

Opponent's Report

Pavλίna Černá, "Ethics of the Self as an Aesthetics of Existence in Wharton's *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence*"

Pavλίna Černá's thesis is a well-written, rigorous and closely-observed analysis that contests the interpretation of Edith Wharton's two most famous novels as textbook examples of literary naturalism and the genre's emblematic plot of social determinism. While Černá acknowledges Wharton's debts to the naturalist movement, she deftly uses Michel Foucault's late writing on ethics as a conceptual frame to read Wharton against the grain of her naturalist influences. The Wharton who emerges through this Foucauldian construction is a newly-radicalized Wharton, an author focused far less on depicting the monolithic social institutions of Gilded Age capitalism than on identifying paths for nonconformity, individual liberty and self-transformation.

I found this argument original and persuasive and I would like to see Černá's claims more fully fleshed out. I am also impressed by the depth of research behind Černá's thesis, which displays a formidable acquaintance with Foucault's scholarship as well as an authoritative familiarity with a wide range of contemporary criticism relevant to her subject.

The suggestions that follow, then, are meant for the published version/s of this manuscript and do not qualify my admiration for the thesis.

In the book or article revisions of this work, Černá will need, in a number of places, to be more daring about complicating her own argument. For example, while Černá convincingly extricates Wharton's protagonist, Lily Bart, from the naturalist "plot of decline" by proving Lily's ethical development according to Foucault's "techniques of the self" and "techniques of existence" – mainly "self-critique, and contemplation," Černá should pay more attention to her own observation that Wharton borrows formulas from domestic fiction in order to frame Lily's ultimate resistance to commodification. As Černá notes, Lily most vividly confronts an example of "individual re-creation" (29) in the domestic figure of Nettie Struther.

From an ill, 'fallen woman' . . . [Nettie] becomes a happy mother who lives for her husband and daughter. Considering Wharton's struggle for self-definition within the still-patriarchal society of the Gilded Age, she interestingly employs a sentimental domestic sphere as a counterpart to social determinism. . . . Nettie's kitchen, protected from the public gaze, creates a space for reflection and self-determination. (29)

Wharton's reliance on domestic formulas as a means to construct her most specific image of "autonomy" from social determinism is indeed an interesting issue and one which deserves further investigation since it raises the question of whether Foucault's scheme of ethical development can be so readily assimilated to Wharton's evidently domestic vision of selfhood. Perhaps it can. Nineteenth-century domestic fiction, for all its conservatism, precisely proposed to offer alternatives to an emerging market society. But, as yet, Černá has not really pursued the implications of Wharton's domestic influences and their potential to trouble, modify or enrich her Foucauldian reading of the novelist.

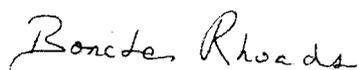
Černá's analysis would thus benefit from more research into the anti-market doctrine and proto-feminism (however compromised) promoted by Wharton's domestic predecessors. Indeed, Černá should consider how the tension she already lays out in Foucauldian terms of determined v. ethical subject may also indicate an important clash in Wharton's fiction between patently gendered canons of nineteenth-century writing and ideology: i.e. naturalism/domestic fiction. At present, Černá only hints at this: "Naturalism introduced the 'masculine ideal of authorship (xiv)'—connected with routine and hard work—as opposed to the notion of writing as an amateur, aristocratic, and effeminate leisure activity (5)." And further: "In style, Edith Wharton stood between the sentimental domestic fiction of her female predecessors and the realist, naturalist style of her contemporaries" (13). To sum up, a fuller exploration of Wharton's domestic v. naturalist borrowings seems to me the most meaningful direction for the further development of Černá's research. Such a direction would also require Černá to present a more complicated picture of Wharton's general ideological ambivalences and evolution since, as Černá describes it, where *House of Mirth* offers an extremely positive version of the domestic woman's potential to transcend market society, by the time Wharton writes *Age of Innocence* fifteen years later, the domestic paradigm, figured by May Welland, is significantly more negative: "May epitomizes the angel in the house: she lacks 'freedom of judgment.' . . . Throughout the novel Wharton builds up an image of May's 'abysmal purity' (40). This apparently radical shift in Wharton's use of the domestic should be considered and explained.

There is one important historical error in the manuscript. The Married Woman's Property Act of 1882, which Černá references, was the nineteenth-century's most important piece of British (not American) legislation concerning women's rights.

Overall, this is an exciting and promising piece of scholarship. The thesis testifies to the candidate's ability to handle dense theoretical paradigms, to engage in wide-ranging research, and to sustain an original argument through close and nuanced readings.

I recommend Pavlína Černá's thesis for a defense and I suggest that a grade of "excellent" be awarded to it.

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