Space Travel as Time Travel
On *The Memory of Architecture in the Edith Wharton's Travel Writing*

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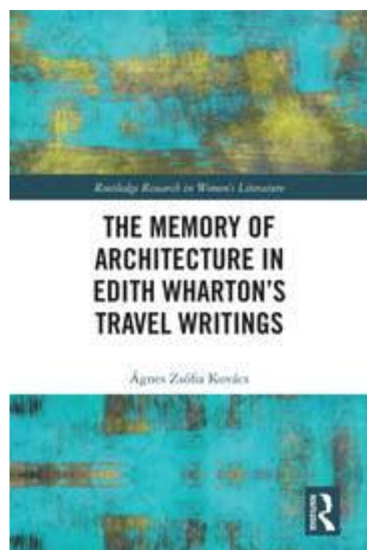

The Memory of Architecture in the Edith Wharton's Travel Writing
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Review by Zoltán Vajda

Combining the generic perspective of travel literature with a historical study of architecture, Ágnes Zsófia Kovács's work on Edith Wharton's travelogues, in fact, moves beyond both, ending up in a study of the American author's strategy of using travel as a means of moving not just in space but also in time, through cultures and ages. And all this from a perspective that has repercussions in women's writing, transnational and cross-gender American Studies.

An avid traveler with no hint of tropophobia, Wharton's itineraries encompass a series of trips that she made between 1888 and 1834 around the Mediterranean, including countries such as France, Italy, Morocco, Greece, or Spain. Kovács invites her reader to make the same tours in a comprehensive fashion, showing us, as an experienced tour guide, the particular sights that structure Wharton's travelogues. The architectural aspect of these sights forms the major thrust of the work: as Kovács claims, Wharton's main interest as a travel writer lies in architecture and more particularly, the cultural memory shat shines through the Mediterranean attitude to historical tradition built into Italian villas, gardens and churches, French cathedrals, Moroccan mosques, public buildings and harems as well as Greek temples, or Spanish cathedrals.

This approach aligns with the post-theory study of travel writing, whose primary goal of investigation is no longer only to say something about the generic features of the work in question or theorize about travel in and by itself, but rather to understand it as a way of getting access to features of other cultural realms as exhibited through the perception of the travel writer. For Kovács, such an underlying theme consists in the cultural continuity that Wharton as a writer was preoccupied with treating architecture as a platform of cultural tradition.

Her methodology also enables Kovács to raise questions about the women's literature bit of her project, also related, unsurprisingly, to the problem of travel and architecture. She convincingly connects Wharton with contemporary gender-based norms when it came to conventions of female travel writing, oscillating between the positions of resistance and accommodation – often depending on the conditions and purposes of publishing. Thus, at the beginning of her travel writing career, committed to educating an American audience about the architecture of villas, gardens, Baroque and Renaissance churches in Italy, Wharton consciously attempted to defy the role of the genteel female travel writer providing sentimental, personal impressions about the sights visited as well as practical guidance for would-be female travelers in the Mediterranean. Instead, her aim was to engage with the discourse of contemporary male authors, who positioned themselves as experts on architectural theory when discussing the built environment of Europe. Hence was, for instance, Wharton's disapproval of the illustrations commissioned by her editor for her book on *Italian Villas and Their Gardens,* (1904) because she found them more congenial with the travel account of a non-expert female traveler than the one that she adopted as a theoretician of architecture, reproducing male experts' discourse.

As contemporary critics pointed out in connection with Wharton's approach to Italian architecture in the book, there was nothing feminine or American about it (71-72). Yet, her using the scientific discourse associated with contemporary masculine scholarship and a cosmopolitan travel narrative instead of an American nationalist one characterized only part of her writing about the Mediterranean. Ironically though, Wharton did not shy away from the female, impressionistic approach when she took notes about the places that she visited for herself or when she tried to affect her audience for a political cause such as the cultural destruction that World War I caused in France or its impact on Morocco.

So as to arrive at such conclusions, Kovács also had to look at the production and reception process of Wharton's travel related texts. She makes a clear distinction between texts

meant for publication thus involving editorial expectations also considering the presupposed demands of the American audience and the ones meant for recording her personal experience and reflections upon the sights that she visited. According to Kovács, the discovery of cultural continuity through architecture in Wharton's travel literature also enables us to make sense of her personal notes and fragments that she never published. In and by themselves they would remain insignificant for scholarly investigation, yet, placed within the larger pattern of Wharton's *oeuvre*, *The Osprey Notes* (1926), *The Cruise of the Vanadis* (1888) or other fragments reflect the same interest in architecture as a platform for conserving past cultural traits – whether in the south of Italy, the Aegean or Spain.

Such a history-driven perspective was also professed and practiced by contemporary critics in their desire to see architecture as a reflection of the culture of the people that created it (45). Yet, Wharton's approach is different from them in that it offers a link to be established also between the modern spectator and the past world through its cultural artifacts; she strives to create that connection by offering an insight into stylistic continuities in the architecture of past ages.

All the above becomes supported by Kovács's analysis of Wharton's trips to individual countries. Her travels in Italy, for instance, inspired the publication of *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* (1904), where she employs a scientific, art historical discussion of the architecture in various Italian regions, from Rome to Genoa or Florence to Venice. In her analysis of the book, the author shows how Wharton defies expectations of the critics about a "belletristic" tradition of travel writing (44), showing more interest in the historical aspect of garden and villa architecture, how the features of the ancient Roman villa architecture were preserved in Renaissance and Baroque style artifacts (e.g. 49, 50, 58).

In Kovács's reading, a similar interest in historical continuity informs Wharton's other travelogue on Italy, by the title *Italian Backgrounds* (1905). A collection of essays, it records her travels across Italy along an itinerary including Parma, Rome, Milan, Venice, and Syracuse. The volume is offered as a praise for Italian Baroque style in architecture as a platform of historical continuity through the preservation of earlier traditions. Wharton does so in a debate with contemporary artist and art critic John Ruskin, who idealized Italian Gothic as a style period. At the same time, she follows Ruskin's method through looking beneath the façade of architecture in order to detect continuities of the past (81). Such a preoccupation with continuity in styles detectable in the Italian Baroque makes Wharton emphasize the idea of "background" in architectural study.

Historical continuity of a similar nature is also recorded in *Wharton's A Motor-Flight Through France* (1908), which offers an analysis of the built environment inspired by her travels in the country in 1907 and 1908. She undertook these after she got alienated from her husband in 1907 and her decision to settle down in France for the rest of her life. In the volume Wharton finds a strong presence of the Roman or medieval past in French architecture as a condition for continuity. According to Kovács, the preservation of such buildings of past ages through their organic integration into contemporary architecture ensures for her a basic difference from the American sense of discontinuity in this regard (109).

This continuity was disrupted by World War I for Wharton through the destruction of cathedrals, and she records this experience in her book *Fighting France* (1915). Thus, for her, the war resulted not only in material destruction but also a cultural one, overthrowing a regime based on continuity with the past. In fact, this act would result in France losing its peculiar trait distinguishing it from the United States. Yet, despite the sentiment of destruction, Kovács argues, Wharton could still detect the continuity of French culture over the ruins of cathedrals destroyed by German bombardment.

Wharton's travels in North Africa, primarily Morocco, also resulted in a vivid sense of historical continuity. As it turns out from Kovács's reading her travel account *In Morocco* (1920), which records her travel experience in the country in 1917, Wharton tries to discover the medieval Oriental past in the Moroccan presence with a simultaneous anxiety that contact with

European culture will destroy it within the context of the French protectorate. For her, traveling in Morocco compares to travelling into the medieval Muslim past, ubiquitous in the country. One important component of this cultural memory regime is architecture, another being the rigid social order with women forced to live confined to harems, living contrary to Wharton's standards of US upper class female domesticity as well as Jews segregated into ghettos. At the same time, Wharton also positions herself as a medieval Christian traveler lost in "the Moroccan prolonged past" (148). Interestingly enough, one might add, it is here in Kovács's analysis that the past and its continuity into the presence becomes a threat for Wharton. Topophilia turns into anxiety for her if not tropophobia (cf. Tuan 1974).

Historical continuity through the memory of architecture also informs Wharton's travelogue about the Aegean, recording two boat trips, one in 1888, another in 1926, in *The Cruise of the Vanadis* and her *Osprey Notes* respectively. In the former, she emphasizes continuity through integrating ancient Grek architecture into buildings of later times. The latter also offers, through the textual fragments, an imaginative journey into the ancient past through picturesque scenes of architecture and landscape also with interesting repercussions concerning Wharton's relationship with time to be discussed below.

Wharton also produced fragmented reflections concerning her travels in Spain in the 1920s and 1930s. These notes attest to her fascination with medieval Spanish architecture as opposed to the modern one, Kovács contends. It is especially the world of churches and cathedrals where Wharton can detect the past in the present – unchanged and identifies the past with an idealized image of medieval Spain. In such a maneuver can one find the pattern that Wharton had used to describe the memory of architecture also in France and Morocco. Only architecture can preserve a world otherwise bound to fall into oblivion according to her. Only a sentimental traveler can detect such connections between past and present through architecture, she believes. Such impressions, in turn, can only be evoked in none other than the traveler who is aware of the cultural significance of places and landscape because for her art appears "as a transitory feeling" (199).

Kovács follows the principle of chronology in discussing the various sites of Wharton's visits. In doing so, she succeeds in showing how historical changes and developments such as the First World War pushed Wharton toward new scenes. Moreover, this approach also facilitates an appreciation of how Wharton kept shifting to new countries in her search for the usable past in the architectural memories of the Mediterranean. It was the war in France that, for her, disrupted the intimate cultural connection with the past through the destruction of cathedrals and thus pushed her to Morocco with its still intact architecture reflecting continuity with an Arab medieval past in the present reality of French occupation.

At the same time, this linearity of spatial travel plus cultural continuity as the favorite subject of the traveler are briefly juxtaposed to a circular pattern of time travel in the chapter on Wharton's Aegean trips. Here, in a peculiar manner, in Kovács's treatment, Wharton's travelogue can be read as one in strong unison with of her life experience. Given that, one of her last travels meant to revoke the memory of her first one in the Aegean as a child, though unrecorded.

Based on the above one would, expectantly, infer a robust streak of traditionalism in Wharton's work, but the picture is more complicated than that. A member of the post-Civil War generation in the United States, her travelogues also have something to say about her American identity in a modernist/traditionalist frame of reference, thanks to Kovács's analysis. All the dramatic economic, and social transformation that the United States had undergone during the second half of the nineteenth century made the country an epitome of technological progress and modernity. Nonetheless, along with the positive responses, the Gilded Age also evoked significant criticism generating the "genteel tradition" that championed conservative values connected with an idealized past. Kovács emphasizes the impact of this intellectual strain on Wharton, whose fascination with European architectural memory and its role in sustaining continuity with the past was in stark contrast to the intellectual "estrangement of the past," in

historian Anthony Kemp's phrase, which American modernist thinkers associated with contemporary American culture (Kemp 1990).

Modern western historical consciousness, starting with the project of the Reformation broke with the medieval, premodern vision of homogeneous time, holding the past to be based on the concept of continuity thus determining the present, the two being identical. No innovation or novelty becomes possible in the premodern system of reverence for the past (v). By contrast, the modern view identifies nothing else but a continuity of revolutionary changes taking place in time, one replacing the other in a permanent series of "supersessions" (vi, 52), the endresult being a break with the premodern attachment to the past (54).

Starting with the early Protestants, Americans strove to develop exceptionalism by breaking with the European past, and Wharton, who chose to be an expatriate, leaving such a tradition behind, ironically, became a representative of a reverse process. Parting company with US modernity, she chose to get connected with European traditionalism. Another irony is, of course, her absolute reliance on modern means of transportation such as the steamer or the automobile to fulfill her mission of making a pilgrimage of the European architectural past adopting either the scientific, masculine or the feminine, sentimental, personal strategy of writing. Yet another irony about Wharton and her relationship to modernity could be that as a traveler, in most of her trips, she made hardly any connection with humans of the countries visited, perhaps with the exception of Morocco. Yet, once found, the past got demolished for her in France through the destruction of medieval cathedrals, although still preserved in the rest of French culture, and Wharton decided to move on to reestablish such a connection with the past, getting to Morocco, Greece, Spain.

Yet, this is not the case of "once found, never lost". If humans fail to function as subjects of the traveler's interest for Wharton, architecture may also become decrepit in view of real life experience. In her account of the unfinished Greek temple in the south of Italy serves as an allegory for Wharton visiting it in a company of fellow American travelers. Although functioning as an important artifact of architectural memory, it signifies the disruption of the Greek presence as lived in Italy. Yet, for Wharton, revisiting the sights of the Aegean also provides her with an opportunity to reconnect with her childhood memories and the time that she had first visited the same sights. Symbolic in another sense, her conscious effort to remake the journey of the Odyssey signifies a third way of establishing continuity with the past – at the personal level as well as at the broader western cultural one.

Based on meticulous research and a rich array of methodological operations, this book by Ágnes Zsófia Kovács proves to be a superb achievement in integrating travel literature analysis with a perspective on the significance of travel and other spheres of cultural experience in Wharton scholarship as well as literature on American modernism and should be a useful read for an expert and a lay audience alike.

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