The reconfiguration and authority of text in the house of mirth

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Edith Wharton’s The House of Mirth presents an interesting study of the social construction of subjectivity. The Victorian society which Wharton’s characters inhabit is defined by a rigid structure of morals and manners in which one’s identity is determined by apparent conformity with or transgression of social norms. What is conspicuous about this brand of social identification is its decidedly linguistic nature. In this context, behaviors themselves are rendered as text, and the incessant social appraisal in which the characters of the novel participate is a process of deciphering this script of behavior. People’s actions here are read, as it were, according to the unique social grammar of this society. The novel’s treatment of this conception of social reading is brought to the fore through its devaluing of written texts in favor of legible behaviors. The novel signals this pattern from its opening. In the first scene we are introduced to Selden, engaged in what we discover is a typical activity for the novel’s personae, the silent, personal, interrogation of another person. “ If she had appeared to be catching a train,” we are told, “ he might have inferred that he had come on her in an act of transition between one and another of the country houses which disputed her presence?”(5? emphases mine). Here, Selden, at his first glimpse of Lily, has taken to conjecturing all manner of explanations for her simple presence in the train station. He, like all members of his social niche, does not shy away from judgement until he is more fully appraised of her situation. Even, the slightest “ air of irresolution” gives him license to divert his attention from whatever he may have been doing to ascertaining the motive of her appearance at what, it would seem, was not an odd location. We are told on this first page that this is not aberrant behavior, the private entertainment of some annoyingly curious person. As Wharton informs us, “

it was characteristic of her, [Lily], that she always roused speculation, that her simplest acts seems the result of far reaching intentions” (5). Indeed, “ in judging Miss Bart he, [Selden], had always made use of the ? argument from design'”(7). Every one of Lily’s acts has a meaning which can be discerned through an investigation like Selden’s. Selden reads her behaviors, evaluating the syntax of activity while seeking its semantic content. Certain words (acts) uttered (performed) in certain contexts tells us what the speaker (actor) intends to communicate. Given this interpretation of behavioral texts, it is not, then, surprising that on entering Selden’s flat, Selden and Lily share a brief conversation regarding another form of text, his book collection. We can see clearly that books make their first appearance not as sources of knowledge, but as social pretext. In the course of conversation, we learn that those who collect books generally? Selden is an exception? do so not to read them, but merely to be possessed of something high in value due to its rarity. At this early stage, then, it is suggested that written texts are subordinate to behavioral texts in the sense that they are used in the service of actions rendered intelligible through behavioral interpretation. As we shall see, to be seen reading a book or paper is far more important than actually reading it. Indeed, the pretense of reading written texts, in one of its few appearances, is the perfect device by which to conceal one’s true reading of another person’s behavior. This is brought out most strongly in the scene in which Lily comes upon Percy Gryce on the train. There is the image of Percy “ dissembling himself behind an unfolded newspaper” while Lily “ began to cut the pages of a novel, tranquilly studying her prey [Percy]” (20). Wharton even speaks of Percy’s “ conscious absorption” in the paper, an absorption which leads Lily to infer that he is

well aware of her presence. His reading is an act of deflection, the written text used as pretense in the service of reading (or avoiding reading) another person. This use of written texts is common throughout the novel. We are told, for instance, that at Bellemont, “ the library? was in fact never used for reading, though it had a certain popularity as a smoking-room or a quiet retreat for flirtation” (63). And in that very library, Wharton reintroduces Selden, who, “ though a book lay on his knee,? was not engaged with it” (63). Again, written texts lay open, like Lily’s novel or Percy’s newspaper, though unread in a scene in which the reading of others is perhaps most acute, interactions between the sexes. This juxtaposition between reading behaviors and written texts is emphasized most strongly in the case of Percy Gryce. Percy is identified strongly with his habits as a book collector. The only qualities of Gryce for which he is known socially are his money and his books. Wharton tells us that “ the existence of the collection was the only fact that ever shed glory on the name of Gryce” (24). Moreover, Percy conceives of his own social value in terms of his book collection, enjoying the thought of “ the interest that would be excited if the persons he met in the street or sat among in travelling were suddenly to be told that he was the possessor of the Gryce Americana” (24). But Percy’s own sense of his identity was not only wrapped up in his possessing an incomparably large Americana collection, his own awareness of this identity was itself brought about through reading. While Percy eschewed personal attention, he was an avid reader of book-collecting journals, forever searching for references to his collection. It is through his reading, then, rather than through actual social interaction that “ he came to regard himself as figuring prominently in the public eye” (24). In other words, where most person’s self-conception

was determined by reciprocal reading of each other's behaviors in some public setting, Percy's self-conception was determined by his surrogate use of written texts to judge his own worth. It seems no accident to me that Percy, one of the most socially uncomfortable figures in the novel, is the only one whom Wharton identifies with written texts. It is almost as if his association with these texts precludes his interacting according to the grammar of behavioral textuality like the other members of his society. It is important to note, as well, the great authority this form of text has, an authority which transcends the truth of intention which the text is supposed to communicate. For instance, take Lily's interaction with Rosedale after leaving Selden's apartment in Book 1, Chapter 1. As Lily admits in the next chapter, " a mere statement of fact would have rendered it, [her observed visit to Selden's], innocuous." Yet she still invents a lie which Rosedale sees as false. It is not so clear why she does this. It seems obvious enough that she is momentarily afraid that a statement of fact would actually be compromising. Perhaps it is not, after all, correct for her to visit Selden. I think, though, this can be better understood in terms of the authority of Rosedale's reading of Lily's behavior. What makes Lily immediately reluctant to divulge the truth of the situation is the paralyzing realization that Rosedale has already interpreted her behavior. She feels a certain impotence in trying to disabuse him of that interpretation, even with the truth, because she, implicitly perhaps, realizes the overarching power of such social reading, the authority of behavioral texts. Having allowed herself to be seen exiting the Benedick, she must, in a sense, surrender to the meaning of such an act. She must, as it were, take responsibility for what she has ? said' or ? written' and for what Rosedale, according to all the conventions of social

grammar, can legitimately interpret. This indicates an interesting discontinuity in the linguistic model, for the language behavior becomes more important than the intentions which that language is supposed to transmit. This can be further seen in Wharton's treatment of what can be considered to be the most significant written texts in the novel, Bertha Dorset's letters to Selden. It is important, I think, that Lily never actually reads the letters herself and is so reluctant to use them to her advantage. It is, in my estimation, too easy to say that Lily's unwillingness is the product of some deep-seated moral sense which makes her loathe their usage. It does not seem inconsistent with Lily's character, especially as she rocks unsteadily over the abyss of dinginess, to do whatever she can to stay afloat. I think that it is more illuminating to consider this case as an instance similar to the Rosedale incident adduced above. Here, as in the Rosedale case, there is a sense of impotence against the authority of behavioral reading. The written text of the letters functions in the same way as the truth of Lily's presence at Selden's. There is a sense in which the writing down of these past iniquities renders them silent. That is not to say that they would not have the desired effect if Lily chose to use them, as her simple, veracious explanation to Rosedale would have been successful to dispel his impression. Rather, I mean to indicate the novel's implicit privileging of behavior as authoritative, " live" text over its less powerful, " dead" written alternative. In a world governed by a behavioral grammar, the written text seems in certain sense, inadmissible, mere scrawl and not communicative at all.