

Defining the American *Flâneuse*: Constance Fenimore Woolson and “A Florentine Experiment”

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[F]lânerie parallels with the idea of the search, and in the abstract wandering in the city this search would seem to be not for place but for self or identity. *Flânerie* can thus be interpreted as an attempt to identify and place the self in the uncertain environment of modernity . . .¹

The figure of the *flâneuse* (the female counterpart to the urban stroller, the *flâneur*, who fascinated both Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin as they contemplated how this figure of modernity defined urban spaces in Europe) initially was considered to be represented by the body of the streetwalker, the prostitute, who was thought to be the only kind of woman “on the stroll” in cities; however, recent scholarship has shown how female *flânerie* and its representation in writing reconfigures our understanding of not only modernity but also the construction of female subjectivity. Most considerations of the *flâneuse* as a visible and active agent in defining the metropolis focus upon European cities and European women who were, more often than not, consumers, shop girls, and artists, rather than prostitutes.

The non-European women who strolled through European cities also complicated this category. Given that in the latter part of the nineteenth century, many American women traveled to Europe and many writers, both male and

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female, adopted the figure of the American Girl Abroad in their fiction to tease out the complex relationship between the Old World and the New, it is no surprise that many American women travelers participated in *flânerie* as they made their way across the European continent. In fact, the surfeit of travel writing by American women in the nineteenth century stands as a testament to not only the pleasures of travel but also the intensity of their experiences as they wandered through old European cities.

Did not American women stroll through American cities during modernity? The rise of American cities understandably comes after that of European cities; therefore the *flâneuse* of American cities inhabits a different space in relation to her European counterparts in that the city itself is busily being constructed and has less baggage than European cities. One may argue that the *flâneuse*, at least in the context of earlier American centuries, strolled through the wilderness or nature to observe not only her country but also her counterparts. In the post-Civil War era, when the metropolises of the United States started to flourish with both the influx of people and a constant stream of capital, women became more visible in the city, both as workers and as shoppers. Literature mirrors this bifurcation: in works such as Mary Austin's "The Walking Woman" (1907) and Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896), female protagonists walk through sparsely populated terrain that is untouched by industrialization or urbanization, whereas in novels such as Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900), Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's *Iola Leroy; or Shadows Uplifted* (1892) and Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins's *Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South* (1900), the female protagonists' identities depend on and are shaped by the metropolises they inhabit.

American women who traveled abroad in the nineteenth century as well as representations of such women in literature brought their American walking sensibilities to Europe and often used their perambulations in foreign cities to ponder what they had been and what they were to become. One such woman was the American writer Constance Fenimore Woolson (1840–1894), who in letters to family members and close friends in the United States, expressed her delight in living abroad for the first time, after her mother's death freed her from familial obligations in the United States and allowed her to travel to destinations she had only dreamt about. Woolson's unfortunate childhood in New Hampshire and Ohio had been scarred by the deaths of most of her siblings (some in childhood of scarlet fever, others after marriage of tuberculosis) as well as by the early death of her father. This prompted years of traveling around the United States with her mother while trying to carve out a

writing career for herself.²

A grand-niece of James Fenimore Cooper on her mother's side, Woolson had relatives in Cooperstown, New York, and a family summer cottage on Mackinac Island, Michigan, but it was St. Augustine, Florida, where she spent some years with her widowed mother, that charmed her enough for her to consider it an ideal place to which she might retire. However, after her mother's death, the chance to travel to Europe, and to meet expatriate writer Henry James, was too tempting to resist. Her departure from the United States in 1879, which marked the beginning of a nearly fifteen-year sojourn in Europe, also signaled the beginning of a peripatetic and nomadic existence, punctuated by long sojourns in Florence and shorter stays in places such as Geneva, London, Venice, and Oxford, as well as trips to Greece and Egypt.

Woolson, a popular novelist, short story writer, poet, and travel writer during her lifetime, though enthralled by Europe and all its possibilities for her, wrestled with the problem of how to make a home when all the prerequisites for home—at least to a single woman living in the latter half of the nineteenth century—were not available to her. Writing both in the United States and abroad, Woolson examines the condition of women in post-Civil War America and reveals gendered spaces that were closed to, and forgotten, overlooked, or ignored by, male writers of the same time period. A prolific writer and an enthusiastic walker, her life and works highlight the constraints and limitations of womanhood in the United States in writings set in the United States and abroad. In particular, her keen observations of city life amongst the expatriate communities in Italy—Rome, Venice, Florence—where she lived and worked provide us with paradigms of the American *flâneuse* in action. In particular, Florence stands out as the location where Woolson cultivated lasting friendships with American writers and artists, and contemplated the condition of expatriate American women while she tried to make herself at home.

This paper traces the intersections of *flânerie*, travel, and gender through an examination of Woolson herself as a *flâneuse* whose observations of urban life informed her fiction, and of the figure of the American Girl Abroad as *flâneuse* in Woolson's fiction. Focusing on Woolson's short story "A Florentine Experiment," I discuss how Florentine urban spaces and their subjection to the expatriate female gaze provide Woolson and her *flâneuse* protagonist with the means of addressing their identities as American upper-middle-class women in Italy and of reinventing themselves in Florence, a foreign city that itself symbolizes artistic rebirth.

THE *FLÂNEUSE*

Charles Baudelaire's essay, "The Painter of Modern Life" (1863), is an appreciation of the artist and illustrator Constantin Guys (1802–92), who specialized in painting contemporary life. Baudelaire's characterization of Guys as a *flâneur* defines this stroller of cityscapes in the following way:

The crowd is his element, as the air is that of the birds and water of fishes. His passion and his profession are to become one flesh with the crowd. For the perfect *flâneur*, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world—such are a few of the slightest pleasures of those independent, passionate, impartial natures which the tongue can but clumsily define. The spectator is a *prince* who everywhere rejoices in his incognito. The lover of life makes the whole world his family . . .³

Baudelaire declares that the "mainspring of [Guys's] genius is *curiosity*"⁴ and that this quality is what allows Guys to enjoy *flânerie* so that it informs his art. In his essays on Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin also imagines his *flâneur* as a man of the crowd, mingling anonymously with the masses in his perambulatory perusal of Paris. Benjamin declares that the figure of the *flâneur* is a symbol of modernity who transforms the city to suit his own purposes:

The street becomes a dwelling place for the *flâneur*; he is as much at home among house façades as a citizen is within his four walls. To him, a shiny enameled shop sign is at least as good a wall ornament as an oil painting is to a bourgeois in his living room. Buildings' walls are the desk against which he presses his notebooks; newsstands are his libraries; and café terraces are the balconies from which he looks down on his household after his work is done.⁵

The *flâneur* in Benjamin's construction is a man who strolls through the city but does not make a spectacle of himself; rather, it is his eye that makes a spectacle of the city. By occupying space that would have been alien to him, he makes it his own, just as he, in the quotation above, makes public space his own by transforming its parameters into private domestic space. His discerning eye connects him to literary realism as he takes in the quickly-changing

city.

Considerations of the *flâneur*'s female counterpart, the *flâneuse*, have challenged models of modernity as masculine. In an influential essay, "The Invisible *Flâneuse*: Women and the Literature of Modernity," Janet Wolff declares: "The literature of modernity describes the experience of men. It is essentially a literature about transformations in the public world and in its associative consciousness . . . [which addresses] their concern with the public world of work, politics and city life."⁶ By reminding us that "these are areas from which women were excluded, or in which they were practically invisible,"⁷ and that men and women occupied separate spheres, Wolff argues that the *flâneuse* "was rendered impossible by the sexual divisions of the nineteenth century."⁸ Wolff ends her essay by hinting at some possibilities for correcting this imbalance:

What is missing in this literature is any account of life outside the public realm, of the experience of "the modern" in its private manifestations, and also of the very different nature of the experience of those women who *did* appear in the public area; a poem written by "la femme passante" about her encounter with Baudelaire, perhaps?⁹

Wolff's essay triggered a landslide of essays about the existence, definition, and validity of the *flâneuse*. For instance, Elizabeth Wilson's essay, "The Invisible *Flâneur*," points out that the existence of the *flâneur* itself was, by the same token, precarious and verging on the invisible. Wilson notes here how women in nineteenth-century Europe could not be made invisible in public spaces, despite restrictions: "although the male ruling class did all it could to restrict the movement of women in cities, it proved impossible to banish them from public spaces. Women continued to crowd into the city centres and the factory districts."¹⁰

Wilson also points out that in economic terms, the position of the *flâneur* was far less financially and emotionally stable than we might imagine and that "excessive emphasis on 'the Gaze' occludes—ironically—the extent to which the *flâneur* was actually *working* as he loitered along the pavement or delved into the underworld of the 'marginals.'"¹¹ Taken in conjunction with the Benjamin quotation earlier in this essay, the *flâneur*'s work can also be seen as a kind of home-making, and thus not only is his livelihood insecure financially, but it also disrupts gendered notions of space and work.

Deborah L. Parsons, in her book entitled *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City, and Modernity*, continues to survey *flânerie* in the late nine-

teenth and early twentieth centuries and acknowledges that the decline of the *flâneur* and the rise of the *flâneuse* coincide.¹² Because the moments in which they enter the public sphere are different, the *flâneur* and the *flâneuse* bring different perspectives to how they engage with the city and Parsons emphasizes the importance of *flânerie* as a metaphor for the experiences and the aesthetic styles of urban society by identifying its characteristics as “adaptability, multiplicity, boundary-crossing, fluidity.”¹³

Parsons goes on to agree with Wilson that “the concept of the urban spectator is ambiguously gendered,” undercutting “the myth that the trope of the urban artist-observer is necessarily male and that the woman in the city is a labeled object of his gaze, from outside a gendered structure of literature.”¹⁴ This demolishing of binaries allows for a more constructive consideration of the urban gaze. Parsons also provides us with the categories of the *flâneuse* associated with the city of modernity: the New Woman, the working girl, and the female shopper.¹⁵ Parsons explains:

They are significant as images of urban women within the city as well as metaphors for female perceptions of the city. Although this new freedom was limited, and subject to the manipulations of employers and the commodity industry, its importance for emancipation should not be overlooked. Women’s legitimate participation in city life was an extremely significant divergence from Victorian conventional belief and acquired a great deal of anxious attention from contemporary social commentators, who tended to regard women as becoming overwhelmingly present.¹⁶

Though neither a working girl nor a shopper and perhaps born half a generation too early to be labeled a New Woman, Constance Fenimore Woolson’s *flânerie* abroad is made possible because she works (though not a shop girl, she is nonetheless subject to the whims and demands of her publishers) and because her work, in turn, chronicles creatively her observations about her surroundings, her friends, and herself within this urban context.

CONSTANCE FENIMORE WOOLSON IN FLORENCE: WALKING, OBSERVING, WRITING

Woolson remarked in a letter to Samuel Mather dated March 20, 1880, “[T]he only way I can manage ‘Europe’ and my own life here is to settle down for a number of months in each place. So I shall see Europe slowly and by no means extensively; but I shall see and enjoy thoroughly the places I *do*

see.”¹⁷ In Florence, Woolson settled for longer periods of time: from 1880 to 1883 she stayed in various pensions in Florence and from 1885 to 1889, she mostly stayed on Bellosguardo hill, overlooking the city. During both sojourns, she was walking, observing, and writing: in the first stay, she delighted in discovering Florence and its environs as well as becoming friends with Henry James who showed her Florence and tutored her in Florentine art; in her second stay, as a known member of the expatriate community in Florence through her friendships with James and others on Bellosguardo, she more actively constructed a home for herself.

Woolson chronicled her delight in reaching Florence for the first time to Samuel Mather in the letter mentioned above:

Here we are on the bank of the Arno, with the Duomo and Giotto’s beautiful Campanile opposite. I feel more foreign, more far away in the old world, in *Florence*, than I have felt since leaving New York. London I seemed to have learned from books so thoroughly that it was not novel; Paris was New York over again; Mentone was a country place; but Florence! I foresee that I am going to be quite roused up here.¹⁸

And once she was settled in the spring of 1880, she exclaimed in a letter dated April 10, “I am enchanted with Florence, it is even more beautiful than I expected,” and recounted her schedule: “Every afternoon I give an hour or two to one of the churches, generally managing to go by the Campanile and ‘Gates of Heaven,’ and then off I go for a long walk outside the city, often up one of the hills in order to get the beautiful views which open in every direction.”¹⁹

Woolson’s being “roused up” in Florence, interestingly enough, seemed to have as much to do with *flânerie* as it did with enjoying nature. Rayburn S. Moore notes how even as a young girl, Woolson “enjoyed taking long walks in the ‘Water Cure Woods’” in Cleveland where she went to school²⁰ and that an older Woolson, living in St. Augustine after her father’s death in 1873, expressed her delight in walking in a letter to her old friend Arabella Carter Washburn: “The life here is so fresh, so new, so full of certain wild freedom. I walk miles through the hummocks, where it looks as though no one had ever walked before, gathering wild flowers everywhere, or sitting down under the pine trees to rest in the shade.”²¹ It is no wonder then, that in Florence, Woolson walked not only in the city but on the outskirts of Florence as well.

In a letter to Katharine Livingston Mather dated December 10, 1880, Woolson indicated how important her writing and walking schedule was to

her:

The best of me goes into my writing, and so, on the whole, I prefer to write quietly for the freshest part of the day, take a good walk, and then curl up in an easy-chair with an entertaining book, and go to bed early. If people will be so kind as to seek me out in my leisure time, or come and go to walk with me, I am delighted; but that is all the time I have for them! . . . I find I know a good many people here this winter, and have even been invited out several times to dinner, to evening companies, and to lunch parties. I have declined everything except one or two afternoon teas, which come in nicely with my afternoon walk.²²

Walking gave Woolson's life a structure, a routine, to facilitate the writing that was her livelihood. During her years in Europe, a period in which "women were achieving greater liberation as walkers and observers in the public spaces of the city,"²³ she not only wrote serialized novels but also short stories and travel essays for *Harper's Magazine*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Lippincott's Magazine*, and *Century*.²⁴ Many of her works from this period recalled American terrain with which she was familiar or drew inspiration from the Italian cities she inhabited. As Parsons remarks, "It is with this social influx of women as empirical observers into the city street that aesthetic, urban perception as a specifically masculine phenomenon and privilege is challenged."²⁵ For Woolson, her urban observations are an important and necessary part of her identity as a writer.

As a working woman abroad, Woolson herself challenged gendered conventions by embodying various transgressions of the ideology of separate spheres: she was a woman, but her work was not housework; she was unmarried and supported herself in a profession that was increasingly female, though also still dominated by men; she wrote where she lived and so her private domestic space was also where she conducted her public work; and at the same time, she was expected to observe the social niceties of genteel women living abroad.

The delight Woolson experienced when she first arrived in Florence turned into exasperation as the social demands made upon her as a private individual encroached upon the activities that sustained her as a public published author. In a letter from early 1883 she wrote:

[T]he demands that Florentine society makes upon one's time are too great for any person who has other things to do. It is a very hurried, breathless sort of existence.

Every family has its day for “receiving” and if one calls on any other day, it is considered to mean that one does not care to get in. Result: one has to take all the precious afternoon hours—my only ones for walking and visits to the galleries—for these tiresome receptions, and one cannot even walk at that time, because there is not time for it!²⁶

Nevertheless, Woolson’s commitment to her afternoon walk perhaps was due to the fact that Florence brought together the best of both worlds: walks in nature that recalled to her walks she enjoyed in various climes in the United States as well as urban strolls to take in the cityscapes. She wrote to Katharine Livingston Mather about this in a letter dated April 27, 1880: “In addition to the pictures and churches, the very streets of Florence are full of interest to me, and certainly the country is a never-ending pleasure for my eyes—the snow-capped mountains in the north-east, and the lovely valley of the Arno going down toward the west.”²⁷ To Samuel Mather she wrote later: “But it seems to me, so far at least, that the natural scenery of my own country is as fine as anything there is here. But what we have *not* at home, is the Art, and the associations. So these make my pleasure here.”²⁸

Art is what brought together Woolson and her fellow expatriate American writer, Henry James. Armed with a letter of introduction from one of James’s cousins, Henrietta Pell-Clark (sister of Minnie Temple, who served as James’s muse both during her life and after her early death at age twenty-four in 1870), Woolson met Henry James in Florence in the spring of 1880; he proceeded to befriend her and school her in Florentine art. In various letters from that period, she wrote of how she “is up to [her] head in Florentine history, books on art, etc.”²⁹ and which buildings and works of art she admired: the Strozzi Palace, the old convent of San Marco, the interior of Santa Maria Novella, and the statue of Lorenzo Medici in the sacristy of San Lorenzo.³⁰

Most of what Woolson did not understand or disliked seemed to be art that James appreciated. Woolson remarks in a letter from 1880, “At present I confess, Giotto remains beyond me. And H. J. says calmly, ‘Some day, you will see it.’ May be [sic].”³¹ Her comments about the Duomo are also telling: “The Duomo (interior) is too vast and cold. I went there one rainy afternoon alone, and had the weirdest time! It was almost dark inside, and I was the only person in all the great gloomy space. I went there again with H. J. who admires it, and tried to make me admire it too.”³² When Woolson confessed to not admiring the statues called “Day” and “Night” in the chapel of San Lorenzo because she thought they “looked so distracted,” Woolson recounted James’s response: “‘Ah yes,’ he said, ‘*distracted*. But *then!*’ Here words failed him,

and he walked off to look at a fresco (we were in Michael Angelo's house) and (probably) to recover from my horrible ignorance."³³

Woolson was good humored about her ignorance about art and was willing to be schooled in it, but also noted "I have been perfectly honest and even to myself would not pretend to admire what I did *not* admire."³⁴ In fact, she was as charmed by her gallery visits with James as she was with their walks around the city, jaunts to various parks within the city such as the Cascine and the Boboli Garden, and excursions without, such as a drive to Fiesole which she wrote was "one of the loveliest drives around Florence, this to Fiesole, which is an ancient Etruscan village, much older than Florence, on a high hill some miles distant. There is a most beautiful view there from the little plateau in front of the old convent."³⁵

Sharon L. Dean comments on this insistence on Woolson's part to view architecture as part of the landscape: "[F]or Woolson, the art or architectural object improves when it is transformed into landscape."³⁶ That is, despite James's tutorials on the virtues of individual pieces of art and architecture, Woolson was never unaware of how those works are situated within a larger environment and she recalled American space while viewing and inhabiting European space. In this independent and American view, she constructed her identity as an American *flâneuse*; Woolson reflected this new point of view in her short story, "A Florentine Experiment."

THE AMERICAN *FLÂNEUSE* IN "A FLORENTINE EXPERIMENT"

"A Florentine Experiment," published in the October 1880 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly* and included in the posthumously published *Dorothy and Other Italian Stories* (1896), is one of Woolson's earliest published stories set in Italy. In fact, of the Italian stories, only "Miss Grief" (*Lippincott's Magazine* May 1880), the story which is probably now the most anthologized of her short stories (though not included in either of her two Italian story collections), was published earlier than "A Florentine Experiment." In her introduction to *Women Artists, Women Exiles: "Miss Grief" and Other Stories*, the collection of Woolson short fiction she edited, Joan Myers Weimer discusses three Italian stories she included in the volume that "feature successful male writers and critics who resemble James"³⁷—"Miss Grief" (1880), "The Street of Hyacinth" (1882), and "At the Château of Corinne" (1887)—but does not mention "A Florentine Experiment" which features a male character who circles the female protagonist through Florence's galleries and visits the same churches that Woolson and James did. Weimer notes that in the three

short stories she selected, “their plots insist on the negative effect of [the male protagonist’s] arrogance and the patriarchy that sustained it. In two of the stories, the heroine marries the James-like character, but it is clear in both cases that this solution is a ‘downfall.’”³⁸ “A Florentine Experiment,” though of this period, does not match these plot summaries: arrogance is evenly spread out between the protagonists, patriarchy is countered by matriarchal power, and the marriage of the protagonists is not a capitulation to patriarchal norms but a measured decision that suggests the male protagonist and the female protagonist are equals.

“A Florentine Experiment” accomplishes this by establishing the relative autonomy of the protagonist, Margaret Stowe (whose name recalls those of two earlier women writers who traveled to and wrote about their experiences in Europe, Margaret Fuller and Harriet Beecher Stowe), and her non-dependence upon the male protagonist, Trafford Morgan. Margaret’s independence is symbolized by the ease with which she strolls by herself through the byways and parks of Florence; her familiarity with the city and its art complements the poise with which she responds to Trafford’s conversation and allows her to physically walk away when she deems conversations are finished.

The narrative begins with Margaret sitting “on the heights of Fiesole overlooking Florence”³⁹ with a childhood friend, Beatrice Lovell, who hands her a letter an admirer has written. Beatrice, with golden hair and violet eyes, is in mourning for her husband, the late Mr. Lovell, who at fifty-six, was her senior by three decades. Beatrice does not particularly care for the letter writer and asks Margaret to keep the letter. She then goes off to Venice.

Margaret, unlike her friend, is not yet married. She is the orphaned niece (but not the heiress) of a wealthy American woman, Miss Harrison, with whom she has been living for eighteen months. Margaret is “not beautiful” but has “a well-shaped, well-poised head” with dark hair and dark eyes, is “tall, slender, and rather graceful,” and has “an air of what is called distinction [which was] . . . but a deep indifference, combined with the wish at the same time to maintain her place unchanged in the society in which she moved.”⁴⁰ In contrast to the more conventionally pretty Beatrice, Margaret is somewhat plain, but as the narrative progresses, we see that she has a spirit that keeps her from being put upon by others.

Margaret meets Trafford Morgan at a gathering within the expatriate community in Florence and describes him to her aunt as being “of medium height, neither slender or stout; he is light, with rather peculiar eyes because they are so blue . . . He has a long light mustache, no beard, and very closely cut light

hair. . . . He looks fatigued. He looks cynical. I should not be surprised if he was selfish. I do not like him."⁴¹ Later, she discovers he is the man who had written the letter to Beatrice, who also turns out to be the grandson of Adam Morgan, a friend of her aunt's.

Margaret and Morgan begin to spend time together walking in Florence—in the art galleries, churches, and parks—until he misinterprets her behavior as affection for him and tells her "I am in love with some one [sic] else."⁴² Margaret is incensed by his arrogance and says that she knew he was in love with Beatrice and also informs him that her attentions to him were an experiment to help her forget a past suitor who is now to be married to another. Margaret declares her experiment is a complete failure and they part company.

The following year, after sojourns in other countries, Margaret and Morgan meet again in Florence. They both have learned that Beatrice Lovell is engaged and to be married in England. This time it is Morgan who proposes his experiment to "build up an interest in" Margaret in order to forget Beatrice.⁴³ Again, they frequent the sights of Florence, with most of their community understanding he is courting her but when Morgan tells her that his experiment has succeeded, Margaret is perplexed. She asks him, "You do not love me; I am not beautiful; I have no fortune. What, then, do you gain?"⁴⁴ When he responds, "I gain, Margaret . . . the greatest gift that can be given to a man on this earth, a gift I long for,—a wife who really and deeply loves me,"⁴⁵ Margaret is livid because she interprets this as Morgan's "deeply-rooted egotism" deluding him into thinking that she loves him; therefore she wishes "to make [him] put into words [his] egregious vanity, to make [him] stand convicted of [his] dense and vast mistake."⁴⁶ Again they part ways and they travel in different parts of Europe for the duration of the summer.

The following autumn, Miss Harrison encounters Morgan and invites him to call on her. When he comes, she informs him that Margaret is to be married. Margaret herself comes home from a party but does not converse much with Morgan who announces he is to leave town the following morning. However, he oversleeps and kills time until the next train by going to the Duomo where he encounters Margaret. As they walk and talk within the Duomo, he confesses his love for her and urges her not to marry without love. In the last scene, when they confront Miss Harrison and ask her why she lied to Morgan, she laughs and tells them that she invented "a sort a neutral ground upon which [they] could meet and speak . . . a sort of experiment . . . a Florentine experiment."⁴⁷ Morgan and Margaret laugh, confessing to "one or two of those experiments, already!"⁴⁸

“A Florentine Experiment” echoes not only the perambulations of Woolson and James (there is in this short story mention of the sculptures in the San Lorenzo chapel as well as the key scene in the Duomo in the rain), but also shows the American *flâneuse* in her element. And it is Margaret’s walking alone in the city that demonstrates her relative independence. This independence is in part a financial independence: though most of Florence thought Margaret would inherit her aunt’s money, they both understood that most of it is to go to another relative. In the meantime, Miss Harrison “gave Margaret every luxury; especially she liked to see her richly dressed.”⁴⁹ As a non-heiress, Margaret is her own person and does not feel the burden of wealth though she reaps benefits from it. She is more like a paid companion to her aunt, and so her going off on her own to walk in the Boboli Garden while her aunt goes on a drive with Morgan indicates her need for some time on her own and her sense that she is entitled to it.⁵⁰

Walking defines Margaret: she is fearless when traversing Florentine space. Unlike Venice, with its reputation for decadence and danger, Florence is safer, more comfortable, and more refined for a walker like Margaret. Her composure is commensurate with her familiarity with the city and its parks: indeed her encounters with Morgan in the Boboli Garden spread out behind the Pitti Palace and in the Cascine along the Arno River show how in control she is of herself, of her environment, and of Morgan, who comes upon her walking alone in each park. When they walk together, it is Margaret who takes the lead in suggesting walks and places to sit. For instance, in the beginning of their relationship, they chance upon each other in the Boboli Garden, where Morgan “had gone to walk off a fit of weariness; here he came upon Miss Stowe. There seemed to be no one in the garden save themselves, at least no one whom they knew.”⁵¹ After exchanging greetings, she is the one who invites him to walk with her: “Are you going now? If not, why not stroll awhile with me?”⁵²

Margaret’s invitation clearly marks this space as hers: much like Baudelaire and Benjamin’s *flâneurs*, she makes this space her home. Morgan discourses on art as he and Margaret stroll around the park; when he rejects her suggestion of sitting in the amphitheatre because he wants something more secluded, she is able to guide them higher up the slope to a seat which provides them with a panoramic view of the city and beyond:

It commanded a view of the city below, with the Duomo and Giotto’s lovely bell-tower; of the fruit-trees all in flower on the outskirts; of the tree-tops of the Cascine, now like a cloud of golden smoke with their tender brown leaflets, tasseled

blossoms, and winged seeds; of the young grain springing greenly down the valley; and the soft velvety mountains rising all around. "How beautiful it is!" she said, leaning back, closing her parasol and folding her hands.⁵³

Her appreciation of this view, which situates Florentine architecture within a verdant landscape that may recall vistas in the United States, reminds us of Sharon Dean's statement about how Woolson, and here by extension, Margaret, believe that architecture has more value when it is situated within a natural environment. Her delight in this view contrasts with Morgan's comments on Giotto, Titian, and Botticelli, offered in response to Margaret's wishing to be instructed in art, which imply that art can outdo nature.

Despite her ease as a *flâneuse*, with or without a companion, Margaret is not unaware of social rules that restrict her mobility and freedom. On one hand, after their meeting in the Boboli Garden, Margaret remains in control of their relationship by ignoring Morgan's attempts at flirtation and declining his offer to escort her home.⁵⁴ On the other hand, she is cautious about advancing her relationship with Morgan: she waits until May, when most of the tourists and her circle have left Florence for Venice, before she takes action:

Miss Stowe now stepped over the boundary-line of her caution a little . . . she went with Trafford to the Academy, and the Pitti; she took him into the cool dim churches and questioned him concerning his creed; she strolled with him through the monastery of San Marco and asked what his idea was of the next world.⁵⁵

When they re-encounter each other after a year's hiatus, Margaret still enjoys her solitary walks. Again, Morgan encounters her in a Florentine park: "Then one afternoon, he came upon her unexpectedly in the Cascine; she was strolling down the broad path, alone."⁵⁶ Again, the landscape is compared to American scenery: "They had strolled into a narrow path which led by one of those patches of underwood of which there are several in the Cascine, little bosky places carefully preserved in a tangled wildness which is so pretty and amusing to American eyes, accustomed to the stretch of real forests."⁵⁷ Margaret finds this charming and feigns inattentiveness when Morgan reminds her that he used to tell her that art was better.

In the year they are apart, Margaret acquires a biting sarcasm which she is not loath to reveal to Morgan. When he proposes his own experiment in which he would try to fall in love with Margaret in order to forget Beatrice, Margaret's "lip curled."⁵⁸ In the ensuing conversation, Margaret clearly has the upper hand:

“The plans are not alike,” she said. “Yours is badly contrived. *I* did not tell *you* beforehand what I was endeavoring to do!”

“I am obliged to tell you. You would have discovered it.”

“Discovered what a pretense it was? That is true. A woman can act a part better than a man. *You* did not discover! And what am I to do in this little comedy of yours?”⁵⁹

Morgan asks her, “After all, if there is no one upon whom it can really infringe (of course I know you have admirers; I have even heard their names), why should you not find it even a little amusing?” but with a “peculiar expression” she responds, “I am not sure but that I shall find it so.”⁶⁰ When Morgan asks her, after she imagines the Medicis buried underneath the Medici chapel, “Since when have you become so historical? They were a wicked race,” she can drolly reply, “And since when have you become so virtuous? . . . They were at least successful.”⁶¹ Dean states that this short story is “so heavily ironic that it is difficult to know if and when either of these characters loves the other”;⁶² however, the irony contained within their verbal sparring reveals a genuine interest in each other, which Margaret and Morgan try to conceal.

Walking promotes talking in “A Florentine Experiment.” Morgan is attentive to Margaret in his experiment: “He now asked questions of her; when they went to the churches, he asked her impressions of the architecture; when they visited the galleries, he asked her opinions of the pictures. He inquired what books she liked, and why she liked them; and sometimes he slowly repeated her replies.”⁶³ This last trait annoys Margaret but that does not deter their strolling and conversing. In the cloisters of San Marco they discuss George Eliot’s *Romola* (1863), and in the “Michael-Angelo chapel of San Lorenzo” they bribe the custodian, sneak in to admire the two pairs of statues named “Day” and “Night” and “Dawn” and “Evening,” but end up talking about Morgan’s infatuation with Beatrice.⁶⁴

Because it is in stilted spaces where social drama is viewed or staged rather than places to stroll that Margaret and Morgan have the confrontations that lead to long separations—their first is in Miss Harrison’s drawing room, their second is in the amphitheatre of the Boboli Garden—Woolson keeps us wondering as to the outcome of Morgan’s last encounter with Margaret in the Duomo because the Duomo is also where religious rites are staged and viewed. Nonetheless, just as she transforms the outdoors of Florence into the traditionally indoor space of the home for Margaret, Woolson brings about another startling metamorphosis by expanding the inside of the Duomo to

accommodate strolls that seem more in order in a landscaped park.

What seems like a horribly ironic and embarrassing chance encounter in a dim cathedral becomes a serendipitous meeting when Morgan accompanies Margaret as she walks to one of the exits and then convinces her to stroll within the cathedral with him: "See how it is raining outside. Walk with me once around the whole interior for the sake of the pleasant part of our Florentine days,—for there *was* a pleasant part; it will be our last walk together."⁶⁵ Margaret's silence during most of the walk encourages Morgan to confess his love for her. As he speaks, Woolson marks the sections of the cathedral: they pass the choir, pass "under Michael Angelo's grand, unfinished statue and [come] around on the other side," walk down the north aisle, and then to the center of the cathedral where Margaret sheds tears and Morgan realizes that he still has a chance.⁶⁶ They make two more circuits of the Duomo together; relieved that their love for each other is reciprocated, their conversation regains its usual vivacity and implies a happy ending.

Margaret's ownership of Florence through her frequent walks allows her a degree of confidence that levels the playing field and allows her to meet Morgan on her home ground and on her own terms. With relatively unimpeded mobility and freedom Margaret makes herself at home in Florence: not only within social circles but in the city. Though she is away from home and perhaps not yet ready to admit to the fact that she, like Baudelaire's perfect *flâneur* feels at home everywhere,⁶⁷ for Margaret, this exercise in American *flânerie* has resulted, happily, in starting a new home with Morgan.

FLORENTINE HOMEMAKING

When Woolson returned to Florence in 1886 after a few years of living elsewhere in Europe, she saw herself as more of a native Florentine and reveled in that feeling in a letter to Katharine Livingston Mather: "Florence is lovely. I am such an old resident now that I no longer go about with a Baedeker at nine o'clock in the morning. But I anticipate the greatest pleasure in re-visiting, one by one, and at my leisure, all my favourite pictures, statues, churches and palaces."⁶⁸ By choosing to live on Bellosguardo ("beautiful view") hill, southwest of Florence, Woolson was able to enjoy the best of both worlds: the rural retreat of Bellosguardo within walking distance from the urban splendor of Florence. Surrounded by nature and a panorama of Florence before her, the American *flâneuse* in her must have been deeply satisfied.

James introduced her to his friends, Francis Boott, his daughter Lizzie, and

her husband Frank Duveneck who arranged for her to rent rooms in the Villa Castellani where they were staying in 1886; in 1887, she moved to the nearby Villa Brichieri.⁶⁹ In a letter to E. C. Stedman in 1887, she described her homemaking in Florence:

After seventeen years of wandering, I have at last a home of my own—(though but a temporary one). Such joy as I take in my own tables & chairs, tea-cups & cushions, I don't believe you can imagine, but Mrs. Stedman can. . . . But the view, & the air, & the scene, & the flowers, & the sense of ownership (for a year)—the tranquility of spirit, the far-awayness—these to me, just now, seem infinite riches.⁷⁰

Making friends—she became godmother to Lizzie Boott Duveneck's baby—and enjoying the seclusion and beauty of her new environment gave rise to such expressions of happiness in being settled.

However, this sense of home in Bellosguardo did not last very long: now a "native" and better known in society than during her last sojourn in Florence, social engagements intruded upon Woolson's time and she grew to resent this state of affairs. James wrote to Boott about Woolson's departure from Florence: "She has gone, with her sister, to Corfu and the East, and she will probably have written you that at the last she left Florence with (seemingly) a kind of loathing: loathing, I mean, for the crowd, the interruptions and invasions."⁷¹ These social interruptions and invasions kept Woolson from doing what she did best and liked most: walking, observing, and writing. The "crowd" invaded her home where she worked on her writing, and they took up her time so she had no time to walk around, observe, and enjoy Florence, the urban space that she as a *flâneuse* transformed into home. No wonder, then, that she felt such a loathing: she was doubly homeless and so had to leave.

The writing of "A Florentine Experiment" so early in her stay in Florence was for Woolson a Florentine experiment. If, as Parsons maintains, *flânerie* is "an attempt to identify and place the self in the uncertain environment of modernity,"⁷² these American *flâneuses* in fiction (Margaret Stowe) and in real life (Woolson herself) accomplish this with self-control, independence, and a keen eye for observation. Woolson responds to the long tradition of American and British fascination for Florence chronicled by male writers such as Byron, Shelley, Cooper, Melville, Hawthorne, Ruskin, Browning, and James with her own construction of an American woman strolling in and around Florence: the American *flâneuse* is cognizant of that tradition but de-

velops, through her own *flânerie*, different ways to experience the world and define herself.

NOTES

¹ Deborah L. Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City, and Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 41.

² Until scholars such as Rayburn S. Moore, Cheryl B. Torsney, Joan Myers Weimer, Sharon L. Dean, Victoria Brehm, and Lyndall Gordon “rediscovered” Woolson, most scholars who had heard of her knew her through the biased and unflattering references made by Leon Edel in his multi-volume biography of Henry James. These scholars’ works serve as correctives to Edel’s work and present exciting, important, and diverse views on Woolson’s life and writing. Moore and Brehm have chronologies of Woolson’s life that are helpful. See Victoria Brehm, ed., *Constance Fenimore Woolson’s Nineteenth Century: Essays* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001); Sharon L. Dean, *Constance Fenimore Woolson and Edith Wharton: Perspectives on Landscape and Art* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2002); Dean, *Constance Fenimore Woolson: Homeward Bound* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995); Lyndall Gordon, *A Private Life of Henry James: Two Women and His Art* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998); Rayburn S. Moore, *Constance Fenimore Woolson*, Twayne’s United States Author Series (New York: Twayne, 1963); Cheryl B. Torsney, *Constance Fenimore Woolson: The Grief of Artistry* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989); Torsney, ed., *Critical Essays on Constance Fenimore Woolson* (New York: G. K. Hall, 1992); Joan Myers Weimer, ed. and introd., *Women Artists, Women Exiles: “Miss Grief” and Other Stories* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988).

³ Charles Baudelaire, “The Painter of Modern Life,” *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. and ed., Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon Press, 2006), 9.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵ Walter Benjamin, “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire” in *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*, ed., Michael W. Jennings, trans. Howard Eiland, Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingstone, and Harry Zohn (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2006), 68–69.

⁶ Janet Wolff, “The Invisible *Flâneuse*: Women and the Literature of Modernity,” *The Problems of Modernity: Adorno and Benjamin*, ed., Andrew Benjamin (London: Routledge, 1991), 141.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 141.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 154. “La femme passante” (“A female passer-by”), from Baudelaire’s poem “À une passante” (“To a Woman Passing By”), one of the poems added to the second edition of *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1861), is a statuesque woman in deep mourning the narrator glimpses and by whom the narrator is entranced; she is silent though the narrator imagines that she may be someone whom he might have been able to love. See Charles Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil*, trans. James McGowan and introd. Jonathan Culler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 188–89.

¹⁰ Elizabeth Wilson, “The Invisible Flâneur,” *Postmodern Cities and Spaces*, eds., Sophie Watson and Katherine Gibson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 61.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹² Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis*, 6.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 42.

- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 43.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.
- ¹⁷ Clare Benedict, ed., *Constance Fenimore Woolson* (London: Ellis, n.d. [1930]), 181.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 179.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 181.
- ²⁰ Moore, *Constance Fenimore Woolson*, 21.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 25.
- ²² Benedict, *Constance Fenimore Woolson*, 237–38.
- ²³ Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis*, 6.
- ²⁴ *Harper's Magazine* published her major novels and novellas as serials: *Anne* (Dec. 1880–May 1882), *For the Major* (Nov. 1882–April 1883), *East Angels* (Jan. 1885–May 1886), *Jupiter Lights* (Jan.–Sept. 1889), and *Horace Chase* (Jan.–Oct. 1893). It also published all of the Italian stories collected in *The Front Yard and Other Italian Stories* (1895) and *Dorothy and Other Italian Stories* (1896)—“At the Château of Corinne” (Oct. 1887), “Neptune’s Shore” (Oct. 1888), “A Pink Villa” (Nov. 1888), “The Front Yard” (Dec. 1888), “Dorothy” (March 1892), “A Christmas Party” (Dec. 1892), “A Transplanted Boy” (Feb. 1894), and “A Waitress” (June 1894)—except for “A Florentine Experiment” (Oct. 1880) and “In Venice” (April 1882) which ran in the *Atlantic Monthly* and “The Street of the Hyacinth” (May and June 1882) which was published in *Century*. The *Atlantic Monthly* published some of her representative short stories, such as “Lady of Little Fishing” (Sept. 1874) and “Rodman the Keeper” (March 1877). *Lippincott's Magazine* is where two of her most anthologized short stories, “Felipa” (June 1876) and “Miss Grief” (May 1880) appeared.
- ²⁵ Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis*, 6.
- ²⁶ Benedict, *Constance Fenimore Woolson*, 269–70.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 182, 184.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 190.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 184.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 185–87.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 186.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 187.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 188.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 185.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 190.
- ³⁶ Dean, *Constance Fenimore Woolson and Edith Wharton*, 196.
- ³⁷ Weimer, *Women Artists, Women Exiles*, xxxv.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, xxxv.
- ³⁹ Constance Fenimore Woolson, “A Florentine Experiment,” *Atlantic Monthly* 46 (Oct. 1880): 502.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 506.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 507.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, 513.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, 519.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 524.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 524.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 524.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 530.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 530.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 507.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 507.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 510.

⁵² Ibid., 510.

⁵³ Ibid., 511.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 511.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 512.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 518.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 518.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 519.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 519.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 519.

⁶¹ Ibid., 522.

⁶² Dean, *Constance Fenimore Woolson: Homeward Bound*, 120.

⁶³ Woolson, "A Florentine Experiment," 520.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 520–22.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 528.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 528–29.

⁶⁷ Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life," 9.

⁶⁸ Benedict, *Constance Fenimore Woolson*, 295.

⁶⁹ Lyndall Gordon discusses James's sojourns in the Villa Brichieri, first as Woolson's sub-letter in December 1886 and then later as a houseguest for over a month during the spring of 1888 and reads them, especially the first, as indications that James and Woolson knew each other better than formerly supposed (*A Private Life of Henry James: Two Women and His Art*, 208–12, 217–19).

⁷⁰ Dean, *Constance Fenimore Woolson: Homeward Bound*, 91.

⁷¹ Henry James, *Letters*, Vol. III: 1883–1885, ed., Leon Edel (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1980), 267.

⁷² Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis*, 41.