
Crossing Paths, Parting Ways: Ella Wheeler Wilcox and Edith Wharton

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Abstract

Two bestselling women writers, Ella Wheeler Wilcox and Edith Wharton, occasionally crossed paths through different forums during the First World War. For example, both writers numbered among the famous contributors to King Albert's Book (1914), a tribute to the Belgian king and people as the country sought to withstand German invasion. Both women were in France at the end of the war, Wharton working tirelessly on behalf of Belgian refugees and orphans, Wilcox preaching the benefits of sexual purity and spiritualism to U.S. troops. These moments of convergence notwithstanding, the two authors diverged sharply in their worldviews. In numerous ways, Wharton defined her aesthetic in contradistinction to a sentimental, reformist writer like Wilcox. In particular, Wharton declared infantile the national faith in "endless self-improvement," readily attainable happiness, and potentially avoidable pain that the prolific Wilcox, considered by scholars to be "New Thought's chief proponent," preached as gospel. Throughout her fictional corpus, Wharton suggests that exposure to pain could function to refine character and sharpen in sensitive natures already-established powers of discernment and appreciation. As her "argument with America" grew more trenchant, this requisite sensitivity to pain on the one hand and its lack on the other came to define for Wharton a distinction between not only fictional characters but also Old and New Worlds. Indeed, her insistence on confronting painful subjects in her later fiction was in large part fueled by her critical stance toward what she saw as her native country's fervent revulsion from the same, thanks to New Thought principles alongside other cultural and specifically medical panaceas. While for her contemporaries the embrace of these panaceas signified both "healthy-mindedness" and unequivocal progress, for Wharton they signaled the opposite. This paper restores the dialogue between Wilcox and Wharton in order to reanimate the specific, significant ideological and aesthetic differences informing popular women's writing produced at the same historical moment in a similar transnational context.

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