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“Expatriate Everywhere”: Self, Other and the American Ethos

There is a strain of rebellion that runs through the distinctly American brand of democracy. It is a nation that brought itself into being by cleaving off from its mother country, violently, performing a sort of hostile makeover – no longer a collection of colonies, now an indivisible individual. This spirit of “everything you want is there for the taking” has been crucial to the land of opportunity from the very beginning. It can be seen in popular books like Sarah Palin’s *Going Rogue* whose title and author’s slogan calls to mind a disregard for others in the name of the unique individual. The “American dream” tells us we can be or do anything we put our mind to—but at what cost? In both Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* and Claire Messud’s *The Emperor’s Children* we find the true price tag of what Nathan calls “the American idea of the inviolable self”(160): the denial of the interrelatedness of Selves, the destruction of the Other. To attempt to go it alone, to *go rogue*, is, as Wayne Booth writes, “to destroy a ‘self’ that one never ‘possessed’ in the first place. To break off from [the] ‘others’ is to break off parts of [the] self”(240).

The novels of Wharton and Messud wrestle with New York City high society, the idealized slice of life that the American dream aspires to—whether at the turn of the 20th century or the 21st, wealth and power never go out of style. However, in order to gain wealth and power in a capitalist society someone else must lose. In order to better or advance oneself, someone else must be sacrificed. This is what J.M. Coetzee describes as “dog-eat-dog individualism,” the idea that all that is needed is “energy, hard work, and a belief in one’s (individual) self”(116). Throughout Wharton and Messud’s novels, we find this ethos manifesting itself in the characters that leech and feed off each other to build themselves up.

With Wharton's work we can actually identify contemporary social practices that promoted such a land grab for selfhood. In the early 1900s, the idea of anyone being able to achieve the American dream spread among the middle class. For women who wished to improve themselves their best bet was to "read up," and a profusion of reading guides and high society novels—including the works of Edith Wharton—were the main recourse for actualizing their own personal dreams as Amy Blair explains in her article "Misreading *The House of Mirth*":

I see reading up as part of the process at the turn of the century by which class identity was decoupled from solely financial considerations so that a remaking of the self through cultural acquisition (both material and intellectual) became the imperative means of upward mobility (150).

Of course, we read *The House of Mirth* as a critique and condemnation of Lily Bart's society, not an instruction manual for social climbing. It is safe to say Wharton would agree, but the fact that such a blatant misreading could run so rampant speaks to the character of the readership at large. The civilization that Lily was so evidently the victim of that "the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate"(Wharton 6), is so deeply ingrained in the ethos of the American people that readers can witness the disintegration of a life over the course of a novel and still wish to be shackled in the tragic heroine's place upon her death. It is an elucidation of what Blair refers to as "the phenomenon even the most anti-exceptionalist Americanist is tempted to read as peculiarly American: the dream of class mobility"(151).

We can see how Lily would be an attractive object to identify with for the middle-class reader. She is herself of middle-class wealth, an attractive, talented young girl trying to come into her own and declare her selfhood, yet held at bay by her financial straits – "Whichever way she looked she saw only a future of servitude to the whims of others, *never the possibility of*

asserting her own eager individuality”(Wharton 105, italics mine). But what individuality does Lily have to assert? According to Booth, none at all in fact: “The isolated individual self simply does not, cannot exist. Not to be a social self is to lose one’s humanity”(238). Lily mistakes the commandeering of character perpetrated by her social set for individualism. In reality, the Dorsets, the Trenors, and Rosedale are all in possession of selves, co-dependent, defined by their relation to and influence on each other. The fact that these characters are blind to their interrelatedness, “are apt to forget that the modest satellite drowned in their light is still performing its own revolutions and generating heat at its own rate”(Wharton 122), primes them for a breakdown of their humanity. If they do not recognize their selfsame nature they will have no qualms about giving up the Other in the name of personal advancement. When Wharton writes of Lily’s “torn heart uncomforted by human nearness,” we see her world as a cold, dead place where human nearness is impossible—every individual is an island, and “the being to whom no four walls mean more than any others, is, at such hours, *expatriate everywhere*”(156, italics mine). This unmoored state for Lily is not only metaphysical, but physical as well as Blair points out: “[Lily] is a perpetual guest in other peoples’ houses and purchases her clothing with donated or borrowed funds”(155). In attempting to go it alone up the social ladder, Lily essentially bankrupts her ‘self,’ both monetarily and ethically.

The fall Lily suffers is tragic, especially because the blame for it cannot fall solely on her. As Dorset explains to Lily, “You were singled out as a sacrifice”(Wharton 256). She was taken into a circle in which she was financially unqualified for membership, but she possessed talents and a beauty that were of use to the other members of the set. Such accoutrements were valuable in terms of capital for character. However, once Lily’s stores were exhausted, the others did not hesitate to discard her—and why should they? We could not expect a much different reaction by

our heroine herself, in whom “the other-regarding sentiments had not been cultivated”(Wharton 116-7). This ethical malaise runs deep in her society. She was indoctrinated at a young age into a parasitic approach to personhood: take and take, but never give.

However, I do not wish to throw Lily under the ethical bus in addition to the societal bus whose tire tracks mar her custom-made dress. Miss Bart wrestles continually with the choice between the high life she so enjoys and a life of charity and philanthropy like Gerty Farish because, as Mrs. Fisher observes, “at heart, she despises the things she’s trying for. And it’s the difficulty of deciding that makes her such an interesting study”(Wharton 198). An interesting study not only for Mrs. Fisher, but we the readers as well. Lily recognizes that “the fact that her life had never satisfied her proved that she was made for better things”(Wharton 164), and those “reading up” would agree. But where do better things really lie—with the individual or with humanity at large?

It would seem that the episode in Nettie Struther’s kitchen acts as epiphanic moment for Lily, opens her eyes to the existences outside of—yet somehow intricately connected—to her own:

Such a vision of the solidarity of life had never before come to Lily. She had had a premonition of it in the blind motions of her mating instinct, but they had been checked by the disintegrating influences of the life about her. All the men and women she knew were like atoms whirling away from each other in some wild centrifugal dance; her first glimpse of the continuity of life had come to her that evening (Wharton 339).

While this moment gives us our “first glimpse of the continuity of life,” its imagery is also telling. Atoms are discreet, bounded entities. The only continuity they can provide is reactionary, the transfer of forces, inertia, but since their individual makeup is just that—individual, set, non-transferrable—this picture is not a recanting of the individual. It is merely an admission of the existence of other individuals in one’s sphere.

Perhaps this is why so many contemporary readers of Wharton read *The House of Mirth* not as an exposition of the flawed ethos of high society (that thereby trickled down to middlebrow readers), but simply a case of an individual (i.e. Lily) meant to illustrate which missteps to avoid—which rungs were weak—when climbing the social ladder. To offer a warning on the personal, rather than the societal, level. The “continuity” in question may have been misconstrued as a continual whirling of atoms instead of a continuous flow between selves. Almost exactly 100 years later, the issue has still yet to be resolved in Messud’s *The Emperor’s Children*, where we will again run across the atom as image of self.

However, atoms never stop moving, and neither has the ideation of the atomic model during the century between the two works at hand. I turn again to Wayne Booth and his trading in of the model for that of the more fluid *character*:

If I think of myself not as an atomic unit bumping other atoms but as a *character*—as someone doing my best to enact the various roles “assigned” me—I discover that there are no clear boundaries between the others who are somehow both outside and inside me and the “me” that the others are “in”(239, italics original).

This concept of *character* is a stark departure from the ways of thinking about the self we have considered so far. Booth not only acknowledges the existence of the Other, he asserts that it is a necessary precondition for Selfhood. We are each equally inside and outside our specific Self as well as the selves we refer to as Other.

In his article “Political Stories: The Individual in Contemporary Fiction,” Nathan Oates displays shades of Booth’s *character* when he considers how the effects of political events on the state of the self. The American individual, Oates maintains, is “predicated on a willful violence and aggression that our culture has hidden from our eyes behind an ornate curtain”(160). We previously found evidence of this violence and aggression in *The House of Mirth* as well as in the willful misreadings Blair discussed in her article. The status quo remained relatively unchanged through the 20th century. Oates asks, what happens when what we previously thought to be outside and separate from our personal selves asserts itself in our lives in a big way—a September 11th-like way, fundamentally changing our relationships to everyone and everything:

If the domestic sphere and so the idea of the individual self have *become unmoored* and diffused by the political realities of our time, as we see in Messud..., what should the new relation between the self and society be?(165, italics mine).

Such an unmooring is precisely what we are concerned with. It is the means by which the American individual becomes “expatriate everywhere.” If we see ourselves as connected solely to our domesticity and not each other, then “the altering of the domestic space ultimately points to a more fundamental, existential destabilizing of the self”(Oates 158). (It is noteworthy that Lily herself begins to feel expatriate only after seeking solace in the “almost human arms” of a

room and finding none.) Without a port of call, we are set adrift and must find something—or *someone*—that we can anchor ourselves to, that we can define ourselves in relation to.

In Messud's novel we meet an array of characters who carry the torch of their forebears in *The House of Mirth*, marching onward and upward in their colonialist quest for character. Among them we find Julius, who had “worked hard to erase the traces of his past”(Messud 29), one lived in rural Michigan, opting instead to assume the more socially valuable pasts of friends and acquaintances: “He would adopt everyone's best anecdotes and brazenly tell them back to their former owners as his own, only somehow embellished, improved, somehow better”(95). We have all had the experience of someone telling one of our stories *for* us. Afterward, we always think we could have told it better, conveyed a truer sense of that specific piece of our personal history. To *commandeer* a story, to take the history of an other and retell it as your own is to consume a part of that other's self.

Consumption is a recurrent theme in *The Emperor's Children*. It is as if the characters think of one another not as other selves, but as commodities to be bought, sold or traded. Ludovic says to Marina, “I am ready to envelop you”(Messud 281), and in a very literal act of consumption David takes a bite out of Julius' cheek. We see this cultural cannibalism take place even between parents and their own children, as in the case of Murray and Marina Thwaite – “Sometimes, absurdly, he imagined that she wanted purely to consume him, eating his words and the air he breathed and spewing them out as her own”(Messud 129). Murray's fear is, of course, well-founded. After all, what he imagines Marina doing to him, i.e. consuming him, is exactly what he himself did to countless others in order to cultivate his own self, and this recognition gives him pause: “He suddenly saw his daughter as a monster he and Annabel had created—they and a society of excess”(Messud 73). This is Coetzee's “dog-eat-dog individualism” at its best—

or worst. Murray recognizes that something fundamental is wrong, but he is powerless in the face of it because, as Roger says in the opening chapter, “Once you’re in this world you’re in it, aren’t you?”(Messud 9).

The most tragic part of *The Emperor’s Children* is watching a character willingly enter into this world, this machine, believing it the sole route to noble personhood, only to find it bereft entirely of that precious good. In a chapter aptly titled “An American Scholar,” we are introduced to Frederick “Bootie” Tubb, in the tub, David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* in hand. He has recently dropped out of college and embarked on an autodidactic quest, hence the hefty tome: “He was reading it to be educated, which was, along with self-reliance, his current great aim”(Messud 57). He is “reading up.” He is the next link in the chain of what Booth refers to as “Individualism as Literary Heritage,” predicated on “an insistence that a liberated self will be found, if at all, only in some original mode, as yet unforged—in some innovation, some form of creativity that will break with everything that has gone before”(250). And so he packs his bags.

Bootie moves from tiny, isolated Watertown, first to Amherst, then to New York City. He travels to progressively more and more populous places, but all the while he draws further and further into himself. Each stop offers greater prospects for experience, yet he continually squanders the opportunity because he is so stuck on being self-reliant. “Who do you think he talks to in a day?” Danielle asks (Messud 402). Sadly, the answer is no one. No one bothers much to question what Bootie is doing, let alone talk to him aside from Danielle, possibly because at some point in the past she felt as he seems to feel now – “I feel like in some way I am him, or he is me. Or that could have been me. Does that sound ridiculous?”(Messud 402). To the rest of the individualist characters it does, but Danielle stands apart, in possession of an awareness of which her friends are oblivious to their own lack.

The Other exists to Danielle in a way it does not to her peers—as part of the Self. She envisages herself as “a palimpsest, many people, all at once”(Messud 295). The image of a manuscript with multiple texts written over each other, the earlier ones still visible in the gaps and spaces of the most recent, is a fitting comparison and calls to mind Booth’s concept of character. Danielle questions her nagging suspicion of the interconnectedness of Self and Other until it is thrown into high relief by the events of September 11th. As she stands with Murray at the window of her apartment, the television on in the background, the morning of the attacks, her eyes become opened to the reality of her situation in “the continuity of life,” she feels “as if they were simultaneously in Manhattan and anywhere on the planet”(Messud 411). Post-9/11 Danielle sinks into depression. Her friends, the ever-inviolable individuals that they are, are unable to comprehend her despondency. Ludovic in particular takes issue with her, “because she had taken it hardest of them all and he felt she had least cause.... Ludo thought *the problem was pure self-indulgence*”(Messud 450, italics mine). Self-indulgence is exactly what it is. Danielle is mourning the parts of her self that took up residence in those others that were lost, as well as the parts of those others that resided in her. More tangibly, she mourns the loss of Murray, who occupied the largest place of all:

What nobody knew or could ever know, of course, was that you’d found your other half, your Platonic completion, and then your self—he’d been her *self*, although she still didn’t understand how quickly this had happened, and how completely—was wrenched apart, leaving a great suppurating wound, a jagged gape of flesh, that nobody could see and that you couldn’t ever talk about (Messud 467, italics original).

This passage falls within the confines of the chapters entitled “Burying the Dead,” a suite in four parts, which only serves to highlight the funereal nature of Danielle’s loss. She is no longer her self because the other that she was defined in relation to is no longer. She is left an empty husk, “a sign with no referent”(Messud 467).

And what of Bootie? As he walks closer and closer to the heart of the catalyst of Danielle’s awareness he sees less and less, as if the Other were—always had been—nothing more than part of the domestic space that was dissolving all around him – “In the throng, he felt absolutely alone, more so than he had before. He felt no connection to the faces, the voices, that came to him from far away”(436). The “existential destabilizing” Oates writes of manifests itself in Bootie as a willful turning away from humanity, forsaking it in the name of an absurd individualism and self-reliance. At this point Bootie ceases to be in all forms except the corporeal. His substantial physical bulk is reduced, just like Danielle’s, to an empty husk. All of his relatives believe him to be dead as a result of the terrorist attacks, and, for all intents and purposes, he is.

Here, we finally revive the “atom as self” image, though we find, tragically for Bootie, that it will not revive him as a Self:

Mutability, precisely the capacity to spin like an atom, untethered, this thrill of absolute unknownness was not something to be feared. It was the point of it all. To be absolutely unrelated. Without context. To be truly and in every way self-reliant.... He had been given—his fate—the precious opportunity to *be* again, not to be as he had been. Because as far as anyone knew, he *wasn't* (Messud 438, italics original).

All of the qualifications he puts forth as essential to the self-reliant mode are antithetical to the conception of selfhood we have been constructing. We need to be related, we need context. “Untethered,” unmoored, we would drift away. Without the Other we become the All, signs without referents—we can have no meaning. The great literary strides Bootie wishes to make are impossible in this world of his because he can only mean something when there is someone to mean it to – “He wished he had someone to say this to, but in this new, this self-reliant, life, did not”(Messud 355).

This American scholarship of the Self has failed us. We have seen the inviability of the inviolable individual. Our society’s ethos tells us not to look outside of our selves, but to turn inward, steeling our selves, compacting our selves into cold, hard atoms whose only contact with others are accidental violent collisions. We need a new model—a true model—because, as David Foster Wallace said in his commencement address at Kenyon College, published as *This is Water*, “The most obvious, ubiquitous, important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about”(8). Wallace goes a ways toward offering such a new model, and while I would like to quote the entire speech at length, I will settle here for the opening parable:

There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet
 an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says,
 “Morning, boys. How’s the water?” And the two young fish swim on for
 a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes,
 “What the hell is water?”(Wallace 3-4).

What the hell is the Self? It is the ever-present mediator of our experience, yet we rarely stop to think about how it is defined or how it affects our experience. We spend our time reading up, building our selves their own personal ivory towers, “tiny skull-sized kingdoms”(Wallace 117),

that by the time we look up it is too late. We are stone cold, 200 feet tall and utterly alone. When these towers come crumbling down, like on September 11th, we are given the opportunity to reconceptualize our selves.

This new model must be able to accommodate shocks, sudden changes, entrances and exits. It must also abolish the individual, acknowledge the essential interconnectedness of all selves. It should replace the “kill-or-be-killed gladiatorial amphitheatre” that we currently reside in with “a busily collaborative beehive or anthill”(Coetzee 119). It should enable us “to experience a crowded, hot, slow, consumer-hell-type situation as not only meaningful, but sacred, on fire with the same force that lit the stars—compassion, love, the subsurface unity of things”(Wallace 93). Our discourse on the Self has been brimming with aqueous language: we have described the *unmooring* of the Self, the *fluid* nature of the boundary between Self and Other, the need to be *anchored* to a referent to gain meaning, the *drift* that occurs when we have nothing to anchor our selves to. Bootie’s choice of reading material when we first meet him seems remarkably prescient—as does the locale—in light our progress from that starting point. “This is water.” We are water.

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