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Edith Wharton's vision of continuity in wartime France

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Abstract Reading Wharton's two nonfiction texts about France together provides the possibility of comparing a pre-war travelogue to a war report on French culture. Wharton's precise descriptions and sound method of visual interpretation of moral value in *A motor-flight* (1908) become problematized in descriptions of war damage in *Fighting France* (1915). *A motor-flight* provides several examples of continuity in French material culture offering the chance of a meaningful use of the past. In *Fighting France*, visits to the war zone show the damage done to civilized landscapes, historical monuments, houses, cathedrals that are destroyed or ruined, offering only chances to think of the scope of the losses in cultural terms, meditations on the lost sense of the past. Images of destruction are linked to this loss of historical continuity. Visits to the trenches show the war as a menace difficult to visualize for the traveller. Here the main effect of the war seems to be the continual threat to secure reflexes and habits of the old reality that is being replaced by war. Also, there are no reports on human wounds but descriptions of the damage to the material environment become humanized. In general, however great the material damage shown and the cultural ruin indicated, Wharton finds traces of continuity in the devastated French countryside of the abandoned war zone: new life begins in the ordered lines of the gardens, in the new uses of the churches, in the reorganization of everyday life among the ruins. From the perspective of the language of war, this means that Wharton's war reports do not use the disillusioned tone necessary for the language of Anglo-Saxon male combat gnosticism. The standard reason for this can be that she was never in combat. Another likely reason, however, can be her Francophilia. In a gesture that may be identified as a reliance on the outmoded British high rhetoric of war, Wharton adopts the French attitude to historical continuity she describes, which eventually cannot and would not accept the material

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and cultural devastation the war brings. Although a non-combatant who is rarely close to the lines, Wharton does not report on the home front and her new roles there. She struggles to comprehend and represent her experience of the war zone as an eyewitness, and the method she uses for this is the architectural vision of her former travelogue in order to communicate the extent of the material loss to her noncombatant American audience.

Keywords Edith Wharton · War literature · Travel writing · French culture · Architecture · Historical continuity · Aesthetic theory · Visualization of war · Language of war

Traditionally, Wharton's wartime texts have been considered sentimental and propagandistic as compared to the textual production of the Lost Generation on their war experience. In the past two decades, however, there has been increasing critical interest in Wharton's wartime publications, which are now seen as less simplistic and propagandistic in tone and subject. Recent critical interest also extends to women in the war zone instead of the preoccupation with masculine life and language of the trenches. As part of this renewed interest in Wharton's wartime texts, this essay addresses Wharton's contribution to the nonfiction of the Great War with specific reference to *Fighting France* (1915), her collection of war essays, through the lens of her pre-war travelogue, *A motor-flight through France* (1908).

Wharton wrote about France and French cultural 'continuity' repeatedly before and during the First World War. In her pre-war travelogue she celebrates continuity by displaying its effects, in her war reports she is frightened by its possible loss, while in her essays to American soldiers *French ways and their meaning* (1919) she explains it to her possibly hostile American audience. In *French ways* Wharton devotes a full chapter to continuity as a major characteristic of the French in contrast to Americans as descendants of English and Dutch colonists uprooted from their homeland and forced to adapt to a new environment. Continuity for her meant the passing down of traditions in the production of food and wine, in the arts, in manners from generation to generation to constitute a sense of the past that not only "enriches the present" but also connects one "with the world's great stabilising traditions of art and poetry and knowledge" (Wharton 1919, pp. 82–83, p. 97). Contemporary commentators are divided about the role of continuity in Wharton's nonfiction on France. On the one hand, Nancy Bentley reads *A motor-flight* in relation to the ambivalent 'modernity' of Wharton's vision when she points out how Wharton both embraces and criticizes social and cultural change in the book (Bentley 2005, p. 225). In contrast, Hermione Lee stresses the importance of continuity for Wharton and states that in Wharton's nonfiction "writings on France, the emphasis is always on 'continuity'" (Lee 2008, p. 265). Mary Suzanne Schriber links the discourses of continuity and loss when she compares *Motor-flight* to *Fighting France*. She claims that Wharton both relies upon and inverts usual romantic travel writing expectations in *Fighting France* through presenting the sights and insights in the context of the nightmare of the front lines. Therefore, in *Fighting France* the reader experiences travel in the grotesque: "The dream of

travel inscribed in *A Motor-Flight Through France* is immediately evoked and reversed in *Fighting France*; it is a dream that has been contorted into the nightmare of war" (Schriber 1999, p. 143).

Wharton's *A motor-flight through France* provides accounts of the values for which French culture stands in a materially represented form and refers to this French cultural content as "continuity" (Wharton 1908, p. 37). In particular, Wharton provides a model of understanding visual culture with an eye for historical continuity. Her main examples of cultural value are Romanesque and Gothic cathedrals (Wharton 1908, p. 10). She takes up this view of continuity in her wartime articles in *Fighting France* when she surveys the damage that war does to French cultural values at a cataclysmic time when actual physical structures, whole towns, are ruined (Benert 1996, p. 323). It should therefore be of no surprise that in her descriptions of the war front it is the destruction of cathedrals which constitute a prime example of material and cultural loss. Because of the all-pervading French sense of continuity Wharton argues for, she takes account of the way the French withstand the material loss to their culture in wartime. The sense of a long, continuous past enables the French to resume their former life in the old way at the time of a crisis. At the same time, Wharton stresses France is in need for help to stop the pointless destruction of culture materialized in historical buildings.

In Wharton's writing, a strong visual interest in the built environment that I call architectural vision plays an important role. In Wharton's architectural vision buildings have clear-cut functions that have emerged over centuries so that they embody continuity in a material form. For example, in *The decoration of houses* she explains the emergence of different types of houses and rooms (Wharton 1898, p. 2), in *Italian villas* she studies the functions of structural elements of Renaissance gardens (Wharton 1905, p. 7), and, in *A motor-flight,* she explains connections between architectural styles from Romanesque to Baroque and their variations over time and across space. In her fiction the architectural vision also plays an important role: it structures the plot (Stephenson 2010, p. 1099) and amplifies characterization. For example, Lily Bart's habitats indicate the downward spiral of her social position in *The house of mirth* while Undine Spragg's change of abodes from hotel room to chateau chart her social advancement in *The custom of the country* (Wharton 1905, p. 287; Wharton 1913, p. 1003 and Macheski 2012, p. 196). Similarly, the two French nonfiction texts display continuity in the form of architecture: town houses and cathedrals are shown to bear the legacy of earlier generations. The comparison of the two books shows us an architecturally represented image of the threat to continuity Wharton encountered during her visits to the war zone. Through telling about the damage of sights that would have been well-known to her American readers, Wharton communicates the effects of war to them in an understandable but troubling way.

Taken together, *A motor-flight through France, Fighting France*, and *French ways and their meaning*, map out a history and order of French culture that is threatened to be destroyed by war. When the materially encoded signs of continuity are destroyed, their loss is a great actual cultural loss. Yet greater is the threat they represent symbolically: the threat German advancement poses to the whole of French civilization. War destruction, therefore, takes on a wider 'cultural'

significance of the possible loss of French civilization. Yet, the representation of that significance has not been widely discussed, even though Wharton's writing can be seen as contributing to the counternarratives about the memory of the First World War that have been explored extensively by cultural historians of the mnemonic turn. The exclusion of Wharton's nonfiction offers, then, an interpretive challenge: to integrate it into other narrative conceptualizations of the memory of the First World War and rethink the way Wharton uses the language of war. *A motor-flight* shows her earlier articulation of French culture in the pre-war period and influences the way she then views France at war in *Fighting France*. Some things may have been disrupted by the war but not, it seems, Wharton's historical vision of France and its culture.

In addition, an awareness of her nonfiction offers a chance to re-evaluate Wharton's international theme. The experience and architectural rhetoric of cultural continuity and loss in her wartime nonfiction reverberates in her much better known fictional renderings of the end of Gilded Age elite culture in the United States. In *The age of innocence* (1920), published between her two war novels, *The Marne* (1918) and *A son at the front* (1923), the disintegration of the genteel tradition is represented as a loss as irreversible as that caused by the Great War.

In this essay three interrelated issues are mapped out in detail. Firstly, changing interests in the reception of Wharton's texts about the First World War are discussed in the context of renewed critical interest in the memory of the Great War. Secondly, the concept of historical continuity that Wharton defines in *A motor-flight through France* is explored together with an analysis of her specific way of visualizing French cultural values that I have named her 'architectural vision.' Thirdly, the architectural images of cultural loss in *Fighting France* are linked to her concern with historical continuity.

Wharton and the war of words

The traditional literary image of the Great War had been provided primarily by men who recounted their devastating experience of the trenches. As a case in point, Robert Penn Warren's introduction to *A farewell to arms* points out the book's appeal as telling "a truth about the First World War, and a truth about the generation who had fought the war and whose lives, because of the war, has been wrenched from the expected pattern and the old values" (qtd. in Buitenhuis 1966, p. 493).[1] Warren's interpretation reverberates in Paul Fussell's now classic account of the literature of World War I, *The Great War and modern memory* (1975). Fussell argues that the experience of the trenches created the predominantly ironic view of the world evident in what we call 'modern' literary sensibility (Fussell 1975, p. ix). Fussell was interested in how soldiers remembered and wrote about their experience, and how this literature forged later generations' understanding of

[1] The problem with Warren's comment is that Hemingway was not a soldier and spent exceedingly little time on the Italian front before he was injured. There was a world of difference between the Italian front and the trench warfare on the French front.

modern war and modern experience (Heathorn 2005, p. 1106), forming what Samuel Hynes called the "myth of the war." Hynes states the myth of the war can be reduced to two terse propositions: "the old betray the young; the past is remote and useless" (Hynes 1990, p. xiii).

As Steven Heathorn points out, Fussell's classic has been both criticised and appropriated by historians and cultural critics. On the one hand, Fussell's idea that the Great War gave rise to or accelerated modernism has been criticised along with his canonized list of British subaltern authors. On the other hand, his focus on memory has remained a suggestive insight, "complicating but not displacing Fussell's essential argument: that the terrors of the trenches created a profound caesura in culture between what existed before the fighting and what could exist after" (Heathorn 2005, p. 1106). In literary studies, James Campbell criticizes how the aesthetic and ethical principles of World War I poetry have been applied in its criticism (Campbell 1999, p. 203). Campbell proposes the term 'combat gnosticism' for the ideology that presupposes a secret knowledge of war that only an elite which was exposed to combat can know and is legitimized to communicate. Campbell questions the basic epistemological assumption of this thinking that combat experience provides direct access to unmediated reality in order to draw attention to possible alternative modes of communicability (Campbell 2005, pp. 204–207). Campbell's thesis enables us to question the distinction not only between combatants and non-combatants but the gender implications of this distinction as well. The canonization of male war writers with combat experience has been criticised in feminist studies for decades: from Gilbert and Gubar's *Sexchanges* on, the main question has been how female non-combatants behind the trenches experienced and were able to communicate *their* experience of the war.

Wharton scholars have been re-evaluating her war writing in the past two decades. Alan Price's *The end of the age of innocence,* a detailed study of Wharton's philanthropic work, was the first book-length study to interrogate the critical marginalization of Wharton's war texts. Price accepts that the impairment of Wharton's rich sense of irony was an effect of the war, but he argues that Wharton shifted rhetorical registers when writing about World War I: her first, 'loud,' satirical register represented a total condemnation of Germany, her second, 'tremolo' register pondered on the effect of the war on language (Price 1996, p. xiii). Meanwhile, other scholars, particularly feminist scholars, have examined the gender dimension of Wharton's language use when writing on horrors of the home front rather than those of the trenches.[2] For instance, Margaret Higgonett discusses how Wharton strained to find the language appropriate to convey her war experience. She claims that in *A son at the front*, Wharton "treats war as a discursive system that imposes itself as natural via a change in people's language,"

[2] The literature here includes Sandra Gilbert's"Soldier's Heart" in her own *No man's land* (1989), C. M. Tylee's discussion of feminist strategies in Wharton (1997), Julie Olin-Amentorp's rereading and overview of Wharton's wartime texts (2004), Haytock's account of the relation of war and modernism in Wharton (2008). Most recent contributions are Hazel Hutchison's *The war that used up words* (2015) with its sections on Wharton's role in representing the Great War from the perspective of the home front and Alice Kelly's publication of a recently discovered but unfinished war story by Wharton on women's roles at the home front (Kelly 2015).

and how Wharton satirizes the indifference of civilians to the change (Higgonnet 1993, pp. 217, 212). More recently, Joanna Scutts has provided a convincing study of the female artist's role on the home front and her quest for words about the war invisible for women behind the lines, as well as the nature of this invisible "real" in Wharton's short stories (Scutts 2014, para. 19–20). Jean Gallagher argues that vision is one of the crucial aspects that marks the gendered division of war experience (Gallagher 1998, p. 11) and studies how acts of seeing construct wartime female subjectivity in Wharton's short story "Writing a war story" and in *Fighting France*. For Gallagher, Wharton manages to escape from the traditional female position in war, i.e. being the object of the male gaze, and becomes the subject of vision (female gaze) by complex strategies: stressing her eye-witness position, indexing (pointing to taboo topics like wounded bodies indirectly), and inserting gaps in traditional indexing (Gallagher 1998, p. 12, 19, 24).

Julie Olin-Ammentorp was the Wharton scholar after Price to write a book length study about Wharton and the Great War, this time focusing on her writing rather than philanthropic activities. Ammentorp's extended study of Wharton's wartime texts and their significance for her later production takes issue with gendered readings and attempts to position the texts in relation to the male literary canon of the war. On the one hand, Olin-Ammentorp distinguishes between the "high rhetoric of war" characteristic before and in the early phase of the war and disillusioned war writing with an experience of fighting (Olin-Ammentorp 2004, p. 12). On the other hand, she links this distinction to the opposition between a traditional way of writing (realism) and modernism emerging as an artistic response to the war. In addition, Olin-Ammentorp challenges the notion of the war canon as defined by male scholars and recharts the whole conceptualization of war writing by including the female perspective and thereby altering the critical scene. However, Ammentorp locates Wharton outside the area of the newly defined female perspectives of war representation notwithstanding that she claims Wharton's rhetoric of war is subject to shifts of tone during the war years:

> Wharton missed the literary boat at the war's end. Literature and all the big literary lights – Virginia Woolf, D. H. Lawrence, James Joyce, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot – went on to create modernism, which has since come to be seen as the only viable artistic response to a world shaken by the war. Wharton, like others, questioned the limits of genre in a postwar world. But in the end she adhered to an earlier mode of writing, becoming a literary traditionalist" (Olin-Ammentorp 2004, p. 13).

In Olin-Ammentorp's survey of Wharton's entire wartime production, she accepts the premise that her literary output remains traditional whether she relies on the idealistic rhetoric of war in an exaggerated or in a quiet form. At the same time Olin-Ammentorp claims that Wharton fails to fit into the Gilbert and Gubar paradigm because "her attitudes to women were not liberalized by war," and she portrays the guilt of the survivor through old men, not women. So, Ammentorp maintains that Wharton, although a non-combatant, represents a middle way "between the conventions of men's war writings and those of women" (2004, pp. 11 and 15).

Culturally oriented readings of Wharton's wartime texts are of special interest in understanding this anomaly. They draw attention to the central role of France and French culture in Wharton's texts in connection to the cultural loss the war represents. The fact that Wharton and Henry James shared a Francophilia has often been pointed out. Buitenhuis asserts the commonplace that: "[f]or James, as for many of his generation and upbringing, France stood for taste, for style, for civilization. This romantic vision made inevitable the other side of the coin – that the Germans were barbarians bent on the destruction or loot of Europe" (Buitenhuis 1966, p. 496). Wharton shares this attitude and the acknowledgement of this background helps one appreciate the importance of things French in her fiction.[3] In "French Lessons," William Blazek compares Wharton's war propaganda texts, *Fighting France* and *French Ways;* he claims that, although on the surface she encourages the United States to aid France against German aggression, she also aims "to instil in Americans a more sophisticated range of social markers" that are key to French culture "as a refined combination of aesthetic sensibility and a love of individual freedom." Pointing out this quality moves Wharton's so called propaganda beyond patriotic banalities (Blazek 2008, p. 11). For Blazek, then, Wharton's French lesson is definitely not about loss but about the need for continuity.

Annette L. Benert also connects Wharton's interest in architecture and France to her concern with the effects of war. First Benert claims that Wharton's "lifelong engagement in architectural issues" was related to Progressive ideology, to an awareness of how the built environment affected those who lived in it:

> the new structures and spaces were also expected to reify an America at last come of age, to reinforce traditional elitist values, and to reproduce social class structure and relationship in a volatile and unpredictable urban environment. Progressive ideology saw city planning and institutions of high culture as agents of social control (Benert 1996, p. 324).

For Wharton and her class, Benert claims, France represented the standard in public and private spaces and landscapes (ibid). Benert points out that Wharton's reaction to the cultural destruction of World War I should be seen as linked to Progressive ideology, and that her war work "grew out of her strong identification with French material culture" (Benert 1996, p. 337). Yet, "Benert's account of Wharton's war

[3] The importance of Wharton's attitude to France has been acknowledged but not explained by David Clough, who only mentions the importance of *Fighting France* in his survey of Wharton's war writings (1973, pp. 3, 13)., Alan W. Bellringer's study fills this gap, as it discusses the basis of Wharton's critical interest in French culture and points out the influence of W. C. Brownell on Wharton's view of the French. Brownell was Wharton's editor at Scribners and his *French Traits: An Essay in Comparative Criticism* (1888) influenced Wharton's *French Ways* directly (Bellringer 1985, p. 113). Both accounts are indebted to Victorian critics of culture Brownell's to James and Arnold (1985, p. 114), while Wharton's shows the influence of Ruskin in particular. Her text's relation to Ruskin's ideas is manifest in that she stresses the importance of the habit of precise visual observation that she practices in observing French life (Bellringer 1985, p. 116, Benert 1996, p. 325). Julie Olin-Ammentorp and William Blazek look at the French connection in relation to war: Ammentorp argues that Wharton has a French attitude of resilience to the war rather than an English sense of disillusionment (2004, p. 23), and Blazek writes that for Wharton the war offered a chance to teach a lesson about a range of sophisticated French cultural habits for her American readers (Blazek 2008, p. 11).

work is critical of Wharton's simplification of French issues during the war (Benert 1996, p. 328), of a reduction of ambiguity and irony in Wharton's representation of things French.

Benert's nuanced reading of architectural concerns in Wharton is, however, resonant of stereotypical ideas in the criticism of Wharton's war fiction. Benert sees the simplification of the idea of France in the wartime texts, the loss of ambiguity and irony, although gendered rereadings of Wharton's wartime language use have claimed it was subtly satirical and not solely sentimental. Benert highlights the role of Wharton's architectural vision to the discussion of her wartime texts, but she performs this without gender sensitivity.

The question that emerges is whether it is possible to consider Wharton's representations of French material culture, especially architecture, as an alternative way to visualize war and express the war experience. In particular, what is visible of the war during her excursions to the war zone, and how does Wharton construct a vision of war in her reports on wartime France? To what extent is this vision indebted to her previous work as a travel author? The next section examines how Wharton's architectural vision represents her travel experience of the French countryside first in her pre-war travel text and second in her wartime reports. Of particular interest is how her architectural vision constructs the limits of her understanding what the First World War is like.

Historical continuity in *A motor-flight through France*

A motor-flight draws attention to the importance of historical continuity and the special way of seeing that is needed for appreciating it. Bearing in mind that "America is the silent subject of this book on France" (Schriber 1991, p. xli), as Mary Suzanne Schriber points out, the focus on continuity is in stark contrast with the alleged lack of human interaction with the land in America. The contrast indicates an opposition between a civilized and uncivilized landscape in France and the United States, respectively.

In the northern French agricultural countryside one can glimpse the "higher beauty" (Wharton 1908, p. 5) of land cultivated over the centuries. This is "land developed, humanized, brought into relation with history, as compared with the raw material with which the greater part of our hemisphere is still clothed" (Wharton 1908, p. 5). The opposite of this cultivated landscape is the landscape that evidences no trace of human interaction from the past; the US landscape.[4] In the Seine country this cultivated quality is identified with a characteristically French intelligence of life in general:

[4] Interestingly, in *The Innocents Abroad* Mark Twain was not impressed by the same quality of the French landscape at all, as for him it was too artificial and neat, hedged, fenced, partitioned all over – a phenomenon incomparable to the free open spaces of the US West he much preferred (1869, pp. 105-106). In contrast, Wharton is arguing for a pleasurable actual experience of sights that extends the viewer's sense of historicity (1908, p. 29).

> Never more vividly than in this Seine country does one feel the amenity of French manners, the long process of social adaptation which has produced so profound and general intelligence of life (Wharton 1908, p. 29).

What she calls the 'intelligence of life' results from the awareness of 'the accumulated experiences of the past' (Wharton 1908, p. 11) in the form of social interaction and everyday habits of work. The motor car provides a chance for an intimate view of a landscape or town instead of the usual vistas of touristic travel, like railway lines and stations. Wharton states that one can take a fresh look at the traces of cultivation in the landscape and in the towns dotting it.

In *A motor-flight through France* Wharton traces the built environment for evidence of continuity. While traveling, she places encountered phenomena in the framework of preexisting knowledge and actually experiences historical continuity. This is the sensation that makes it worth-while to leave home, Wharton claims:

> [...] the truest invitation to travel, the sense of continuity, of relation between different districts, of familiarity with the unnamed, unhistoried region stretching between successive centers of human history exerting [...], in deep unnoticed ways, so persistent an influence on the turn that history takes (Wharton 1908, p. 37).

In the United States Wharton cannot sense this continuity, as it is "the country where the last grain-elevator or office building is the only monument that receives homage from the surrounding architecture" (Wharton 1908, p. 32), where only the new is valued. Therefore, a chronicle of French regions and country landscapes has an educational purpose as well.

Wharton's accounts of French architecture and her concept of the ideal way of understanding visual arts appear to be different from standard travel texts about France. Firstly, the text introduces the French countryside rather than the well-known urban sights, hence the absence of Paris and its spectacles. Secondly, the text uses the idiosyncratic perspective of the motorist rather than that of the railway traveller. Thirdly, Wharton reflects on her own method of appreciating art objects explicitly. Wright has called Wharton's method of appreciating scenes 'imaginative reconstruction' (Wright 1997, p. 80), indicating a creative involvement in the perception of sites. From the perspective of an interest in her architectural vision this self-referential quality is one of the most challenging aspects of Wharton's *Motor-flight*.

Wharton draws up an aesthetic theory of understanding visual arts in her comments on method. She points out a specific order of the mind that is needed for perceiving and experiencing historical continuity. Wharton uses the phrase the "cathedral's word" as a metaphoric expression that refers to the presence of historical continuity in France. If travelers can hear this word and understand it, then they will benefit from his their travels in that they will be able to experience historical continuity (Wharton 1908, p. 11). What is needed for hearing that word? It is plainly: "the reverence for the accumulated experiences of the past, readiness to puzzle out their meaning, unwillingness to disturb rashly [...] the desire [...] to keep intact as many links as possible between yesterday and tomorrow [...] to lose the

least […] of rich human heritage" (Wharton 1908, p. 10). Furthermore, to understand the voice of the past one needs to be able to relate to objects from the past, which involves actively seeking and creating connections between past and present.

For Wharton, visual art objects like cathedrals have a material and a cultural side. Her description of visual comprehension is built on the premise that visual art objects carry a cultural meaning additional to their material compositional value. Wharton calls these two sides of art objects their aesthetic and their moral value (Wharton 1908, p. 9). Also, Wharton differentiates two orders of the mind for the understanding of these two values of visual art objects (ibid.). The first order of the mind sees the object, for instance the cathedral, as a sight, as a piece of art in an album, or as an aesthetic object distinct from the present. This object represents a stage of history and culture that has been surpassed in the course of human struggle for development (ibid.).

The second order adds an extra dimension to the work and assesses the cultural relevance of the object. Wharton calls this aspect the ability of listening to 'the cathedral's word,' to a collective voice (Wharton 1908, p. 10). Listening implies that in this comprehension the past is linked to the present and the building is not so much a sight but an inspiration, the same kind of "effort toward a clearer vision" (ibid.) for the observer-listener. It is not the effect but the source of the art object that is being appreciated (ibid.). The building inspires an emotion in the perceiver, notably reverence for the forces of the past, its heritage (Wharton 1908, p. 11).

The second order of the mind works with the impressions produced by the art objects on the perceiver because impressions form an important starting point for Wharton's accounts. The term stands for the general emotional effect created in the perceiver of art. Reflecting on her impression of Nevers, she admires the sight because it "carried us abruptly back to the Middle Ages, but to an exuberant northern medievalism far removed from the Gallo-Roman tradition of central France," (Wharton 1908, p. 68) while at Bourges there is "a different impression than the richer but perhaps less deeply Gothic impression produced by rival churches of the North" (Wharton 1908, p. 70). In other words, she talks about an impression, the emotional effect that she associates with the notion of the Gothic. For her, Gothic is not simply an umbrella term for a handful of stylistic features but an attitude to life in a given era represented by art for the perceiver who can identify with this attitude emotionally.

Wharton's visit to Bourges cathedral is described along the dual-order pattern of understanding visual art. The elements of the place are not special because one by one they are not exceptional (ibid.). Still, the five portals, the ancient glass, the nave and the aisles produce the effect together as "a fortunate accidental mingling of many of the qualities that predominate in this or that more perfect structure" (Wharton 1908, p. 71). Again, there is more to the impression than the sum of stylistic detail: an emotion, a sensation (Wharton 1908, p. 70), a spell of "spiritual suggestion" (ibid.) that in this instance evokes the mystical devotion (Wharton 1908, p. 71) that moved medieval Christianity.

Wharton calls the emotional effect triggered by visual art the spell of "spiritual suggestion" (Wharton 1908, p. 70) connected to "mystical devotion which issues

from the very heart of Christianity" (ibid.) The problem with this "suggestion," however, is the extent to which it is communicable. For Wharton, the impression at Bourges presents a "less expressible side of the influence of the Middle Ages, the power that built mighty monuments but also created other houses where the spirits of the saints might dwell." (Wharton 1908, p. 72). Again, the material expression does not equal the spiritual suggestion that is to be experienced by the viewer on the spot, as a response, as a fleeting emotion.

If spiritual suggestion in the second order of the mind is an emotional experience, it is no wonder that later on, when she writes about Rheims cathedral, she names the first and second orders of the mind as "the technical way of feeling" and "the *sentimental* way of feeling" in the visual arts, respectively (Wharton 1908, p. 177, emphasis mine). Firstly, the technical way of seeing involves a specialist who is interested in technical detail and cannot recognize the validity of another way of feeling at all (ibid.). Secondly, the sentimental way of feeling aims at taking in the total effect of art as stimulating sensations, setting up a movement of associated ideas (ibid.). The movement of associated ideas experienced by the sentimental way of feeling leads to a deep assimilated experience, a vivid synthesis of the past. Wharton makes the point that a sense of the connection to the past is not technical knowledge alone (Wharton 1908, p. 180). In the case of Rheims, the movement of associated ideas is linked to the Gothic spirit and a synthesis of the Gothic past. Naturally, this is performed not by a specialist but by an amateur in spite of the specialist's dismissal of the sentimental way of feeling.

Wharton therefore contends that the visual arts should be considered through the sentimental way of feeling. A technical way of considering them fails to understand the significance of technical detail in arts that lie between thought and sense. The technical appreciation starts out with the idea that:

> thought and its formulation are indivisible […] therefore, the only critic capable of appreciating the beauty of a great work of architecture is he who can resolve it into its component parts, understand the relation they bear to each other and not only reconstruct them mentally but conceive of them in a different relation, and visualize the total result of such modifications (Wharton 1908, p. 178).

In contrast, Wharton stresses the need for "historical association" (ibid.) in the visual arts.

The critical skill Wharton performs and calls 'sentimental feeling' in her descriptions of visual art is linked to the way she thinks Americans should understand history (Wharton 1908, p. 11). This appreciation or understanding presupposes an awareness of the past by the perceiver, and this is what makes appreciation valuable. The sensibility that the sentimental way of understanding art cultivates is connected to a sense of historical continuity in the perceiver:

> an approximate acquaintance with the conditions producing the building, the structural theories that led up to it, their meaning, their evolution, their relation to the moral and mental growth of the builders – indeed, it may be affirmed

that this amount of familiarity with the past is necessary for any genuine aesthetic enjoyment (Wharton 1908, pp. 178–179).

For Wharton, the significance of technical detail in the visual arts lies in a connectedness to the past. This connection to the past can, in turn, only be appreciated by the observer who can recreate the links between present and past in special moments of experience. This aesthetic experience of historical continuity can often emerge in France, where material representations of historical continuity abound and are respected.

From the perspective of aesthetic theory, Wharton's *Motor-flight* aims at documenting the emergence of the aesthetic experience of continuity in the French context focusing on visual, primarily architectural, examples. *French ways and their meaning* discusses 'continuity' as the main value of French culture, which is described, as noted earlier, as a "sense of the past" (Wharton 1919, p. 97) in the present that Americans have yet to learn to appreciate. This model of French cultural continuity encoded in material culture is used in Wharton's wartime account of the devastated French countryside written for an isolationist American audience.

War and cultural destruction in *Fighting France*

Wharton's wartime essays about the situation in France had been written and published well before the United States joined the conflict in 1917. The essays were reissued as a book under the title *Fighting France* in 1915. Wharton took five trips to inspect the state of the hospitals behind the front line to four areas: to Verdun in the North-East, to Lorraine and the Vosges in the East, to western Belgium in the North, and finally further East of the Vosges to Alsace. She agreed to write about her impressions in essays for *Scribners' Magazine* "to bring down to American readers the dreadful realities of war" (Wharton 1934, p. 352). Wharton's specific aim was not only to inform but also to influence the American public and change its neutral position to the war (Blazek 2008, p. 11). As part of the job of the eye-witness, Joanna Scutts argues, "Wharton's central challenge lies in getting near enough to 'the war' to truly be in a position to observe and represent it" (Scutts 2014, para. 17). Wharton wrote six essays altogether: an introductory piece about the outbreak of war in Paris, four reports from the different war fronts, and a concluding section on the "French tone" of resistance. When read in comparison to *Motor-flight*, Wharton's *Fighting France* reports on how the war's destruction and meaninglessness interfere with the continuity of French culture. Is it possible to destroy this continuity? The symbols of continuity: cathedrals, cultivated land-scapes, houses are certainly destroyed by war. What happens to their cultural value? How do the French react to the danger that war poses to their cultural ideals? Wharton's collection of articles represents war in terms of its threat to historical continuity and eventually reasserts that French national courage defies the destruction on the level of ideas but needs practical help.

Wharton defines war as a factor that stops the everyday flow of time and blocks the historical continuity of culture (Wharton 1919, p. 13). For Wharton, life arrested by war appears in different kinds of silences. Already at the outbreak of the war, the arrest of life is recorded in Paris as an "impression of suspended life" (Wharton 1915, p. 24). At Poperinghe, the arrest of life "symbolized the senseless paralysis of a whole nation's activities," a forgetfulness of the past "like a mind from which memory has gone" (Wharton 1915, p. 157, 156). Wharton records that "the paralysis of the bombarded towns is one of the most tragic results of the invasion" (Wharton 1915, p. 184) The most vivid architectural metaphor of *Fighting France*, according to Hazel Hutchison, is connected to the experience of arrested town life at Cassel. Here Hutchison highlights the description of the big siege gun at Dixmude: "a noise that may be compared—if the human imagination can stand the strain—to the simultaneous closing of all the shop shutters in the world" (Wharton 1915, p. 161, qtd. in Hutchison 2015, p. 87). Hutchison writes that Wharton was not allowed to see horrors of the front, but she could hear and represent the sounds of war. In addition, desolation is also manifested in silences, like in the section "In the North": "the mournful hush of Dunkerque was even more oppressive than the death-silence of Ypres" (Wharton 1919, pp. 174–175). In this representation, war stops time artificially, and the resulting arrested life means a middle position between life and death that is silent and difficult to talk about.

In *Fighting France* the war experience does not simply mean the arrest of life but rather an ambiguity between an old and a new sense of reality. Wharton experiences the arrest of life in juxtaposition to everyday life, finding difficult to believe that war in the present is actually the new real, "the whole huge and oppressive and unescapable fact of the war" (Wharton 1915, p. 89). Wharton reflects on how war changes what we consider real in a series of comments on what seems real or unreal to her whilst travelling.

The duality of the old reality and new reality in war seems to be a simple incongruity at first. When in a bourgeois country house near Nancy, commandeered by a General, a bedroom is turned into a study with "sturdy provincial furniture littered with war-maps, trench-plans, aeroplane-photographs and all the documentation of modern war," and where the garden blooms as the "untroubled continuance of placid and orderly bourgeois life" (Wharton 1915, p. 107), the two sides just do not fit. So it is at the front near Rheims or in the Vosges, where death is lurking from the enemy lines but the countryside is peaceful and it is difficult to imagine the danger (Wharton 1915, pp. 184, 197–199). Yet the two sides turn against each other very quickly, as in the case of Ypres, where Wharton sees a defaced house to which people might have been coming back any minute, but right then the crash of guns begins and the presence and dominance of war is reasserted (Wharton 1915, p. 153). At Cassel the inhabitants are slumbering in their provincial sleep while "infernal flowers," i.e. white flashes from bombs, open and shut in the background (Wharton 1915, p. 149), and pose an immediate threat to provincial normality.

The duality of the old and new senses of reality in war is also reasserted at Châlons. Nightfall finds the travellers in the war zone without a valid permit. It is only with the help of an old friend "from before the war" that they can wander

around to find their lodgings. The double nature of the war situation is striking when old realities are reasserted for a short time as a fleeting "vision" of the past:

> I stood there in the pitch-black night, suddenly unable to believe that I was I, or Châlons Châlons, or that a young man who in Paris drops into dine with me and talk over new books and plays, had been whispering a password in my ear to carry me unchallenged to a house a few streets away! The *sense of unreality* produced by that one word was so overwhelming that for a blissful moment the whole fabric of what I had been experiencing, the whole huge and oppressive and unescapable fact of the war, slipped away like a torn cobweb, and I seemed to see behind it the reassuring face of things as they used to be. The next morning dispelled that vision (Wharton 1915, pp. 88–89, emphasis mine).

The old sense of reality from before the war comes back for a fleeting moment, with a sense of unreality connected to its incongruous appearance in the present. For this fleeting moment, the new reality of the war experience withdraws. However, the appearance of the past is dispelled quickly by broad daylight. War is indeed a fact and a new reality, and what had been real before the war and during the night is now only a vision of the night. There is no turning back, war and its new reality seem inescapable.

The ambiguous co-presence of the old and the new senses of reality remains a central feature of Wharton's rendering of her war experience. William Blazek writes that the ambiguity of a hidden reality and of a more accessible unreality of the Western front is a key feature of *Fighting France* (Blazek 2008, pp. 12–13). In a similar vein, Olin-Ammentorp claims that Wharton's shaken old sense of reality is central to her experience of war and that, in *Fighting France,* Wharton struggles to understand war that "nearly obliterated civilization," i.e. the old sense of the real (Olin-Ammentorp 2004, pp. 26–27). That is why she relates "experience after experience where she must learn anew that the old reality no longer obtains" (Olin-Ammentorp 2004, p. 30).

The struggle to understand the new reality of war is also manifest during her visit to the trenches. In the trenches the tension between old reality and new reality is far from stable. When visiting the first line of the fighting, Wharton looks around with the "sense of an all pervading, invisible power of evil, the saturation of the whole landscape with some hidden vitriol of hate", but soon "the reaction of unbelief set in", as she looked around and felt she wss in an everyday, harmless valley (Wharton 1915, p. 133). In other words, the war is invisible for her in the trenches "[…] of all this, nothing was really perceptible or comprehensible to me. As far as my own observation went, we might have been a hundred miles from the valley we had looked down on. […] all this was infinitely less real and terrible than the cannonade above the disputed village. The artillery had ceased and the air as full of summer murmurs" (Wharton 1915, p. 215). What she can observe behind the trenches does not fit the notion of the new real she has experienced so far, therefore she struggles to glimpse the war and its new terrible reality that here remains invisible. Jean Gallagher comments on this specific passage that when Wharton sees nothing and a soldier shows her where to find the enemy, "the soldier's gestures make the

invisible enemy real for both author and audience" (Gallagher 1998, p. 24). Gallagher adds that this incongruity of experience and new reality Wharton describes forms a gap in her supposed unified writerly position of propaganda (Gallagher 1998, p. 26), as Wharton's representation leaves a margin of the unknown to the depiction. Gallagher's description of the margin of the unknown in her war experience can be formulated in terms of the old reality—new reality opposition that has been traced though Wharton's text so far. Wharton takes a reflective and meditative stance towards the nature of the new reality and towards her role as a witness, and this stance goes beyond the need for clear and distinctive images of right or wrong required in war propaganda.

The incongruity of actual experience and the new sense of reality becomes intolerable. In the case of the Chasseur Alpin, Wharton and company are looking at Alsace from a point above the plateau when a soldier warns them they are fully visible from the German lines and they hastily retreat. Afterwards a picnic luncheon in the perfect sunshine scene loses its old normal meaning:

> As we sat there in the grass, swept by a great mountain breeze full of the scent of thyme and myrtle, while the flutter of birds, the hum of insects, the still and busy life of the hills went on all about us in the sunshine, the pressure of the encircling line of death grew more intolerably real. *It is not in the mud and jokes and every-day activities of the trenches that one most feels the damnable insanity of war*; it is where it lurks like a mythical monster *in scenes to which the mind has always turned for rest* (Wharton 1915, p. 200, emphases mine).

War is comprehended here as an invisible but all-encompassing threat to everyday habits and assurances. The new reality of war is a projected relation to things, an awareness of danger, always being on the alert, watching for the underlying danger behind the deceptively normal and harmless surface of ordinary things. This new reality is a fear of the well-known that can collapse any minute, limiting everyday life.

Similarly, this watchful awareness is focused upon by the image of trench warfare by soldiers' sleepless watching. At the end of her essay "In Alsace" she writes: "little by little, there came over me the sense of that mute reciprocal watching from trench to trench: the interlocked state of innumerable pairs of eyes, stretching on, mile after mile, along the whole sleepless line from Dunkerque to Belfort" (Wharton 1915, p. 216). She imagines soldiers in the silent, seemingly normal night watching out for signs of an offensive all along the line of the trenches. The soldiers on duty, from the outside, are engaged in a meditation of the night landscape, but because of the "insanity of war" they are watching out for the collapse of the seeming old normality and peace that can occur any minute. The powerful image of soldiers watching each other epitomizes the sense of war Wharton glimpses in her reports.

Wharton's very last vision of the front captures a similar image of an ordinary sight replete with invisible danger. She records "the picture of a shelled house where a few men, who sat smoking and playing cards in the sunshine, had orders to hold out to the death rather than let their fraction of the front be broken" (ibid.). In these two scenes, the historical continuity manifested in a seemingly peaceful

landscape or sight is underpinned by the awareness of danger threatening that continuity.

In *Fighting France* war is real and present in that it can change the usual historical value of an object or situation to something devoid of connection any minute. But it is difficult to determine the actual scope of the transformation war brings. Between the Vosges and Lorraine, further contradictory scenes of ordered activities in war "bring home to the bewildered spectator the utter impossibility of picturing how the thing *really happens*" (Wharton 1919, p. 209). Potential chaos and actual order are juxtaposed when she describes French soldiers toiling away as diligent and orderly ants. This is further demonstrated in her description of the 'trapper colony' that the French soldiers create for themselves in the forest (Wharton 1915, p. 208, 210). It is an utterly civilized space complete with cabins, paths, flower-bed and wood chapel—a quarter of a mile from the hell of the trenches near the borders of Lorraine. It is this unpredictable duality of an old normality and the new madness of war that is difficult for Wharton to visualize and verbalize. Gallagher writes that in this scene "the juxtaposition of almost domestic activities and the potential for wounding begins to refract the unified writerly gaze" (Gallagher 1998, p. 26). From the perspective of continuity, the juxtaposition is that of the old order of the world and the threat of its destruction by war, creating a new reality. In this scene the old and new senses of reality appear together; their co-presence propels the self-referential remarks about the limitations of expression.

Formulating the war experience

Wharton's formulation of her war experience is linked to her architectural vision. Wharton draws upon conventions of travel writing as evidenced in *A motor-flight* in her later work, *Fighting France*, particularly in the way she describes landscapes, towns, sights and objects of visual art. The co-presence of the old reality of pre-war France and the new reality of war-time France can be clearly seen in both her descriptions of sites and destroyed buildings. About Wharton's use of familiar architectural elements in new contexts, Mary Suzanne Scriber writes that in *Fighting France* old familiar elements of travel writing are juxtaposed to scenes of destruction. Through this process, the old romance of travel becomes "a nightmare journey" (Schriber 1999, p. 143), travel writing "in the tradition of the grotesque" (Schriber 1999, p. 143). William Blazek also comments on Wharton's reliance on images of destroyed buildings but he takes this further in his focus on the wartime text. Blazek states that the strongly referential observations of the book constitute a way to "emphasize the real loss of civil society and the tearing of old bonds between people and the places where they live" (Blazek 2008, p. 13). I agree with Blazek that Wharton's account both records the damage war does and performs a defence of French civilization that is being threatened by the Germans war destruction. Wharton's architectural vision juxtaposes familiar objects and sites of travel to sites of war destruction like landscapes, towns and churches in order to drive home the scope of cultural loss. However, the architectural vision also records possibilities of continuity, with the overall effect that the account exemplifies not

only the material destruction of war but also the prevalence of cultural continuity in the cultivated landscape and in the built environment, like growth and work in gardens, new functions for old architectural sites, and also old functions in new settings. Later on in *French ways* the image of the ruined house that occurs in *Fighting France* repeatedly offers the possibility of new insight into French manners (Wharton 1919, pp. v–vi).

As the first element of travel writing, Wharton shows how the look of the landscape changes in war. In *A motor-flight* the landscape in the French countryside bore the sign of centuries of French peasants working the land (Wharton 1908, p. 37). In *Fighting France*, their attachment to the land is a re-statement of the earlier observation in Motor-flight (Wharton 1915, p. 3), and later on this will accentuate the contrast of the land that is left fallow or is dotted by graves, or lines mar its surface where fighting had taken place, like at Meaux (Wharton 1915, p. 24). Another effect of war is the removal of road signs to confuse outsiders to the region. The fields are dotted by graves the plough has to avoid. However, later on in the spring she reports that "the landscape, in its first sweet leafiness, is so alive with ploughing and sowing and all the natural tasks of spring, that the war scars seem like traces of a long-past woe" (Wharton 1915, p. 97). The war is not past yet, of course, but ordinary life resumes in the fields nevertheless, and by "circling the graves" (ibid.) it respects but minimizes the traces of war.

Another defamiliarized element of travel writing incorporated in *Fighting France* is the presentation of towns that draws upon metaphors of death and disease. In the war text, destruction in the towns is rendered through personification. The bombardment in Dunkerque, for example, is likened to human wounds. With its silence and emptiness, the ruin of Ypres resembles a "disemboweled corpse" (Wharton 1915, p. 152). At Gerbéviller the combined earthquake and tornado of destruction resulted in a "martyr" town (Wharton 1915, p. 98). A town in the Vosges is almost dead but for the faint traces of life that go on regardless of military orders to evacuate (Wharton 1915, p. 123). In Nieuport, the old part of the town looks as if it had survived a "prehistoric cataclysm" (Wharton 1915, p. 166), while the new part looks as if it had died of "colic" (Wharton 1915, p. 167). The arrest of life is visualized as the threat to human life objectified in the form of "dead" (Wharton 1915, p. 94) towns.

The personified rendering of ruined houses is another telling sign of human loss. At Dunkerque, a house with its front torn away is represented as poor and painful, "like some poor humdrum person suddenly exposed in the glare of great misfortune" in stark contrast to the damage done to the cathedral, which represents dignity and martyrdom (Wharton 1915, p. 174). A similar sight at Ypres functions as a metonymy of human loss:

> some house fronts are sliced clean off with the different stories exposed, as if for the stage-setting of a farce. In these exposed interiors the poor little household gods shiver and blink like owls surprised in a hollow tree. A hundred signs of intimate and humdrum states, of humdrum pursuits, of family association, cling to the unmasked walls. Whiskered photographs fade on morning-glory wallpapers, plaster saints pine under glass bells, antimacassars

> droop from plush sofas, yellowing diplomas display their seals on office walls. It was all so still and familiar that it seemed as if the people for whom these things had a meaning might at any moment come back and take up their daily business (Wharton 1915, p. 153).

The front wall and door that had linked the outside of the house and its interior have vanished, a sign of the loss of an "inwardly protected domestic order" that would be provided by doors in a Whartonian domestic architecture (Luria 1997, p. 309). The list of familiar objects once so close to the humans who had inhabited these houses now intensifies the effect of destruction: not only are the spaces and objects ruined and their inhabitants absent, but also the meaning that connected objects and humans have become lost in the rubble. We can find a similar list of objects functioning as signs of destruction at Auve, the first ruined village Wharton sees. Here the destruction of the community is described like the house with the torn front above:

> The photographs on the walls, the twigs of withered box above the crucifixes, the old wedding dresses in brass-clamped trunks, the bundles of letters laboriously written and as painfully deciphered, all the thousand and one bits of the past that give meaning and continuity to the present – of all that accumulated warmth nothing was left but a brick-heap and some twisted stove pipes! (Wharton 1915, p. 58)

The ruins indicate that the community is smashed together with its relation to the past, and it is the end of this historical continuity that is expressed by the list of objects without their usual meaning in the description. Devoid of their context, these objects are without function, as there is no need for them to link anyone to the memory of family or other forms of continuity anymore. Wharton provides the context and meaning of the objects in this passage. The exposed interiors provide a glimpse into the everyday life of families which has been ruptured violently.

In contrast, gardens linked to the houses represent a possibility of a new start. Wharton's third essay, on the Vosges, begins with a meditation on flowers and gardens among "murdered houses" (Wharton 1915, p. 93). Despite the ruins, "everywhere we have seen flowers and vegetables springing up in freshly raked and watered gardens. My pink peonies were not introduced to point the stale allegory of unconscious Nature veiling Man's havoc: they are put on my first page as a symbol of conscious human energy coming back to replant and rebuild the wilderness" (Wharton 1915, pp. 93–94). At Gerbéviller the major and his family live in the cellar of their ruined house, tending their garden, and give Wharton peonies. In the small villages that suffered from the fight the previous year "new life was budding everywhere" (Wharton 1915, p. 94): hammers sounded, masons were at work, gardens produced lettuces and reddishes, even "an ancient tram-car had been converted into a café and labelled: "Au Restaurant des Ruines'" (Wharton 1915, 95). At the market of Dunkerque, the same "unbreakable human spirit" (Wharton 1915, p. 175) reasserts itself in the bargaining around the makeshift stalls. The arrest of life breaks as everyday life resumes, and continuity reasserts itself through

human energy in the form of familiar objects of everyday French life like lettuces and cafés.

Typical of the possibility of a new start is the situation at the riverside garden of the Premonstratensian monastery. The monastery is now the hospital and asylum for the town, where the human wreckage of the front is gathered (Wharton 1915, p. 112). Between the formal lines of its classical French garden, shells had made hollows, but life goes on, even in the building which is ruined in places. However, since it is immense, when one part is wrecked, the inmates move to another wing and continue their activities.

The potential of resuming life appears in the context of familiar French cathedrals and churches as well that acquire new war functions. The first section of the book begins with a well-known image of the cathedral at Chartres, an impression of light and colour that is the representation of ethereal harmonies, symbolic of life on earth, rich with meaning:

> [The cathedral] seemed to symbolize the life on earth, with its shadows, its heavy distances and its little islands of illusion. All that a great cathedral can be, all the meanings it can express, all the tranquillizing power it can breathe upon the soul, all the richness of detail it can fuse into a large utterance of strength and beauty, the cathedral of Chartres gave us in that perfect hour (Wharton 1915, p. 5).

The image is familiar from *A motor-flight*, that of the cathedral as a symbol of continuity. Wharton provides the ideal response of an amateur art-historian: an emotional reaction to the cathedral's "word" through a reverence for the effort that has gone into its creation and an impression of the spiritual source of the material structure (as seen in Sect. 2). The description of the cathedral at Chartres fits those at Amiens and Bourges in *Motor-flight*. However, in the first section of *Fighting France*, Chartres cathedral signifies what is to be destroyed by war, the image of the cathedral stands in opposition to the losses to be enumerated in the book later on; more specifically the destruction of Rheims cathedral and other churches in ruins in the subsequent chapters.[5] The perfection of Chartres cathedral before the war will be impossible to find in the ruined churches and other architectural objects of the war zone.

As the new version of the once familiar cathedral, Rheims cathedral represents the tragic result of war destruction. When the bombardment began, the west front of the building was covered in scaffolding, which caught fire and the church burnt down. What remains has little to do with the tranquillizing power of Chartres. Here, too, one finds extraordinary colors (Wharton 1915, p. 185), but the impression here is not of continuity but of evanescence:

[5] Edith Wharton confines herself to the moment of her visit to Chartres in July 1914 and does not overtly write in the knowledge of what happened in Reims just seven weeks later. Also, "The Look of Paris" was written and published before the essay "In Alsace" and before the decision was made to collate the essays into a book. She knew about the first bombing of Reims (September 20 1914) when she wrote the first essay but she did not know then that she would be able later in 1915 to visit Reims. Therefore the glaring contrast between the two images cannot be intentional but rather follows the discursive logic of the text: it is linked to the use of elements of travel writing and to the use of architectural vision.

> the knowledge that this is the beauty of disease and death, that every one of the transfigured statues must crumble under the autumn rains, that every one of the pink and golden stones is already eaten away to the core, that the Cathedral of Rheims is glowing and dying before us like a sunset (Wharton 1919, p. 186).

Instead of representing strength and life, this structure represents "disease and death." Instead of the usual old ethereal associations, it is now newly ephemeral.

In terms of the pre-war cultural value of historical continuity, Rheims cathedral is the material form that carries additional cultural meaning. When the everyday flow of time is not interrupted, its interpreters can listen to its story of the past, respond to it emotionally, and their reverence for it links the past to the present. At the time of war, however, responses are different. Now the cathedral is in ruins, 'dying.' There is no word from it to listen to, the cathedral has lost its usual added meaning. Still, there is an emotional reaction from Wharton: the sentimental way of feeling for the cathedral's ultimate value, namely continuity, is turned instead into an experience of the loss of continuity.

Devastation, however, does not prevail everywhere, and, similar to gardens and houses, churches not only lose old functions but also gain new ones. Churches, for instance, are turned into hospitals. This is the case at the church in Blercourt, where healing and a service go on in parallel: "the sick under their earth-colored blankets, … the black dresses of the women, … and the silver haze floating out of the little acolyte's censer" (Wharton 1915, p. 69). In contrast, at a village on the bank of the Meuse, fifteen hundred sick are housed in a church, which is turned into a mere stable for the sick bedded down on the stone floor like cattle (Wharton 1915, p. 79). At Nieuport the cathedral is in ruins, but under its flank dead soldiers are buried in rows, still maintaining the last old function of providing burial ground (Wharton 1915, p. 168), preserving continuity.

Conclusion

This essay has discussed Edith Wharton's *Fighting France* as an alternative literary representation of the Great War. Unlike literary accounts by male writers legitimized by their author's actual experience of the trenches, *Fighting France* relies on the language of travel texts from before the war. A comparison between *Fighting France* and its pre-war predecessor, *A motor-flight,* reveals their mutual reliance on an architectural vision when charting scenes of travel: she uses architecture to express civilization, culture and continuity. Wharton's pre-war travel text relies on this architectural vison of French cultural continuity which entails a double coding of objects of visual art: they have a material-aesthetic side and a spiritual-moral side or value. In *Fighting France* war destruction is shown not through human suffering directly but through the damage to the built environment. Spaces used for illustrating war destruction are familiar from earlier travel texts, the ruin or destruction of the familiar creates an amplified effect, often enhanced through personification. Taking Wharton's pre-war model of visual art into account in the war text explains the spiritual or moral value of ruined architectural spaces

displayed in it. Wharton illustrates that the spiritual value for which objects of visual art stand cannot be destroyed by war or disappear.

The feeling of unreality to which Wharton repeatedly refers forms a major part of her representation of her war experience. An old sense of reality in which continuity prevailed is replaced by a new sense of reality where relations stop and continuity is lost. The loss of continuity is recorded in the material disruption of the built environment. However, there are instances when Wharton feels the return of the old reality she has known, and at such ambiguous instances she detects what she calls 'a sense of unreality.' She knows the old reality or signs of continuity may disappear at any moment to be replaced by a new reality, of lost order. She evokes the familiar in her descriptions of the war zone: familiar elements of travel writing and familiar domestic scenes which lose their old meaning in the war context.

In *Fighting France* the non-combatant female artist reports her experience of the war zone through the familiar language of travel and of domestic spaces within the new reality of war. The interplay of the two 'realities,' the old reality of peace and the new reality of war, forms a basic rhetorical device in the narrative that drives home to its non-combatant American readers the extent of cultural destruction the war represents.

The essay argues that despite Wharton's shock at the material destruction of the architecturally encoded signs of continuity, she repeatedly finds traces of a French historical continuity expressed in the reappearance of ordered gardens, in buildings endowed with new functions, in people's activities, even in the French military camp with spaces that locate all the functions of civilized social life French culture has produced through centuries. So the early bewildering feeling of unreality connected to a lingering sense of an old reality in the book is replaced by the impression that historical continuity reasserts itself as life starts again among the ruins, right behind the trenches, in the fields, and in people's everyday activities.

Wharton's war account *Fighting France* is a travel text that illustrates French spiritual resilience to the material destruction of the Great War and asserts the superiority of French civilization. At the same time, it visually records the shocking and wasteful material destruction of the cultivated or built environment her American readers know so well from their travel books in order to alert isolationist Americans to the pressing need to intervene in the conflict. Despite the clear stance for intervention, the text goes beyond a simple assertion of a need for war to defend civilization. Through its repeated attempts to articulate the nature of war in a series of visual images I named Wharton's architectural vision, *Fighting France* offers a meditation on what war destroys and what it threatens to bring for the non-combatant.

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