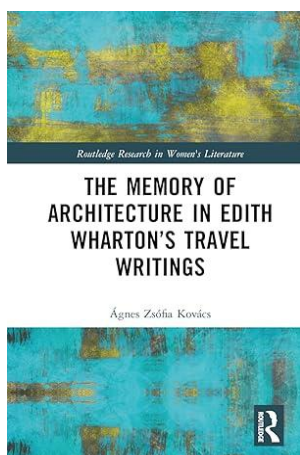


Exhausting scholarship in Ágnes Kovács' *The Memory of Architecture in Edith Wharton's Travel Writings*

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At first glance, this is a book meant to exhaust the repertoire of scholarship on aspects like architecture and its memory in Edith Wharton's travel writings. It so happened that, a few years ago, I came to read a study by Ágnes Kovács on "The Perception of Time in Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* (1920) in the Context of Her War-Related Nonfiction". The non-fiction item referred to – discussed in the paper she had sent to an academic journal¹ – was Wharton's *Fighting France*, a travelogue published by the American writer in 1915 as a reaction to the German inflicted

war on France in 1914.

Also, after having met the author in person – during my Erasmus exchange in Pécs, where she was a guest as well – while she was performing a presentation with an analogous content, I could say that my initiation in the mysteries of the topic is a consistent one. Thus, once I came into possession of a copy of the present Routledge book, I noticed that, in its chapters, the focus on "time" in Wharton's non-fiction works was preserved; however, an augmentation on "space", due to its title, one can easily presume. The two concepts make a productive pair all along a textual product the structure of which consists of a long introduction, seven chapters – with three of their titles including the word "continuity", seemingly conceptualized either culturally or historically – and a far from being brief conclusion.

At the core of the book, Chapter 4 – "The war of images: Edith Wharton's architectural reports of war in *Fighting France* (1915)" –

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¹ For which I had the honour of acting as Executive Editor at the time. The study was published in 1922, Volume II, Issue 1, of *Papers in Arts and Humanities*, the academic journal of Partium Christian University in Oradea.

appears to balance properly between two other chapters dedicated to France and its national, imperial and colonial status: it is preceded by “Historical continuity in *A Motor-Flight Through France* (1908)” and followed by “A Motor-Flight through North Africa: the miracle of Morocco.” The writer’s preoccupation for historical past and its relation to her contemporaneity is highlighted by Ágnes Kovács in subchapters such as “Continuity as a journey into the past” (Chapter 3) or “Facts and dreams of the Moroccan past” (Chapter 3); also, items indicative of the past, i.e. Gothic ruins as employed in “Renovations contra ruins” (Chapter 3), become the paradoxical illustration of a frustrating WWI reality in “Visions of cultural destruction in *Fighting France*” (Chapter 4).

Italy is in fact the first geographical space to be approached in the book – from a historical perspective on the country’s architecture – in the first two chapters: “Wharton’s view of cultural continuity in *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* (1904)” and “Uncatalogued treasures: travels in art history via *Italian Backgrounds* (1905).” The major objectives are villas and gardens, with a view to underlining – in Wharton’s appreciations of them in her travelogues – transitions from the ancient times to the Renaissance and later the Baroque. Actually, in one subsection, Kovács writes about how Edith Wharton identified national characteristics as “rooted in cultural preferences” – i.e. in the case of Italy, “her inventory of Renaissance and Baroque gardens indicates that the Italian garden art is rooted in Roman examples in terms of relation between nature and house...” (2025: 55-56).

The last two chapters encompass other Mediterranean realities reflected not only in publications during the writer’s life but also in fragments to be edited posthumously: a 1926 Aegean voyage, for instance, in *The Cruise of the Vanadis*, published in 1992; or “Back to Compostella” and “A Motor-Flight to Spain”, both written in the late 1920s, two of the three fragments which together, according to Kovács, “comprise a very small and not easily accessible segment of Wharton’s travel output” (2025: 186). Just like in the previous chapters, some topics are meticulously discussed: architecture in “Observing architecture in *The Cruise of the Vanadis*” (Chapter 6) and in “Architectural vision² in ‘A Motor-Flight to Spain’” (Chapter 7); historical past in “Absence and presence of the past in Athens and Crete” (Chapter 6) and in “St. James’s Way: Wharton’s Spanish cathedral trail in...” (Chapter 7) In what regards the latter (section/subchapter), the premises for a comparative approach are laid, the voyage and the transition of perspective from France (in)to Spain being highlighted.

² The syntagm also appears in “Wharton’s architectural vision in her colonial war reports” (Chapter 5) and in “Architectural vision in the *Osprey Notes*” (Chapter 6).

Apart from the long introduction and the not so short conclusion, each chapter has its own introduction and conclusion and extremely rich endnotes – a situation that has both advantages and disadvantages. The readers are continuously reminded what the purpose and the goals of the book are, but, on the other hand, the accumulation of repetitive information can make the process of reading a little bit fastidious. A thoroughly positive aspect is the presence, in all of the chapters, of sections/subchapters devoted to the scholarship regarding Wharton’s travelogues, either published or in manuscripts, i.e. old or recent editions, critical studies, etc: “Influences and editorial interventions” (Chapter 1); “Influences, editing and illustrations, contemporary reviews” (Chapter 3) – in which Wharton’s own involvement in the process of editing and publishing her own texts with Scribner’s is brought to the fore, highlighting the fact that writing and producing a book should not be left, by a responsible author, at the discretion or the taste of publishers; “Antecedents, articles to book, early reviews” (Chapter 4); and so on.

John Ruskin is pointed at as one – if not the major – influence on how Edith Wharton’s aesthetic and critical perspective has been built. Without referring explicitly every time, in her travel writing, to the English critic and art historian, Wharton both appropriated and contested his legacy, as shown by Ágnes Kovács in “Writing the history of art and architecture” (Chapter 1). The same, and detailed, presentation of Ruskin’s ideas is made in “Sources and book” (Chapter 2), with the American writer taking over: “Wharton’s essays in *Italian Backgrounds* focus on what remains to be told about Italian art after Ruskin’s overpowering description and evaluation of it.” (2025: 70) Alongside Goethe’s, Ruskin’s name is mentioned by Kovács (2025: 167) as perceived influence – although not referred directly by Wharton in the Aegean texts – in “Antecedents and publication history: Homer, Goethe and Ruskin in the typescript” (Chapter 6).

Henry Adams and Henry James – “both concerned with how the sense of the past pervades French settings and social life” (Kovács, *The Memory of Architecture in Edith Wharton’s Travel Writings*, New York and London, Routledge, New York and London, 2025: 91) – are the American authors and Whartons’ contemporaries of significant impact on her aesthetic conscience: the first with his famous *Education...* and his book on French religious monuments, *Mount Saint-Michel and Chartres* – with an emphasis on the iconicity of Virgin Mary; and the second with *A Little Tour of France*, in which he identified himself as “sentimental tourist,” more interested in “personal impressions of places rather than in pieces of technical information.” (2025: 92) Kovács is keen on detecting even subtle differences and influences, either through her own critical observations or by closely following other opinions: “Yet Wharton values

the Greco-Roman remains more than James does, and, according to Barnes (2003), she sounds more eager to highlight her own acumen in art history” (2025: 93).

Published by Routledge in their collection/series “Routledge Research in Women’s Literature,” the present book is on an American woman-writer very much preoccupied, throughout her entire life, with expressing “her own acumen.” On the other hand, the book is dedicated by the Hungarian woman-author to the memory of her father and she starts her “Acknowledgments” by thanking her “doctoral fathers” from the University of Szeged. Nevertheless, academic readers, regardless of gender, will find the – many times exquisite and other times a little bit overwhelming – information more than worth reading.

