

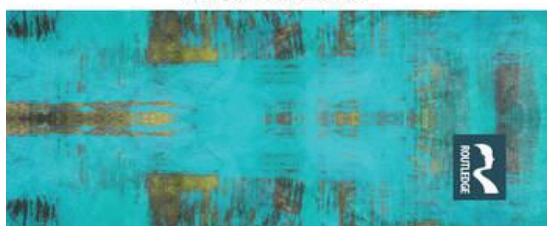
BOOKS

Ágnes Zsófia Kovács, *The Memory of Architecture in Edith Wharton's Travel Writings*, New York: Routledge, 2025, 226 p.



**THE MEMORY OF
ARCHITECTURE IN
EDITH WHARTON'S
TRAVEL WRITINGS**

Ágnes Zsófia Kovács



Drawing on a post-theory definition of travel writing as social discourse, Ágnes Zsófia Kovács's book argues that a close analysis of architectural and natural spaces in Edith Wharton's travel writing repositions these texts within a larger cultural field shaped by aesthetic, social, and historical conventions and by the institutionalization of early twentieth-century publishing. Most readers today associate Wharton with major novels of manners such as *The Age of Innocence* (1920) and *The House of Mirth* (1905), even though, as Kovács notes, Wharton was actually better known during her lifetime for her travel writing. Recent criticism has done much to change this view by broadening the Wharton canon through archival discoveries and the publication of little-known documents. It has also brought an interdisciplinary lens to Wharton's engagements with ethnography, visual culture, and cultural history—

discursive practices that together form the nebulous generic category of her "travel writing." Kovács's book is part of this growing body of criticism, as it seeks to complement existing research, including the major book-length study on the topic, Sarah Bird Wright's *Edith Wharton's Travel Writing* (1992) as well as articles by Annette Benert, Nancy Bentley, Emily Orlando, and Gary Totten. It aims to show that an



analytical framework combining art-historical and ethnographic perspectives can reveal a more nuanced understanding of Wharton as a reflective thinker concerned with metaphysical questions such as the historical and cultural continuity encoded in her representation of architectural monuments, cultivated spaces, and natural landscapes.

To achieve this, the book maps the geographical areas covered in Wharton's travel writing and situates them within the context of nineteenth-century traditions of writing about travel and art history. In addition to the five major volumes of travel writing that Wharton published during her lifetime, Kovács also includes several other travel pieces brought to light by recent academic and archival research. Chapters 1 and 2 investigate Wharton's views of ancient and modern Italy, focusing respectively on her aim to write a handbook of garden architecture in *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* (1904) and on her theoretical reflections on art history in *Italian Backgrounds* (1905). The next two chapters explore Wharton's writings on France, where, as an American expatriate, she contemplates the sentimental feelings evoked by Gothic cathedrals in *A Motor-Flight Through France* (1908) and contemporary popular discourse about French civilization during the Great War in *Fighting for France* (1915). Chapter 5 examines *In Morocco* (1920), focusing on how Oriental stereotypes and French colonial discourse shape Wharton's portrayal of North African society and culture. The last two chapters are dedicated to more recently discovered travel writings documenting Wharton's travels in the Aegean – her 1888 diary *The Cruise of the Vanadis* and fragments about her 1926 trip collected in *Osprey Notes* – as well as accounts of her travels in Spain, including her "Spain Diary" ([1925] 2011), "Back to Compostela" ([1928] or [1930] 2011), and "A Motor-Flight Through Spain" (1928 or 1930).

Crucial to these arguments is a critical attention to Wharton's position as a female author in the contemporary literary marketplace, along with an examination of how her works refract both earlier traditions of travel writing and the dominant aesthetic theories of her time. Following Wright, Kovács argues that Wharton's travel writing occupies a position between the earlier belletristic tradition, focused on impressionistic sketches and the picturesque, and the genteel tradition of the Grand Tour, devoted to individual education and the cultivation of the nation. The former includes, for instance, Washington Irving's *Alhambra* (1832) and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *French and Italian Notebooks* (1864), and the latter is exemplified most notably by John Ruskin's ideal of precise and objective observation. While in her descriptions of architecture Wharton clearly prioritizes the Ruskinian model, Kovács shows how the business of publishing shaped Wharton's travel writing, as editors sometimes expected her to produce more impressionistic pieces aimed at a female readership, as in *Italian Villas and Their Gardens*. On the other hand, the book also explores how Wharton departs from Ruskin's legacy of aesthetic judgment and moral didacticism, adopting instead a cultural-historical mode of understanding in her architectural representations and the cultural continuity embedded within them.

The discursive definition of travel writing enables Kovács to situate Wharton's work within multiple interlocking contexts, including broader nineteenth-century U.S. cultural practices linked to technological progress, economic development, politics, and social change, as well as the institutionalization of the contemporary literary

marketplace. According to Kovács, Wharton navigates the belletristic, genteel, and objectifying traditions of travel writing, “moving away from the legacy of a Romantic sensitivity through an objectivizing continuity-oriented stance towards an agnostic aesthetic sensuousness of modernist taste” (24). Significantly, the democratization of travel in Wharton’s time went hand in hand with her development as a professional female travel writer. Starting in the 1840s, rapid industrialization and social change made travel possible for an increasingly large middle class population, whose interests and tastes also influenced, to some degree, the modes of publishing and the contemporary reception of various writings on travel. Kovács’s study is sensitive to this sophisticated process, which allowed Wharton to convert her cultural capital as a learned author into profit within the literary marketplace, while continually negotiating with magazine editors and book publishers over readers’ expectations, deadlines, marketing strategies, and sales revenues. In keeping with the custom of the age, Wharton’s poems, essays, short stories, and book chapters were first published in illustrated monthly magazines – both highbrow and middlebrow – including *Harper’s Bazaar*, *Scribner’s Magazine*, *The Century Magazine* as well as the *Pictorial Review*, the *Delineator*, and the *Ladies’ Home Journal*. Just how important publication history is to Wharton’s travel writing is evidenced by the key changes she made to the magazine pieces when adapting them to books for a changing audience.

The scope and methodology of Kovács’s book are defined by a post-theory conception of travel writing as flexible, contextual, and interdisciplinary—pragmatically blending multiple approaches and shifting perspectives within frameworks that are spatially and historically localized, fragmented, and overlapping. The definition of travel writing as social discourse draws on Michel Foucault, whose work undergirds Edward Said’s account of Orientalism as the signifying practice through which Western culture has sought to manage and produce the Orient. Yet readers of Kovács will find that her interpretations of Wharton do not rely on any dominant, abstract theoretical framework such as poststructuralism, postcolonialism, feminism, or Marxism. Instead, her analysis emphasizes a loose definition of travel writing “as a group of discursive productions within a cultural field” (203), insisting on the genre’s fluidity and relying not on all-encompassing theories but on spatial metaphors such as “margins,” “borders,” and “extensions.” Doing so allows Kovács to trace the significance of travel writing within Wharton’s continually expanding oeuvre and to locate the topographies of her writing across a broad cultural field that blurs generic distinctions, including the distinction between fiction and nonfiction.

The implications of Kovács’s study extend well beyond Wharton scholarship. By focusing on Wharton’s popular work rather than her major novels, the book repositions literary history around notions of contemporary popularity rather than subsequent canonicity. Her definition of travel literature as a loosely assembled body of texts with permeable generic boundaries subverts traditional literary hierarchies and opens the way for further scholarly inquiry into cultural history and post-theory travel writing studies. A disaggregated theoretical stance is valuable because it seeks to move beyond the limitations of grand narratives and overarching theories. It may also explain the overall structure of the book, which reads more like a collection of

individual essays, each with its own introduction and conclusion, only tenuously related to the author's overall argument. The post-theory framing challenges readers to connect feminist and postcolonial readings of Wharton with the institutional contexts of publishing, which complement, but are not always fully integrated into, the book's thesis about architectural and natural topography. The book raises important questions that invite further research, including how Wharton's pursuit of cultural continuity might intersect with experiences of disruption, cultural destruction, and loss in her wartime travel writing. Conceived as "a textually oriented survey of Wharton's travel writings" (209), *The Memory of Architecture in Edith Wharton's Travel Writings* lays the groundwork for further inquiry into topics such as aesthetic representation and spatial description in the travel writings of Henry James, for instance, as well as Wharton's relationship to modernist authors including Marcel Proust. It will appeal to a broad academic readership while serving as an important resource for scholars and researchers working in the fields of travel literature, aesthetics, ethnography, visual culture, and cultural history.

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