

Redeeming the Muse: Narcissus and Creativity in Edith Wharton's *Hudson River Bracketed*
and *The Gods Arrive*

Edith Wharton's last two completed novels were a duology comprised of *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive*. In them Wharton tells the story of the writer, Vance West, structuring the narrative around the Homeric *Odyssey* and Augustine's *Confessions*.¹ As in these two classical narratives of wandering and homecoming, the women in Vance's life play a significant role in his journey of creativity, primarily as sirens and muses. Wharton also richly incorporates other classical figures. The focus of this paper will be on Wharton's employment of the Narcissus and Echo narrative from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, its interplay with elements of the *Odyssey* and the *Confessions*, and how it complicates and ultimately redeems the role of women and what they represent in the life of the artist. At times Vance's women are detaining, undesirable Echoes, but they are also reflective pools, through which Vance acquires knowledge of himself. Collectively, the women in Vance's life stimulate his creativity, enable his success, and make it possible for him to complete his work. In this way, the female occupies a privileged position in the creative process. This is a decided departure from Wharton's earlier heroines, who were drawn as passive objects of art.²

A salvific and maternal muse figure appears in the form of Vance's lover, Halo Spear. Ostensibly opposing her are the sirens of the novels, Laura Lou, Vance's wife; and Floss Delaney, the worldly vixen of his youth. Laura Lou is described repeatedly as a shell, a clear pool, and an echo; as such, her chief function is to reflect Vance's Narcissus. Despite the emptiness of these female characters, Vance's creativity is nevertheless fueled by the suffering that arises from his experiences with them. When it comes to Halo, however, though she may

¹ Carol Singley (1998) has done a careful examination of Wharton's duology and the *Confessions*, but other than that little work has been done on the classical figures and themes in these two novels.

² See Susan Gubar for a discussion of Lily Bart and Undine Spragg (1981: 250-51).

reflect him, he, in turn, becomes her Echo. More experienced, more well-educated, and older than Vance, Halo guides him in his work, beginning with their rendezvous at a clear pool on a mountaintop, where he begins to understand not only himself as an artist but also the depths of his ignorance (Wharton 1929: 77 ff.). Eventually Halo assists him with his novel, and in the course of their creative collaboration, he assimilates her with the process, until “he and his art and this woman were one, indissolubly one in a passionate mutual understanding” (Wharton 1929: 344). Micaela Janan, in her discussion of Lou Andreas-Salomé’s work on Narcissus, states that narcissistic love “enables creativity” (Janan 2007: 287) and that “the narcissist projects himself onto the object, in the form of his own over-valuing fantasies; he is in turn seduced by these projections. Narcissus ultimately erases the object under the onslaught of the subject’s projections” (Janan 2007: 290). Vance does this, not just with his creative work but also with the women in his life.³ Early on Vance thinks of Halo as “mistress of the keys of knowledge and experience” and “the goddess, the miracle, the unattainable being” (Wharton 1929: 74, 346), but eventually he comes to regard her as an encumbrance, when, in fact, her understanding is greater, and she is withholding from him knowledge, which he is not yet prepared to receive.

Like Monica of Augustine’s *Confessions*, Halo embodies a connection to the mystical upper regions, from which creativity descends. It is not until Vance is reconnected with Halo (and realizes that he does not deserve her) that he finds peace, and she transcends her status as Vance’s object. At this point, Wharton depicts her, now pregnant with Vance’s child, as Continentia from the *Confessions*, maternal and fecund with arms extended in a sacred pose (*Conf.* 8.11.27; Wharton 1932: 439). This marks her as the critical source that binds Vance’s

³ Gubar points out that the woman is often the art object but not the sculptor (244). Along these lines Singley also finds Halo’s characterization unsatisfying, since she inspires but never creates (1998: 204-205).

creative life with the spiritual wholeness he seeks, both of which cannot be attained until he reaches beyond his reflection in the pool.

Works Cited

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