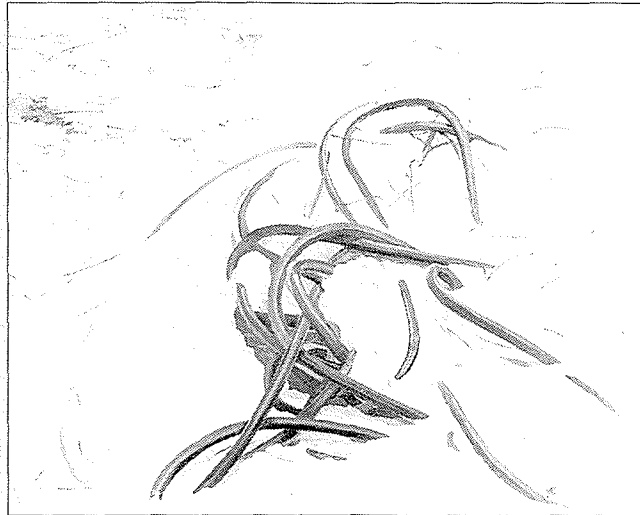


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## A Realist's Progress

From the start of her career in the early 1970s, Catherine Murphy has been hailed as a brilliant representational painter, an heir of Edward Hopper, notes critic Gerrit Henry in *Art in America* (Jan. 1994). "She was praised for her aerial views from the window of her Hoboken apartment looking toward the Empire State Building, or her tree-shaded, high-lawned treatments of her childhood home in the woods of Lexington, Mass., all painstakingly painted from life." But, as *Garden Hose in Melting Snow* (1988), right, shows, Murphy has progressively come to grips with aspects of 20th-century modernist abstraction.



From a few feet away, *Garden Hose in Melting Snow* looks exactly like what its title says it is. But from 10 feet away, Henry observes, "it looks like a field of pristine white strewn lightly with pencil markings, with loopy bright-green calligraphy at center." Murphy herself comments: "It's about a line on a piece of paper. The snow is the paper, the line is the garden hose."

"She is unusual among today's realist painters," Henry says, "for she accepts the challenge of incorporating abstraction within—not imposing it on top of—convincing naturalist imagery."

nationality." Latin American writers, for example, are generally praised for writing about their native region, not for literary virtues independent of nationality.

Indeed, contrary to popular perceptions, the prize was not intended to be awarded purely on the basis of literary merit. Alfred Nobel (1833–96), the Swedish inventor and frustrated writer who endowed the prize, declared in his will that it should go to the author of "the most outstanding work of an idealistic tendency." It has often gone to writers who have exposed injustice, such as Britain's John Galsworthy, who won in 1932 on the strength of works such as *The Silver Box* (1906), a play about the law's unequal treatment of rich and poor, or to spokesmen for the underdog, such as John Steinbeck, author of *Of Mice and Men* (1937) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), who won in 1962.

For all its limitations, the Nobel Prize undeniably has its great moments. When Soviet dissident Alexander Solzhenitsyn was selected in 1970,

a French writer said the choice by itself justified the existence of the Nobel Prize.

## The Age of Corruption

"Edith Wharton's Abuser" by Kenneth S. Lynn, in *The American Spectator* (Dec. 1993), 2020 N. 14th St., Ste. 750, Arlington, Va. 22216.

R. W. B. Lewis's *Edith Wharton: A Biography* (1975) won the Pulitzer Prize and the Bancroft Prize and is the work upon which other commentators on the author of *Ethan Frome* (1911), *The Age of Innocence* (1920), and other famous novels now rely. Lynn, a literary biographer and erstwhile professor, charges that the Yale University professor's work is a scandal—ridden with errors and "profoundly corrupt."

Thanks to Lewis, Lynn contends, today's critics and scholars who write about Edith Wharton (1862–1937) "are working out of the following assumptions: Borne down by her society, her

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mother, and her husband, Wharton collapsed. Victimization, however, laid the groundwork for rebellion and rebirth. Gallantly, she fought back. She resumed writing. She had an affair with [a journalist named Morton Fullerton]. She shucked off her husband. And early and late she produced brave, wonderful books. In fine, *she triumphed*."

This "Wharton myth," Lynn argues, is a product of "the fantasies of [Lewis's] ideologically driven mind, wherein victimization equates with virtue and a wealthy, socially privileged mother . . . is bound to be a moral monster."

In his relatively skimpy treatment of Wharton's childhood development (she is 40 years old by page 105 of the 532-page text), Lewis manufactures psychodramas "out of swift manipulations of scanty facts, omissions of lengthier contradictory facts, pumped-up rhetoric, and bluff," Lynn asserts. For example, Lewis strongly implies that what Wharton described as a "choking agony of terror" she suffered in childhood "was rooted in the traumatic scoldings, humiliations, and other abuses visited upon her by a Gothic ogress of a mother." He ignores, Lynn points out, "Wharton's touching expression of gratitude to her mother and father for helping her through her agony," which is contained in an unpublished autobiographical fragment.

Lynn cites criticism of the Wharton biography made in the (London) *Times Literary Supplement* by two former research assistants, Marion Mainwaring and Mary Pitlick, whom Lewis warmly praised in the book as "something closer to collaborators" than assistants. "He lavishly praised my research," Mainwaring said, "but distorted or neglected much of the material I gave him. One result is that other writers have been propagating his errors." For example, Mainwaring found out a great deal about Wharton's affair with Fullerton, but was not able to find out much, not even her first name, about a woman named Mirecourt, who allegedly blackmailed Fullerton. In a letter to Lewis, Mainwaring speculated that Mirecourt might have been a journalist, "a kind of French Henrietta Stackpole," alluding to a reporter in Henry James's *Portrait of a Lady*. In Lewis's book, the Mirecourt woman appears as "Henrietta Mirecourt."

The other researcher, Pitlick, pointed out that a crucial "breakdown" Lewis claims Wharton had in the summer of 1894—supposedly precipitated by her marital unhappiness, her absorption of society's, and her mother's, "distrust" of anyone who took writing seriously, and her loss of self-confidence in her early stories—never took place. Lewis took at face value the excuse of illness that Wharton gave her publisher for failing to produce a promised volume of stories. He ignored the letters she wrote to others showing her to be "an ebullient woman going back and forth to Europe." The facts, Lynn writes, did not fit the "Lewis-confected Wharton myth."

## A Grimm Dahl

"The Grimmiest Tales" by Christopher Hitchens, in *Vanity Fair* (Jan. 1994), 350 Madison Ave., New York, N.Y. 10017.

Critics make two complaints about *The Witches*, *The BFG* (Big Friendly Giant), and Roald Dahl's other popular books for children. First, that the books, as one irate mother from Iowa charged, are too sophisticated and do not teach moral values. She cited passages in which a witch plotted to kill children, there was a reference to "dog droppings," and people's "bottoms" were skewered. Second, critics charge that Dahl (1916–90) was an anti-Semite and a racist, and that he treated his wife badly. Hitchens, a journalist, contends that the critics just don't grasp the powerful appeal of "a good yucky tale."

To the Iowa mother, Hitchens says: "The word is out about bottoms and dog doo-doo, and while you may want less of it, the kids are unanimous. They want more. They also wish for more and better revolting rhymes, sinister animals, and episodes where fat children get theirs."

One explanation of adults' dislike of Dahl's work is jealousy, Hitchens asserts. The writer's formula, as he himself said, consisted of "conspiring with children against adults." He was not merely a pied piper but "a genuine subversive," Hitchens writes. "In his world, kids are fit to rule. They understand cruelty and unfairness and, I'm very sorry to say, are capable of relishing it. They also have a rather raunchy idea of what's funny."