,” to order her text, but in The Age of Innocence, they appear in disorder. As a modern multicultural, Ellen subverts all but the last of these “virtues.” Indeed, “intellectual honesty” seems to be the only French virtue that coincides with Ellen’s modern multiculturalism. Exemplifying the new and challenging the old, Ellen’s multiculturalism at once allows and disallows her to model Wharton’s complex “French ways.” As Nowlin’s “transplanted harbinger of the modern,” Ellen is incapable of welcoming traditional values of taste, reverence, and continuity as willingly as a lady of Salon Paris or Victorian New York: her “cosmopolitan spirit” has endowed her with too much insight to conform to convention.

Immediately, Ellen challenges conventions of taste, which Wharton defines as “the regulating principle of all art, of the art of dress and of manners, and of living in general.” In the first scene of the novel, her low-cut gown is a virtual showstopper: “‘My God!’ [Larry Lefferts] said; and silently handed his [opera] glass to old Sillerton Jackson.” Even the men of New York are scandalized. In her dramatic return, the Countess violates codes of manners, too, for her spectators are appalled that a woman who had reportedly “bolted with [her husband’s] secretary” would dare to show her face (and “a little more shoulder and bosom than New York was accustomed to seeing”) at the opera. To her audience, “it seems distasteful…to drag the family scandal out in the public.” This offense against Wharton’s first “French” virtue becomes explicit when the narrator reveals Newland’s reaction: “He hated to think of May Welland’s being exposed to the influence of a young woman so careless of the dictates of Taste.” Though Wharton criticizes America’s “undefinable domain of Taste,” Newland and his social set share a basic notion of it that permits them to emit a collective gasp at Ellen Olenska.

While Wharton tries to nurse American taste through its supposed infancy, an existing code of appearance and behavior already governs the sub-culture of Old New York: “Taste” based on hidden vice, displayed virtue, and an aesthetic that is at once Puritanical and decadent. This conservative “Taste,” eludes Ellen’s worldly imagination that allows her to dress creatively, speak frankly, and critique openly. A true cosmopolite, Ellen understands the relative and arbitrary nature of taste, so she exists outside the provincial policies honored by Newland’s social set. Though Newland sympathizes with Ellen, he honors the old European wisdom that proclaims that “the essence of taste is suitability.” Ellen may operate under different, more
modern, standards of taste, that ruled by individual imagination instead of popular opinion, but she is, according to Wharton’s “regulating principles,” unsuitable in Old New York. She is breaking traditions of taste.

In addition to normative taste, Ellen fails to embody reverence, the second of Wharton’s “French ways.” According to Wharton, “‘Reverence’ may be the wasteful fear of an old taboo; but it is also the sense of the preciousness of long accumulations of experience [and the] instinct to preserve that which has been slow and difficult in the making.”

Whereas Ellen lacks familiarity with Old New York’s code of reverence, her critics not only know but also adhere to it: “There were certain things that had to be done, and if done at all, done handsomely and thoroughly; and one of these, in the old New York code, was the tribal rally around a kinswoman about to be eliminated from the tribe.”

Ellen Olenska, this exiled “kinswoman,” fails to follow “the old New York code” because her cosmopolitan code of reverence outreaches the narrow law of “the tribe.” While she perceives her relationship with Newland as a private connection, the public assumes that “he and Madame Olenska were lovers, lovers in the extreme sense.”

What is precious to the primitive group is not precious to the modern multicultural, and Ellen is expelled for stirring another “dreaded scandal.” She must be shunned because she has ignored “routine, precedent, tradition, the beaten path”; she must be shunned because she is, unlike the ladies of society and salons, “irreverent.”

If Ellen’s bad taste and irreverence challenge the so-called morality of the leisure class, then her violation of Wharton’s third “French way,” continuity, endangers the very identity of New York society. More than an artistic principle or “a sense of preciousness,” the virtue of continuity seems to hold a particular “culture” together and secure its place in history: “We should cultivate the sense of continuity, that ‘sense of the past’ which enriches the present and binds us up with the world’s great stabilizing traditions.”

Though Wharton perceives an absence of continuity in the United States as a whole, she finds a sense of the past in her reconstructed memories of Old New York, which she identifies as one of “a few little local patches” of Euro-American tradition and which she depicts “in terms of its past.” By associating Old New York with custom, conservatism, and conformity, Wharton conveys the sense of cultural continuity felt by its citizens. Their identities rely on their common understanding of and aversion to “bad form” and foreignness.

Signifying both of these, Ellen Olenska’s cultural unorthodoxy is a crime against the continuity of Anglo-American New York. Furthermore, as long as Ellen fails to model the taste, reverence, and continuity of the “New Frenchwoman” to New York society, she fails to serve as a “Frenchwoman” figure.

On the other hand, as Nowlin mentions, Ellen does personify one “French way”: “the progressive virtu[e] of ‘intellectual honesty’.” Rather than a retrospective opinion of taste, reverence, or continuity, her single moral inheritance from France is the more courageous and innovative “tendency [to] test every new theory, religious, artistic or scientific, in the light of wide knowledge and experience, and to adopt it only if it stands this scrutiny.” A product of Ellen’s “unique sociological fabric,” her free thinking at once prohibits her from modeling the conservative side of the “New Frenchwoman” and allows her to demonstrate the modern virtue of “intellectual honesty.”

As evidenced by her rejection of the institution of marriage, she questions rather than swallows cultural conventions: “Fashionable! Do you all think so much of that? Why not make one’s own fashions? But I suppose I’ve lived too independently.” To this avant-garde woman, who is conscious of her own individuality, ideological conformity is unthinkable. Instead, Ellen chooses independence, equality, and diversity.
In this regard, Ellen’s “intellectual honesty” is quintessentially American. As her personal quality, this supposedly “French way” implies individuality and anti-traditionalism. As a cultural quality that crosses lines of gender and culture, it implies egalitarianism and diversity. In addition to Ellen’s mixed identity, Wharton’s observation that “intellectual honesty was never so little in respect in the United States as in the years before the war” accounts for Ellen’s status as an outsider in Old New York. Moreover, Wharton’s remark links Ellen’s “intellectual honesty” to modern America, for this virtue finds an almost perfect match in post-war Bohemian America—namely in Bourne’s “intellectual sympathy.” In French Ways, “intellectual honesty” may seem French, but in The Age of Innocence, as Ellen’s example shows, “intellectual honesty” reflects the inimitable American spirit of democracy and multiculturalism that Bourne interprets as “an intellectual sympathy which is not satisfied until it has got at the heart of the different…expressions” of thought and culture. It is the only “French way” that Ellen can translate into “American” because it is the only “French way” that is, as Wharton herself asserts, “democratic.”

Thus, the findings of Ellen’s cultural experiment indicate that “French ways” are compatible with “transnational America” to the extent that both cultures engage in democratic thinking for the sake of “turning [a] rapidly changing province…into a new cosmopolitan center of the civilized world.” Contrary to the opinions of her old-fashioned critics, Ellen Olenska facilitates this process in The Age of Innocence, for she exposes the narrow minds of Old New York to new cultural perspectives. Whether they realize it or not, May Welland and Mrs. Archer are more enlightened women for having witnessed the intellectual courage of their multicultural sister, who seeks sexual and cultural equality. As a figurative visitor from the post-war era and the global community, Ellen introduces their world, which lacks “intellectual honesty,” to the “cultural yearnings” of the future. That these yearnings prove to be incompatible with the ways of Old New York is not only an admonition against the provincialism and xenophobia of 1870s Anglo-America but also a herald of modern multicultural America. Ellen’s exile is a cultural lesson, her “dual citizenship” a sign of the future.

Through Ellen Olenska, Wharton imagines the unique possibilities of a “transnational America”:

> Only America, by reason of the unique liberty of opportunity and traditional isolation for which she seems to stand, can lead in this cosmopolitan enterprise. Only the American—and in this category I include the migratory alien who has lived with us and caught the pioneer spirit and a sense of new social vistas—has the chance to become that citizen of the world. America is coming to be, not a nationality but a transnationality, a weaving back and forth, with the other lands, of many threads of all sizes and colors.

In other words, the American heterogeneity that Old New York perceives as a cultural threat is actually a cultural blessing. Blinded by its xenophobic “innocence,” the world of the Wellands and van der Luydens fails to realize the rareness of the blessing of multiculturalism—which, as the story of twentieth-century American immigration indicates, is also an inevitability. Therefore, if Wharton’s New York represents a “cultural order that inadvertently paved the way for its supersession,” Ellen Olenska represents the “younger generation” that follows it. As a result of her cultural mélangé and modern kind of “intellectual honesty,” Ellen must belong to a time and place other than Gilded-Age New York or Belle-Epoque France; she must belong to a multicultural America with “new social vistas.”
Despite Ellen Olenska’s associations with “French ways,” her democratic “tendency” allies her more fully with modern American ways.\textsuperscript{92} Though she ultimately settles in France, and thus could be perceived, even at the end, as a “Frenchwoman,” it is unfair to link this multicultural woman to a single culture. Instead, Ellen’s characterization, like Bourne’s “transnational America,” relies on the “enterprise of integration” that preserves and combines a variety of cultural identities.\textsuperscript{93} Furthermore, I maintain that Ellen fails to find complete cultural acceptance in her lifetime since pre-war France, although perhaps more tolerant or avant-garde than Old New York, still belongs to “the most homogeneous and uninterrupted culture the world has known.”\textsuperscript{94} Rather, what Ellen really seeks is a yet-unborn American culture in which “dual citizens” like herself “are more valuable and interesting to each other for being different.”\textsuperscript{95} As her encounter with Old New York has shown, Ellen Olenska belongs in a society that is not merely tolerant of but based on cultural difference. A sign of diversity and democracy, Ellen is a new American woman.

Notes

1 Edith Wharton, \textit{French Ways and Their Meaning} (New York: Appleton, 1939), 120.
6 Bourne, 86.
8 Bourne, 88.
9 Bourne, 90.
10 Waid, xvii.
12 Quoted in Wegener, 116.
13 Waid, xiii.
14 Nowlin, 100.
16 Nowlin, 90.
17 Wharton, \textit{French}, 98.
19 Wharton, \textit{Age}, 189.
20 Nowlin, 106.
22 Wharton, \textit{Age}, 216.
24 Bourne, 87.
26 Banta, 54.
28 Wharton, *French*, 100.
29 Wharton, *French*, 100.
31 Wershoven, 76.
36 Bourne, 96.
37 Wharton, *Age*, 80, 39.
39 Nowlin, 94.
40 Wershoven, 78.
41 Bourne, 96.
42 Wharton, *Age*, 56.
43 Wershoven, 80.
44 Bourne, 97.
46 Bourne, 97.
47 Wharton, *Age*, 50.
48 Wharton, *Age*, 146.
51 Bourne, 94.
52 Bourne, 94.
54 Wegener, 117.
56 Nowlin, 90.
57 Banta, 51.
58 Nowlin, 104.
60 Bourne, 94.
61 Nowlin, 100; Bourne, 96.
62 Wharton, French, 40.
63 Wharton, Age, 7.
64 Wharton, Age, 11, 10.
65 Wershoven, 80.
66 Wharton, Age, 11.
67 Wharton, French, 38.
68 Wharton, French, 41.
69 Wharton, French, 41.
70 Wharton, French, 31.
71 Wharton, Age, 200.
72 Wharton, Age, 200.
73 Wharton, Age, 201.
74 Wharton, French, 32.
75 Wharton, French, 31, 97.
76 Wharton, Age, 79; Goodwyn, 131.
77 Wharton, Age, 6.
78 Nowlin, 104.
79 Wharton, French, 74.
80 Bourne, 91.
81 Wharton, Age, 47.
82 Wharton, French, 72.
83 Bourne, 95.
84 Bourne, 95.
85 Wharton, French, 75.
86 Nowlin, 107.
87 Nowlin, 90.
88 Bourne, 96.
89 Bourne, 96.
90 Nowlin, 107; Bourne, 95.
91 Bourne, 96.
92 Wharton, French, 74.
93 Bourne, 97.
94 Wharton, French, 80.
95 Bourne, 95.