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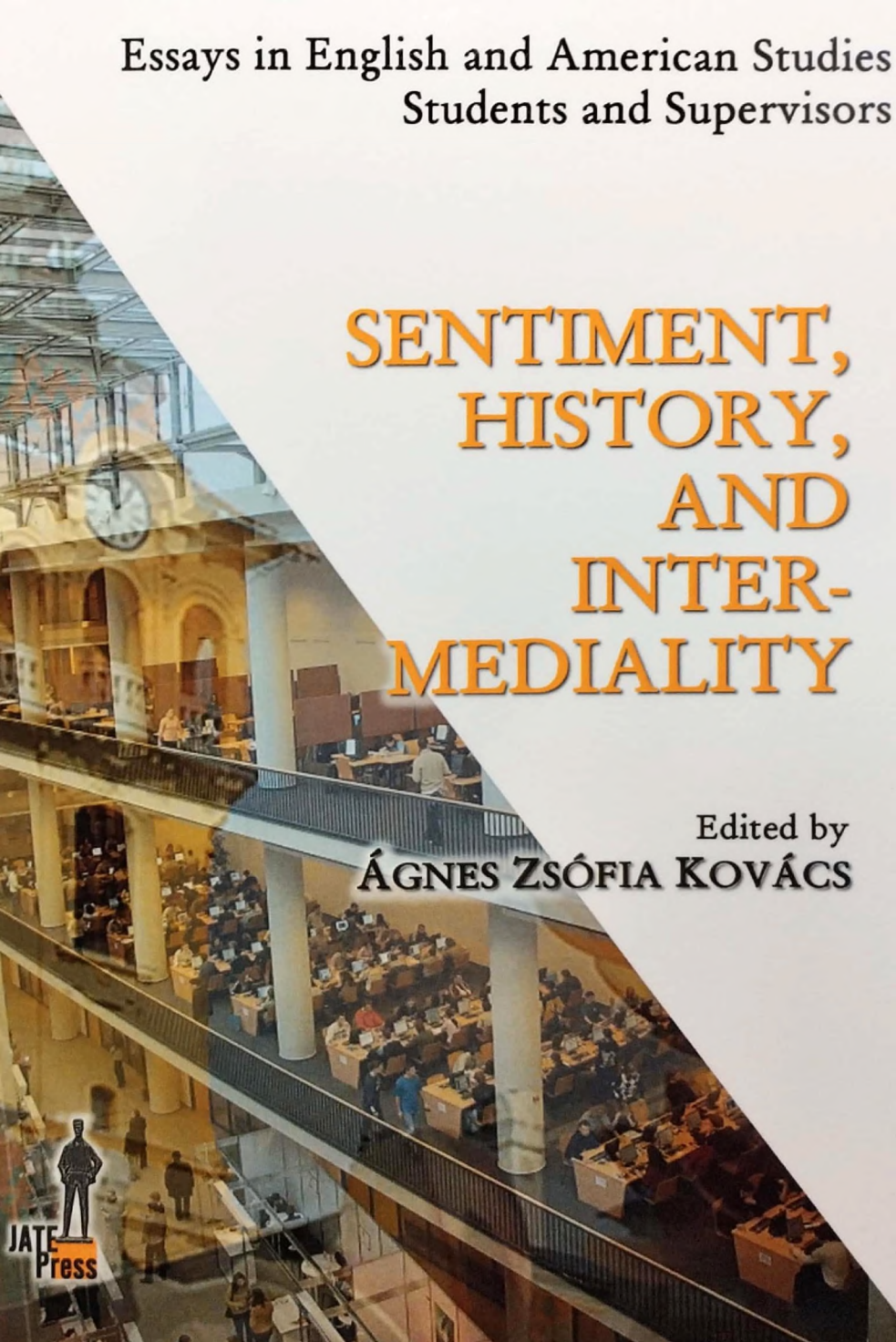

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Edith Wharton's Argument with Ruskin

Keywords

Edith Wharton, visual culture, John Ruskin, reading architecture, the Italian Baroque, art history

Everybody knows Edith Wharton the novelist of manners, but fewer have heard of her as the author of travel books.[1] Yet, Wharton published five volumes of travel in her life: two on Italy, two about France and one on Marocco, and was better known as a travel author than as a novelist at the beginning of her career in the life of letters. In these travel accounts Wharton focuses her reports on elements of visual culture, she describes architecture, professes a general interest in spatial arrangements typical of the given community.

Wharton's visual and architectural perspective comes from contemporary trends in art criticism and travel writing. Wharton is defying an earlier tradition of travel writing that came with an interest in picturesque scenes, curious sights, ruins and landscapes (Annus 2006, 17). Instead she prioritized the observation of architecture and architectural arrangements. In criticism this difference is called the contrast between the belletristic tradition of the picturesque and John Ruskin's model of precise observation (Wright 1997, ix).

The question in the case of Wharton is how her travel accounts represent the change from picturesque critical model to that of precise observation, and what the exact reason for the change in her case is. The paper shows that Wharton was interested in the observation of visual culture and architectural space in order to give evidence of the historical continuity encoded in them. Her observations and comparisons measure up the extent of the cultural continuity pictures and buildings carry. For Wharton, Italy and France represent ideal locations where centuries of cultural legacy and connection can be perceived just by the observation of pictures, buildings, even of cultivated landscape. Wharton is definitely frustrated by earlier celebrations of picturesque effect because, she thinks, they miss this point. Later on, World War one will be the biggest threat to the idea of cultural continuity encoded in visual art and human spatial arrangements, a problem Wharton will tackle in her wartime travel account about France (Schriber 1999, 145; Ammentorp 2004, 38; Kovács 2017, 543).

Wharton's travelogue I introduce here is her second collection of essays on Italy, *Italian Backgrounds* 1905. The first and perhaps better known volume is *Italian Villas* 1904, which surveys spatial arrangements of Italian Renaissance and Baroque garden architecture. In *Backgrounds*, Wharton constructs a general model of seeing continuity in art, which is most useful for charting out Wharton's relation to earlier traditions of writing about art and travel. I argue that in *Backgrounds* Wharton makes a case against Ruskin's accounts of Italian art because his method of precise observation remains blind to the place of the Italian Baroque, as many have stated (Lee

[1] In her lifetime, she published *Italian Villas and their Gardens* 1904 and *Italian Backgrounds* (1905), *A Motor-Flight through France* (1908) and *Fighting France: From Dunkirk to* (1915), and *In Morocco* (1920). One journal titled *The Cruise of the Vanadis* was published posthumously about a cruise on the Mediterranean (1992 and 2004).

2008, 94, Lasansky 2016, 160; Peel 2012, 287; Montgomery 2016, 112; Blazek 2016, 64). Yet I also wish to add that this is important for Wharton for the loss in the story of Italian historical continuity, and that Wharton, perhaps ambiguously, actually applies Ruskin's method of observation to epochs other than Ruskin's favourites. The article shows this through focusing first on Ruskin and Wharton, then on Wharton's representations of the Italian Baroque, and finally on her commitment to the notion of continuity.

1. Sentiment and science in Ruskin and Wharton

John Ruskin was a formative painter, critic of art and architecture, social thinker of the Victorian era whose ideas dominated thinking about art and art history in the latter part of the nineteenth-century. Ruskin uses the analytical skills of the natural scientist in his readings of painting, in his *Modern Poetry*, and architecture, in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* and *The Stones of Venice* (Ruskin 1846, 1849, 1851–3). In both areas he tries to go beyond the surface of the picturesque. His accounts of architecture from the 1850s–80s describe layers of stone, eventually telling the life story of a building (Ruskin 1849, ch 6). Gothic and Byzanthine bulidings, and even the work of the early Renaissance present the most organic examples of such architectural stories (Ruskin, 1851–3, vol. 2). Although Ruskin relies on several disciplines in his observations, as Stephen Kite in *Building Ruskin's Italy* puts it, he never identifies with any of them, he remains an amateur (Kite 2012, 2).

Ruskin's descriptions focus on not only the visual and tactile description of a building but also the emotional effect and the moral or religious values the work carries. Robert Hewison in his *Ruskin: the argument of the eye* claims that in Ruskin's visual imagination each fact finds its place in three orders of truth: truth of fact, truth of thought, and finally the truth of symbol (Hewison 1975, ch 8). Kite puts this more directly when he says that Ruskin provides visual, imaginative and moral/religious readings to the "facts" he describes (Kite 2012, 9).

How is Wharton related to Ruskin's writings on Italy and on watching architecture? In her autobiography, 1934, Wharton situates *Backgrounds* as part of a discussion in the 1870s on whether travel writing and art criticism belonged to the domain of the cultured amateur or the educated expert. Here she makes no reference to John Ruskin. Instead, here Wharton situates herself as the exponent of the scientific method in travel writing as opposed to writers of subjective impression, who eventually learned to combine sentiments and technique (Wharton 1990, 898). However, in her autobiographical fragment "Life and I" she refers to Ruskin with admiration: "His wonderful cloudy pages gave me back the image of the beautiful Europe I had lost, & woke in me the habit of precise visual observation" (Wharton 1990, 1084).

The only monograph on Wharton's travel writing so far by Sarah Wright adds the name of Ruskin to Wharton's amateur/expert opposition. Wright emphasizes Wharton's resistance to American travel authors of the picturesque like Irving and Hawthorne and highlights Ruskin as the influence that triggered Wharton's criticism of her American precursors (Wright 1997, 37). Wrights writes that Ruskin helped Wharton to move toward a more scientific register of travel writing expected by US journals in the 1880s (ibid.).

Robert Burden in his *Travel, Modernism and Modernity* stresses the different examples Ruskin and later Pater presented for Wharton. Burden identifies Ruskin's theory as an insistence on the moral function of art. In contrast, he identifies Pater as an insistence on art for art's sake (Burden 2015, 213). In Wharton's travel writing, Burden writes, the two different influences create an ambiguity: her need for balance and harmony is in contrast with her enjoyment of the emotional and ornamental Baroque (Burden 2015, 211). Burden claims that Wharton develops modernist themes and styles of presentation both in her fiction and her travel writing, and her

developing penchant for Pater and the Baroque in her travelogues is a sign of this change (Burden 2015, 213).

Emily Orlando's *Edith Wharton and Visual Art* shows the important influence of the Pre-Raphaelite movement on Wharton's fiction. Orlando shows how Wharton criticizes the image of the Pre-Raphaelite beautiful passive woman, the object of the male gaze, more and more as part of her increasing emphasis on heroines who are able to construct and manipulate the visual impressions their own bodies create (Orlando 2007, 26). Orlando writes that Wharton sided with Ruskin's ideas in her *The Decorations of Houses* (1899) already (Orlando 2007, 175).

Italian Backgrounds itself refers to Ruskin several times in a critical way. In the essay on Parma Wharton notes that as a devotee of the fourteenth century, Ruskin has led several generations of travelers to pass 'any expression of structural art more recent than the pointed style' (109–10),[2] who would find little in Parma for their taste. Also, Milan lacks 'the pseudo Gothicism, [...] which Ruskin taught a submissive generation of critics to regard as the typical expression of the Italian spirit' (155), a perpendicular ideal (156). Wharton's essays criticize Ruskin's ideal of art and image of Italy because it cannot see Italian art after the Renaissance.

2. Foreground and background

Wharton's criticism of Ruskin's limited way of seeing Italian art is put forward in the final essay of the book through two technical terms from painting: foreground and background. Wharton is interested in how human sight and attention are manipulated in pictures and then capitalizes on this theme to expand it as a metaphor of creating knowledge about art.

Firstly, she defines the key terms foreground and background. In early Renaissance devotional paintings, there are two quite unrelated parts. The foreground shows a conventional devotional theme, characters in typical attitude and symbolic dress. The background is secular, it shows what the artist sees, depicts scenes from contemporary life (173–4). For Wharton, the background of religious paintings direct the observation, present a chosen view of a realistically painted landscape, and add a personal note from the painter. For her, the secular background forms the real picture with impressions from the painter's life.

Wharton expands the duality of foreground/background to one's knowledge about Italy and Italian towns. What is in the foreground of our knowledge about Italy? Wharton claims that the foregrounded knowledge of Italy derives from guide books and is the knowledge of the mechanical sight-seer. It is a conventionalized view of Italy stiffened into symbols, it forms a facade (177). The background is known by the dreamer and by the serious student of Italy, who "in the open air of observation can disengage from tradition" (177–8). Wharton claims that the idea of Italy as the country of ancient ruins and the Renaissance belongs to knowledge about Italy in the foreground, while in the background there is much more to observe (afterwards) that is related to the life in the background – hence the title of the book.

Interestingly, in practice a focus on backgrounds means observing Baroque art and architecture as part of the notion of Italian culture, not only antique, Medieval and Renaissance culture, as Wharton shows. For instance, in the case of Rome, antique ruins are normally foregrounded at the expense of Baroque Rome. Hasty travelers flock to the town to tour the Forum and the ancient sites, disregarding the fact that most of the buildings in Rome at the time (1905) were actually built by architects of the Baroque and decorated accordingly (184). The happy few who stay for more than three days see a middle distance, while the idlers who spend more time also

[2] Subsequent references to *Italian Backgrounds* (Wharton 1905) follow as page numbers in brackets.

see the background, in fact the whole boundless horizon of Rome (179). In an implied criticism of Ruskin, she writes: "Is it not a curious mental attitude which compels the devotee of medieval art to walk blindfolded from the Palazzo Venezia to Santa Sabina on the Aventine, or from the Ara Coeli to Santa Maria Sopra Minerva, because the great monuments lying between these points of his pilgrimage belong to what some one has taught him to regard as a 'debased period of art'?" (182). So Wharton prioritizes the Baroque in Rome in the face of Ruskin's rejection of the period he called the "Barbarous Gothic" (Ruskin 1851–3, vol. 3).

Wharton goes on to exemplify the Italian Baroque through several spectacular examples relying on the schema of foreground and background. One further example for this is Venice, the staple Ruskinian site, where a young Wharton and her father had strolled with Ruskin's *Stones of Venice* in hand (Wharton 1990, 851). In Venice, the foreground is Byzantine-Gothic and early Renaissance, while the background conforms to Baroque and Rococo taste. The Baroque background is expressed in the interior decoration of old palaces and is usually relegated to the background of attention (189). As Wharton puts it: "the spirit of the eighteenth century expressed itself in rather in her expanding social life and the decorative arts which attend on such drawing-room revivals" (192). Wharton gives a historical reason for this: as Venice was "less under the influence of the Church than any other Italian state, she was able to resist the architectural livery with which the great Jesuit subjugation clad the rest of Italy" (192). In this metaphor for Venice, Byzantine-Gothic architectural style is identified with uniformed clothes and understood as a surface, distinct from the 'internal' design, invisible substance. That is the background, which is out of sight. In Venice this interior or background is Baroque because the life of the Baroque went on inside the buildings: in the saloons and galleries, decorated with paintings by Tiepolo and Canaletto. These decorations are usually considered to lack value: they are ornamental, illusory, emotional. Yet, after surveying some palace ceilings and walls decorated by Tiepolo, Wharton concludes that the paintings "recall the glory of another great tradition," because in the light of Venetian painting, Tiepolo's work can be seen as a direct "descendant of Titian and Veronese" (ibid.), as the lines, the types, the majesty of his scenes, if not his colors, link him to the *cinque cento*. Wharton's view links the supposedly valueless Baroque to the valuable Renaissance.

Wharton includes not only the discussion architecture and painting but also that of literature into her new image of the Italian Baroque. Again and again she refers positively to typical characters of the commedia dell' arte who enact the social comedy of types with the rough humor. Her first essay of the collection describes the descent into Italy from Switzerland from North to South à la Goethe, but also like a comedy with typical characters who are the travelers. In the essay on Parma she explains the Baroque sentiment that is communicated in line and color in Corregio's technically elaborate paintings. The Baroque seems to embody the lack sincerity: it forecloses mannerisms, masquerade, a laughing art, a life of intrique without conviction (113), a lack of sincerity that "modern taste has most consistently exacted" (112) Wharton comments. Yet, she herself goes on imagining and describing how a Baroque play had been acted out in the Farnese theatre. Similarly, she populates the Baroque salons of Venetian palaces with imagined characters from the comedies of Goldoni, and the *commedia* is praised as the art of satirizing social appearances. Finally, Wharton ends her last essay with a scene in the Museo Correr in Venice where the mannequins stand for the types of the Baroque world, and embody the world of appearances: fine clothes, gay colors, and graceful attitudes (213) a world that was arrested by Napoleon's actions and all but disappeared since.

Wharton's argument with Ruskin highlights the importance of "seeing" which is an idea similar to Ruskin's. Ruskin himself stresses the importance of seeing the real thing instead of an artificial idea, be it a leaf or a building. He criticizes picturesque artificial images of landscape

and architecture and instead he practices a precise observation of art. Wharton's insistence on seeing not only the foreground but also the background of pictures, notions, and cultural phenomena seems similar to Ruskin in this sense, but Wharton's scope is different: instead of Ruskin's prioritization of certain styles, Wharton emphasizes connections in art.

3. Seeing continuity

Wharton criticizes Ruskin's Gothicism on two counts: one, it is not comparative enough and two, it is blind to the historicity of art.

Firstly, Wharton claims that prioritizing a period of Italian art is against the comparative impulse of nineteenth-century century art criticism (182). "The perception of differences in style" she writes, "is a recently developed faculty" (104) of the first half of the nineteenth-century century but it also came with indifference toward all but a brief period of that art" (ibid.). Yet the comparative impulse is the 19th century's most important contribution to the function of criticism, she adds. Perceiving modifications (183) in art will grant interest to all modes of art, not only to the ones considered valuable: only when the art critic begins to survey the modifications of art as objectively as he would study the alternations of the seasons, will he begin to understand and to sympathize with the different modes in which man had sought to formulate his "gropings for beauty" (184). Artistic modes, she claims, evolve from each other and should not be attributed value in themselves.

Secondly, this kind of comparative criticism will be able to account for continuity in art. Continuity is not problematic in times of peaceful transition, for instance as Christianity replaces Roman gods in the Iberian peninsula (78), the new god of the towns lives beside the old gods who reside in natural habitats. The essay on hermits analyzes the coexistence of the two worlds as it is indicated by the appearance of old gods in Italian landscapes (79, 81). However, moments of social and artistic transformation become especially interesting in regard to continuity: how do "modes of gropings for beauty" change at the time of crisis. At the marble church of Tirano in chapter 1, she analyzes the transition of styles, the coexistence of different traditions. The interior, she writes, "escaped the unifying hand of the improver and presents three centuries of conflicting decorative treatment, ranging from the marble chapel of the Madonna ... to the barocco carvings of the organ" (24). For Wharton, understanding changes in art requires that one understands the new conditions of art that generate new forms (185). The Baroque is of interest in this respect as well: Bernini was the genius of the Baroque time of transformation, he was the artist of the bravura period but integrated elements of Renaissance art and "the germs of Bernini and Tiepolo must be sought in the Sistine ceiling" (182) she contends.[3]

Wharton argues that the survey of modifications in art leads to a specific model of cultural continuity focused on ongoing historical connections in art. Compared to this model, Ruskin's focus on the Gothic seems rather limited in scope. Wharton even provides her own example to the blindness of Ruskinian bias. A group of terracotta figures representing the Passion in San Vivaldo were considered to be Baroque pieces, so nobody paid them much attention. When Wharton visited San Vivaldo, she saw that the pieces showed patterns and arrangement of an earlier, sixteenth-century century fashion. She had photos taken of the groups which she sent

[3] For an alternative idea suggesting the disruptive effect of historical/cultural continuity on race relations in the United States as suggested by Thomas Jefferson within the context of sentimental philosophy see Vajda 2009, 283 and Vajda 2017, 131.

to the director of the Royal Museums of Florence at the time who duly identified them as fifteenth-century pieces indeed. In her essay she comments:

> the mere fact that a piece of sculpture was said to have been executed in the seventeenth century would, until very recently, have sufficed to prevent it receiving expert attention. [...] concealing them from modern investigation as effectually as though they had been situated in the centre of an unexplored continent [...] in the heart of the most carefully-explored artistic hunting ground of Europe (104–5).

So ironically, in the case of the terracottas of San Vivaldo, the bias against the Baroque resulted in complete blindness to actual details.

4. Conclusion

Wharton's method of seeing and studying art in *Italian Backgrounds* shows many traces of Ruskin's legacy. They both attribute importance to seeing, to observing architecture, although Wharton argues for an expanded scope of historical interest than Ruskin to study all manners of art, in a non-evaluative manner. The paper showed that reason for the difference between Ruskin and Wharton lies in Wharton's interest in continuity and historical change as represented in pictures, building, interior decorations. Wharton's lucid comments on Baroque comedy and appearances that function as introduction and conclusion of the collection even suggest that a concealed satire of Ruskin's method is being performed.

Returning to the secondary sources on Wharton's place in the discourses of travel writing of the period, it is important to point out that Wharton was unduly reticent about Ruskin's influence in her autobiography, that Wright's account on her relation to Ruskin seems more relevant, while Burden's psychoanalytically phrased reading for ambiguity of scholarly Ruskinian/aesthetic Baroque oriented voice in Wharton being the law of the father vs. desire mixed in her sounds somewhat general. A less general explanation for the duality would be to acknowledge Wharton's interest in continuity and crisis in art due to the changes in the conditions of production.

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