

Flushing Away Sentiment: Water Politics in *The Custom of the Country*

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The red-faced Elmer Moffatt simply appears one day, poor and from nowhere, quickly becomes "conspicuous," and by the end of Edith Wharton's novel, is rich and everywhere. "Many people who seemed personally unacquainted with him were recognizing and pointing him out" (254). His rise to prominence is due in a large part to his interest in the town of Apex: its real estate, its streetcars, and its water works. During the period of 1880 to 1910, roughly the time frame of the novel, expensive, long-term investment in water projects was perhaps the major issue for city governments, honest as well as corrupt. The method Elmer Moffatt employs to revitalize Apex and profit from it replicates the new water filtration systems being installed across the United States to turn contaminated water into clean. Recognizing the logic of Elmer's machinations in the novel reveals Edith Wharton's practical grasp of late-nineteenth-century municipal water problems, suggests how to account for the novel's reward of circulation, and contributes to a better understanding of the ways that Wharton's narrative transcends the traditions of women's authorship and is shaped, as Amy Kaplan puts it, "by her immersion in this very modern culture" (453).

The Pure Water Move

As nearly every critic of the novel has noted, a series of pointed references and offhand remarks makes it clear that something is rotten in the City of Apex. For nearly a decade Elmer Moffatt plays Wall Street financier Harman B. Driscoll against local politician James J. Rolliver, leveraging what he knows about Abner E. Spragg's "Pure Water Move" and being paid handsomely to keep quiet. As the novel describes it, the scheme was a "tense" and "epic" endeavor into "the muddiest reaches," requiring "patient skill," "a sense of security," "a strange lucid force of resistance," and "an instinct for holding off and biding [one's] time" in order to sell a "bad" asset. But the novel also takes great pains to emphasize the connection between the death of the Spraggs' two children by typhoid and the financially rewarding plan to circulate clean water to the residents of Apex. Two of their three children, Mrs Spragg explains during Ralph Marvell's early visit to the Stentorian, "had died of typhoid during the epidemic which devastated Apex before the new water-works were built; and this calamity, by causing Mr Spragg to resolve that thereafter Apex should drink pure water, had led directly to the founding of his fortunes" (48). More details emerge in a direct quotation: "He had taken over some of poor father's land for a bad debt, and when he got up the Pure Water Move

the company voted to buy the land and build the new reservoir up there: and after that we began to be better off, and it *did* seem as if it had come out so to comfort us some about the children" (48-9). Finally, it is reported that without quite understanding the "occult connection between Mr Spragg's domestic misfortunes and his business triumph," Ralph appreciated that Mr Spragg had "vowed on his children's graves that no Apex child should ever again drink poisoned water – and... by some impressive law of compensation, material prosperity had come" (49).

The narrative protests this connection too strenuously to be taken at face value. Who could argue that the Pure Water Move was not at least in part a noble endeavor? In fact, sanitation engineers coping with typhoid epidemics at the turn of the century argued strenuously *against* the construction of water supply systems in favor of better sewage treatment plants. While discoveries in the 1880s that typhoid and cholera were waterborne accelerated pure water campaigns, by the 1890s it was widely recognized that the source of typhoid fever was contaminated human waste that found its way into the water supply¹. Even so, it remained far more socially acceptable (and thus politically feasible) to raise money for pure water rather than for a town sewer, but such simple measures were increasingly discredited.

Clearly, there is something amiss in Abner Spragg's business affairs. When he leaves home and walks toward his office there is a "glint" in his half-closed eyes, differences "lurk" in his features, and his mouth tightens "as the gleam of a night-watchman's light might flash across the darkness of a shuttered house-front" (70). Apparently unaware of any graveside vow, Undine judges her own behavior to be "as clear, as logical, as free from the distorting mists of sentimentality, as any of her father's financial enterprises" (206). The family's departure from Apex was Abner's idea (73). "He's running yet!" Elmer observes, with an emphasis that suggests the topic is not family politics. "I wish I could scare some people as easy as I can your father" (65).

Whatever it is that Abner Spragg has done, Elmer Moffatt enjoys the role of reclamation. After Abner arrives in New York Moffatt asks him to "stand for political purity" and expose Rolliver for the benefit of Driscoll. Next, Moffatt threatens, as part of the "Ararat Trust Investigation" to put Driscoll behind bars. The indictment is temporarily quashed, and eventually Driscoll pays Moffatt off for his silence. Moffatt then realigns himself with Rolliver (who is now in Congress); together they "chuck out" Driscoll, and gain control of Apex². But young Driscoll's appointment to the Ambassadorship in the final pages of the novel suggests that Moffatt is still active, using Rolliver's Washington D.C. power base to quiet Old Driscoll with this gift.

1. Schultz and McShane 390. The typhoid fever bacillus was identified in 1880; the cholera bacillus in 1883. Of all the major cities, they report, Baltimore delayed the longest in building a sewer system. "The city paid for that folly with one of the two highest typhoid rates in the nation" (397).
2. Real estate speculators were often involved in such deals, Schultz and McShane explain. "Because of their traditional mistrust of centralized government, Americans usually turned to the local ward politicians or even private groups or individuals for such vital urban services as water supply, street sanitation, and even fire protection" (391).

Signaling its own moral hierarchy, the novel rewards Elmer's mode of vigilante profiteering as he shakes up the temperate and shakes down the corrupt. Put in a way that apprehends the thematic significance of his labor, he transforms pollution into a productive affluence while outmaneuvering the novel's purists and reformers.

That is, Elmer Moffatt is a filtration system. He functions precisely like the new systems being promoted to clean up city water supplies. These new filters worked on the principle of bacteria filtering out bacteria: water is pumped into a sedimentation basin to settle and then is sent to a filtration bed, where it percolates through layers of sand into the distribution pipes. While harmful bacteria could theoretically seep through the sand, it does not do so because of a phenomenon called "Schultsdeck," or "dirt cover." A shiny, jelly-like layer of bacteria collects on the top layer of sand and prevents the rest of the bacteria from passing through¹. The process was proving highly effective and overturned many conventional theories about pure water. Raw, unfiltered water sitting in reservoirs remained vulnerable to typhoid contamination, and without competition from other bacteria, the typhoid bacilli survived longer (Whipple 51).

Similarly, it is because of the impurities around him that we, as well as Undine, end up embracing Elmer Moffatt. The hints of unsavory doings in *Apex* mitigate our distrust of his later maneuvers, and he is able to come across as a fairly decent fellow and a praiseworthy businessman. It almost doesn't matter how he has amassed his wealth; nobody seems to have gotten hurt, except Ralph Marvell, whose notion of purity is admittedly impractical. Elmer keeps his word, likes children, and sports a red ribbon for acting in the public interest. Cynthia Griffin Wolff concedes that Moffatt "seems humane, by turns; almost likeable in the end" (239-40). Robert Caserio agrees: "Wharton's presentation of Moffatt is, surprisingly, consistently attractive" (204). A combination of deal-making savvy and a visceral aesthetic sense, Elmer circulates in the world and filters out its distasteful elements, providing Undine, at the end, with a refined and beautiful environment.

Contemporary Water Politics

Trying to account for the number of substantive water details in the novel, Gerard Sweeney has recently proposed a connection between Edith Wharton and a distant relative who was once involved in a similar project. There is a "likelihood," Sweeney claims, that Edith knew about a plan proposed by her cousin-in-law Joseph Wharton (for whom the University of Pennsylvania Business School is named) in 1891 to supply pure, untreated water from property he owned in New Jersey to the typhoid-racked city of Philadelphia (50). Raw sewage was being dumped into the Schuylkill and Delaware Rivers, contaminating the source of the city's drinking water, and causing frequent outbreaks of typhoid and cholera. Wharton's project, a matter of public record in the late 1890s, was not pursued because of a New

1. See Whipple 77 and McCarthy 32-33.

Jersey legislative decision to limit the export of its water, Sweeney claims. Drawing on sources such as John McPhee's ecological history of the Pine Barrens and a biography of the elder Wharton, Sweeney offers a portrait of a good man and a good plan as the real-life referent for Abner Spragg and the Pure Water Move. But if indeed Edith Wharton was familiar with the plan, she was also aware of its potentially tragic inadequacy.

Sweeney acknowledges the hints of "impurities" in the Apex water deal, but perhaps because of his investment in equating the two Wharton schemes, he dismisses the evidence as "testimony about her inventiveness" (54). But a history of Philadelphia water policy not cited by Sweeney reports that Wharton's Pine Barrens plan was never taken seriously. His plan was too expensive, his "pure" water was an unsightly, brownish tea color, and the new supply did nothing to halt the dumping of sewage and wastewater into the local rivers (not that this worried Philadelphia's famously corrupt city council¹). In fact, residents did not stop dying of typhoid until after 1905, the year the long-resisted water filtration system came on line to deal with the city's sewage problem².

By 1913, Edith Wharton would have certainly understood that her cousin's pure water plan would have done little to prevent typhoid deaths. The prevention of disease by strict sanitation measures was now recognized. During the years that *Custom of the Country* was being planned and written, Typhoid Mary was being tried and imprisoned for endangering New York area residents, *McClure's* magazine (which would serialize Wharton's *Summer* in 1917) published an article by Samuel Hopkins Adams entitled "Typhoid," sanitary engineers had proclaimed that "it is safe to say that for every case of infectious disease due to drinking water ten cases are caused by infected milk," and a 1908 book-length study of typhoid fever by an eminent bacteriologist had declared: "while it is true both historically and as a fact of to-day, that typhoid fever is a disease of civilization, it ought to be clearly understood that it is only a disease of defective civilization³."

1. McCarthy 49.

2. Gretchen A. Contran, Rose A. Cheney. "Mortality Trends in Philadelphia: Age- and Cause-Specific Death Rates 1870-1930," *Demography* 19 (1982): 97-123. McCarthy's study adds that in the first year of filtration, 1905, the typhoid rate fell an average of 90% in areas receiving filtered water. In 1906, the worst annual death toll from typhoid in 45 years occurred, but it only struck areas of Philadelphia still drinking unfiltered water (85).

3. "Typhoid" Mary Mallon was a cook in several wealthy New York suburban households. She was identified as a carrier of the typhoid bacteria during a 1904 epidemic of typhoid fever that spread through Oyster Bay, New York. She had disappeared by the time the outbreak had been traced to the household where she worked, but she appeared again, in a Park Avenue home in 1907. The New York City Department of health had her committed to an isolation center on an island off the Bronx where she fought her detention up to the U.S. Supreme Court. In 1910, the health department released her on condition that she never again work as a cook or in food service, but in 1914, she was found to have been involved in the spread of typhoid in New Jersey and New York, and was again imprisoned. She died in 1932 after a stroke. See Edwin Jordan, "Profitable and Fruitless lines of Endeavor in Public Health Work," in Congress of Technology, *Technology and Industrial Efficiency* (Boston, 1911), quoted in K. Celeste Gaspari and Arthur G. Woolf, "Income, Public Works, and Mortality in Early Twentieth-Century American Cities," *Journal of Economic History* 45 (1985): 360.

Far removed from the ravages of typhoid fever it is easy for the twenty-first century reader to nod and assume that Abner Spragg's motives in selling his land to the water-works are at least partially noble. But the fishiness of the endeavor, signaled by the label "Pure Water Move," the Spraggs' precipitate departure from Apex to New York, and the revelation of collusion between Rolliver and Spragg suggests that Edith Wharton does not want us to think of it as a carefully considered project. It may have failed completely, like many such quick fixes of the era. Several cities that responded to typhoid epidemics by merely finding new supplies and building new reservoirs tragically overloaded their sewage systems and experienced new epidemics¹. The newly available water closets of the 1860s and 1870s "overflowed the old privy waste disposal systems, soaked the urban water tables, and converted large portions of city land and streets into a stinking morass" (Schultz and McShane 393).

Wharton would also have had ample models for the corruption involved in Spragg's Pure Water Move: the newspapers and magazines circulating in her day were as full of items about political party bosses and government contracting scandals as they are today. From 1902 to 1904 *McClure's* was publishing muckraker Lincoln Steffens's popular exposés of municipal graft, "rings," and "boodling²." In one article, Steffens condemned an ongoing effort "to sell out the water works of Philadelphia, and all other such plants in the state³." In another, he reported that St. Louis officials had been actively trying to find a buyer for their water works, which was worth \$40,000,000. "The boodlers thought they could let it go at \$15,000,000, and get \$1,000,000 or so themselves for the bargain. 'The scheme was to do it and skip', said one of the boodlers who told me about it, 'and if you could mix it all up with some filtering scheme it could be done; only some of us thought we could make more than \$1,000,000 out of it – a fortune apiece. It will be done some day'" (120). Something like it seems to have been "got up" in Apex.

1. Milwaukee, for instance, opened its municipal water works in 1874, but wastewater continued to be dumped back into Lake Milwaukee and its feeder rivers even after the Flushing Tunnel sewer system came on line in 1888. Finally, after a typhoid fever epidemic in 1910, the city began treating and filtering the water. See Judith Walzer Leavitt, *The Healthiest City: Milwaukee and the Politics of Health Reform*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982; pp. 57-9.
2. These articles were also reprinted in Lincoln Steffens's best-selling book *Shame of the Cities* (1904), which Sweeney acknowledges Wharton might have seen. A "ring" or a "machine" is a group of politicians who agree to work and vote as a group for the ring's mutual (financial) benefit. "To Booodle" is an old term that means to bribe.
3. Steffens tells a story of city corruption that anticipates Moffatt's dealings: "When they have sold out all they have, the politicians form a competing company and compel the old concern to buy out or sell out. While Widener and Elkins were at sea, bound for Europe, in 1901, the Philadelphia ring went to the Legislature and had introduced there two bills, granting a charter to practically all the streets and alleys not covered by tracks in Philadelphia, and to run short stretches of the old companies' tracks to make connections... Without notice the bills were introduced at 3 p.m. on Monday, May 29; they were reported from committee in five minutes; by 8:50 p.m. they were printed and on the members' desk, and by 9 p.m. were passed on first reading. The bills passed second reading the next day, Memorial Day, and on the third day were passed from the Senate to the House, where they were 'jammed through' with similar haste and worse trickery. In six legislative days the measures were before Governor Stone, who signed them June 7, at midnight" (223).

“Diverse and ever in motion”

In addition to establishing the text's ethical position, the novel's central tale of conspiracy and “ring politics” constitutes its deep structure. Everything “goes round” and everyone seems strangely linked. Louis Auchincloss is critical of the role of coincidence in *Custom of the Country*, given its apparent determinism and “awesome effect of ineluctable circumstance¹.” It is certainly a puzzle why, in a story that starts in New York and climaxes in Paris, Apex remains the center of Undine's world. There doesn't seem to be enough there there for that². Even its oft-spoken ways and mores are not quite enough to keep its characters tied to home and each other. But the gravitational pull of collusion and secrecy keeps the characters in close orbit³.

The novel's characters mingle and circulate by means of hotels, serial marriages, pure water deals, newspapers, motorcars, revolving circles and spheres, and simply by “going round”. The novel, Cynthia Griffin Wolff observes, focuses its rage on two specific evils: “the tendency to withdraw from the rest of society and to ignore everything that is difficult or ‘common’ or ‘not nice’”, and “the denial of normal, natural life energy” (239-40). Healthy circulation, figured most prominently by the flush Elmer Moffatt, is the actual going about in the world and living in it. Even the vaguely malicious Dicky Bowles and Baroness Adelschein seem somehow more wholesome than the listless, solitaire-playing Miss Wincher, the virginal Harriet Ray, the cold, impenetrable visitors to Skog Harbor, Maine, or the Dagonets, “the last, etiolated remnants of a once-vital organism” (Wolff 234). The novel insists that complexity and diversity contribute to the health of the human condition.

The Custom of the Country's endorsement of filtered water (water circulated through a shiny layer of bacteria) over “pure” water is also a declaration of its political principles. Evoking the Biblical story of a rather ineffective Pure Water Move, the Ararat investigation neither enlightens nor cleans up “that dim underworld of affairs where men of the Moffatt and Driscoll type moved like shadowy destructive monsters beneath the darting small fry of the surface” (149). If purifying floods merely give the underworld more room to maneuver, Elmer takes full advantage. As Elaine Showalter observes, Elmer has “a genuine disdain for religious piety and social cant,” which echoes Wharton's own pragmatic, middle-of-the-road politics (94). That he apparently transforms Apex into a thriving metropolis without muckraking or purist sanctimony signals the novel's laissez-faire sentiments, as do the Temperance episode, the allusion to meddling reformers that precedes Ralph's suicide, and the proto-Darwinism of Ralph's Montaigne allusion, “*divers et ondoyant*.”

1. Auchincloss, Louis. *Edith Wharton: A Woman in Her Time*. New York: Viking Press, 1971; 140.

2. Cf. Gertrude Stein on Oakland, California.

3. Even the rivalry between Undine and Indiana seems to be a function of water politics. Indiana's father, a plumber, would presumably have some involvement, but the Spraggs literally distance themselves from him.

Montaigne's first essay "By Diverse Means We Achieve the Same Ends" (from which the celebrated phrase is taken) shares the novel's tone of scientific detachment and its embrace of heterogeneity (such as Elmer's "great representative assemblage of unmatched specimens" [303]). But a later essay may have provided the novel with its political sensibilities, its imagery of underwater menace, and perhaps even its title. In "Of Husbanding Your Will," a meditation on circulation and municipal government, Montaigne justifies his two terms as Mayor of Bordeaux, explaining that he never really involved himself in the business of politics¹. "The mayor and Montaigne have always been two, with a very clear separation," he argues with a sense of control and detachment from business that uncannily prefigures Elmer Moffatt (774). Everyone knows there is knavery in being a financier, Montaigne shrugs. "An honest man is not accountable for the vice or stupidity of his trade, and should not therefore refuse to practice it: it is the custom of his country, and there is profit in it. We must live in the world and make the most of it such as we find it" (774). Montaigne's essay closes with a short passage from the *Aeneid*: "Should I this monster trust? Should I not know /The calme Seas counterfait dissembling show, /How quietly sometimes the floods will go?" While similarly monstrous water imagery has been said to inform much of Wharton's novel (from the name "Undine" to the sensation of drowning that plagues Ralph to Peter Van Degen's frog-like face) I suggest that the idea of an impure flood as a phenomenon that needs to be confronted and managed (with businesslike detachment) is shared by both this essay and Wharton's *Custom of the Country*.

The novel's recognition of disease, sewage, and corruption adds a fundamental level of grit that is widely sensed by its readers but usually resisted – perhaps because one does not expect such things in an Edith Wharton novel. On the level of tone, this grit successfully filters out any residual romance the reader might feel about small-town American life. On the level of genre, it suggests an unlikely kinship with noir mystery novels such as Arthur Conan Doyle's 1902 *Hound of the Baskervilles* (mentioned on the first page of Wharton's novel), which ends, after the moment of revelation, with an image of a fetid, stinking swamp. But most importantly, this grit helps us to fully appreciate why Elmer circulates, unsettles, collects, revitalizes, and profits as he does. Without changing substantially, he grows redder and glossier, productively filtering the vulgar material out of his surroundings and remaining somewhat unrefined himself. The Pure Water subplot (which evacuates any sense of Apex as an idyllic place) muddies the waters of the novel, but without it, Elmer Moffatt, perhaps the novel's greatest achievement, could not emerge as clean as he does.

1. Book 3, Chapter 10 (or 11, depending on the edition). Wharton would probably have owned one of several editions of John Florio's translation, which often appeared with the (apt) epigraph from Lord Bacon: "Most current for that they come home to men's business and bosom."
2. Virgil's original text is as follows: – *Mene huic confidere monstro, Mene salis placidi vultum, fluctusque quietos Ignorare?* (Translated by Florio: "Should I this monster trust? Should I not know /The calme Seas counterfait dissembling show, /How quietly sometimes the floods will go?") As Montaigne constructs the metaphor, the 'monster' is public opinion.

While many critics have noted that *The Custom of the Country* is a novel about money, it is also a novel of urban politics and public health. Amy Kaplan argues that Wharton sought in her writing to transcend the so-called "domestic tradition" of female authorship and situate her work in the broader literary marketplace. Clearly she has done so here. With her impure water move, Wharton confronts two of the more complex social realities of turn-of-the-century life: municipal finance and the circulation of clean water. If, as Sweeney concludes, Wharton's story of Abner Spragg "has a strong ring of authenticity" (56), it probably has less to do with her wealthy, distant cousin-in-law than with her scientific and political intelligence and her habit of reading the newspapers. To assume otherwise is to relegate her, as Kaplan puts it, "to the margins of American literary history as a novelist of manners or an aloof aristocrat clinging to outmoded values" (453). Wharton's fictional public utility neatly flushes away such sentiment.

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