
‘Momentary Escapes from the Expected’: ‘Thin Places’ in the Travel Writing of Edith Wharton

Bonnie McMullen*¹

¹Independent Scholar – United Kingdom

Abstract

The travel writing of Edith Wharton contains many passages in which the writer seems to transcend the everyday reality around her and enter into what seems an almost magical, mystical experience of her surroundings. This state, although akin to what for some could be described as an experience of religious exaltation, for Wharton was realized in more historical and aesthetic terms. The intensity of these encounters goes some way to explain what drove her to travel throughout her life and to continue writing about her journeys, long after her reputation as a fiction writer was well established. Certain spots in Greece, Italy, France, and Morocco, often encountered accidentally and away from tourist routes, triggered transcendent experiences. Although Wharton would probably not have recognized the term, the locales that evoked such responses are like those designated by the Celtic Christian term “thin places,” meaning places where the walls between one dimension and another are weak. I shall consider the writing on “thin places” of Eric Weiner, Winifred Gallagher, and Roger Scruton in relation to Wharton. I shall also consider the triggers for her transcendental experiences, be it landscape, historical associations, or human experience in particular settings. I shall examine whether her differing modes of travel, from her Mediterranean cruise to her motor journeys through France and Morocco, affected the nature of her apprehension of place and the intensity of her responses. Finally, I shall try to establish a link between the “thin places” in the travel writing and the moments of vividness that lift her fiction above social documentation or comedy of manners. I shall argue for a unity in Wharton’s writing that demonstrates a theory of art that aspires to ecstasy.

*Speaker