
Edith Wharton's Argument with Restlessness

Virginia Ricard*¹

¹Université Bordeaux Montaigne – Université Michel de Montaigne - Bordeaux III – France

Abstract

In "The Change in the Feminine Ideal," an essay published in the Atlantic in March 1910, Marie Deland noted that everywhere one finds "a prevailing discontent among women, a restlessness infinitely removed from the old content of a generation ago." In the final pages of *The House of Mirth* (1905), Edith Wharton also notes this change and excoriates Lily Bart's absence of attachment to "any one spot of earth," or to the "grave endearing traditions" of a particular place. Restlessness and rootlessness isolate Lily and make her vulnerable. This from a writer whose own mobility, both literal (her constant travels, her love of cars) and metaphoric (her openness, her adaptability, her constant praise of curiosity, her eagerness and energy), is legendary. For Wharton, constant mobility and travel paradoxically deplete rather than augment our energy, whereas place is able to contain meaning-multiple meanings-and attachment to place enables "mysterious links of kinship" that dissolve boundaries and allow us to take part in "the mighty sum of human striving." It is place, not movement, in other words, that creates kinship and community of feeling. In this paper I would like to explore two opposing trends at work in Wharton's oeuvre: an expressed need for movement and distance, if only to know and comprehend the world, and a contradictory desire for a fixed abode to which, as the narrator of *The House of Mirth* puts it, the "heart could revert and from which it could draw strength for itself and tenderness for others." I will pay particular attention to Wharton's war writings and her war work.

*Speaker