



One half of the double staircase leading from the terrace to the lawn at Staatsburgh

Lily Bart at Bellomont: Beauty on the Battlements

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In Book I of Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, Lily Bart, a well-wired accessory of the New York aristocracy, walks into a place and situation she assumes she can manipulate to her benefit but ends by suffering her first unwitting loss in a work of accelerating losses. The place is Bellomont, a Hudson River estate somewhere near Rhinebeck, to which Lily will journey by train from Manhattan, in order, among other things, to secure a more predictable and affluent future for herself—or so she would like to imagine. While she believes her training will assure her an easy win, Lily Bart, a gambler by nature, is willing to test the very hands of Fate even as she battles to retain a final hold on a vital part of herself that lies somewhat beyond the discernible rules of the aristocratic game plan. From the beginning, Lily Bart's actions reveal the "pitfalls of using masquerade as a means of asserting a personal identity" (Hovet and Hovet 349); and she navigates between two: one that will free her from the confinement of her gender and her class and one that will concretize her place in New York society at the expense of her agency. While her actions will finally reveal "how impossible it is for her to negotiate actively or articulately between the two images" (Hovet and Hovet 349),¹ the Bellomont chapters offer a brief, vibrant glimpse into the possible.

Appropriately, Lily's story begins in September, at the cusp of autumn, the Hudson Valley's most spectacular but poignant season whose very power, like Lily's, is in its momentary glory. Visitors to Bellomont must capture the moment and revel in it, for its transitory splendor metamorphoses. As Nancy Von Rosk writes, "Bellomont's visual delight is calculated and contrived to achieve just the right effect" (336), and for Lily Bart, staging the right effect might allow her to succeed if only she were able to break outside of contrivance, however beguiling. In this aching season, each moment that passes changes the aesthetics and refashions the recognitions and responses, and so for Lily, as for Bellomont in its autumnal glory, time and appreciation are of the essence lest the moment is gone forever.

Lawrence Selden inadvertently links Lily herself to the contrived impressions of Bellomont as they stroll together towards his flat at The Benedict in the novel's opening chapter.² "Everything about her was at once vigorous and exquisite.... [S]he must have cost a great deal to make.... [It was as though] a fine glaze of beauty and fastidiousness had been applied to vulgar clay. Yet the analogy left him unsatisfied, for... was it not possible that the material was fine, but that circumstances had fashioned it into a futile shape" (5). Bellomont and Lily become centers of spectacle and, at times, the spectacle itself. However, as Frances L. Restuccia reminds the reader, while Selden and others would like to depict Lily as an "aesthetic commodity," unlike Bellomont, her repeated oscillations between the demands of external reality and the desires of her inner self reveal her to be, like the colorations of autumn, as much of a natural work in progress as a work of art (406). "If Wharton invites us to apprehend Lily as an analogue of art, we must take care in constructing the parallel, avoiding the traditional legalistic tendency to ascribe univocal meanings to things, to wash away their ambiguity—in this case to regard Lily as an art object, or in other terms as a 'work'" (Restuccia 407). Lily's constant reconfigurations of herself, in fact, underscore her unwillingness to be simply a replica of an old manor house, like the Trenors' house, where books are on display but never read. If she is going to be a cultural marker, Lily wants to be one where the intellectual, the moral, and the social interconnect for a greater purpose than just to be gazed upon or to serve as a prop. Lily knows that "beauty is only the raw material of conquest and that to convert it into success other arts are required" (36). Unfortunately, while Lily tries to control her own agency and take charge of what others see as an "aesthetic commodity," bringing to it her own brand of clever design, she is also unlike the monolithic Bellomont in that, "for all the hard glaze of her exterior," she is, like the coloration of foliage, "inwardly as malleable as wax" (55), and it is this malleability which will eventually lead to Lily's destruction, for she can neither fully mold herself to her own design nor hold herself to society's blueprint. The ambiguities—even those merely sensed—are ultimately too compelling.

Significantly, then, the name *Bellomont* suggests the dynamic of outer and inner at work in the place and the person: the word *Bellomont* is comprised of roots that intimate both "beauty" and "battle."³ The opening scene of the Bellomont section interfuses both connotations. We find Lily gazing down from the mansion's main stairway upon the card table and those around it in the great hall below. Wharton stunningly captures the external attractions of the setting:

Tall clumps of flowering plants were grouped against a background of dark foliage in the angles of the walls. On the crimson carpet a deer-hound and

two or three spaniels dozed luxuriously before the fire, and the light from the great central lantern overhead shed a brightness on the women's hair and struck sparks from their jewels as they moved. (26)

It is almost, and not for the last time, as if Lily Bart has momentarily lost herself within the brushwork of a painting. This is, we are told, one of those moments that could “[gratify] her sense of beauty and her craving for the external finish of life”—but not at this juncture, for she has just lost a preliminary skirmish of the battle that will intensify throughout her days at Bellomont (24). As she observes a seemingly intimate grouping of ladies of wealth before the fire, we learn that she has just lost a great deal of money (by Lily's standards) to these women, and their apparent closeness only amplifies her distance from them and their world. Lily's disconnect allows her to reflect upon the precariousness of her life as compared to theirs. In this instance, therefore, the external beauty of the scene below her merely gives “a sharper edge to the meagerness of her own opportunities” (26). In the last moments of her own life, Lily's mother had warned her, “Don't let [dinginess] creep up on you,” and shortly, as Lily looks at herself in the candlelight of her room, she notices two lines have crept onto her mouth. For the already frustrated Lily Bart, “[I]t seemed an added injustice that petty cares should leave a trace on the beauty which was her only defence against them” (29). As one who has spent much of her life in the company of those with the means she has not, her inability to refuse what for her is a high-stakes game of cards intensifies her need to find her way into the presumed certainties of wealth if she is to avoid the “dinginess” that killed her mother. Unlike Bellomont, where the weathering of age will bring distinction and prestige, the early wrinkles will diminish Lily's value and raise the stakes. In fact, time is one more thing with which Lily's beauty must battle, and Lily has little time left, for she has been on the market for some years and has to secure the deal before it is too late. Lily “found herself actually struggling for a foothold on the broad space which had once seemed her own for the asking” (40). Her visit to Bellomont, as we learn even on the train ride to Rhinebeck, is calculated to close the deal that will allow her at last to assume her rightful place in society, where she can practice a mastery of the societal games she seems initially equipped for in every way but financially.

That the novel should begin at Grand Central Station, an urban nexus, far from the seemingly pastoral solace of Bellomont, is only too ironically appropriate. People come and go at the train station, making temporary connections; social interactions are irrelevant here unless they facilitate better ties. Grand Central Station marks the beginning of Lily's journey toward what she thinks will be the “bright pinnacles of success” and of a series of “slippery surface[s]” that will inop-

portunately pop up to prevent her from achieving that desired “success” (40). Lily and Selden meet at the station, where the omniscient narrator qualifies Selden as “spectator” to Lily’s spectacle, one Selden enjoys watching (4). The encounter underscores Wharton’s thematic interest in the relationship between Lily and her surroundings, between people and places. In fact, Lily herself connects the train station with another site of spectacle, a social spectacle—a cotillion—where people come and go in search of connections, some temporary and others permanent; and it is Lily who brings in the aesthetic judgment on those people who are both spectators and spectacle, saying to Selden, “It isn’t hotter here than in Mrs. Van Obsburgh’s conservatory—and some of the women are not a bit uglier” (4).⁴

Grand Central is, in fact, the architectural prologue to the Bellomont section of the novel. It is here, as Mark Bauerlein notes, that “Lily Bart appears in all her beauty and incompetence[; that] Selden mystifies the stranded woman into a strategist[; and that we see] the interpersonal dynamic that will drive them to amusement, reproof, love, disappointment, and, finally, his skepticism and her suicide” (3). It is here that we, as readers, first encounter the word “dinginess,” and it is here that we learn from the narrator that Lily had eluded this stigmatizing quality that defined the “average section of womanhood” (5). Lily stands out in Grand Central as the spectacle within the spectacle, for, as the narrator notes, “Miss Bart was a figure to arrest even the suburban traveler rushing to his last train” (3). The semiotic significance of Grand Central as a locus of cultural conduct and as a marker for Lily’s impetuosity which will lead to her ruin is clearly present in the behavior of and exchanges between Lily and Selden: “[S]tandards of deportment are binding and unforgiving, and Lily Bart is in danger from the moment of her appearance” (Bauerlein 9). Lily initiates the proposal to go for “a cup of tea,” accepts Selden’s invitation to “come up and see” his apartment even though she knows it is inappropriate, something made clear by the char-woman’s stare as Lily comes down the stairs and flinches at the perceived “odious conjecture,” and finally lies to Simon Rosedale when he questions her about what she is doing at The Benedict as she leaves the building (4, 6, 14).

The opening scene in Grand Central reflects both Lily’s penchant for disregarding the rules of conduct and for relying on them, and during the train ride to Rhinebeck, we will see Lily continue to flout propriety and gamble just as she did when she answered Selden’s invitation to his apartment: “Why not?... I’ll take the risk” (6). On the train, Lily demonstrates that she has learned how to play the game of the wealthy, that she knows the ins and outs of the mode and manner of its workings. Lily has learned “the mediated and socialized forms of power, power that women enjoy and that they use skillfully and sometimes brutally”; she has



A.B. Wenzell illustration from the 1905 edition of
The House of Mirth. Courtesy Bard College Library

learned that “power resides in the ability to define the terms of exchange, to make one thing ‘equal’ to another” (Dimock 378). When she realizes that Percy Gryce is seated close by, she establishes her power play by positioning herself as predator: “She began to cut the pages of a novel, tranquilly studying her prey through downcast lashes while she organized a method of attack” (18). Lily has been marketing herself for years—ever since her father’s death and her mother’s warning

that her beauty was “the last asset in their fortunes, the nucleus around which their life was to be rebuilt” (35). A marriage to Percy would redefine the terms of her existence, make her equal to the others, and give her access to place, position, and power. Lily is skillful at crafting the means for the vastly rich but bashfully uncertain Percy Gryce⁵ to arrive at the certainty of proposing to her. She has, Wharton tells us, “the art of giving self-confidence to the embarrassed”—in this case to an opulent but mind-numbing mama’s-boy who will “do the honor of boring her for life” when they are married (18, 27). As she later tries to convince herself, marriage to Percy Gryce would put an end to her “vulgar cares” and leave her a level playing field on which to engage in societal contests such as those that will eventually destroy her (51). Yet, even as she painstakingly refashions herself from the bold and unconventional woman who takes risks to the innocent, domesticated female who gains Percy’s admiration for preparing tea on a “lurching train” and provokes “a delicious sense of exhilaration in him,” Lily connects once again with the instability of her surroundings, the train ride that reels and rolls unexpectedly; as the narrator notes, “[D]angerous theories as to the advisability of yielding to impulse were germinating under the surface of smiling attention...to her companion” (19, 21). As her own personal architect, Lily reconstructs herself as needed, but she cannot sustain the structured performance nor free herself from the censorious gaze of public scrutiny that will seal her fate.

The embattled Lily Bart wants more than what she is so obviously equipped to manage. Bellomont is, after all, a marketplace for social parasites like Lily and Carry Fisher and for social piranhas like Bertha Dorset. Lily, on the one hand, understands and participates in the matrimonial market, as she makes quite clear when she responds to Mrs. Trenor’s counsel to “*go slowly*” with “Why don’t you say it, Judy? I have the reputation of being on the hunt for a rich husband?” (47). At the same time, Lily does not want to be purchased, to be “the one possession in which [Percy] took sufficient pride to spend money on it” (51). Her days at Bellomont are in part an internal battle between her willingness to find her place among “people whom she had ridiculed and yet envied” and her desire for something beyond those sometimes “brutal and self-engrossed” people with such carefully crafted rules and expectations wound around them (65-66). If Lily is to be an investment for someone with capital, as Selden suggests during their earlier tête-à-tête, then she seems to be looking for a different kind of currency, one that the enigmatic Lawrence Selden whose arrival at Bellomont provides as an apparent alternative to a mercantile world that she simultaneously covets and eschews. Whether it is social relations, friendships, or love interests, the language and the politics at Bellomont are those of dollars and cents; and while Selden, as Lillian

S. Robinson notes, is a “man with the sensitivity to see through and beyond the world of Bellomont... and the façade Lily herself maintains,” he survives the “double standard that destroys Lily” and becomes an “ironic parallel” to Lily (351-352). The only difference between them is that a lack of inheritance and the concomitant power/social status that comes with it does not become what Robinson calls “a fatal liability” for Selden (358). He can play both sides of the game, losing at most a match.

Before Selden arrives, the evocative powers of Bellomont’s external beauty continue to reveal the ebb and flow of Lily’s own conflicted feelings, the consequences of which will be concretized in her inauspicious walk on the morning she is supposed to meet Percy for church. Standing on the terrace facing the river and leaning against the balustrade, Lily is once again at a distance, observing others, including Percy Gryce, at afternoon tea. The shapes, smells, and visual textures of the landscape unveil the preliminary tinges of the coming autumnal season:

Seating herself on the upper step of the terrace, Lily leaned her head against the honeysuckles wreathing the balustrade. The fragrance of the late blossoms seemed an emanation of the tranquil scene, a landscape tutored to the last degree of rural elegance. In the foreground glowed the warm tints of the gardens. Beyond the lawn, with its pyramidal pale-gold maples and velvety firs, sloped pastures dotted with cattle; and through a long glade the river widened like a lake under the sliver light of September. (50)

For Lily, however, this “tutored” beauty doesn’t fully reach within her. As Wharton tells us, given the surroundings, “[S]he might have been lost in the mazes of an inarticulate happiness[, but i]n reality, her thoughts were finding definite utterance in the tranquil recapitulation of the blessings in store for her” (48). Lily “cannot appreciate the charms of nature”; for Lily, “nature is [simply] another stage set, another theatrical scene in which to perform” (Von Rosk 342). The beauty of her surroundings is just a backdrop for her next performance; in fact, as Percy casts “agonized glances” in her direction, she uses nature’s charm to “sink into an attitude of more graceful abstraction,” having “learned the value of contrast... [and] fully aware of the extent to which Mrs. Fisher’s volubility was enhancing her own repose” (49). She creates the spectacle of the indifferent lover and enacts one more stratagem in the service of securing the life she says she desires. While the architectonics of a now clearly-blueprinted future overwhelm any poetic or painterly sensations of the moment, they will be fully endangered at last by the arrival of Selden, who, like most men at that time, does not have to calculate and contrive; he can choose to invest or not to invest in Lily.

Selden appears as if on cue to remind us of the predestined outcome of Lily's battle to reconcile a constructed life of comfort with the challenge of a life built upon some deeper but indefinable instinct. Selden is the "slippery surface" that will ultimately precipitate Lily's losing a "foothold" that would have "gained [for her] the bright pinnacles of success" (40). Wharton never makes it clear whether Selden's arrival is the work of chance, whether he follows Lily to Bellomont deliberately, or whether in fact he has responded to a telephone summons from Judy Trenor. In any event, his arrival puts him squarely within Lily's line-drawing of her life with Percy Gryce. At the conclusion of her staged terrace reverie, Lily assumes it is Percy whom she hears walking behind her, "and she smiled at the significance of his coming to join her instead of beating an instant retreat to the fire-side"—as if her very constructions have drawn him to her and as if her own battle plan is proceeding as anticipated (52). Instead, as "[s]he turned to give him the welcome that such gallantry deserved," her "greeting wavered into a blush of wonder" (52). Lily's calculating design is altered by two variables—Selden's unexpected but perversely welcomed arrival and Bertha Dorset's cunning manipulation of a game she has little chance of losing. Bertha has what Lily has not—an attendant influence, which, the narrator notes, "in its last analysis, was simply the *power* of money (emphasis ours). Bertha Dorset's social credit was based on an impregnable bank account" (274). Later, a scorned and abandoned Lily will remind the reader of the connection between money and credibility when she answers Gerty's plea to tell "the whole truth": "The whole truth?"... What is truth? Where a woman is concerned, it's the story that's easiest to believe. In this case it's a great deal easier to believe Bertha Dorset's story than mine, because she has a big house and an opera box, and it's convenient to be on good terms with her" (235-236).

On the next morning in the Bellomont library—a place with "so ambiguous an atmosphere," not unlike Lily's own sustained misgivings, making her "like a water-plant in the flux of the tides"—Lily begins a Sabbath battle with a fate she has consistently tempted (53, 55). Having thought about her longing for the trapped luxury of the "great gilt cage" of society and the allure of living outside it, Lily is drawn into the quiet, comfortable respectability of the library at the end of the house, a space "that is almost the only surviving portion of the old manor-house of Bellomont: a long spacious room, revealing the traditions of the mother country in its classically-cased doors, the Dutch tiles of the chimney, and the elaborate hob-grate with its shining brass urns" (56, 61). However, it is, for the most part, a "library" in appearance only, whose "pleasantly shabby books" are remnants of earlier owners, and there is little sense the Trenors have added much if anything to these holdings. In fact, we are told, "The library at Bellomont was

never used for reading, though it had a certain popularity as a smoking room or a quiet retreat for flirtation” (60). As Von Rosk notes, the Bellomont library is “rather a stage for performance” (337). And so it turns out to be on this morning, as Lily comes upon a private exchange between former lovers Lawrence Selden and Bertha Dorset at the far end of the room. Selden *does* have a book in his hand, for whatever it signifies: a sign that he is “outside the cage,” an excuse for a rendezvous, or a prop for his own participation in the theatrics of the day (57). Lily’s question to the annoyed Bertha, who views Lily’s intrusion as a personal affront, and the bemused Selden—“Dear me, am I late?”—has its own ambiguities: a simple question about having missed the church-going party and a chance to win her hand (or rather Percy’s hand) in marriage or a veiled comment on a pattern of mis-timings that will run throughout the novel and lead to her death at the end (62). At least, Wharton tells us, “The sight of [Selden’s] composure had a disturbing effect on Lily, but to be disturbed was in her case to make a more brilliant effort at self-possession” (61). Certainly, she is able to cast herself into another of those well-constructed moments for which the shelves of unread books seem aptly placed. Yet, while Lily thinks she has staged a good performance and kept them from reading her “cover,” it is obvious from Selden’s “puzzled amusement” and Bertha’s later recreation of the truth for Percy that she has been well read (62).

In fact, Lily’s day with Selden will test the limits of her performance as she reaches a high point both emotionally and topographically. Selden’s appearance has had a way of “readjusting her vision,” and Lily has already begun recasting the players at Bellomont and her own role in the performance (57). “How different [her friends] had seemed to her a few hours ago! Then they had symbolized what she was gaining; now they stood for what she was giving up. She closed her eyes... and the vacuous routine of the life she had chosen stretched before her” (57). Wharton will follow both the sinuous path of Lily’s “vision” and the contours of the land surrounding Bellomont in an upward movement that takes Lily and Selden to where they will momentarily achieve a beauty of recognition well above the contrived attractions of the social world fronting the Hudson with seeming imperceptibility. The movement to that hilltop begins with Lily leaving Selden and Bertha Dorset and moving out through the glass doors of the library. She moves along the garden walk, seemingly headed in the direction of the church that stands at the gates of the estate, presumably with some intention of belatedly joining Percy Gryce and the rest of the group at services. But as she walks, she wonders about Selden’s reasons for being at Bellomont: “Was it possible, after all, that he had come for Bertha Dorset?” (63). She dismisses the possibility that Selden simply came “to spend a Sunday out of town” and instead sees the situation

as one shaped around triangulated desire, in which she, and not Bertha, is the object of Selden's affection and Bertha is her rival: "Lily was not easily disconcerted; competition put her on her mettle, and she reflected that Selden's coming, if it did not declare him to be still in Mrs. Dorset's toils, showed him to be so completely free from them that he was not afraid of her proximity" (63).

Her thoughts carry her away from the possibility of making it to church before the close of the service, and she opts instead to "sink into a rustic seat at a bend of the walk" (63). For a moment, she sees herself ornamentally as she is taken by the graspable beauty of where she is: "The spot was charming, and Lily was not insensible to the charm of the spot or to the fact that her presence enhanced it; but she was not accustomed to taste the joys of solitude except in company, and the combination of a handsome girl and a romantic scene struck her as too good to be wasted" (63). After waiting a half hour, however, without the fulfillment of her certitude, she experiences a "vague sense of failure" in some ways more acute than that following her loss at cards. For one who, as we have heard, prefers pleasant "solitudes" in the presence of others, she experiences "an inner isolation deeper than the loneliness about her" (63). It is not enough to be an ornamental part of an ornamental place if there is no one to observe the beauty of her adornment.

But Selden does arrive, of course, and immediately their chemistry is palpable and puts them in sharp contrast to the contrived friendships and exchanges at Bellomont. While giving the initial impression of gamey control, their banter has a freshness, a spontaneity, which is candid and intimate—a verbal ascension that anticipates the physical climb they will soon make:

"How fast you walk!" he remarked. "I thought I should never catch up with you."

She answered gaily: "You must be quite breathless! I've been waiting under that tree for an hour."

"Waiting for me, I hope?" he rejoined, and she said with a vague laugh: "Well—waiting to see if you would come."

"I seize the distinction, but I don't mind it since doing the one involved doing the other. But weren't you sure that I should come?"

"If I waited long enough—but you see I had only a limited time to give to my experiment." (63-64)

She explains the general outline of her former plan for the day—with the clear implication that she has been working to land a suitable partner. And yet, when Selden informs her of his desire to undermine the necessary rendezvous

(not yet understanding her reference to Gryce), Lily willingly relinquishes what Ruth Yeazell calls the ornamental “position of leisure-class marker” (719): she “received this with fresh appreciation; his nonsense was like the bubbling of her inner mood” (64). They banter on, experiencing there in the woodland pathway “the same luxury of enjoyment that they had felt in exchanging absurdities over his tea-table” on the day she had taken the train to Rhinebeck, for they both respond to and enjoy the aesthetic forces (64). Lily can revel in the momentary luxury just as she revels in the evanescent beauty of the autumn day. Heightening the contrast of the moment is the return of the churchgoers, including Percy Gryce. Lily’s game plan becomes transparent, for Selden sees with clarity Lily’s blueprint for her future and where their talk about Americana fits within her grand scheme of capturing the obsessive collector Gryce. Battling the confusion of the moment—and clearly her own struggle between inner and outer, between securing her role as “leisure-class marker” and rejecting it—Lily rallies herself by telling Selden disingenuously, “That was why I was waiting for you—to thank you for having given me so many points” (65). Appreciating her performance, as he makes quite clear a few moments later when he says, “[Y]ou’re such a wonderful spectacle: I always like to see what you are doing,” Selden invites Lily, even as Gryce approaches, to walk with him that afternoon so she can thank him “at her leisure” (68, 65). Lily accepts, and she and Selden move on to unearth a possible “republic of the spirit” in the hills above Bellomont (70). Giving up “control over the terms of her selfexposure [sic]” puts Lily at the mercy of public scrutiny (Moddelmog 345). In a world of speculative activities where a woman’s reputation (or lack thereof) makes or breaks the deal, Lily’s disregard for appearances gives Bertha Dorsett the opportunity to redefine her as a bad investment and, as such, a liability for an institution like marriage.

As they walk from Bellomont—on a “perfect” afternoon—Wharton’s description of what they see becomes even richer and more vivid to amplify the now *untutored* natural beauty around them (66). The surroundings will almost free them from the constructs they have been battling at the mansion. Walking eastward, Lily and Selden cross the “high road,” reaching a meadowy “zone of lingering summer,” before their path “dipped into a lane plumed with asters and purpling sprays of bramble, when, through the light quiver of ash leaves, the country unrolled itself in pastoral distances” (66). As they move upward along “shaded slopes,” the trail becomes more forested: “The boles of the trees stood well apart, with only a light feathering of undergrowth; the path wound along the edge of the wood, now and then looking out on a sunlit pasture or an orchard spangled with fruit” (65). Wharton will remind us here that “Lily had no real intimacy

with nature, but she had a passion for the appropriate and could be keenly sensitive to a scene which was a fitting background of her own sensations” (66). Lily finds “something of herself” here in nature’s “calmness, its breadth, its long free reaches”; the “landscape outspread below her seemed an enlargement of her present mood” (66). If this is a kind of stage set for Lily, then her performance will be less guarded than the one she has staged at Bellomont; it will be a performance just for Selden.⁶ Wharton tells us that “[t]here were in [Lily] at the moment two beings, one drawing deep breaths of freedom and exhilaration, the other gasping for air in a little black prison-house of fears. But gradually the captive’s gasps grew fainter” (67). The idyllic landscape brings with it the momentary cessation of the push-pull of Bellomont, invisible even from their elevated position.

Here, well above the world of “negotiable securities,” Lily feels a “sense of lightness, of emancipation” (67), and her connection to Selden is unlike the “manacles chaining her to her fate” at Bellomont, but rather like the “link[s] of the chain that [would draw] them together” as equals (7, 68). Selden was the “richest man she had ever met,” but his riches could not be measured in the marketable realities of the world they had left behind (68). The “September haze veil[s] the scene at their feet” and allows them to contemplate Selden’s idea of success—“personal freedom”—what he calls entering the “republic of the spirit” (67, 70-71). As they discuss the multiple freedoms Selden’s republic would offer, Lily sees the soullessly utilitarian future she has crafted for herself, imagines reconfiguring the blueprint, and asks him, “Why do you make the things I have chosen seem hateful to me, if you have nothing to give me instead?” (74). His response, “No, I have nothing to give you instead,” awakens her from the momentary reverie that had brought her a reprieve from the mercantile world she simultaneously hungered for and reviled (75). As captives of the natural world, Lily and Selden become partners in a game of their own creation. Almost willing to tempt fate, they play an intense match of emotional chicken.

“Do you want to marry me?” she asked.

He broke into a laugh. “No, I don’t want to—but perhaps I should if you did!”

“That’s what I told you—you’re so sure of me that you can amuse yourself with experiments.” She drew back the hand he had regained, and sat looking down on him sadly.

“I am not making experiments,” he returned. “Or if I am, it is not on you but on myself. I don’t know what effect they are going to have on me—but if marrying you is one of them, I will take the risk.”

She smiled faintly. “It would be a great risk, certainly—I have never concealed from you how great.” (76)

Wharton writes, “She leaned on him for a moment, as if with a drop of tired wings,” but the sound of a “giant insect,” a motor car reminding them of the world they left behind, undoes the “spell of a perfect afternoon” and returns them both to their roles of spectator and spectacle (76, 67). As spectator, Selden takes no risks, but Lily’s participation, even momentary, in his “republic of the spirit” seals her fate; and the phrase “Let us go down” is prophetic for Lily, for, unlike Bellomont, she will lose her market value forever and begin a descent from which she will never recover (77).

Part Two: Locating Bellomont

There have been various attempts to identify Bellomont as an actual Hudson Valley estate. The most notable pronouncement was that of Louis Auchincloss, in his introduction to *The Selected Writings of Edith Wharton*, who suggests the connection of Bellomont and the Ogden Mills Estate in Staatsburg, a few miles south of Rhinebeck.⁷ Eric Homberger, among others, links Judy Trenor, hostess at Bellomont, to Mrs. Ogden Mills (156). The fact that such linkages have risen almost to the status of truisms makes them no more possible to substantiate than Lily Bart’s assumptions about her ability to master the games played within estates like Bellomont.

Given the visual and thematic richness of the Bellomont episode, one can approach its actuality in at least one of two ways: 1) Since the interplay of setting and action is so impelling, Bellomont *must* be based upon an actual setting or composite of actual settings; or 2) Conversely, since the interplay is so impelling, one is better off to assume much of it is the work of Wharton’s imagination, interfusing bits of the tangible with bits of the intangible. In either case, the text remains the same, and the implications for Lily are unaltered. However, given the suggestions of the Bellomont-Staatsburgh connection, it seems a worthwhile investigation to put the assertion to the test.

Wharton in the Hudson Valley

While it is easy enough to infer that Edith Wharton spent a good deal of time in the Hudson Valley, it is difficult to determine exactly how much and with what sense of pleasure. Her childhood memories of visits to her Aunt Elizabeth Schermerhorn Jones are notably, if briefly, recalled in the 1934 reminiscence *A Backward Glance* as being a source of great unease. She thought back to Wyndclyffe, Aunt Elizabeth’s Rhinecliff mansion, as a place of “terror”—an impression produced, she writes, by what seemed to her the mansion’s “intoler-

able ugliness” (28). She adds, as part of her anti-idyll, “I can still remember hating everything at Rhinecliff, which, as I saw on rediscovering it some years later, was an expansive but dour specimen of Hudson River Gothic; and from the first I was obscurely conscious of a queer resemblance between the granitic exterior of Aunt Elizabeth and her grimly comfortable home, between her battlemented carps and the turrets of Rhinecliff” (28). When she paid this return visit to Wyndclyffe Wharton unfortunately does not say. R.W.B. Lewis’s biography of Wharton includes a brief mention of a visit “with the Tom Newbolds at Hyde Park, rejoicing in ‘the wonderful colours of foliage’” (172). Ironically, the visit took place on the afternoon following the opening of the stage version of *The House of Mirth* on October 22, 1906.⁸

However, there is not much more in the way of concrete evidence of when and where Wharton stayed in the Hudson Valley. Nor can we prove that Wharton ever paid a visit to the Mills Mansion either before or after it was renovated in 1895—the significance of which we will speculate about later on. The closest we can come is via inference. For example, we know that Edith and Edward Wharton were members of the same “coaching club” as the Millses. A history of the club shows them on the same outing at least three times;⁹ however, the official record of the club indicates that the Whartons were only on such outings around the Newport area. As far as the Mills-Bellomont connection is concerned, as Allen Weinreb concludes, based upon his research, “While there is no documentation to prove that Wharton ever came to Staatsburgh, it is likely she was entertained there at some point as part of a gathering of the local gentry” (94).¹⁰ That, however, is as close as we can come to being definitive.

The Ogden Millses and “Society”

Ogden Mills was the son of a man who was one of the great beneficiaries of the California Gold Rush in the mid-19th century. The father, Darius Ogden Mills, made his fortune as a merchant and banker, capitalizing directly on the wealth generated by the gold fields. By the 1880s, he had become one of New York City’s wealthiest entrepreneurs and one of the city’s most prominent philanthropists. In many ways, his son Ogden was overshadowed by Darius and, later, by his wife Ruth. As Weinreb notes, “It is regrettable there is a fair amount of literature written on D.O. Mills, very little has been written about his son.... Ogden Mills, whose fortune was largely inherited, and so less spectacularly acquired, did not attract as much popular attention” (32). Nonetheless, Ogden was certainly a man of affairs, serving on boards of a large number of corporations and continuing his father’s philanthropic activities. On the other hand, one could suggest that his

most notable accomplishment was his marriage to a rather remarkable wife.

Ruth Livingston Mills seems to have been the more aristocratic partner of the Mills marriage. As Weinreb suggests, “To the world beyond his friends, family, and associates, Ogden Mills lived his life largely in the shadows cast by his famous father, and to a lesser degree, by his socially ambitious wife” (33). Following her marriage to Mills in 1882, Ruth began a lifelong quest to be the next Mrs. Astor—to become, that is, the undisputed leader of New York society. Her husband’s great wealth combined with her notable early American family pedigree put her in a position to make the run at social supremacy. Eric Homberger refers to her as one of society’s “ultra-fashionables” (216) who not only had her own ballroom in her Manhattan mansion but could boast to some effect that she could host a dinner for a hundred persons without putting on extra help (Amory 175). The opportunity to become the leader of Society would beckon throughout the 1890s and into the new century as the health of Mrs. William Backhouse Astor declined, leading to her death in 1908.¹¹ Well before that, challenges to Mrs. Astor had come from Alva (Mrs. William K.) Vanderbilt and Mrs. Oliver Hazard Perry Belmont¹² (Homberger 270-272). However, according to Daisy Chanler,¹³ the final and primary challenge to Mrs. Astor came from a new source: “Mrs. Ogden Mills was the other leader; she was much younger and her house was the centre of the inner, smarter circle, without in the least detracting from Mrs. Astor’s social supremacy” (*Roman Spring* 235). With her refurbished mansion on the Hudson, in addition to those in Manhattan and Newport, Mrs. Mills was well equipped to accelerate the competition.

Several have suggested that Mrs. Mills was used by Wharton as the model for Judy Trenor, heightening the case for the Staatsburgh-Bellomont connection. Eleanor Dwight asserts unequivocally that Mrs. Ogden Mills was, after Mrs. Astor, “a younger social leader and a model for a difficult society hostess [presumably Mrs. Trenor] in Wharton’s novel *The House of Mirth*” (39); however, she offers little support for this assertion. Eric Homberger also asserts that Mrs. Ogden Mills “was unflatteringly portrayed as Judy Trenor in Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*” (156)—but once again without elaboration. Weinreb offers a similar take, suggesting his own view of Wharton’s strategies in depicting both the Millses and their estate. “The physical details of the house are changed, enough to disguise it minimally and protect the author from charges of infringing on the Millses’ privacy.” In discussing the reason fellow aristocrat Winthrop Chanler did not recognize the Millses in the novel,¹⁴ Weinreb suggests, “Changing details again, both to protect herself and to advance the intrigues of the plot, Wharton depicted Judy Trenor as a tall blond and Gus Trenor as a lecherous dullard.” The Millses’ contemporary

Elizabeth Drexel Lehr placed Mrs. Mills at the head of a “cult of rudeness,” a label that could be applied to several of the society women in *The House of Mirth*, and may be motivated in Lehr more by personal animus than descriptive accuracy.¹⁵ On the other hand, a diary entry of Florence Adele Sloane¹⁶ from 1894 indicates that while she may have heard unnerving things about Mrs. Mills, a visit to Staatsburgh showed any fears about the woman to be unfounded. In describing an evening boat ride, she notes, “It could not have been nicer, and Mrs. Mills was a revelation to me. It shows what a terrible mistake [it is] to judge of people only by hearsay” (176). Any correspondence between the understated Ogden Mills and the boorish Gus Trenor beyond the question of wealth and association with a Hudson Valley estate seems outside the bounds of even the most basic query.

The History of Staatsburgh

What was to become the Mills estate involved property initially settled in the 1790s by future New York governor Morgan Lewis after his marriage to Gertrude Livingston in 1779. The initial structure was a brick farmhouse on 1,600 acres built to serve as a summer home (Zukowsky 164). The house was enlarged in 1816 to accommodate a growing family, including daughter Margaret and her husband Maturin Livingston and was called “The Staatsburgh House.” The house was rebuilt in the Greek revival style after a fire in 1832 and was passed on to Maturin Livingston II, who named it “Enderkill Farms.” Finally, in 1890, it was inherited by Maturin’s daughter Ruth, already the wife of West Coast magnate Ogden Mills. The mansion was enlarged and remodeled in 1895 under the guidance of Stanford White of McKim, Mead, and White along neoclassical, Beaux Arts lines for the then lofty cost of about \$350,000. As Weinreb has written, the similarity of the east elevation of the redesigned mansion to the north elevation of the White House in Washington was no accident.¹⁷ Weinreb suggests that “[i]n attempting to remake Staatsburgh into Society’s version of the White House, Ruth Livingston Mills and Stanford White gave what may be the fullest architectural expression of the concept of ‘American aristocracy’—in all its glamour and paradoxes—found at any house from America’s Gilded Age.” A piece in the *New York Times* of January 12, 1896, described it as “a home which, in furnishings and appointments, will equal any mansion in New York City” (“Homes of Millionaires” 25).

The same *Times* article also stressed that the mansion was a fusion of old and new: as much as its new guise was a forward-looking gesture to the societal potentials of the coming century, it retained a rootedness, a justification even, in things ancestral. The article notes, “In building the new mansion, Mr. Mills has respected the historical associations of the site which it occupies by leaving

untouched the walls of the old house in which his wife, Maturin Livingston's daughter, was born, and which had been in her family for many years." As a result, "The Livingston house occupies the central part of Mr. Mills's new home. The old rooms retain their original shape, but, of course, have been decorated to conform with the new part of the house. The old walls have been so completely inclosed [sic] and adapted to new conditions that nobody would suspect their existence." The reporter, true to his period, refers to the house as "Mr. Mills's new home," unaware of or overlooking the fact that the house belonged to Ruth Livingston Mills and that she was undoubtedly the driving force behind the final form the mansion was to take. Ruth Mills, in fact, had been deeded ownership of the mansion by her mother in 1890 (Weinreb) and would to a great extent be co-designer of the renovated showpiece. As Allen Weinreb writes of her working relationship with Stanford White, "His charm and diplomacy probably served him well when dealing with the proud and always particular Mrs. Mills" (60). White's collaborative skill was essential in allowing Mrs. Mills to retain a strong sense of the ancestral past, particularly as it would be encoded in the Great Hall. A perceptive visitor to the mansion might detect that

[a] long beam spanned the stairwell of the grand staircase where a load-bearing wall had to have been before. More obvious was the presence of two 1832 window apertures adjoining the lowest run of the staircase, such that the more northern window opened beneath a landing, a situation not even as adventurous an architect as Stanford White would allow if designing the house from scratch. Compromises like these... were an implicit reminder that Staatsburgh was an altered "Colonial" house. To a Gilded Age sensibility, such architectural quirks may well have seemed "quaint." (77)

Such "quirks" may also have been Mrs. Mills's reminder to her societal peers that she was not only moneyed but blessed by important roots in the American past. This, as we shall suggest, may ultimately have some significance to Wharton's rendering of Bellomont as we begin a "tour" of the fictional estate with an eye to the assumption by many that it is the country place of the Ogden Millses. We will start with the interior of the mansion.¹⁸

The Main Hall

Any attempt to link this area of the house to the Mills Mansion seems initially to be met with failure. The hall at Bellomont is described as being "arcaded, with a gallery supported on columns of pale yellow marble" (24). A "great central lantern overhead" lights the hair of the clustered women below and, significantly, "struck



Staatsburgh, family portraits in the main hall



The main hall in 1905

sparks from their jewels as they moved” (24). These architectural features are not a part of the great hall of the Mills mansion as we enter it today. There are no yellow columns; there is no arcading. Still, it was an area for card-playing and the arrangement of the space for the centennial of *The House of Mirth* in the spring and summer of 2005 allowed one to imagine with little difficulty the sight of the Lily Bart, the loser at cards, gazing down upon the ironically glittering scene below.

Lily’s Bedroom

As explained by Staatsburgh Site Director Meloye Moore, if Lily Bart had been a guest staying at the Mills Mansion around 1905, she would have stayed in the area reserved for single women on the second floor, in the center section that was a reworking of the original mansion. Areas in the north and south wings would be reserved for married couples; single men would have stayed in the “bach-



One of the guest bedrooms for single women

elor area” of the ground floor, conveniently located near the billiard room that now serves as the admissions center and gift shop for the mansion. We see only a couple of brief glimpses of where Lily is quartered during her stay at Bellomont. Her room seems to face eastward at one point and westward at another. On the morning she receives the summoning note from Judy Trenor on her breakfast tray, “The windows,” we are told, “stood open to the sparkling freshness of the September morning, and between the yellow boughs she caught a perspective of hedges and parterres, leading by degrees of lessening formality to the free undulations of the park” (41).¹⁹ A small fire simmers in her fireplace, and its light “contended cheerfully with the sunlight which slanted across the moss-green carpet and caressed the curved sides of an old marquetry desk” (41). For the sunlight to enter at that time of day, the room would have to face eastward or, at least, southeastward.

Later, on the fateful Sunday morning when she will quietly rebel against going to church with Percy Gryce—and, in a sense, to a life of going to “the most expensive church in New York” (59) with him—the view from the room where she stays seems to feed these subversive desires. “And who could consent to be bored on such a morning?” her author asks (60). The disturbing age lines of the

night before seem to have vanished from her face, and the room itself seems to have moved to the other side of the mansion:

And the day was the accomplice of her mood: it was a day for impulse and truancy. The light air seemed full of powdered gold; below the dewy bloom of the lawns the woodlands blushed and smouldered, and the hills across the river swam in molten blue. Every drop of blood in Lily's veins invited her to happiness. (60)

To see the hills across the river—and indeed there are prominent hills, including the distant Catskills, across from the Mills Mansion—Lily would have to be looking westward. To confuse the issue further, she hears the sound of the omnibus that is to take the worshipers, including Lily, to church. She leans behind her shutters to catch a glimpse of the vehicle, which presumably has come up the drive at the front of the mansion, orienting herself to the east again. These two passages create problems in terms of the locations of the formal gardens and the “park” (a term Wharton uses several times during the Bellomont section). One is drawn to conclude that, from her room, these landscaping details form the middle distance between the mansion and the river with its hills beyond. The complication comes from the presence of the morning sun falling across the floor of her room and the sight of the omnibus below—both suggesting an eastward orientation. We will see, too, how these factors further complicate correspondences between the fictional Bellomont and Staatsburgh as we follow Lily out onto the terrace.

The Library

While one is first struck by the long library at the south end of the Mills mansion as a possible model for the room Lily enters, not everything works to link it with that of Bellomont. It is certainly a fine place for a brief and relatively private Sunday morning rendezvous between Laurence Selden and Bertha Dorset. The way the Library is set today provides a barrier between the larger north end of the room and the relatively cozier area near the fireplace. One can easily envision Lily Bart coming into the library from the drawing room (as one would in the Mills Mansion) to discover the meeting taking place at the far end of the room. The description of the Trenor library as a place “little used for reading” certainly applies to that of the Millses'. The Trenor library, we are told, “was almost the only surviving portion of the old manor-house of Bellomont” (61)—a fact at variance with the Mills library, which was a part of the additions to the original manor-house added during the renovations of 1895. The Mills library also has none of



STAATSBURGH STATE HISTORIC SITE

Staatsburgh library

the Dutch touches noted by Wharton. There are no “classically cased doors,” no “Dutch tiles of the chimney,” and no “elaborate hob-grate with shining brass urns” (61).²⁰

Nor are there “family portraits of lantern-jawed gentlemen with tie-wigs and ladies with large head-dresses and small bodies” (61).²¹ At the same time, one can find portraits somewhat in the manner of Wharton’s description in the reception hall of the current Mills Mansion. They are hung along the paneled south wall of the hall: seven of them, male and female, Lewises and Livingstons. In their portraits, both Margaret Lewis and Margaret Beekman Livingston wear a large cap of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, though it would be difficult to argue either is small-bodied.²² Judge Robert Livingston wears a tie-wig of the late eighteenth century. Whether he or any of the others are lantern-jawed would be up to the eye of the beholder. Opposite them, too, in front of a non-working fireplace are andirons with small brass urns worked into them. Are we to make anything of these “misplaced” objects? Probably not, although they are reminiscent of the fusion of old and new that was part of Mrs. Mills’s strategy in the redesign of the mansion. Did they exist in a pre-1895 version of a “library” now fused into the new one by Wharton? Did Wharton combine a recollection of earlier visits to the house with later ones? Or are they coincidental? Not only do

we have no direct evidence of Wharton's visiting the house at any period of her life, but there are no known descriptions, photographs, drawings, or floor plans of the pre-1895 mansion. So we are left to speculate. Nonetheless, Wharton has captured part of what Ruth Livingston Mills was in fact trying to convey through the redesign of the mansion—that parts of the interior should speak of present status reinforced by ancestral approval. Faced with such a potent combination of forces, such a place stands in stunning contrast to the precariousness of the essentially “orphaned” Lily Bart trying to play her way back into a flow of time worthy of her presumed managerial skills.

* * *

Exterior elements of Bellomont provide Lily Bart with opportunities to free herself from the pressure of matching herself to the expectations of others. The beauty here is often that of a different sort from the carefully articulated interiors. From the window of her room, as we have seen, she has glimpsed alternatives to the boredom of succeeding at the game of social manipulation. The forces outside are, of course, generally natural ones, or the fusion of man and nature. But even in the presence of tailored nature, something more instinctive works within Lily. It will, of course, be part of her undoing because of her inability to read the text of freedom correctly. Again, too, there are a number of elements that link this compelling exterior of Bellomont to Staatsburgh, but one can only carry the correspondences so far.

The View from the Terrace

As she sits on the “upper step” of the terrace at Bellomont, Lily Bart could well be looking at the Hudson from the terrace at Mills Mansion. The terrace at Staatsburgh is balustraded and provides a view with some of the elements Lily sees. The balustrades move from the upper terrace down a double staircase toward the great lawn, like a cupping pair of parentheses. Standing on the terrace today, one still can see Wharton's description of the way the “river widened like a lake” (49) at the bottom of the lawn. A map of the Staatsburg area will show the lake-like elbow-joint called Vanderburg Cove nudging the shoreline. Just south of that is a smaller double cove providing the Mills Estate with its own lake-like vista. Not surprisingly, it is now called “Mills Cove”; at the time of the house's renovations, however, a feature article in the *New York Times* referred to it simply as “the bay at Staatsburg” (“Homes of Millionaires” 25). Vanderburg Cove could be seen from many of the Victorian mansions, including Wyndclyffe, the despised house of Wharton's Aunt Elizabeth Schermerhorn Jones. But Wyndclyffe loca-

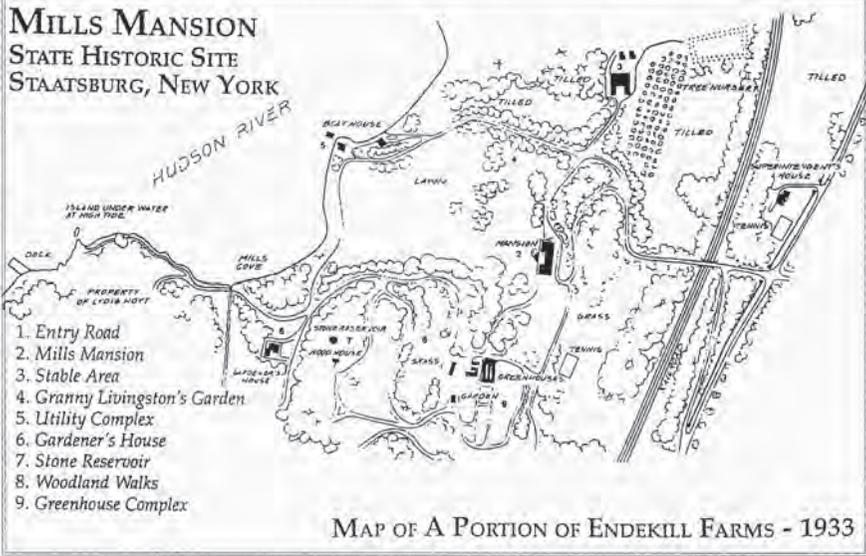


View to the west from the terrace stairs

tion overlooking the northern shore of the cove would have given it a decidedly more oblique perspective and flattened any sense of its being lake-like. Of interest, however, is the description from the same *New York Times* article and its accompanying illustration. According to the reporter, “Looking from the west windows of the mansion the Hudson is hedged in by wooded hills and mountains, so that to all purposes it is a lake, and northward the blue peaks of the Catskills mark the horizon. Smooth lawns stretch from the house almost to the river’s edge.” It is Wharton without the grazing cattle, and if Edith Wharton in fact never did set foot on the Mills estate, she could easily have replicated this aspect of it from a simple newspaper clipping. The same article would even have provided her with a mention of the balustrades bordering the “broad marble landing”—the terrace—on the west side of the mansion.

At the same time, there is the question of the cattle Lily sees grazing on the sloping pastures between her and the river (50) and “the sunken garden” (48) a short distance from the tea-taking group on the terrace. In addition, as she continues to muse about her future from her place on the terrace, she is able to see “the long avenue beyond the garden” and “the flash of wheels” from a horse-drawn carriage upon it (52). For the visitor to the Ogden Mills Mansion today, the view of the road with approaching guests upon it would be more appropriate from the eastward-facing front of the mansion. [see diagram]. As far as we can tell, Lily is still upon a step coming down from the terrace, since she hears the breaking up of the tea party on the terrace behind her. As for the gardens, those of the last century would have been to the south and southwest of the mansion, and any

Figure 1. Map of Portion of Endeckill Farms—1933. (From "Guide to Grounds of Mills Mansion State Historic Site" n.d.)



“long avenue” beyond the gardens would probably have been invisible to her (if, by long avenue, we might imagine the road to the neighboring Hoyt House.) Nor would the road have provided direct carriage access to the house. [see diagram]. As to whether cattle grazed on pastures sloping toward the river before 1905, there is no indication of this in either written or oral accounts.

Eleanor Dwight suggests one simple solution to what Lily sees from the terrace: that she is in fact looking out over the grounds of the Mount. She writes, “In *The House of Mirth*, which Wharton wrote at Lenox when the garden was in its first stages, several scenes describe the landscape at the Mount and show her attitude toward nature” (114). The sunken garden, she suggests, is in actuality the one recently designed by Wharton; earnings from *The House of Mirth* would allow her to add stone walls to it (7). The lake-like view of the Hudson could, she implies, be Laurel Lake as viewed from the Mount, with the Berkshires beyond. Dwight, however, does little physical detailing beyond this and supports Auchincloss by affirming simply that Bellomont “was modeled after the country estate of the Ogden Mills family, friends of the Whartons” (8).²³ She additionally cites the letter by Wharton friend Winthrop Chanler to his wife Daisy after reading the novel that Laurence Selden was most likely based on Walter Berry and the Millses were among those easily recognized in the novel—presumably as the Trenors (7). In any event, the “problem” with the view of the gardens below the terrace could as easily be explained by Daisy Chanler herself, who wrote with some authorial

insecurity of Wharton's garden at her villa Ste. Claire le Château in the south of France: "She [Wharton] could do it so much better herself, but I doubt if she would try to describe it. It would be telling something too intimate, for her garden is somehow an image of her spirit, of her inmost self" (*Autumn in the Valley* 114). It might be asking too much of Wharton to expect the gardens at Bellomont to be too identifiable and too detailed.

Church

On the fateful Sunday at Bellomont when Lily Bart consciously or subconsciously rebels against a life of the best pews in the best places of worship with Percy Gryce, we are told that the "smart" omnibus carries the worshipers "to the little church at the gates" of the estate (53). That the church is also in walking distance—an option Lily briefly considers after missing her means of transport—also reinforces its proximity to Bellomont. This would certainly be a good match for St. Margaret's Episcopal Church, built in Staatsburg in 1892. It was initially a "mission" of St. James of Hyde Park, a church that stands at the gates of the Vanderbilt Mansion, or the "Hyde Park Estate" as it was then known. In some ways, one would imagine the Gus Trenors worshiping at a tonier church such as St. James; in fact, Ruth and Ogden Mills were both laid to rest in a mausoleum in the St. James graveyard. On the other hand, the Millses' daughter, Gladys, was married at St. Margaret's in a major society wedding to Henry Carnegie Phipps in 1907. And Ogden Mills donated stained glass from Chartres to St. Margaret's as a memorial to Ruth. Whichever (if either) church Edith Wharton had in mind, we once again can never know. What she *has* established by its location near the gates of Bellomont, of course, is a Gilded Age juxtaposition of wealth and worship, a convenient reinforcement of religion as a social rather than a spiritual imperative. As Wharton says about the "smart omnibus" that would arrive to convey family members and guests to church, "Whether any one got into the omnibus or not was a matter of secondary importance, since by standing there it not only bore witness to the orthodox intentions of the family, but made Mrs. Trenor feel, when she finally heard it drive away, that she had somehow vicariously made use of it" (53).

It is not without reason, however, that Lily Bart avoids the church on this particular Sunday. While it is outside the gates of Bellomont, it is still an extension of the estate and its opulently constructed guests. On this one day her spiritual hungers will drive her further afield, beyond the dignified beauty of a church building to where she can feel her own breathing and pulsations, and a beauty beyond crafting.

The Journey Upward

In *A Backward Glance*, Edith Wharton describes her indifference to most fairy tales and things of the imagination when she was a child:

My imagination lay there, coiled and sleeping, a mute hibernating creature, and at the least touch of common things—flowers, animals, words, especially the sound of words, apart from their meaning—it already stirred in its sleep, and then sank back into its own rich dream, which needed so little feeding from the outside that it instinctively rejected whatever another imagination had already adorned and completed. There was, however, one fairy tale at which I always thrilled—the story of the boy who could talk with the birds and hear what the grasses said. Very early, earlier than my conscious memory can reach, I must have felt myself to be kin to that happy child. I cannot remember when the grasses first spoke to me, though I think it was when, a few years later, one of my uncles took me, with some little cousins, to spend a long spring day in some marshy woods near Mamaroneck, where the earth was starred with pink tailing arbutus, where pouch-like white and rosy flowers grew in a swamp and leafless branches against the sky were netted with buds of mother-of-pearl... (4-5)

Wharton allows a grown but childlike Lily Bart a similar opportunity—in this case on an autumn day of exceptional reach. Physically, it is a journey one could have as easily made from Staatsburgh as from Bellomont. The movement from the mansion to where Lily Bart and Lawrence Selden enact their “republic of the spirit” scene takes them on an ascending (and finally descending) journey that is rather “mappable” in terms of the Mills Mansion and its environs.

The gardens to the south of the mansion (at least as they were laid out in 1905) would have provided Lily with a relatively formal way to begin her physical movement away from the mansion. She is, after all, still theoretically committed to finding her way to church on foot. While her movement from the library seems to carry “her rustling grace down the long perspective of the garden walk” (62), it seems to place the gardens once again in front of the terrace. However, at any estate on the eastern shore of the Hudson, walking westward to get to church—unless it is on the edge of the river itself—would be impossible. The layout of the Mills gardens, to the south of the mansion (**see diagram**), certainly makes more sense. The garden walk would then bring her through the gate at the south end to what is today more of a “wood-path” than it was then—a narrow roadway to the Hoyt House. But it did lead through a heavily wooded area to the Old Post Road, where it would provide the shortest route to St. Margaret’s if one were going

on foot. From there, Lily and Selden might have crossed the Post Road and—in our imaginations, at least—across the newly-built golf course²⁴ (which, of course, is not mentioned in *The House of Mirth*), or slightly to the north, along pasture lanes. They would then have climbed the rise of ground beyond where Route 9 runs today, reaching a hilltop that will allow them to look both east and west—to where they can see the moon rise over the valley of the Crum Elbow Creek and the car on the Post Road between them and Bellomont. As importantly, they are situated to see the Currier and Ives-like images of orchard, field, and steeple below (and were they where we have placed them, they would have perceived these images in both directions). Such an omni-directional location, with its virtual republic of images, is an apt place for imaging a republic of the spirit—which, of course, Lily and Selden will leave upon the hilltop as they descend back to Bellomont with its aristocratic topography. But, then, a similar journey could have been taken from several other nearby Hudson River estates.

* * *

What are we to conclude then about the Staatsburgh-Bellomont connections? Anyone who enters the Mills Mansion or walks upon its grounds would have little difficulty imagining the Trenors and their guests, including Miss Lily Bart, playing out their gilded games there. The beauty of the Mills estate on a cloudless September afternoon can even now be blinding in its intensity. Add to this natural landscape bejeweled men and women, mirrored doorways, the blaze of self-congratulatory artificial lighting upon gilt walls and ceilings, and the shimmer of crystal glasses, and one gains an appreciation for the challenges that Lily Bart fails to negotiate.

While our investigations anticipated the appearance of a “smoking gun” that would show that Wharton to some degree had Staatsburgh in mind for her Bellomont, such a discovery never revealed itself. There may be a number of reasons for this:

- The absence of published letters or other writings by Wharton herself indicating a direct knowledge of the Livingston-Mills property in either its pre- or post-1895 manifestations—or the writings of any others.
- The lack of floor plans, photos, or other resources that could give a clear sense of what the house was like prior to 1895. If Wharton was drawing partly from pre-1895 visits to the house, the variations between novel and the mansion as we know it now could be attributable in part to her recreating a place of memory. But even if we had such plans, we have no evidence of such visits at any time.

- The lack of paper evidence in the Mills family that Wharton was a familiar visitor to their estate or more than a distant social acquaintance. Most of the Mills family papers were destroyed, probably, Allan Weinreb conjectures, at the time the family turned over the estate to New York State in 1938.²⁵

As the *New York Times* clipping of January 12, 1896, demonstrates, Edith Wharton could have used elements of the Mills Estate without ever having seen it. The clipping could have served as crib notes, allowing her to twit the Millses (or persons like the Millses) from afar, without feeling she had violated acts of hospitality. If, in some way, she wished to speak to or of Ruth Livingston Mills and her rivalry with Alva Smith Vanderbilt Belmont²⁶ by naming the estate “Bellomont,” we can imagine the possibility—but we cannot go beyond that.

All of these speculations, however, do nothing to diminish the brilliant power of either *The House of Mirth* or the Mills Estate then and now. If nothing else, our investigations here may help to soften one of those small but persistent literary certitudes. If one wishes to continue building upon the proclamations of a sure Bellomont-Staatsburgh correspondence based upon a few unsupported statements, one apparently does so with a wish or a sense of unearned ease rather than fact.

Endnotes

1. Notes Hovet and Hovet write that the “last name Bart points to the ultimate price of ‘bartering’ between the two images” (349).
2. Suzanne W. Jones writes that Wharton often depicts tensions between persons and places, but it is in *The House of Mirth* that she “does a better job... of sustaining a thematic interest in the relationships of the characters with their surroundings” than in other works (188).
3. Latin and Italian guide the eye and ear as one considers the name of the estate. The “bellom” in Bellomont is a close-enough homophone to the Latin *bellum*, which means war or battle, and the name also brings together two Italian words *bello*, which, in general, means “beautiful,” and *monte*, which, when used as a noun, means “mountain or hill.” The translation “beautiful mountain” is certainly an apt description of the estate’s location. What makes the name more interesting to our discussion, given its Latinate connection, is the use of the Italian word *monte* in phrases like *mandare a monte* or *che va a monte*. The former meaning “to mess up,” and the latter meaning “to go against the grain.” Bellomont becomes the perfect place for Lily to battle against the grain.
4. In the short story “After Holbein,” Wharton once again makes a similar connection between two seemingly disparate spectacles: the dining table of one of New York’s elite hostesses and “a railway buffet for millionaires” (478).
5. The name “Gryce” might well have been chosen by Wharton to echo the Bryces who were a part of the Astor set at the end of the 19th Century, just as “Bellomont” could also be a suggestion of the Belmont family sired by August Belmont earlier in the century. Lloyd Stevens Bryce was at various points in his life Minister to the Netherlands and editor of *The North American Review*. Of particular interest to Wharton may have been Carroll Bryce, the brother of Lloyd Stevens, whose reclusive ways parallel the retiring Percy Gryce; their names not only rhyme but rhythmically connect. The obituary for Carroll Bryce in 1911 notes that “[h]e was a familiar figure in

- Fifth Avenue. He never spoke to any one at the Gotham [the hotel where he maintained his apartment] except to give necessary directions” (“Carroll Bryce Dead” 13).
6. See Cynthia Griffin Wolff’s article “Lily Bart and the Drama of Femininity” for a full discussion of Lily as performer in a societal drama. Wolff writes, “Too virtuous to enact the society drama, she is not virtuous enough to reject the role, nor is she original or brilliant enough to invent a role for herself” (216).
 7. See *The Edith Wharton Reader*, p. 44. He is, however, not dogmatic about the connection, noting that “‘Bellomont,’ the remodeled manor house of the Trenors on the Hudson, might be Staatsburg.” In the commentary he provides for the diary entries of Florence Adele Sloane’s *Maverick in Mauve* he is equally tentative, noting that the Mills Mansion was “reputedly the model for the Trenors’... in *The House of Mirth*” (175). It is important, too, to note a spelling discrepancy between the village of “Staatsburg” and the name of the estate itself, which adds an “h” at the end, a confusion to which Auchincloss falls victim. The Millses reverted to the original spelling of the estate and the village going back to the late 18th Century, perhaps providing a slight disconnect from the village (and its “modernized” spelling) of the 1890s.
 8. Wharton co-wrote the stage version with prominent American playwright Clyde Fitch, but the run was a brief one of only fourteen performances. The beauty of the Hudson Valley must have been some solace for Wharton after reading reviews like that of the *New York Times*, which felt the play collapsed under its own cynicism: “... but three hours of that sort of amusement must have been a bit wearing, even on the most cynical” (“‘The House of Mirth’ a Doleful Play” 9).
 9. Susan Walker and Patricia Lamers of The Staatsburgh Historic Site led us to the book *The Coaching Club*, a possession of the site. The privately printed volume of the club’s history indicated the Whartons sharing various carriages (but not that of the Millses) in 1889, 1890, and 1892.
 10. Weinreb was former Site Assistant at The Staatsburgh Historic Site. His history of the Mills family and the site is richly detailed and annotated but, at this time, exists only in manuscript form. He is, at the time of this writing, Interpretive Program Assistant at the John Jay Homestead State Historic Site near Bedford Village in Westchester County.
 11. Wharton provides her own haunting rendering of Mrs. Astor’s declining years in her 1928 story “After Holbein.” In the story, “[p]oor old Evelina Jaspar” (477) exists in a demented state where she still imagines herself hosting magnificent dinners abetted by the fretful attentions of a complicit household staff in its own state of decline. Justin Kaplan notes how Mrs. Astor herself at one point “joked that she had begun to spice up her usual dinner guest list, long on bloodlines and bloated bank accounts and notably short on wit and intellect, by inviting a few ‘bohemians’ off the street. She said she had in mind J.P. Morgan and Edith Wharton” (32).
 12. The naming echo in Bellomont is, of course, tempting, but then one needs to contemplate beyond our ability into the kind of game Wharton might have been playing.
 13. Mrs. Winthrop (Margaret) Chanler was not only a perceptive reader and participant in the “Society” of the late 19th and early 20th Centuries but also a close friend of Edith Wharton. Although each was initially hampered by shyness from developing a close friendship well into adulthood, Mrs. Chanler said of Wharton, “She was more than kind to me and I cannot count the good times I have had under her hospitable roof” (*Autumn in the Valley* 110). In this same reminiscence, she notes with some pleasure how “[i]t was said of Edith Wharton and Theodore Roosevelt that they were both self-made men; she was pleased with the saying and repeated it to me; there was a good deal of truth in it” (110).
 14. See RWB Lewis, pp. 151, 153—Chanler recognized Walter Berry in the character of Lawrence Selden but failed to see a possible Mills-Trenor connection.
 15. Lehr 148. Weinreb suggests that Mrs. Mills’s hauteur may have been more ad hoc than “cultish”: “It is unclear how rudeness was a reaction to particular individuals, and how much may have been an expression of bitterness over her failure to capture Mrs. Astor’s position” (41). Still, it is of some interest in trying to piece together the character of Ruth Mills when one comes across

- items like that on the front page of the December 13, 1901 *New York Times*, headed “Protest from Skaters: Staatsburg People Want the Right to Use Mill Pond to Which Propriety Rights are Claimed.” According to the article, Mrs. Mills, “in her anxiety to keep any possibility of contagion from scarlet fever away from her beautiful mansion, has forbidden the young people of the village to skate on an arm of the Hudson River adjacent to the house” (1). The same article also notes that “Mrs. Mills has asked the Board of Education to have the books used in the public schools burned” (1)—presumably also from her fear of scarlet fever contamination.
16. The great-granddaughter of Commodore Vanderbilt on her mother’s side and the daughter of carpet tycoon William Douglas Sloane, Adele Sloane (1873-1960) was a candid observer via diary entries from 1893 to 1896 of the social world of the rich. Louis Auchincloss would marry her granddaughter Adele Lawrence in 1957 and would provide the commentary for the 1983 edition of the diary.
 17. The porticos of each highlight the similarity. A journalist covering the 1907 wedding of Gladys Mills to Henry Phipps remarked how “[t]he residence of Mr. and Mrs. Mills at Staatsburg... bearing proof of its pedigree in every window and door, reminds the visitor of the White House in Washington” (Weinreb 103-4).
 18. One can, by the way, get a useful virtual tour of several of the rooms discussed here: The Main Hall, the Library, and a woman’s guest room by going to the web site of the Staatsburgh Historic Site <http://www.staatsburgh.org/photo.php>.
 19. A *parterre* is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “[a] level space in a garden occupied by an ornamental arrangement of flower beds.”
 20. Nor, according to the staff of the Staatsburgh Historical Site, does the inventory of the books in the house include anything by Edith Wharton. Also, according to Weinreb, “It is unknown what Ogden and Ruth Mills’s opinions were of *The House of Mirth*” (96).
 21. Under “lantern-jaws,” the Oxford English Dictionary has the following: “Long thin jaws, giving a hollow appearance to the cheek.”
 22. Margaret Beekman Livingston (1724-1800) was the great-great-grandmother of Ruth Livingston Mills and wife of Judge Robert Livingston (1718-1775). Margaret Lewis (1780-1860) was the only daughter of Morgan and Gertrude Livingston Lewis (daughter of Margaret and Judge Robert), builders of the original Staatsburgh House in the 1790s. Maintaining an interconnection of family bloodlines, she married distant cousin Maturin Livingston in 1798.
 23. Similarly, in her lavishly illustrated study *A House Full of Rooms*, Theresa Craig provides vivid photos of the Mills Mansion then and now—and makes the connection to Bellomont without proof. She writes, “Wharton was... familiar with the Mills Mansion near the Hudson in Staatsburg” but fails to establish the nature of that familiarity (62-63).
 24. Ogden Mills was one of the driving forces in creating a nine-hole course that now constitutes the south nine of the Dinsmore public golf course. As the New York State Parks website notes, “It is the third oldest golf course in the country. Built as a private nine-hole course in the 1890s, it was an amenity to the estates of the Dinsmore, Hoyt and Mills families.”
 25. Allan Weinreb recalls, via oral histories of the estate, the account of a bonfire consuming personal items before the handover of the estate, perhaps under the direction of Gladys Mills Phipps. He sees such an action as being totally consistent with a family traditionally noted for maintaining a strong grip on the details of its private life.
 26. See, for example, one rather vivid version of the rivalry in the memoir of Elizabeth Lehr, *King Lehr and the Gilded Age*, pp. 147-48.

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