
Wharton's Metaphors of Homelessness

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Abstract

In her autobiography *A Backward Glance*, Edith Wharton describes herself as "some homeless waif who, after trying for years to take out naturalization papers, and being rejected by every country, has finally acquired a nationality"-this nationality being her citizenship in the "land of letters," i.e., her identification as a writer above all things. This rhetoric echoes the language she employs eighteen years earlier to describe one of the beneficiaries of her charitable organizations during the first world war: "Last year, among the waifs swept to Paris by the great torrent of the flight from the North, there came to the American Hostels a little acrobat from a strolling circus. . . All his people were mummers or contortionists, and he himself was a mere mote of the lime-light, knowing life only in terms of the tent and the platform, the big drum, the dancing dogs, the tight-rope and the spangles." That Wharton should highlight the story of a young performer over the many beneficiaries of her charitable work and, furthermore, do so in language that reflects her later description of herself, betrays the depth of Wharton's affinity for the chosen communities of artists. This paper will explore Wharton's identification of mobility with the artistic temperament and suggest that Wharton's charitable work and propagandistic writings during the years of the war were animated by an aesthetic horror at the impact of violence on culture. Rather than see the rootlessness of the artistic condition as a metaphor for the displacement of war refugees, Wharton draws a literal connection between the community of artists she counted herself among and the community of persons unmoored by the circumstances of the war. She further literalizes this connection by mobilizing the former community to aid the latter in the creation of her charitable anthology, *The Book of the Homeless* (1916), a work that resists its own deployment as a political instrument as it celebrates the power of aesthetic culture to create alternative modes of identification.

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