
Globalization and Cultural Fluidity in ‘The Muse’s Tragedy’ and ‘Souls Belated

Paul Ohler*¹

¹Kwantlen Polytechnic University – Canada

Abstract

During the 1890s an international theme emerged in Edith Wharton’s fiction as she strengthened her links to Europe through travel and the forging of friendships. Her affinity with Italy first manifested itself creatively in her short stories late in the decade, including two 1899 stories set in Italy, “The Muse’s Tragedy” and “Souls Belated.” These and other works of the period were indebted to her residence in Spain, France, and Italy during her childhood and journeys such as her 1888 tour of the Mediterranean recounted in *The Cruise of the Vanadis*. In this work, unpublished in her lifetime, Wharton states a preference for the “medieval calm” or stillness she felt in Europe (105). Yet, her education in European culture, and the consequent influence on her aesthetic principles was in part a result of her being a modern traveler able to move rapidly by automobile and ship; she was a “goddess of velocity,” (252) as she put it of a character in *Twilight Sleep* (1927). Her moneyed mobility informed what Nancy Bentley describes as “the journeys that structure her plots, the travel related tropes that are keynotes for her characters” (149). Bentley further demonstrates that Wharton “lived a good deal of her life in the mobile space of travel routes” (150), and her fiction of the period depicts Anglo-European poets and painters, American lovers, and even the ideas that influence them circulating through these spaces. My proposed paper, then, will address “The Muse’s Tragedy,” which opens in an “empty hotel restaurant” and takes place in Rome, to argue that the American protagonist Danyers fixates on an inauthentic literary depiction of Italian culture and lives as a near expatriate in a cultural state influenced by nascent globalization. I will compare the story to “Souls Belated,” which opens on its American characters conversing in a railway carriage somewhere beyond Milan, in order to read both stories for signs that they represent people searching fruitlessly for order in a transatlantic world deeply altered by globalization, a “reformulation of relations, whereby . . . a new technology, or a new mode of circulation creates a network that brings people and cultures into contact with each other” (Cadle 16).

*Speaker