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ÁGNES ZSÓFIA KOVÁCS

***BEYOND THE GILDED AGE, INTO THE WORLD.
THE MEMORY OF ARCHITECTURE
IN EDITH WHARTON'S TRAVEL WRITINGS***

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American writer Edith Wharton (1862-1937) is primarily known for her literary work, which made her the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1921, for *The Age of Innocence*. Born into a respected New York family, privately educated at home and abroad, married to a Boston banker, she intelligently used her admittedly privileged status for artistic purposes, meant to capture the evolving society around her during some of the most intense eras of American and world transformation and transition to new values and realities. Her conjoint interests in architecture, art history, (interior) design, decoration, and garden planning helped to shape a private and public universe, worthy of closer observation than the strictly technical one, habitually devoted to her skills as an awarded author.

Apart from, or complementary to her impressive list of novels, novellas, short stories, and even poetry, Wharton's non-fiction captures a world view and an artistic sensitivity that are congruent with and enriching for the extensively explored fictional world, which already forms her legacy. In 2025, The Routledge Research in Women's Literature series proposes a fresh look at the set of Whartonian texts that pertain to the travel writing genre. From the beginning, via an informed and mindful reminder, Hungarian academic Ágnes Zsófia Kovács draws her readers' attention to the fact that the studied writer first became known as a travel author, subsequently building her literary career, and emphasizes the elements of visual culture, ethnography, and cultural history that contribute to Wharton's personal(ized) investigations of communal life, education, mores, and aesthetics.

It is this peculiar niche in the exploration of a famous body of work that Kovács sets out to exploit, proposing a detailed analysis of what she calls "the Wharton map" (2), which covers three major geographical areas: Italy, France, and North Africa (specifically Morocco). The main corpus is, thus, made up of a set of essential pieces: *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* (1904), *Italian Backgrounds* (1905), *A Motor-Flight Through France* (1908), *Fighting France* (1915), *In Morocco* (1920).

As carefully pointed out, in time, archival research has pushed the limits of this cartography to include Spain and the Aegean in the American connoisseur's overall illustration and assessment of the historical continuity, encoded in the visual and architectural dimensions of the visited territories.

Kovács' introduction opens with the necessary literature review, outlining the major notions that guide her reading and placing it in the clearly identified research gap: a contemporary, post-theory reconsideration of Edith Wharton's travelogues, with interdisciplinary tools and a solid preoccupation for conceptualizing the intersection between the historical and the aesthetic. The relationship between war, crisis, and society, the anthropological streak and the architectural vision stand out in what is presented as the American writer's outlook on beauty and culture, emergent from her texts and their reception so far. Beyond the ever-changing patterns of travel writing throughout time, and its gradual reevaluation as a cultural product, not a merely unimaginative recording of things seen, the importance of gender in travelers' accounts is also highlighted, as it suitably describes the evolution of expectations concerning traditional domestic roles.

Closely following the arguments of previous analysts (Wright (1997), Buzzard (1993), as well as various contributors to the 2002 *Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing* and the 2009 *Cambridge Companion to American Travel Writing*, for instance), Kovács points out how Wharton manages to transcend the established traditions of travel writing via her extensive expertise, appropriating and going beyond the usual combination of genteel, belletristic, and objectifying accounts. Consequently, the researcher astutely classifies the pieces under discussion: "These informative works can be connected to three major traditions of travel writing. The Enlightenment ideal of aesthetic and social *Bildung* related to the elite Grand Tour emanates from Wharton's love for Goethe's Italian Journey. The romanticizing personal touch of the belletristic tradition is present through Symonds and Bourget, and the scientific-moralizing thrust can be considered through Charles Eliot Norton and Vernon Lee's works." (23) One can easily notice Kovács' preoccupation for detail and accuracy, her extensive readings and archival work, her penchant for structure, construction and coherence in argumentation, and the relevance of the information selected, always placed in the appropriate metatextual framework.

Her book is divided into seven chapters, which plunge the reader increasingly deeply into Wharton's topography of the world she discovers and discloses. Chapters 1 and 2 revisit the Italian space, with its villas, gardens, and backgrounds, alongside the American traveler's theoretical and practical considerations on art, architecture, models of observation and coexistence. Moving onto France, which is not just another site of contemplation, but the country that literally adopted Wharton, Chapters 3 and 4 capture the emotions stirred by this complex territory in its visitor, before and after the First World War. "Wharton focuses on the workings of the sentimental mode as she describes her visits to diverse Gothic cathedrals" (28), Kovács contends, noting how the cataclysm annihilates the visual consumption of beauty and leads to a set of completely different representations after the bombing of once sacred places.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 either shift the direction of the recorded expeditions or add to the novelty of the studied material. Against the backdrop of World War

I, Morocco is examined through Wharton's simultaneously fascinated and biased perspectives on North Africa. The researcher focuses on the traces of the French colonial past and rhetoric, identified by an enchanted, yet attentive reader. Island hopping in the Aegean marked different stages in Wharton's early, respectively late, career, which makes the comparative observation of her notes even more interesting, as they prove significantly marked by the evolving socio-historical context. Recently published archival material supports the last chapter of this incursion, which redefines Wharton's Spanish itineraries via relevant excerpts. Placing these new readings in resonance with the previous ones, Kovács argues that "the place of the brief Spanish notes can be estimated anew among Wharton's major travel texts" (29).

Her serious and meticulous literary study succeeds in shedding new light upon the non-fiction of a canonic American author, by revealing an entire series of what she calls "uncatalogued treasures" (63). She embraces aspects that might have previously seemed marginal or secondary, repositions and reinterprets them, proving how essential travel writers and art historians shaped Wharton's nuanced understanding of the complex relationships between past, present, and future events. The depth and resonance of the argumentation rely on erudition and the determination to construe in a disciplined, skilled, architectural manner in and of itself, identifying the author's aesthetic and philosophical filiations and foregrounding her preoccupation with the culture-nature synergy, its significance and evolution.

Kovács does the work of a cultural archaeologist, analyzing synchronically and diachronically, going back to the sources, production, circulation, and reception of the studied works. Thus, she eloquently adds to the existing Wharton scholarship and opens new avenues for research in the field. Her initiative is particularly relevant, since Oxford University Press has announced the publication of an impressive 30-volume *Complete Works of Edith Wharton (CWEW)*. By the inclusion of drama, poetry, non-fiction alongside novels and short-stories, this marks not just an unprecedented acknowledgement of Wharton as "a central, indeed indispensable, figure in English-language literature and the humanities" (<https://whartoncompleteworks.org/about/>), but also the critical move towards a more inclusive overview of her work, which Ágnes Zsófia Kovács has already contributed to notably.

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