

**Arachnologies: Gender and Creativity in Fin de Siècle American Women's Fiction.**

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El presente artículo estudia pautas narrativas y estilísticas, así como imágenes domésticas de escape, rebelión, parálisis y de asfixia espiritual comunes a un grupo de escritoras norteamericanas en la transición del siglo XIX al XX. Explorando estas pautas arquetípicas en escritoras tan dispares como Ellen Glasgow, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, Edith Wharton, Mary Wilkins Freeman o Sara Orne Jewett, el artículo pretende perfilar una cartografía más amplia de la que se ofrece en los cánones «oficiales» de la literatura norteamericana, y abordar aspectos comparativos de escritoras que hasta ahora no se habían relacionado entre sí. Se parte del análisis de novelas como *The Stor of Avis*, *Virginia*, *Summer...*, así como de diversos cuentos procedentes de escritoras del llamado «local color» para concluir que estas escritoras estudiadas no sólo se rebelaron imaginativamente contra los angostos cánones de la feminidad que prescribía la época, sino que también supieron contribuir a nuevas formas de representación femeninas, a través de una búsqueda imaginativa que sugiere nuevos horizontes de dignidad personal. En este sentido, sus obras son «aracnologías» —por usar el neologismo de Nancy Miller que da título al trabajo— y si tiramos del hilo de sus tejidos narrativos nos topamos con la cultura del género y de la misoginia (tan virulenta en el panorama intelectual del siglo XIX, como Gilber y Gubar han estudiado), con las inscripciones de sus estructuras vivenciales y políticas.

This paper aims at exploring distinctive elements of plot, image and narrative patterns recurring in *fin de siècle* American women's fiction. My attempt benefits from and joins in the widespread efforts undertaken by feminist literary critics to sketch a horizon of writing that includes other cartographies and other scenes, other styles of identity. Whether concerned with the representation of women in fiction, with the relations

between female authorship and literary history, or with the way that the category of gender has affected creative experience, feminist criticism has provided multifaceted revisions of accepted assumptions about reading and writing and has greatly contributed to dismantling many of the conventions of literary discourse.

The task of revising the cultural space and adding the performances of other voices, *other writing subjects*<sup>1</sup> has been necessary in order to challenge the interpretative securities of what Charles Olson called a literary *history*, «a history of writing by men,» in Nancy Miller's words.<sup>2</sup> Although the exclusion of women from the canon has been an all-pervading trait in Western culture, the case of American literary history stands as especially representative. The myth of the frontier and the dream of the reconciliation of the races have been quoted once and again as the most relevant features of a literature that Joyce Warren has labelled as basically white, Anglo-Saxon and man-oriented.<sup>3</sup> Taking as the essential quality of American literary identity factors which belong to the experiences of Western men, Americanists have too often selected male writers as American Classics, while ignoring women authors as important as Rebecca Harding David, Kate Chopin or Harriet Beecher Stowe.

Contemporary research has provided useful explanations for the critical invisibility of the many active women authors in America. Nina Baym and Barbara Ozieblo,<sup>4</sup> for example, have offered a broad spectrum of reasons, ranging from simple bias on the part of the critic and the effects on women of a lack of classical education to the fact that the standards of literary excellence have been imposed by criteria which are not neutral but gender and value-laden. According to Baym, the earliest American literary critics began to talk about the «most American» work rather than the «best» work because they wanted to differentiate American from British writing. The problem, however, arises when we look at the quality of «Americanness» because what we call «the» American experience, as we suggested before, refers to aspects of experience which are typically male. Considering that nineteenth-century women led a home-bound and affection-centred life, it is highly unlikely that American women would write fiction conveying the individuality, mobility and sense of self-reliance which are central to the idea of American identity.

Despite the remarkable efforts undertaken by feminist critics to explore and revise women's literature, the truth is that, as Elaine Showalter has recently said, «there is still a great deal of work to be done.»<sup>5</sup> Annis Pratt has provided a useful perspective on the field, arguing that «women's fiction reflects an experience radically different from men's because our

drive towards growth as persons is thwarted by society's prescriptions concerning gender.»<sup>6</sup> Pratt postulates that literary archetypes such as initiation into adulthood, entry into marriage and the quest for sexuality and for personal transformation are usually disrupted in women's fiction. Her theses are specially relevant here, for my organization of materials suggests sequential patterns parallel to those established by Pratt. As we shall see, in *fin de siècle* American women's writing young girls grow down rather than up, the socially festive denouements appropriate to courtship and marriage fiction are often subverted by madness and death, Eros and celibacy are punished alike and when a journey of rebirth is undertaken, the reward of personal power makes the hero a social deviant. These disruptive patterns depicting tensions and rebellion against society's dictates are recurrent in writers as diverse as Ellen Glasgow, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, Kate Chopin or Edith Wharton. But subversion and disruption are not the only paradigms discernible in *fin de siècle* American women's fiction. They also explored new questions and touched areas of women's self that were largely uncharted by male writers or, at best, described in terms of alien standards.

The paradigmatic angel in the house is probably one of the images of femininity with which writers like Edith Wharton, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps or Ellen Glasgow most deeply dissent. Barbara Welder has shown that submissiveness and self-abnegation were still considered the proper essence of femininity in *fin de siècle* America.<sup>7</sup> In fact, Coventry Patmore's exemplary women were still haunting countless writers and intellectuals, who argued that women could counter the evils of industrial life if they remained within the home. Opposing their culture's stifling ideas about women, works like Wharton's «The Pelican» (1899) and «The Angel at the Grave» (1901) or Ellen Glasgow's *Virginia* (1913) turn the image upside down to reveal the multifaceted contradictions of the archetypal ideal. This critique of one of the most powerful images of femininity reframes an inaugural moment of feminist authorship: it attacks an indictment of patriarchy in a variety of tones and subverts traditional representations ascribed to the trope of the woman.

Recently re-discovered writers like Elizabeth Stuart Phelps explore what Annis Pratt calls «the novel of enclosure in marriage.» According to Pratt, in novels of marriage patterns of pursuit and submission are accompanied by images of suffocation and dwarfing, «the authors depicting matrimony as one of the primary tools for dulling a hero's initiative and restraining her maturation.»<sup>8</sup> This disappointment of expectations characterizes Phelps' novel *The Story of Avis* (1877), a bold

book which was condemned by reviews and critics alike because it expounded the «erroneous theory that marriage is not a woman's best and highest destiny.»<sup>9</sup> Linda Huf has suggested that *The Story of Avis* grew out of Phelps's disappointments over the disregard her literary aspirations had met with at home. The novel apparently was written in sympathy with Elizabeth's mother, a once promising novelist who took to writing hidden in an unheated attic and who died torn by the conflict of being «too good a housekeeper, too tender a wife, too hearty a hostess,»<sup>10</sup> while trying to keep up her artistic aspirations. Like her mother, Elizabeth was driven to practice the writer's profession «as if it had been a burglar's» since her father, a professor at the Andover Seminary, had refused his undomestic daughter a room of her own. Indeed, the novel offers many biographical details but none as symbolic as the image of Avis painting in the freezing attic —an emblematic room in women's fiction—, just as the author herself did, wrapped in her dead mother's shawl.

The novel uses images of domestic confinement, suffocation and paralysis to explore the story of a woman who fails to fulfil her artistic expectations after having married Philip Ostrander, an apparently caring and charismatic tutor at the university. With the example of her mother's thwarted career before her, Avis rejects Philip at first. She wants to paint and she hates to keep house. But Philip persuades Avis, telling her he doesn't want her to be like other men's wives. Once married, Avis's decline as «the most promising artist in New England» begins inexorably. Because Philip has chosen a house that has no room for a studio, Avis postpones her painting for a time, and while her husband does his own research, Avis paints birds on their china and decorates the dadoes in the hall. Once a mother, Avis cannot escape the drudgery of domesticity. At one point in the novel, her husband loses his position at the university so Avis has to start sewing her children's clothes. Unhappily the artist who recently combined colours on canvas now mixes dye in a bucket to colour a baby's cloak. Like Arachne, the motherless weaver whom Athenea turned into a spider, Avis is forced to paint outside representation. Cut off from the work of art, engaged in a language of textile that dissolves the woman's signature, Avis spins like a woman a domestic tale, an anonymous female labour that erases the subject of its production.

It is significant that Avis's great painting following her marriage is a picture of a sphinx, a theme she had envisioned just before her betrothal to Philip. The painting on which she works on and off for five years is interesting because it thematizes a number of representations of Western heroines —Cleopatra, Esther, St. Elizabeth, Jeanne d'Arc— and other inglorious maidens and mothers: «They melted in convents; they leered in

the streets, they sang to their babes, they stooped and stitched in black attics. They fell by the blow of a man's hand...»<sup>11</sup> This «putting woman into discourse»<sup>12</sup> recalls the iconography of Aracne's tapestry, —as Nancy Miller has brilliantly studied it, «a feminocentric protest» that restages the forgotten stories of deprived, raped or abandoned women.<sup>13</sup> But Avis's picture will never be completed. Forced by her husband to sell it to pay off his debts, she hurriedly paints in a child with his fingers on the Sphinx's lips, swearing the Sphinx to eternal silence. As Huff has pointed out,<sup>14</sup> the child recalls Avis's demanding and intrusive boy, who clings to her smock, preventing her from painting.

Throughout the novel the image of the house as entrapment and the attic as a metaphor for freedom stand as two pervading features of an imaginary landscape characterized by a peculiar way of depicting space. According to Nina Baym,<sup>15</sup> in the world of the so-called sentimental novels of the preceding decades, the home was both a nourishing nest and a network of human attachments based on love and mutual responsibility. In contrast, under Phelps' withering glance, home becomes «the cold, inhospitable hearth» where the heroine languishes and fades as if in a pantheon. At the end of the story, by the time her husband and children cannot clip her wings any longer, Avis sits to her painting only to find that she is too old and rheumatic to dare the delirious heights.

Just as *The Story of Avis* depicts the home as the place where aspirations die, in Wharton's fiction, as J. Boydston says, it is too often «the embodiment of much that is wrong in society.»<sup>16</sup> This change of domestic imagery found in women's writing between the Civil War and the First World War illustrates a major shift within the larger context of nineteenth-century American culture: the Civil War had demonstrated the feebleness of the affectional model of human relationships and the women writers of this transitional age found the happy certainty of the sentimental fictionists to be no longer credible. As Elaine Showalter has noted, we are dealing now with a historical change from one house of American women's fiction to another, from the homosocial women's culture of nineteenth-century America to the gender crisis of modernism.<sup>17</sup> As early as the 1880s patterns of social and gender behaviour became strained as daughters pressed for education, mobility and power outside the female sphere. So by the turn of the century home had become a restraint and a constraint and to define it as women's sphere was unambiguously to invite her to absent herself from the world's affairs.

Patterns of dwarfing and entombment similar to those articulated by Phelps can be found in Edith Wharton's «The Angel at the Grave» (1901). The story, which is richly ironic in tone, covers the adult life of

Pauline Anson, the grand-daughter of a transcendentalist writer who relinquishes her personal and intellectual development to care for his home-shrine and to become his literary executrix. Because she bears the stamp of a patriarchal education based on «the centripetal force of (the grand-father's) greatness,»<sup>18</sup> Pauline shapes herself into the rather uncongenial role of «the guardian of the family temple,» which implies abdicating her own life for the sake of becoming his «custodian angel» and literary executrix.

Wharton's characterization of the self-effacing woman is communicated in the story through the use of biblical imagery that stresses the visionary quality of the heroine's immolation. The House, always written with a capital letter, is «the temple,» «the sanctuary» where Pauline, its «young priestess is to be the interpreter of the oracle.» («Angel,» 1172). Her vestal task is assumed as a sacred duty to guide «the lost sheep straying in the wilderness.» («Angel,» 1176). Clearly, the imagery is connected with the cultural values of the time, which glorified abnegation and devotion to the home as major props to the notion of «the superior woman.» Other writers of the period were ultimately ambivalent over the ideal of female service, but in «The Angel at the Grave» Wharton skilfully depicts the cost of feminine submission and fully exposes the futility of living a vicarious existence. After devoting her life to writing her grand-father's biography, Pauline learns from the publisher that the reading public is no longer interested in Orestes Anson. The manuscript in which she had lain «all her dreams, all her renunciations» is envisioned now as «a dead bundle» and Pauline allows herself to feel fully the horror of her waste: «She sat in the cold thinly-furnished interior and it seemed to her that she had ... kept vigil by a corpse.» («Angel,» 1178).

A number of critics have already explained how Edith Wharton was able to develop complex insights on the many cultural contradictions surrounding women. As in so many other of Wharton novels, we find here the familiar discrepancy between the heroine's aspirations and the texture of reality. The tension between desire and their role in society typifies the frustrations of educated women in a world that encouraged renunciation as their only avenue for self-expression. And yet, the story not only questions the redemptive potential of self-sacrifice; it also explores the nature of a woman's problematic relationship with the male literary tradition she feels she has been appointed to perpetrate. Surely it is no coincidence that Wharton chooses Transcendentalist thought as a target for her satire against a male, individualist culture. The Academia and the great masters are treated here with malicious mischievousness. Like

George Eliot's Casaubon in *Middlemarch*, Orestes Anson has the aspect of Milton domesticated and diminished. Though majestic in his metaphysical pedestal, at home he is a pretentious character with a ridiculous jargon. From his «sonorous periods, his mystic vocabulary, his flights into the rarefied air of the abstract» to «the guttural cluck that started the wheels of speech» («Angel,» 1173), Orestes Anson is indeed a skilfully subversive portrait of male authority, for as George Eliot writes, «even Milton, looking for his portrait in a spoon must submit to having the facial angle of a bumpkin.»<sup>19</sup>

Wharton's emphasis on seemingly trivial details does not obscure the story's subversive critique against patriarchal beliefs. While the grandfather, his disciples and publishers control the outside world, the women remain at home, «in cells that left the central fame undisturbed.» («Angel,» 1172). Yet by the end of the story home has become both a tomb-like prison and a frail refuge from a world more frightening than any prison: «She sat in the library, among the carefully-tended books and portraits; and it seemed to her that she had been walled alive into a tomb hung with the effigies of dead ideas» («Angel,» 1178). As in *The Story of Avis*, the sense of failure that Pauline experiences at the end of the story reverses the archetypal image of the angel in the house and confers the idea that to be «the guardian of the family temple» is not to choose a meaningful life but rather to opt for the isolation of rigor mortis.

In Ellen Glasgow's works there also proliferates a grammar of motives that subverts the conventional representations of women ascribed by culture. If the spinster, a much pitied or ridiculed stereotype in literature, is portrayed with sympathy in novels like *The Miller of Old Church* (1911), the inspiring, innocent American girl elicits her satirical commentary. This is clearly perceived in *Virginia*, where Ellen Glasgow provides the reader with another devastating critique of the cramping effects that domesticity and self-immolation have on women. Virginia is the precious self-effacing child-woman of American imagery: beautiful and delicate, «she embodied the feminine ideal of the ages.»<sup>20</sup> Because «ignorance was supposed in some mysterious way to add to her value as a woman ... her education was founded upon the single theory that the less a girl knew about life, the better prepared she would be to contend with it.» (*Virginia*, 22.) Brought up in ignorance and luxury while a girl, she mimics her mother's behaviour when she marries: she enslaves herself for the sake of her family's material comfort and relinquishes any aspiration of personal self. In *Old Town Folks* (1869) Harriet Beecher Stowe observed the inequity by which boys «grow» and girls «shrink.» Likewise,

the structure of *Virginia*, which depicts in two parallel, opposing lines the husband's creative development and Virginia's personal decline, confirms the disruptive patterns discernible in female *Bildungsromanen* —what Pratt calls «the growing-up grotesque»— and provides a bitter counterpoint to the cultural ideal of the angel in the house. At the end of the novel, Virginia, an old woman despite the fact she is 45 years old, must face a disintegrated marriage, an empty house and an identity which has been atrophied because of a consuming necessity for self-sacrifice that has benefited no one.

Critics like Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar and Annis Pratt have recognized insanity as an extended and complex metaphor of the enclosure archetype in women's fiction. Depicting enclosure in the house as a cause of madness, women authors have developed metaphors linking normal households with asylums, «not only using real insane asylums, but also picturing individual rooms, suites, floors and entire houses where women are driven mad by dehumanizing gender norms.»<sup>21</sup> The prototypical mad wife in *fin de siècle* American women's fiction is portrayed in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's «The Yellow Wallpaper» (1892), a tale of hysterical confinement —a fictionalized account of Gilman's own breakdown in 1887 and the treatment she underwent at the hands of Freud's American contemporary, Weir Mitchell. I will not dwell on a story which has been much scrutinized by critics today. Yet, I would like to emphasize here the gendered elements of this tale in which the docile wife and compliant patient confined to an attic can only escape the site of repression through a terrifying loss of self. A similar pattern of confinement and madness underlies Kate Chopin's «La Belle Zoraïde.» The story traces the «growing up grotesque» of a slave mother deprived of her lover and baby, and her gradual descent into madness. The analogies that we can draw from this nightmarish metamorphosis of the self seem to confirm a repetitive pattern in which there is a lack of harmony when the feminine is not perceived as independent from masculine power. The Gothic-like outlines of this imaginary landscape reverse the tenets of official femininity to suggest that passivity, isolation and dependency generate nothing but paralysis and mental asphyxia.

This barren conclusion, though with its own peculiar variations in plot and metaphorical structure, can be traced in Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome* (1912). Here the many images of mutilation throughout the novel degenerate the fairy-tale quality of the story as the angelic Mattie becomes a mirror image of witchlike Zeena. In her French draft Edith Wharton explicitly states that Mattie «exemplified all the dull anguish of the long

line of women who, for two hundred years, had been buffeted by life and who had eaten out their hearts in the constricted and gloomy existence of the American countryside.»<sup>22</sup> Initially the golden maiden, the Cinderella of Ethan's dreams, Mattie Silver is transformed —like Arachne— into a witch, a devouring female insect.

«Her hair was as grey as her companion's, her face as bloodless and shrivelled, but amber-tinted, with swarthy shadows sharpening the nose and hollowing the temples. Under her shapeless dress her body kept its limp immobility, and her dark eyes had the bright witch-like stare that disease of the spine sometimes gives.»<sup>23</sup>

Yet this is not the only macabre metamorphosis that the story hides. First there is Endurance's (Ethan's mother) «growing taciturnity,» then Zeena «too fell silent,» finally Mattie; and they represent only three of the many women gone «queer» in this frozen American landscape. Like Mary Murfree, who saw witchlike features in the overworked and isolated women of the regions about which she wrote, Elizabeth Ammons remarks that this proliferation of terrifying figures is in social terms understandable: «Zeena Frome is the witch that conservative New England will make of unskilled young Mattie; and Wharton's inverted fairy tale about the multiplication of witches in Ethan's life, a story appropriately told by a horrified young man whose job it is to build the future, finally serves a lesson in sociology. Witches do exist ... and the culture creates them.»<sup>24</sup>

Indeed women's inability to survive within the emerging American economic system can be traced as another recurrent theme discernible in *fin de siècle* American women's fiction. Historiographic research has shown today that employment opportunities for women were still so poor at the turn of the century that many women were driven to prostitution and suicide. Apart from Edith Wharton, women writers from the so-called «local color» school, like Sara Orne Jewett, Rose Terry Cooke, Mary Murfree or Mary Wilkins Freeman, articulate some of these social dilemmas from subtle and complex perspectives. Because they write in a transitional age, their works often depict a void between two cultures: the ecologically holistic women's culture of nineteenth-century America and the heterosexual fiction of modernism. Like some of Wharton's or Glasgow's heroines, the women that people their novels live in forgotten villages, where they are left to survive alone, as the best men have been siphoned away by the demands and attractions of an increasingly

urbanized and industrialized world. Emotionally and socially deprived, they are presented with a hopeless choice: they can either stay and starve—such is initially the fate of Louisa, the heroine of Freeman's powerful story, «Louisa» (1891)—, or go out into the world and become a social misfit, as happens to Cynthia Ware, the heroine of «Drifting Down Lost Creek», by Mary Murfree.

But the heroines of the local colorists, as Wood has remarked, are more likely to remain. They remain, although they remain to starve. In «Louisa,» the heroine plants «potaters out there jest like a man» to the dismay of her embittered mother, as «there was nothing for supper but some bread and butter and weak tea.»<sup>25</sup> The story exhibits the hard lives of the female occupants of a small village house as a spectrum of deprived womanhood. The house, naked in its shabbiness, is an emblem of the barrenness of its occupants. Louisa's mother is utterly friendless, with «a meagre little figure in its neat old dress, (and) a small head that showed the wide parting in the thin hair (...). Her face looked pale and sharp against the dark calico dress.»<sup>26</sup> In «An Ignoble Martyr» (1890), a story by Rebecca Hardins David, Prue chooses to stay with her mother at North Leedom, another New England village «made up of ugly, clean, bare houses, (where) each generation grew leaner and weaker; the sallow skin clung more tightly to their bones; the few men that remained became victims of dyspepsia, the women of nervous prostration.»<sup>27</sup> The iconography of the home in these short stories is like a womb in a new and destructive guise: a blank enclosure rather than a garden of delights. As A.D. Wood writes, «it is no longer unlocalized but *a fact*. Local color is very local, indeed.»<sup>28</sup> At its best, the house can be like the mortgaged scrimpy little rooms in which R.H. Davis's toiling heroine lives:

«The furniture in the house was of the cheapest kind, but it had always been cared for with reverence, not because of its associations, but for its money value. Indeed, so much of the lives of the Pettit women for generations had gone into the care of the chairs and tables that one might suspect a likeness between the condition of their souls and that of the filthy Fijian who worships the string of bones which he polishes incessantly.»

In Sara Orne Jewett's softer vision, women are not dominated so much by the laws of scarcity. Yet their resources are indeed limited. In «The Only Rose» (1896), for instance, Jewett explores with ironic insight the fact that many poor women could not afford to remain single, or not to remarry. In this story a woman three times widowed, on visiting her dead

husbands' graves, is faced with deciding which one deserves the best rose. As we follow the crooked, repetitive pathways of her wandering thoughts we realize that the present Mrs. Blickford —before she was Mrs. Wallis and Mrs. Fraley— has had to twist herself out of necessity to fit any change of name. A similar pattern informs Edith Wharton's «The Other Two» (1904), one of the most perfect short stories Wharton ever wrote in which she reflected upon the question of identity. The story's climax is when Mr. Waythorn, the wife's third husband, recognizes that the woman he had thought so unique had been to the other husbands the very epitome of adaptability and pliancy that she is now to him. «She was as easy as an old shoe...a shoe that too many feet had worn.»<sup>29</sup> We easily guess here at Wharton's critique of the institution of marriage as the only profession open for women in the leisured classes. As in «The Only Rose,» the repetitive changes that the heroine's name undergoes —Alice Hasket- Alice Varick- Alice Waythorn— parody women's lack of position and the inverted forms her displacement assumes in society.

The works we have been dealing with so far, whether concerned with marriage, initiation into adulthood or social development, depict an imaginary territory dominated by the laws of scarcity. Similar disrupting patterns resulting in isolation, enclosure and dwarfing inform the quest for sexuality, another highly innovatory theme dealt with by writers like Kate Chopin or Edith Wharton. Although the elements of romance, of the quest for one's heart's desire, are important in these novels, the denouements again are likely to be tragic or inconclusive. As Pratt has pointed out: «In romance, traditionally, the hero returns at the end to a small enclave of society, although he sometimes winds up as a hermit. In women's love fiction the denouements of social isolation persist, but the Liebestod, or love death, ... often replaces survival.»<sup>30</sup>

The multifaceted implications of a woman's sexual awakening in a prohibition-laden culture is dealt with by Edith Wharton in such novels as *Summer*, *The Reef* or short stories like «Souls Belated» or «Old New York.» Far earlier than most American writers Wharton explored woman's quest for Eros, but she also depicted the dwarfed possibilities for the involved woman in a society where criteria for conduct are not the same for her as for a man. In *Summer* (1916), Wharton initially develops a complex system of imagery to convey the necessary sexual components of the search for adult identity as it is experienced by a young woman. Barbara White, in her extensive survey of the anatomy of the *bildungsroman*, has pointed out that it has as a general rule three main stages: initiation, conflict and fulfilment. In *Summer*, however, the sad

course of the novel shows how Charity not only fails to acquire the love and independence she was craving. Because she finds herself pregnant and with no set of options, she is finally forced to marry her foster-father, the very person she had sought to escape. Once again we find the familiar images of entrapment and asphyxia. As happened with Mattie Silver in *Ethan Frome*, Charity's entrapment is associated with the fact that «she had never learned any trade that would have given her independence (...). The roof and walls seemed to be closing in on her. She had no place where she could go.»<sup>31</sup>

Funereal imagery precedes and intrudes on Charity's marriage to Mr. Royall, so as to confirm the story's deadly denouement. From the moment when she realizes she is pregnant, to the end of the novel, the sensual heat recedes and an «autumnal dampness» takes over. It is always grey, ashen, dark, empty, rainy, etc. Charity becomes numb and wooden, «passive as a tired child,» with the hot summer only a memory. The wedding with which *Summer* ends reminds Charity of her mother's funeral, one of the ugliest scenes in all of Wharton. Her mother having died, Charity's legal union with Mr. Royall reminds us of her first adoption when a child and suggests regression, rather than a «step in the journey towards maturity,»<sup>32</sup> as Cynthia Wolff advocates. The structure of the novel confirms Pratt's «growing up grotesque archetype,» for Charity ends where she began: as Royall's dependant, a fate that Wharton surrounds with images of spiritual paralysis and death. If at the beginning of the story Wharton presents Charity as a «night-bird,» a flower experiencing «the reaching out to the Light of all her contracted tendrils,»<sup>33</sup> at the end she resembles a bird with «a broken wing.» According to Ellen Moers, the caged bird metaphor is strikingly present in nineteenth-century women's fiction and it recurs in writers as diverse as Kate Chopin, Willa Cather, Charlotte Brönte, George Sand, Edith Wharton and George Eliot.<sup>34</sup> As Phelps's heroine says to her dying mother: «the wing! it looks as if it meant to wrap us in, wrap us, wrap us in.»<sup>35</sup>

The writings of Edith Wharton exhibit one of the clearest examples of how in women's fiction the novels of Eros either result in fables of regression, as happens in *Summer*, or involve characters who become isolated or die as a result of stultifying gender norms. In *The Reef* (1912), images of disillusionment and isolation accompany Anna Leath's fate after having been emotionally awakened by her lover. In her unfinished and unpublished «Beatrice Palmato» fragment, Wharton fully articulates what Phyllis Chesler has called «the incest model» of sexuality and marriage in America.<sup>36</sup> The story, which contains one of the most

explicitly sexual passages in American literature, depicts Mr. Palmato's incestuous relations with his two young daughters, Isa and Beatrice. Because both of them commit suicide and the mother goes insane as a consequence, this astonishing work offers another example of distorted erotic *Bildungsroman*, where madness and the *Liebestod* replace survival.

Clearly there are some very interesting links between Pratt's thesis and the women writers we have been dealing with. Patterns of isolation, disintegration, regression, atrophy and paralysis proliferate in *Bildungsromanen* and novels of marriage and of Eros, indicating inner discrepancy between personal aspirations and the texture of reality. We have seen that much of the fiction of writers as diverse as Ellen Glasgow, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton shares a strong sense of uneasiness with the values and the expectations of the status quo, along with an eloquent wish to subvert conventional discourses ascribed to women. Some of their writings are still forgotten and others have simply not survived but many of their heroines have stayed to tell us a story of horror and poetry, isolation and violence, sexual awakening and spiritual yearning. Like Arachne, the spider artist, they have woven a tapestry that bears the old emblems of a feminist poetics. Their texts (palimpsests) are also *arachnologies*, to use Miller's neologism, and when we tear the web of their tissues we may discover «the marks of the grossly material, the sometimes brutal traces of the culture of gender; the inscriptions of its political structures.»<sup>37</sup> However, they have not only given us maps of the landscape of our broken culture but also have explored codes and symbols that modify and transcend the rigid polarities from which they spring. Their contribution to new forms of feminine representation is made from a very personal and extremely fertile perspective, by means of imaginative search whose plural insights suggest experimental stages of new gender possibilities.

## NOTES

1. The phrase is Nancy Miller's in *Subject to Change. Reading Feminist Writing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 4.
2. Nancy Miller, «Emphasis Added. Plots and Plausibilities in Women's Fiction,» *The New Feminist Criticism. Essays on Women, Literature and Theory*, Ed., Elaine Showalter (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), p. 341.

3. Joyce Warren, *The American Narcissus* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1984).
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