Mimesis and Moral Agency in Wharton's *The House of Mirth*

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> 'Talk of love making people jealous and suspicious–it's nothing to social ambition! Louisa used to lie awake at night wondering whether the women who called on us called on *me* because I was with her, or on *her* because she was with me; and she was always laying traps to find out what I thought.' (*The House of Mirth* 250-51) Undine was fiercely independent and yet passionately imitative. She wanted to surprise every one by her dash and originality, but she could not help modelling herself on the last person she met and the confusion of ideals thus produced caused her much perturbation when she had to choose between two courses. (*The Custom of the Country* 13)There were certain things that had to be done, and if done at all, done handsomely and thoroughly; and one of these, in the old New York code, was the tribal rally around a kinswoman about to be eliminated from the tribe…. It was the old New York way of taking life "without effusion of blood." (*The Age of Innocence* 334-35)

Recent criticism of Edith Wharton's novel *The House of Mirth* has focused on describing the ways in which its central character's fate has been shaped by the capitalist values of her society or by its patriarchal power structures (Dimock; Robinson; Restuccia; Fetterley; Wolff). In one form or another, these interpretations depict Lily Bart as a victim and stress the deterministic character of Wharton's work. Absent from these readings is an effort to understand the author's attempts to suggest hope and transcendence even in a naturalistic environment. In this essay, I will examine *The House of Mirth* through René Girard's theory of mimetic desire and through some fundamental concepts of Generative Anthropology worked out in the writings of Eric Gans. Central to Girard's thought is the theory of "mimetic desire" developed in his first book *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* (1961) and elaborated in his later works. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on Girard's treatment of the rival: "In desiring an object the rival alerts the subject to the

desirability of the object. The rival, then, serves as a model for the subject, not only in regard to such secondary matters as style and opinions but also, and more essentially, in regard to desires" (*Violence and the Sacred* 145). Because of the mimetic nature of the subject-rival relationship, two desires converging on the same object are bound to clash. Violence, for Girard, is the product of a mimetic rivalry whose reciprocity can be stopped only by a community's turn against a surrogate victim. But while Girard sees violence as the primary element of human mimesis, Gans maintains that the human begins with the renunciation, or more precisely, the deferral of violence: "Since every individual poses a potential threat to the existence of the human community, the renunciation of violence by each of its individual members is the constantly renewed foundation of this community" (*Originary Thinking* 3). An extension of Girard's model of the mimetic crisis, Generative Anthropology—through an analysis of such categories as desire, language, the esthetic, the sacred, and the religious—tries to answer the question, "What is the human?"

The House of Mirth, probably the best known and the most closely analyzed of Wharton's works, chronicles the social adventures in the life of its central character. Lily Bart, beautiful but still single at age twenty-nine, must outdo her rivals and find a wealthy husband if she is to maintain her place in fashionable New York society. But much of the novel's power derives from Lily's unwillingness to realize the future she seems so clearly destined for; as one of the story's perceptive characters puts it, "she works like a slave preparing the ground and sowing the seed; but the day she ought to be reaping the harvest she oversleeps herself or goes off on a picnic" (189). What makes Lily "despise" some of her own desires, and what drives her to give up a rare opportunity to establish her position firmly in the house of mirth? To grasp the significance of Lily's actions, especially her decision to opt out of her mimetic rivalry with Bertha Dorset, we need to consider the novel in light of Wharton's strong sense that the human begins when the individual renounces mimetic desire and her equally strong feeling that mimetic rivalry is inimical to human reason. By focusing my analysis on the workings and manifestations of desire, that most fundamental motive of human behaviour, and by underlining Lily's agency, I wish to move the discussion beyond the Lily-as-victim school of interpretation and to salvage a sense of hope and morality in a novel that is quite bleak and that has been too often solely read as such.

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Wharton depicts New York's old aristocracy in *The House of Mirth* as an undesirable model of behaviour. After her parents' death, the question of who is to become Lily's guardian threatens to remain unsolved until Mrs. Peniston offers to "try her for a year." The other relatives are relieved, but are unaware of the aunt's motives: "It would have been impossible for Mrs. Peniston to be heroic on a desert island," Wharton notes, "but with the eyes of her little world upon her she took a certain pleasure in her act" (36). The social posturing, reflected in the discrepancy between the theatrical gesture and the private

feelings, is elicited by the presence of others. Mrs. Peniston, who never lights the lamps in her huge house unless there is “company” (101), has erected the social into a religion, a distortion that has earned her “an unequalled familiarity with the secret chronicles of society” (123), whose fluctuations she eagerly watches “from the secluded watch-tower of her upper window” (120). But in spite of the “panoramic sweep” of her mind, Mrs. Peniston fails in being her niece’s keeper, for in moments of need, Lily’s “relation with her aunt was as superficial as that of chance lodgers who pass on the stairs” (148). Later, when Mrs. Peniston forsakes Lily, her action is dictated by an anxious concern for social approval–a concern that overrides family obligations, distorts life’s natural relations, and allows anger to triumph over understanding. While she does not even try to ascertain the truth of the rumours about Lily, she chooses to have faith in gossip and to harbour “a settled deposit of resentment against her niece” (127), which ultimately pushes her to disinherit Lily.

Other members of Lily’s family are also victims of this social obsession. When Lily was nineteen, she suggested to her mother buying fresh flowers for the luncheon-table: “Mrs. Bart stared. Her own fastidiousness had its eyes fixed on the world, and she did not care how the luncheon-table looked when there was no one present at it but the family” (31). The yearning for social prestige has re-directed Mrs. Bart’s feelings so much that she grows resentful when the social success of her rivals serves to magnify her own failure. After her husband’s death, Mrs. Bart is ready to sacrifice her daughter, studying Lily’s beauty “with a kind of passion, as though it were some weapon she had slowly fashioned for her vengeance” (34). In her desperate struggle for what she deems her rightful place in New York society, Mrs. Bart can imagine only one use for her daughter’s beauty. As we shall see later, Lily’s distinction lies precisely in her ability to transcend such crude ambitions.

Among Lily’s friends, such transcendence is unimaginable. Judy Trenor, for instance, “seemed to exist only as a hostess…. because she could not sustain life except in a crowd…. [and] knew no more personal emotion than that of hatred for the woman who presumed to give bigger dinners or have more amusing house-parties than herself” (40). For Judy, whose Bellomont party begins the social activities in the story, life’s possibilities have been narrowed to a single public function and her emotions channelled into an absolute hatred for her rivals. Clearly, Judy has distorted the meaning of kindness and generosity traditionally associated with hospitality, since her extravagant dinners and “amusing” parties are intended to awe friends and intimidate rivals.

Judy’s major rival is another society hostess, Maria Van Osburgh, and the competition between the two is all the more intense because never publicly acknowledged. Judy’s desire to triumph over Maria can be understood when we remember that in the social stratification depicted in the novel, the Van Osburghs represent the ‘best’ New York family. Before her party, Mrs. Trenor is worried because her social secretary is away: “‘It was simply inhuman of Pragg to go off now…. She says her sister is going to have a baby—as if that were anything to having a house-party!… And this week is going to be a horrid failure too—and

Gwen Van Osburgh will go back and tell her mother how bored people were'" (41). The poverty of Mrs. Trenor's existence is captured in that strange reversal: a house-party seems more important, because socially more gratifying, than the birth of a baby. But although she hopes to avoid being accused of giving boring parties, Judy's speech, punctuated by so many 'ands,' betrays a dull lifestyle. Judy's worries are, however, not unfounded because Maria Van Osburgh has managed to plant her spies at the party. The clearest example of Judy's imitative conduct is her fight with Maria over the Duchess of Beltshire's sister: Lady Cressida had arrived from England with letters of introduction to the Van Osburghs, but Judy, hoping to appropriate the prestige of being the first to display a member of the English aristocracy to her class-conscious circle, manages to upstage her rival: "'I heard that Maria Van Osburgh was asking a big party to meet her this week, so I thought it would be fun to get her away.… Maria was furious, and actually had the impudence to make Gwen invite herself here, so that they shouldn't be *quite* out of it'" (41-42). The gesture of appropriation suggests selfishness and frivolity, what Judy calls "fun." In fact, the incident dramatizes the petty tricks and complicated strategies that members of fashionable society in *The House of Mirth* resort to for the sake of social prestige. In spite of, or perhaps because of, her high social status, Maria Van Osburgh herself, as her anger clearly reveals, is indeed caught up in the prevailing desire for social glory, for what Judy loosely refers to as "it."

Judy Trenor is, however, disappointed because Lady Cressida is the 'wrong' kind of notability for that time of the year. When fashionable society craves amusement, producing a clergyman's wife can only make one's party boring, as Judy has learned: "'I thought any friend of the Skiddaws' was sure to be amusing.… and it turns out that Lady Cressida is the moral [kind]'" (42). In a precipitate attempt to outwit her rival, Judy finds herself embarrassed because the "moral" has no place in her hedonistic world, one in which the characters look at each other only in light of how they can manipulate or sacrifice people in the interest of social prestige. Because the Trenors "'have to have the bishop once a year,'" Judy admits, "'[Lady Cressida] would have been so useful at the right time'" (42). People become convenient ornaments in Mrs. Trenor's circle, just as religion itself provides a mere opportunity for more social posturing.

Judy's irreverence underscores the ways in which society has become an idol for her and her set, while religion is a matter of social *form* mechanically enacted: "The observance of Sunday at Bellomont was chiefly marked by the punctual appearance of the smart omnibus destined to convey the household to the little church at the gates. Whether any one got into the omnibus or not was a matter of secondary importance…" (51). Religious devotion, Wharton implies, is reduced to the ritualized movements of the omnibus, and for Judy, the Sunday service is nothing but an irritating task. After the uproarious Bellomont party, the people who go to church, like the Wetheralls, do so mimetically: "The Wetheralls always went to church. They belonged to the vast group of human automata who go through life without neglecting to perform a single one of the gestures executed by the surrounding

puppets…—and Mr. and Mrs. Wetherall's circle was so large that God was included in their visiting-list" (52). Wharton's disdain is unmistakable for people like the Wetheralls, whose understanding of the divine is exclusively social and for whom church-going amounts to no more than a chance to be in the proximity of the rich and conspicuous.

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The desire to surpass all competitors for social recognition draws Judy into a vigilant attention to the achievements of others. While she envies Maria's supposed prestige, Mrs. Trenor also fears the story's social climbers—an insecurity reflecting the metaphysical character of fashionable society, an abstraction generated by human mediation. To understand Judy's snobbery toward the Welly Brys—newly-rich and "already thirst[ing] for new kingdoms" (188)—is to grasp what Gans terms "essential unfreedom" (*The End of Culture* 225). Under the auspices of Carry Fisher, a Society scout, the Brys organize a party replete with *tableaux vivants* and expensive music, "and society, surprised in a dull moment, succumbed to the temptation of Mrs. Bry's hospitality" (131). To publicly proclaim her superiority, Judy refuses to attend; her husband (who does attend) declares the party disappointing and the Brys mere social interlopers: "'no, no cigar for me. You can't tell what you're smoking in one of these new houses… my wife was dead right to stay away: she says life's too short to spend it in breaking in new people'" (138). Although the Trenors maintain their pretense to social superiority, their grumbling reflects resentment and fear lest the newly-rich dispossess them. In fact, the story leaves no doubt that mimetic rivalry is behind Mrs. Trenor's apparent indifference: "though she remained haughtily at Bellomont, Lily suspected in her a devouring eagerness… to learn exactly in what measure Mrs. Wellington Bry had surpassed all previous competitors for social recognition" (140); and, as another character assures Selden, "'The dimensions of the Brys' ball-room must rankle: you may be sure [Judy] knows 'em as well as if she'd been there last night with a yard-measure'" (160). Far from being a dispassionate act proclaiming her independence, Judy's absence from the party is in effect a form of presence at it. That Mrs. Trenor's behavior should be profoundly mediated through Maria Van Osburgh's "aristocratic" way of life and the dimensions of a ball-room attests to a world of fluid identities, one in which mimetic rivalries have gradually erased the differences between the various social segments and in which we witness the triumph of what Girard calls internal mediation: "When the concrete differences among men disappear or recede into the background, in any sector whatever of society, abstract rivalry makes its appearance" (*Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* 110). Describing the various groups in the story, Richard Poirier notes how "their essential qualities blend so easily into one another that there is in this novel actually no dramatized conflict of class or of social values" (*A World Elsewhere* 219). The absence of such conflicts reveals how metaphysical desire for social eminence—not the need for any concrete advantages—ultimately dissolves the differences between a Maria Van Osburgh, a Judy Trenor, and a Louisa Bry.

But of all the characters, Lily Bart has the most contradictory relation to her social world. In

"*The House of Mirth* Revisited," Diana Trilling points out that "The poignancy of [Lily's] fate lies in her doomed struggle to subdue that part of her own nature which is no better than her own culture" (109). Lily attempts to transcend the links to her social set: her crass ambitions, her snobbery, and her willingness to engage in the prevailing rivalries. But Lily's struggle is not doomed: if her decision in the second half of the novel to opt out of the mimetic rivalry with Bertha Dorset represents a social defeat, it also stands for Lily's spiritual victory, giving the novel a definite moral centre, one which many critics are unwilling to recognize.(1)

Lily's plans to entice Percy Gryce into marriage indicate the degree to which she has assimilated the ways of her acquisitive world, and when she thinks she has succeeded in securing the attentions of this wealthy and obtuse bachelor, the nature of her crude aspirations reveals how difficult it is for Lily to escape the mimetic element in desire: "She would have smarter gowns than Judy Trenor, and far, far more jewels than Bertha Dorset.… Instead of having to flatter, she would be flattered; instead of being grateful, she would receive thanks. There were old scores she could pay off.…" (49). Lily's speculations reflect how much her (unimaginative) use of wealth is mimetic, but her mediators are perhaps the two most irresponsible and selfish characters in the story—Irving Howe even calls Bertha "a ferocious bitch" ("A Reading of *The House of Mirth*" 123). In short, Lily perceives society as an end, not as an opportunity for nobler and higher possibilities of life; she contemplates using Percy's money "stupidly" (70), to quote her word.

Besides this eagerness to flaunt money, Lily is often anxious to display her beauty, her "asset" as Mrs. Bart calls it. While such readiness makes Lily vain, the need to exhibit her beauty also indicates a dependence on the outside world for the terms of her 'superiority.' As Percy dedicates his millions to drawing people's attention to himself, Lily uses her appearance to achieve a similar end. The novel makes a direct connection between the uses of money or beauty in the interest of social recognition. When it is Lily's turn to appear as Reynolds' *Mrs. Lloyd* at the Brys' party, we detect again a "certain obtuseness of feeling" (196) in the novel's central character: "the completeness of her triumph gave her an intoxicating sense of recovered power.… At such moments she lost something of her natural fastidiousness, and cared less for the quality of the admiration received than for its quantity" (136). Diana Trilling finds this novel "always and passionately a money story. It is money that rules where God, love, charity or even force of character or distinction of personality might once have ruled" (111), a claim that neglects the power of beauty in the eyes of the novel's central figure. Lily herself manipulates what is essentially an aesthetic moment so as to enjoy maximum triumph, cheapening her artistic appearance by turning it into an opportunity to impress, and, like others of her circle, is thereby involved in the process of redefining terms and debasing ideas.

One of the novel's subtle implications is that mimetic rivalry undermines human reason and that membership in the house of mirth distorts perception. Lily begins to transfigure the

objects of her desire, perceiving the “crowded selfish world of pleasure” favourably: “They were lords of the only world she cared for… Already she felt within her a stealing allegiance to their standards, an acceptance of their limitations, a disbelief in the things they did not believe in, a contemptuous pity for the people who were not able to live as they lived” (50). Lily’s assimilation of her group’s values is best captured in the loose sentence that concludes the quotation—a sentence in which the main clause is followed by three parallel constructions reflecting Lily’s relaxed attitude and the extent to which she has surrendered her freedom to others. As Wharton indicates, Lily *knowingly* espouses her group’s standards: like a faithful disciple, she is ready to alter her convictions to suit her lords’ smug perception of themselves and their arrogant expectations of others. This distorted vision takes Lily into paths of snobbery, prejudice and social rivalry. In a conversation with Selden, she remarks on how “delicious” it would be to have a flat, like Selden’s, all to oneself; when he replies that he does know a woman who lives in one, Lily interrupts him: “‘Oh, I know—you mean Gerty Farish.’ She smiled a little unkindly. ‘But I said *marriageable*—and besides, she has a horrid little place, and no maid, and such queer things to eat. Her cook does the washing and the food tastes of soap….'” (7). The snobbish tone sounds very much like Mrs. Trenor’s, for whom “horrid” is a favourite adjective. Lily has already acquired the appropriate note of disdain she assumes when speaking about those she considers socially inferior; her remarks also suggest how beauty and money constitute her guiding criteria of worth, and her ungenerous sentiments about the terms of Gerty’s life are clearly not meant to endear Lily to us.

4

A major part of the novel’s plot centers on an intense struggle between Lily Bart and Bertha Dorset. We get our first and telling glimpse of Bertha while she is looking for a seat on the Bellomont train: “‘Oh, Lily—are you going to Bellomont? Then you can’t let me have your seat, I suppose? But I *must* have a seat in this carriage—porter, you must find me a seat at once. Can’t someone be put somewhere else?'” (23). Bertha’s character is revealed in few words: utterly self-engrossed and irresponsible, Bertha, with her self-assertive tone and gestures, is all will, and, as this incident portends, has no scruples sacrificing other people to please or protect herself. Strange though it may seem, Lily considers her a model, wishing she possessed Bertha’s power with men: “the mere thought of that other woman, who could take up a man and toss him aside as she willed, without having to regard him as a possible factor in her plans, filled Lily Bart with envy” (25). Lily’s desire is aimed at Bertha’s negative form of power, at her ruthless and bull-like strength to behave as her instincts lead. In other words, Bertha’s example helps sharpen Lily’s perception of what is necessary in the pursuit of pleasure and in power struggles.(2)

The reason Lily fails to “catch” Percy Gryce has to do more with the consequences of mimetic rivalry than with “her impulsively expressed wishes to be with Selden” (221), as Poirier believes. Lily does not accompany Percy to church because she wishes to publicly

demonstrate *her* power over Selden–a deliberate response to the rumours that Selden and Bertha's affair is still alive. The story underlines Lily's entrapment in the grip of imitative desire: "Miss Bart had really meant to go to church..... but … today the whole current of her mood was carrying her toward Lawrence Selden. Why had he come? Was it to see herself or Bertha Dorset?" (53). Bertha's presence has revitalized the triangular relationship, and the day after Selden's arrival, Lily, confident in her unbounded power over men and convinced that Selden had come to see her, is surprised to find him and Bertha closeted in the Bellomont library: "Was it possible, after all, that he had come for Bertha Dorset?… But Lily was not easily disconcerted; competition put her on her mettle…" (60-61).(3) The passage illustrates the power of mimetic desire to muddle understanding, for Lily's assumptions stem from her determination to challenge Bertha's presumed hold over Selden. But although competition helps to sharpen her courage, Lily chooses not to succumb to mimetic rivalry; unlike Bertha, she refuses to be unscrupulous, even in dealings with her rival. Diana Trilling is right: "what Mrs. Wharton is captured by in Lily Bart is her ambiguity of purpose, the conflict between her good sense and the pull of spirit" (109). Lily's practical 'good sense,' determined by the laws governing social interaction in the novel, grounds her in the pervasive atmosphere of trivial ambitions, vain display, and fruitless rivalries, while her 'pull of spirit,' shaped by Selden's criticism and by Lily's lingering sense of tradition, enables her to transcend the negative forms of desire that circulate in the house of mirth.

Before examining this turning point in Lily's life, I would like to consider how a minor character, Gerty Farish—from whom Lily feels so different because, as she makes clear, "'[Gerty] likes being good, and I like being happy'" (7)—enacts in her own world what Lily undertakes on a larger scale. Though poor, Gerty is a model of compassion and generosity, and is in every respect motivated by the desire for the good. As if to test Gerty's character—and to dramatize Wharton's sense that the human begins when one renounces mimetic violence—the story unexpectedly thrusts Gerty into a quiet but passionate relationship in which she finds herself competing against Lily for Selden's love. The morning after the Brys' entertainment to which Selden had taken his cousin, Gerty begins to see herself as "the centre of a little illumination of her own" (149), only to realize that Selden had been calling on her because of her goodness to Lily. We witness Gerty's silent suffering as her "suddenly flaming jealousy" jolts her out of a contented existence, pulling her deeper into the love triangle, and profoundly altering her relations with Lily and Selden:

> And now she was thrust out [of Selden's heart], and the door barred against her by Lily's hand! ….on her bed sleep could not come, and she lay face to face with the fact that she hated Lily Bart. It closed with her in the darkness like some formless evil to be blindly grappled with. *Reason, judgment, renunciation, all the sane daylight forces*, were beaten back in the sharp struggle for self-preservation. She wanted happiness—wanted it as fiercely and unscrupulously as Lily did, but without Lily's power of obtaining it. (161-63; emphasis added)

Eric Gans explains how difficult it is for people to transcend resentment:

> The resentful imagination is a reaction against real perceptions that are painful in that they show another in the place that the self would like to occupy. Irrealizable desire is faced with the scandal of a humanly realized centrality. (*The End of Culture* 225)

Immediately after witnessing Gerty's poignant sense of bitter defeat, we see Lily knocking on Gerty's door, late at night, unaware of her friend's torment, herself exhausted and humiliated, having just narrowly escaped Gus Trenor's sexual advances: "Gerty's compassionate instincts, responding to the swift call of habit, swept aside all her reluctances…. disciplined sympathy checked the wonder on Gerty's lips, and made her draw her friend silently into the sitting-room…." (163). Compassion, unthinkable among the other characters, has become second nature to this "incorrigible missionary" (270), whose brief moral lapse prevents any inclination to perceive her as a sentimentalized figure. Although, as Girard points out, "victory over desire is extremely painful" (*Deceit*300), Gerty does not allow hatred to override generosity of spirit. When Gerty reflects over the incident, Wharton makes it clear that sublimation of resentment is constructive of the human community: "what had passed in the secrecy of [Gerty's] own breast seemed to resolve itself, when the mist of the struggle cleared, into a breaking down of the bounds of self, a deflecting of the wasted personal emotion into the general current of human understanding" (269).

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In Gerty-like manner, Lily manages to escape the mimetic element in desire. Aware of her circle's obsession with social significance, Bertha undertakes a systematic campaign of malicious gossip against Lily, resorting to "every turn of the allusive jargon which could flay its victims without the shedding of blood" (110)–confirming the view that in the psychological "struggle of consciousnesses in a universe of physical nonviolence" (*Deceit* 110), social ridicule has become the new weapon for destroying one's enemies. So, when Bertha's love-letters fall into Lily's hands, and given the rules of self-preservation governing the characters' lives, Lily would be justified if she chose to retaliate:

> … with a man of George Dorset's temper there could be no thought of condonation—the possessor of his wife's letters could overthrow with a touch the whole structure of her existence…. For a moment the irony of the coincidence tinged Lily's disgust with a confused sense of triumph. But the disgust prevailed—all her instinctive resistances, of taste, of training, of blind inherited scruples, rose against the other feeling. (104)

Lily is saved from further mimetic rivalries by the restraining hand of tradition and by her enduring sense of honour, two values that represent the only transcendence available in a society where "generosity of feeling" (307) and moral restraint have tacitly become two incomprehensible follies of the remote and forgotten past. Lily's view of experience reaches far back into time—her backward glance, so to speak—suggesting a larger sense of human

fellowship and her apprehension of "the primacy of the ethical" in human affairs (*Originary Thinking* 3), in contrast to the narcissistic outlook of a Bertha Dorset. Lily's moral imagination enables her to perceive the consequences of a simple action that could destroy the entire fabric and 'overthrow' the 'whole structure' of a person's existence.(4) The extent of Lily's shrinking from such an act is reflected in the strength of her feelings of 'disgust' and 'contamination.' The passage also attests to Lily's grasp of the ethical as a supreme human dimension and represents a scathing indictment of the novel's barbarians who, unlike Gerty and Lily, have severed their links with the past by undermining the continuity of life in the present, and who have cut themselves loose from what Wharton calls "old habits, old restraints, the land of inherited order" (147). In their chaotic scramble for social prestige, the members of Lily's set, for whom the sanctity of tradition is unthinkable, have reduced all values to questions of what Wemmick in *Great Expectations* calls 'portable property.'

Feminist critics of the novel have invariably overlooked the significance of Lily's action in burning Bertha's love letters. Frances L. Restuccia, for instance, in the widely-anthologized "The Name of the Lily: Edith Wharton's Feminism(s)," notes that "*The House of Mirth* is a feminist novel" that celebrates Lily's "irreducibility," her "indeterminacy," and her "equivocation"–aspects of character that enable Lily to elude "the attempted encapsulizations of her male observers" (407). In "The Destruction of Lily Bart: Capitalism, Christianity, and Male Chauvinism," Nancy Topping Bazin claims that "The destruction of Lily Bart is rooted in her socialization and her subsequent inability to act with conviction as her socialization dictates or totally in opposition to it" (97). Absent from such readings, obviously, is a recognition of Wharton's willingness to endow the central character with full moral agency: Lily's gesture shows no equivocation whatsoever. Lily will not become Bertha's double.

In subduing her desire for revenge, Lily also rejects the view of the social order held by Simon Rosedale, for whom the desire to enter what he perceives as the "inner paradise" (240) accounts for every one of his actions, but whose structural necessity in Wharton's novel has rarely been recognized.(5) Presented as the story's most conspicuous social-climber, Rosedale knows what he wants and is refreshingly candid about his determination to get it. He begins his social enterprise as a complete outsider, stigmatized, repeatedly snubbed, and invariably ignored. Judy Trenor expresses her circle's typical response: "he was the same little Jew who had been served up and rejected at the social board a dozen times within her memory" (16). But such an obdurate opposition actually inflames Rosedale's ambitions, for "he was prompt to perceive that the general dullness of the season afforded him an unusual opportunity to shine, and he set about with patient industry to form a background for his growing glory" (121). In a world of social antagonisms and sharp rebuffs, Rosedale, untiring in his efforts, dedicates himself to a life of steady calculation, a life in which the "right" wife would help "establish him in the bosom of the Van Osburghs and the Trenors" (239):

> ‘Why should I mind saying that I want to get into society? A man ain’t ashamed to say he wants to own a racing stable or a picture gallery. Well, a taste for society is just another kind of hobby. Perhaps I want to get even with some of the people who cold-shouldered me last year.’ (256)

Rosedale’s candour is Wharton’s attempt to speak the unspeakable and to expose the social hypocrisies of fashionable society. By the end of the story, Rosedale “had figured once or twice at the Trenor dinners, and had learned to speak with just the right note of disdain of the big Van Osburgh crushes” (241). In his triumph, Rosedale becomes a snob, imitating what appears to be the Trenors’ affected speech. If Lily refuses his marriage offer (coupled with his condition that she blackmail Bertha into silence), the decision reflects a disenchantment with a world in which ethical considerations seem incongruous: “Put by Rosedale in terms of business-like give-and-take, this understanding took on the harmless air of a mutual accommodation…. Lily’s tired mind was fascinated by this escape from fluctuating ethical estimates into a region of concrete weights and measures” (259). Richard Poirier underestimates Lily’s grasp of the “primacy of the ethical” when he claims that “Lily’s failure to carry out this blackmail is a matter less of ethics than … of her responding to impulses” (221). Even before she burns Bertha’s letters, Lily is clearly aware of her moral agency:

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> In fending off the offer [Rosedale] was so plainly ready to renew, had she not sacrificed to one of those abstract notions of honour that might be called the conventionalities of the moral life?…. why should she hesitate to make private use of the facts that chance had put in her way? After all, half the opprobrium of such an act lies in the name attached to it. Call it blackmail and it becomes unthinkable; but explain that it injures no one, and that the rights regained by it were unjustly forfeited, and he must be a formalist indeed who can find no plea in its defence. (300)

Lily’s reflections go to the heart of what ails New York society: in their desire for an “enviable” social image, the characters have subverted the dictates of the moral life and reduced human interaction to a question of ‘concrete weights and measures.’ Social supremacy rules where traditional notions of honour once prevailed; spiritual transcendence gives way to social considerations. Diana Trilling notes that “one of the subtler themes of *The House of Mirth* is the parallel Mrs. Wharton traces between Lily’s defeat and the inevitable defeat of art in a crass materialistic culture” (109). More fundamentally still, the defeat reflects the subversion of the moral life. Lily’s decision indicates her ability to apprehend the universality of values and signals her withdrawal from society’s habit of legitimizing its unethical practices: for Lily, blackmail remains blackmail no matter how one looks at it or how justifiable circumstances might make it. The nobility of Lily’s resisting such an easy course lies in the fruitlessness of her action: nobody will ever know, let alone

understand, the significance of Lily's renunciation of mimetic violence. Only Lawrence Selden will—when Lily is already dead.

It is difficult not to read *The House of Mirth*, especially in light of its last chapter, as an ironic comment on Selden's failure to perceive Lily's real nature until after her death. If the other characters manipulate one another to gratify their social ambitions, Selden is experimenting with Lily to satisfy personal theories and guesses. The opening of the novel catches him putting her intentions to the test as he spots her waiting for the Bellomont train: "An impulse of curiosity made him turn out of his direct line … and stroll past her. He knew that if she did not wish to be seen, she would contrive to elude him; and it amused him to think of putting her skill to the test" (3). Selden's experiments reflect his bad faith, since they suggest that Lily has already been judged. Behind Selden's ungenerous shrewdness, we sense a fastidious, suspicious, and an excessively analytical mind, determined to "figure out" Lily. The point is repeatedly made that Selden's ways of knowing Lily proceed from his habit of putting her actions under close scrutiny: "In judging Miss Bart, he had always made use of the 'argument from design'" (5), and "he could never be long with her without trying to find a reason for what she was doing" (11). At the same time, Selden's rigorous examination of Lily's conduct makes him her most discerning critic/mediator, forcing Lily to re-evaluate and discard some of her crude ambitions:

> Lily found herself scanning her little world through his retina… She looked down the long table, studying its occupants one by one, from Gus Trenor, with his heavy carnivorous head sunk between his shoulders, as he preyed on a jellied plover, to his wife, at the opposite end of the long bank of orchids, suggestive, with her glaring good-looks, of a jeweller's window lit by electricity. (55)

Lily's strongly mediated classification of her friends shows a group oblivious to the higher possibilities of existence; their meager achievements, essentially social, testify to the death of the intellect and the spirit in their lives.

In contrast, Selden's distinction seems evident because, as Lily thinks, "he had preserved a certain social detachment, a happy air of viewing the show objectively, of having points of contact outside the great gilt cage in which they were all huddled for the mob to gape at …" (54). The distinction, Lily believes, lies in his ability to transcend the power of money and resist the prescriptions of the social codes. His outside points of reference work to offset the stifling power of the 'great gilt cage'; these 'points of contact' are ultimately located in what Selden himself calls his "republic of the spirit," a seemingly attractive alternative to the society depicted in the novel, for it corresponds to the realm of the intellect and "cultivation" (63). In the "republic of the spirit," Selden feels free "'from everything—from money, from poverty, from ease and anxiety, from all the material accidents'" (68). After spending time in society, he retreats to his safe haven, apparently unaffected by the trivialities of the outside world, thanks to what he calls his 'amphibious' ability. However,

Selden's failure to respond to Lily's appeals reflects an obvious flaw in his republic.

"'Why do you make the things I have chosen seem hateful to me, if you have nothing to give me instead?'" (72). Although his words cheapen her social aspirations, throwing her whole world out of focus, Selden is unable to suggest a viable alternative to what he condemns. Irving Howe notes that in Wharton's fiction "Men fail the heroines less from bad faith than from weak imagination, a laziness of spirit" (15). In Selden's case, laziness of spirit signals his ultimate failure to resist the insidious influence of the prevailing social standards; the "doubting mind" (193) succumbs to the gossip spread by the barbarians of Lily's world, and his undoing happens while he is immersed in the element he disapproves of and Lily's whereabouts become the subject of discussion for a group assembled around Carry Fisher's dinner-table. Thinking that Judy Trenor was at home, Lily had left the party to join her:

> 'The Trenors'?' exclaimed Mrs. Jack Stepney. 'Why, the house is closed—Judy telephoned me from Bellomont this evening."Did she? That's queer. I'm sure I'm not mistaken. Well, come now, Trenor's there, anyhow—I—oh, well—the fact is, I've no head for numbers,' he broke off, admonished by the nudge of an adjoining foot, and the smile that circled the room.…
>
> The air of the place stifled him, and he wondered why he had stayed in it so long … It was pitiable that he, who knew the mixed motives on which social judgments depend, should still feel himself so swayed by them. How could he lift Lily to a freer vision of life, if his own view of her was to be coloured by any mind in which he saw her reflected? (158-59)

7

So shrewd an observer, who "*knew* the mixed motives" (emphasis added) underlying gossip, is nevertheless unfaithful to his knowledge when he lets his perception of Lily be mediated by the group's insinuations. His difficulty in breathing gives the lie to his claim that, though he spends a great deal of time in Society, his "lungs can [still] work in another air" (70). To be 'swayed' by malicious gossip is to betray a lack of a strong inward self, and to endorse, if only grudgingly, the standards that censure Lily. It is to reveal a keen concern for one's social reputation, to fear the kind of judgment conveyed by the group's smug and knowing smile—in short, it is to side with the vulgar world of the Fishers and the Stepneys against Lily.

Selden forsakes Lily once more when she is expelled from the Dorsets' yacht. Humiliated but hoping to be saved from the awkwardness of the moment, Lily asks Selden to take her for a walk: "[His] reason obstinately harped on the proverbial relation between smoke and fire. The memory of Mrs. Fisher's hints … while [it] deepened his pity also increased his constraint, since, whichever way he sought a free outlet for sympathy, it was blocked by the fear of committing a blunder" (219). Selden's 'wretched doubt' indicates his inability to

brush off past insinuations about Lily and, through his faith in her, transcend the force of gossip. The novel is making a direct connection between Society's reduction of ethical considerations to a matter of 'concrete weights and measures' and Selden's entrapment in the realm of evidence, his failure to believe in Lily's goodness and innocence—a failure discernible in his adherence to the safe and reductive generalizations of a proverb.(6) Richard Poirier captures Selden's inadequacy well: "Selden's ways of 'knowing' people are essentially cosmopolitan—by the guesswork, the gossip, the categorizing assumptions that substitute for the slowly accumulated intimacy on which Mrs. Wharton places such redeeming value" (*A World Elsewhere* 232-33). The 'slowly accumulated intimacy,' presented as a surer basis for knowledge and a viable condition in human relations, is another way of describing faith and trust. When assaulted by the vulgar hints of Mrs. Fisher and her like, Selden's 'republic' proves no fortress: denying Lily his sympathy attests to a stinginess of feelings for which his justification remains purely social. Selden's desertion of Lily, more conspicuous than her desertion by her stodgier, less discerning friends, reveals that society is as triumphant over him as over Lily.

To understand the significance of this desertion, we should now examine the happy story of two minor characters. Nettie Struther first became involved with a stylish gentleman, but was left ill and abandoned until she was rescued by Gerty Farish. As Nettie explains, however, the real change in her life began when George asked her to marry him: "'At first I thought I couldn't, because we'd been brought up together, and I knew he knew about me. But after a while I began to see that that made it easier…. If George cared for me enough to have me as I was, I didn't see why I shouldn't begin over again—and I did'" (315). George's faith, combining sympathy and understanding, and growing from his shared past with Nettie, makes the latter's renewal possible by bringing hope to her life, and attests to the superiority of belief over the contractual perception of human relationships. Drawing on George's unconditional trust, Nettie has found enough strength to gather up the fragments of her life.

The effect of the visit on Lily is profound. After leaving Nettie's home, she sees that, through George's faith and Nettie's courage, the couple has reached "the central truth of existence" (319). This truth has to do with the sense of solidarity and relatedness in human affairs and demonstrates the need for generosity of spirit as a way of counteracting the disintegrating social forces that pervade the house of mirth, invade Selden's 'republic,' and entrap the human spirit. Unlike Nettie and George, "the men and women [Lily] knew were like atoms whirling away from each other in some wild centrifugal dance" (319). Community can be achieved through a strong sense of fellowship, which is possible only through a clear understanding of the destructive potential of mimetic desire.

Just before her death, Lily realizes, in what is perhaps the most compelling passage in the novel, that there is something more miserable than material poverty:

> And as she looked back she saw that there had never been a time when she had had any real relation to life. Her parents too had been rootless, blown hither and thither on every wind of fashion, without any personal existence to shelter them from its shifting gusts. She herself had grown up without any one spot of earth being dearer to her than another: there was no centre of early pieties, of grave endearing traditions, to which her heart could revert and from which it could draw strength for itself and tenderness for others. In whatever form a slowly-accumulated past lives in the blood—whether in the concrete image of the old house stored with visual memories, or in the conception of the house not built with hands, but made up of inherited passions and loyalties—it has the same power of broadening and deepening the individual existence, of attaching it by mysterious links of kinship to all the mighty sum of human striving. (319)

Individual existence acquires meaning and a sense of permanence only in so far as it is part of the larger human community. Lily realizes that identity cannot exist in a vacuum, that hope for the future is inevitably based on the memories, emotions, and experiences of the past, and that fashionable society, though it might give one temporary eminence, does not include a spiritual home as one of its advantages.

Because Wharton's novel is concerned ultimately with what makes us human and with the ethical, that supreme human dimension, it is appropriate to describe it as more than just a "document of cultural anthropology" (Banta). In its careful and detailed tracing of the mechanisms of mimetic desire, *The House of Mirth* is a powerful document of fundamental and generative anthropology.

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Notes

1 For a sample of this rejection of morality in the novel: Wai-Chee Dimock claims that "Morality, in The House of Mirth, provides no transcendent language, no alternative way of being" (387); Gary M. Leonard, for his part, thinks that the "'eerie modern' brilliance of this novel rests on Wharton's persistent and skillful refusal to provide a moral center… to experience and the phenomenon of consciousness as well" (13).(back)

2 Others envy Bertha's ways: after comparing Bertha to Lily, Judy Trenor has no doubt whom she admires: "'Every one knows you're a thousand times handsomer and cleverer than Bertha; but then you're not nasty. And for always getting what she wants in the long run, commend me to a nasty woman'" (44). Judy's choice reveals once again how the scale of values in the New York upper class is turned upside down.(back)

3 If people in the house of mirth do not go to church, neither do they put the library to its original use: “The library at Bellomont was in fact never used for reading, though it had a certain popularity as a smoking-room or a quiet retreat for flirtation” (59).(back)

4 For one of the best treatments of the power of the moral imagination to broaden human sympathy, see Martha C. Nussbaum’s “‘Finely Aware and Richly Responsible’: Literature and the Moral Imagination” and “Perception and Revolution: *The Princess Casamassima* and the Political Imagination” in Love’s Knowledge (Oxford UP, 1990). 148-67 and 195-219.(back)

5 Except for Irene C. Goldman, no other critic has noticed the ways in which Rosedale functions as a structural necessity in the novel, as a scapegoat to speak the unspeakable: “Wharton uses Rosedale’s Jewishness to illuminate economic issues and social hypocrisies that would otherwise remain underground” (26).(back)

6 Ironically, Selden fails to heed his own advice to Gerty: “‘[Lily] has it in her to become whatever she is believed to be-you’ll help her by believing the best of her'” (156).(back)

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