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***NO HUMBLE ABODE:  
EDITH WHARTON'S THE MOUNT  
AND THE COMMODIFICATION OF HERITAGE***

"It's the penalty of greatness – one becomes a monument historique.  
Posterity pays the cost of keeping one up,  
but on condition that one is always open to the public."  
(Edith Wharton, *The Touchstone* 73)

**Keywords:** *heritagization of the past; commodification of heritage; nostalgia; "autobiographical house"; memory tourism*

**Abstract:** *Built around Edith Wharton's "autobiographical house" and her legacy at The Mount estate in Lenox, Massachusetts, my paper addresses issues such as the heritagization of the past and the commodification of heritage as made obvious by the transformation of the American writer's residence at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – now a U. S. National Historic Landmark – into a venue for social and academic events all around the year: balls, weddings, parties, conferences, and exhibitions exploring themes from Wharton's life and work. I will argue that Wharton's New England residence, which is at once a site of individual and collective memory and which evinces the American cult of the country house as symbolizing the very idea of heritage, similarly reflects a nostalgia for the past before modernization and a commodification of that nostalgia, encouraging and supporting the development of the so-called "memory tourism". In addition, I will analyze the role of contemporary media in providing new interpretations and representations of this particular site and their attempt at reconstructing and commercializing the spirit of the bygone age.*

In the Introduction to his landmark study *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (1998), David Lowenthal notes the omnipresence of heritage sites "lauding or lamenting some past", be it fact or fiction (xiii). The ubiquitous reach of heritage, whose lure now seems to "outpace other modes of retrieval" (Lowenthal *Heritage* 3), is arguably illustrative of the shift in the Western world from raging about the "untrammelled future" to rejoicing in the afterglow of "has-beens" (*ibid.* 1). The "heritage industry", a term coined by English academic Robert Hewison in the 1980s, started to gain momentum during the 1970s and 1980s, with the expansion of sites which professed to be representations of the past and with the

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development of centers enabling heritage “experiences” based on a combination of technologies and representational techniques which were often very expensive, but which contrasted strongly with the typically monotonous and unimaginative museum displays (Walsh 94).

The prominent cultural historian Michael Kammen identifies contemporary times as an age of heritage “by compulsion that seems ... to satisfy an array of psychic needs, commercial enterprises, and political opportunities” (Kammen 321). The representation and interpretation of heritage has been constantly governed by power struggles and by debates regarding its “ownership” and use. Many times heritage has been perceived as inherently elitist and the province of the dominant groups within society. In this respect, Jacobs sees heritage as “a kind of accolade for which different groups compete”, a “dynamic process of creation in which a multiplicity of pasts jostle for the present purpose of being sanctified as heritage” (qtd. in Smith 85). Peter Gathercole and David Lowenthal similarly point to the contested nature of heritage when they speak about the “battleground of rival attachments” and the competing factions’ struggle to validate present goals by searching for “a heritage essential to autonomy and identity” (Gathercole and Lowenthal 302). Postmodern interpretations of the past and more recent approaches to heritage, however, tend to favor plural histories over traditional “grand narratives” underlying national ideals.

#### **Heritage / memory tourism and the quest for authenticity**

Essentially regarded as “the contemporary use of the past, including both its interpretation and its representation”, the concept of heritage has increasingly become associated with commercialization or commodification. Graham et al. argue that heritage exists as “an economic commodity, which may overlap, conflict with or deny its cultural role,” capable of “being interpreted differently within any one culture at any one time, as well as between cultures and through time.” It “depends on display to give dying economies and dead sites a second life as exhibitions of themselves.” (Smith 82-3)

David Harvey notes that “the active production of places with special qualities becomes an important stake in spatial competition between localities, cities, regions and nations” (Harvey 295). As part of this process, heritage plays a key role. Walsh argues that beautification through the heritagization of space is one of the main mechanisms employed to bring capital to an area (Walsh 136). Sometimes carried out to revitalize an ailing economy, and at other times in order to increase the tourism potential of an already affluent place, the heritagization of space contributes to the preservation of an identity of place through the emphasis on historical characteristics which stand as a metaphor for that place (Walsh 138-9). The collaborative nature of the relationship between the heritage and tourism industries has long been noted, with the process of heritagization turning locations into touristic destinations and, conversely, with tourism rendering them economically viable as exhibits themselves, according to Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (qtd. in Salazar and Porter 2). Consequently, the emergence of heritage tourism as part of cultural tourism can be both seen as a result of the continuous expansion of

the tourism industry, and approached within the larger context of developments in cultural production and consumption (Salazar and Porter 2).

Mike Featherstone remarks that the copious appetite for cultural goods and information and their rising propagation within contemporary Western societies have generated the “revamping” of the more traditional forms of high culture consumption (such as museums and art galleries) in order to cater to the needs of wider audiences by bringing to the foreground “the spectacular, the popular, the pleasurable and immediately accessible” (qtd. in Goulding 838). In a similar vein, through the commodification of heritage and the rise of heritage tourism, critics point out that history itself “becomes something to be established and managed through tours, exhibitions and representational practices in cinema, literature and other forms of cultural production” (Kaplan 35). Robert Hewison argues in this respect that heritage sites are constructed as “time capsules”, as forms of “historical bricolage, a melting pot for historical memories” (qtd. in Smith 82), while Melanie Smith believes that such sites act as false representations of the past, capturing just one moment or several moments in history and isolating them from any meaningful historical context (Smith 82). Lowenthal similarly comments that being “false because more commercial than other versions of the past,” heritage “preserves dross, promotes kitsch and swamps us in the superficial” (Lowenthal *Heritage* 89) while “render[ing] up the spoils of history on untold altars of aggrandizement.” (*ibid.* xvi)

In spite of the flourishing criticism regarding the heritage boom on the one hand and the commodification of heritage on the other, heritage tourism appears as one of the most thriving divisions of the tourism industry. Nostalgia cements this prosperity. Central to any discussion about the nature of the heritage industry, nostalgia seems to be one of the most powerful motives for the contemporary use of the past, responsible for romanticizing and fossilizing the past as well as for keeping the fire of the heritage industry burning (Smith 82), thus giving birth to what has been deemed “memory tourism”. While L.P. Hartley<sup>1</sup> famously noted that “the past is a foreign country,” Punch magazine warns that the past has become in fact “the foreign country with the healthiest tourist trade of all.” (Lowenthal “Past Time” 2)

An ailment typical of modernity and triggered by a sense of irreversible loss and alienation (Bartoletti 24), the nostalgic impulse appears as an “important agency in adjustment to crisis,” acting as a “social emollient” and “reinforc[ing] national identity when confidence is weakened or threatened” (Hewison qtd. in Harrison 17). Nostalgia is usually regarded as a longing to regress to a previous state, a certain “Golden Age” which in retrospect may appear as more normal and orderly (MacCannell 82) than contemporary circumstances in both space and time. In “Nostalgia and Its Discontents”, Svetlana Boym addresses the relational nature of nostalgia in arguing that while melancholia “confines itself to the planes of individual consciousness,” the former is built on the relationship between the

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<sup>1</sup> Leslie Poles Hartley, CBE (1895-1972) was a British novelist and short story writer. The fragment represents the opening line in *The Go-Between* (1953): “The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.”

individual biography and that of groups or nations, between the personal and collective memory (9).

While placing it at the foundation of the “heritage syndrome” which has been gaining momentum over the past decades, Michael Kammen considers that nostalgia “is essentially history without guilt” and that by the same token heritage is “something that suffuses us with pride rather than with shame” (14399). Referring to the growing importance of heritage in the United States, Kammen observes that in the absence of an “authentic or meaningful sense of continuity,” Americans created one by “dramatically increasing their attendance at museums, historic sites, and villages, and by participating in activities that ranged from battle re-enactments to historic preservation at the local level” (11175). When “packaged and commercialized” as authentic, the experience of the past represents one form of escape from the anxieties and limitations of contemporary life (Goulding 837). In his study on *The Tourist* (1976), Dean MacCannell starts from the premise that in their travels, tourists are driven by a certain “quest for authenticity”, arguably meant to replace the alienated interpersonal relationships and dehumanized aspects of modern living (qtd. in Ivanovic 323). It may seem that the disbelief in the authenticity of interpersonal relationships in contemporary society is matched by certainty about the authenticity of touristic sights / sites. As MacCannell observes,

The rhetoric of tourism is full of manifestations of the importance of authenticity of the relationship between tourists and what they see: this is a *typical* native house; this is the *very* place the leader fell; this is the *actual* pen used to sign the law; this is the *original* manuscript; this is an *authentic* Tlingit fish club; this is a real piece of the *true* Crown of Thorns. (qtd. in Ivanovic 323)

John Urry similarly remarks that tourists tend to seek authenticity in other times and places than their everyday lives and notes their fascination for the “real lives” of others, which are somehow imbued with a sense of reality difficult to discover in their own lives and experiences (9). In spite of their quest for authenticity as a form of personal fulfillment, tourists are nonetheless condemned to consume pseudo-experiences (Goulding 837) and become entangled in the so-called “staged authenticity” that “tourist spaces” are organized around, according to MacCannell.

### **Presenting, Representing and Re-creating Edith Wharton’s *The Mount***

If Peirce K. Lewis was right to affirm that “[o]ur human landscape is our unwitting autobiography, reflecting our tastes, our values, our aspirations, and even our fears, in tangible, visible form” (Lewis 1), then Edith Wharton’s *The Mount* can be regarded as an autobiographical house which reveals its creator’s influence on architecture, garden and interior design at the beginning of the 20th century. In the words of Henry James, “[n]o one fully knows our Edith who hasn’t seen her in the act of creating a habitation for herself” (qtd. in Metcalf 12). Built in 1902 as a retreat for experiencing what Wharton referred to as “the complex art of civilized living” (Metcalf 8), together with her ample literary legacy, the Mount estate represents Wharton’s testament to her achievements.

Described in the media of the day as a “very charming estate”, defined by “strikingly tasteful architectural lines” which confer it “an air of stateliness and dignity, yet an air of simplicity... that stifles the slightest suggestion of pretence or simulation” (Metcalf 8) and characterized by Henry James as “a delicate French chateau mirrored in a Massachusetts pond...a monument to the almost too impeccable taste of its so accomplished mistress” (qtd. in Metcalf 8), Edith Wharton’s residence prior to the breakout of the Great War and to her subsequent relocation in Europe was declared a U.S. National Historic Landmark (NHL) in 1971. To this day, it remains one of the few NHLs in the United States dedicated to women (5%).

Having changed several owners and having provided accommodation for different purposes over the years (including a school for girls), Wharton’s former estate had been simply abandoned and neglected until its recuperation and restoration in the late 1970s. Michael Kammen observes that it was in the seventies when the nostalgic mood became truly pervasive in the United States: “Americans seem to want to see and touch anything old – the genuine old, if possible, but even the hokey and plastic ‘old’ will do if nothing better is available” (12902). He further states that the era was characterized by a profound “rejection of the unattractive consequences caused by industrialization” and by equally strong “yearnings for the pre-industrial era as a golden age of pristine simplicity” (Kammen 12913).

Coincidence or not, it was the same convictions and anxieties permeating the American society in the 1970s that led to Wharton’s retreat at the Mount at the beginning of the century, a time of heavy industrialization and urbanization and a similar period of “nostalgia and tradition orientation” (Kammen 47). Just as the American people at the time of the Mount’s recuperation and restoration were looking back at their pre-industrial heritage for inspiration, so was Edith Wharton aiming to reform American interior design at the turn of the 20th century – which she deemed “a varnished barbarism” – by a “return to architectural principles...of the past” (qtd. in Metcalf 12).

Part of a class of heritage known as “house museum”, that is, a site maintained “as it was” so that it offers visitors an insight into what people believed to have been historically important (Harrison 31), the Mount is situated in Lenox, Massachusetts, which together with the surrounding Berkshire region hosts a great number of historical sites and offers a plethora of touristic attractions for both the American and the foreign public (Berkshire Museum, Berkshire Scenic Railway Museum, the area’s Museum of Contemporary Art, Norman Rockwell Museum, Ventfort Hall Mansion and Gilded Age Museum, Chesterwood – the country home, studio and gardens of sculptor Daniel Chester French, author of “Abraham Lincoln” for the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C.). In addition to the museums, the cottages in the area – which provided residence to many of the country’s elite at the turn of the 20th century, by invoking “the more informal country life that they loved in Lenox in contrast to the increasing formality of New York, Boston and Newport” (<http://lenox.org/lenox-history/>) –, including Wharton’s own Gilded Age cottage erected during the peak building years in Lenox and which underwent considerable restoration to be brought back to its former grandeur, stand as evidence of the so-called cult of the country house. For many people, this symbolizes the very idea of

“heritage”, especially in Great Britain. In his *In Anger: Culture in the Cold War 1945-60* (1981), Robert Hewison explains the popularity of the country house by its being an expression of “a pre-war society of established values and social relations” whose “very fabric is the product of a uniquely English artistic tradition” and whose “occupants, in their family relationships, employment of servants, and ownership and rule over the surrounding countryside, reflect a secure social order” (qtd. in Walsh 76). Michael Kammen similarly notes the benefits brought by “the calm of rustic museum villages”, especially in ages of “intense bustle”, while Walsh maintains that such places act as “breathing spaces” in our postmodern world. (Walsh 96)

With its historical background and location at the heart of a highly attractive touristic region, the Mount may be regarded as what Roberta Sassatelli identified as “settings for consumption” (167), often concentrated in institutions which are typically coded as places of leisure. Edith Wharton’s former estate is nowadays a venue for both cultural and academic manifestations, such as conferences, reading circles, temporary and permanent exhibitions and workshops, and for social events such as balls, weddings, parties, concerts and national or regional holidays. Visitors at the Mount can tour the estate and experience life as it was when the Mount provided accommodation for the Pulitzer Prize winner and her equally celebrated friends, while at the same time benefitting from the comfort and opportunities of the present. In this way, the Mount is both a site of memory which bears the mark of its creator and preserves the tangible, material evidence of Wharton’s life (objects, photographs, manuscripts, personal items, her original library) and a place of consumption related or unrelated to the theme of the estate (for instance, people can buy books by and about the female writer, DVD collections, souvenirs and gifts, and they can also relax at the Terrace Café).

In order to make the abode even more attractive to visitors, the organizers resort to sensationalism in advertising the Mount as a site of paranormal activity – certainly not coincidental for the former residence of a ghost story author, famous for the eerie atmosphere and numerous ghost encounters in her works. The official website claims that tourists and visitors will experience the sound of “[c]reaking floors and slamming doors, fading footsteps down empty halls, whispered words in the wind”, after which “[s]ensations and shadows follow.” Furthermore, they will feel “tingling taps on the shoulders” and come across “spectral shapes crouched in corners or gathered in front of fireplaces long gone cold.” (<http://www.edithwharton.org/ghosts/>) The website also provides a gallery of such “ghostly” images.

The role of contemporary media in providing new interpretations and representations of heritage sites and their attempt at reconstructing and commercializing the spirit of bygone ages can’t be overestimated. By building and sustaining anticipation, a variety of non-tourist practices – such as film, television, literature, magazines, records, videos – construct and reinforce the tourist gaze (Urry 3). In *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (1987), Colin Campbell speaks about an “imaginative hedonism” when claiming that “the imaginative enjoyment of products and services is a crucial part of contemporary consumerism” (Campbell 92). Anticipation and covert daydreaming – the

construction of mental images to be consumed for the intrinsic pleasure they provide (Campbell 77) – consequently appear as core processes of contemporary consumerism.

With respect to the way in which the Mount has been represented in the media over the last few years, I would like to consider how Edith Wharton's former residence has been increasingly associated with the contemporary fashion industry and glossy magazines. For instance, *City Living Magazine* features in its February/March 2011 issue an article entitled "Haute Couture in a Historical Home," which speaks about a photo-shoot organized at the Mount in order to support and publicize local, New England fashion designers. Steeped in local history and accessible price-wise in comparison with other means/ venues of advertising and display, the cottage seems to provide the perfect spot for a photo-shoot meant to exhibit the latest creations of local designers. The article permanently emphasizes the relationship between the garments in the pictures and the character of the venue or of its former inhabitant. For instance, the author claims that a flower neck-piece which accompanies an evening gown was "inspired by Wharton's joy in bringing the indoors and the outdoors together" (Worrall 33). Another designer apparently drew her inspiration from "the decoration and design of Wharton's dining room, quite possibly the lightest and airiest room in the house" and hence "her gown certainly filled the pale pink and white high-ceilinged room with sophisticated simplicity and color. Like the dress, this room is unique" (idem). In yet another image, the model is photographed "against the backdrop of the long gallery on the second floor as if it were Wharton herself coming from the library beyond to greet friends arriving in the courtyard below" (idem). A final image shows the model against a background where "the colors in the dress chime perfectly with their setting". It is at this point that the author of the article asserts that "Wharton would have approved", considering that "[h]er house is the epitome of balance, symmetry and proportion, looking simultaneously to the future and back to the past." (idem)

Arguably the best known photo-shoot at the Mount is the one carried out last year by *Vogue Magazine* in order to celebrate 150 years since the establishment of the famous historical house. Under a headline inspired by the title of one of Wharton's best known novels, the photographs taken by the highly acclaimed photographer Annie Leibovitz accompany the article "The Custom of the Country: *Vogue* Re-creates Edith Wharton's Artistic Arcadia." While the article refers to some key moments in Wharton's life, particularly her marriage to Teddy Wharton and her friendship with great personalities of the day, such as Henry James, President Theodore Roosevelt, diplomat Walter Berry, sculptor Daniel Chester French and architect Ogden Codman Jr., the images shot on location at the Mount try to reconstruct the spirit and the appearances of the age in what has been deemed a very fashionable photo-shoot, the more so since the models are all renowned and successful men and women: model Natalia Vodianova (playing Edith Wharton), actresses Juno Temple and Maimie Gummer (playing Wharton's lifelong confidante Anna Bahlmann and her niece Beatrix Farrand, respectively), writers Junot Diaz, Jonathan Safran Foer and Jeffrey Eugenides (playing diplomat Walter Berry, architect Ogden Codman, Jr. and Henry James, respectively), artist Nate Lowman

(playing sculptor Daniel Chester French), actors Jack Huston, Elijah Wood, Max Minghella and James Corden (playing love-interest Morton Fullerton, loyal chauffeur Charles Cook, painter Maxfield Parish and President Theodore Roosevelt, respectively). Each image is, of course, accompanied by a legend stating what (house of) designers each of the characters is wearing.

The pictorial has had its share of controversy, with those who sparked the debate criticizing the fact that there was no woman writer distributed as a character in the feature, even though Wharton herself was a major American female author. Another critique would be that while it is obvious that most of the “models” were transformed to resemble the real life personalities they stood for, Edith Wharton was played by a young and blonde above all, professional model (Wharton was a famous red-head and not particularly pretty, including by her own standards).

Nevertheless, the fact that the Mount was the subject of a feature in *Vogue Magazine* was perceived as a “huge honor” by the marketing and communications director at the Mount, who manifested her delight in having the glossy magazine raise awareness of the Edith Wharton Restoration Society’s work and in calling attention to Wharton’s role as a 21<sup>st</sup> century muse. She added that the presence of the Mount estate in *Vogue* “will help elevate the visibility of the Mount and the Berkshire region on national and international levels” (Rogovoy). The executive director at the Mount similarly observed that Edith Wharton represents a continuous source of inspiration, especially to other women who “have achieved world renown and respect in their given fields” (she refers here to photographer Annie Leibovitz and to *Vogue* creative director Grace Coddington) (Rogovoy). In their words, “[i]t means there is a resurgence – she’s important, relevant, current, and hip.” Or, as *Entertainment Weekly* put it recently, “Edith Wharton is hot.” (Fanto)

At the end of the previous century, David Lowenthal observed that “[m]ost historic houses the world over focus on eminent lives untainted by manual toil. American magnates who amassed European art legacies – Morgan, Frick, Vanderbilt, Carnegie, Huntington – were first famed as robber barons; only immense wealth made them benefactors of national heritage” (Heritage 93). However “untainted by manual toil” Edith Wharton’s rather aristocratic life may have been, the female author and her tangible legacy undoubtedly represent a commendable presence on the American national heritage list. Erected at the beginning of the 20th century according to her own specifications, Wharton’s estate at the Mount is at once an expression of her tastes and an illustration of the condition of the American elite before the advent of the First World War. Nostalgia for a (real or imagined) Golden Age, the fame and literary charisma of its owner, its location amid a rather affluent American countryside, its inherent aristocratic aura and its versatility as a venue for both cultural and academic events, and social and leisure activities have transformed the Mount into a popular touristic attraction and a (pop) media icon.

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