THE MOST BRUTAL moment in The House of Mirth dramatizes not so much the centrality of sex as the centrality of exchange. Sexual favors are what Gus Trenor wants, but his demands are steeped in—and legitimated by—the language of the marketplace, the language of traded benefits and reciprocal obligations. Odious as it may seem, Trenor’s speech merely asserts what everyone assumes. “Investments” and “returns,” “interests” and “payments”: these words animate and possess Wharton’s characters, even in their world of conspicuous leisure. The power of the marketplace, then, resides not in its presence, which is only marginal in The House of Mirth, but in its ability to reproduce itself, in its ability to assimilate everything else into its domain. As a controlling logic, a mode of human conduct and human association, the marketplace is everywhere and nowhere, ubiquitous and invisible. Under its shadow even the most private affairs take on the essence of business transactions, for the realm of human relations is fully contained within an all-encompassing business ethic. Some characters—Trenor and Rosedale, for instance—obviously speak the voice of the marketplace, but even those who hold themselves aloof (as Lawrence Selden does) turn out to be more susceptible than they think.

Of all the characters, Lily Bart has the most puzzling and contradictory relation to the marketplace. A self-acknowledged “human merchandise” (256), she is busy marketing herself throughout most of the book, worried only about the price she would fetch. She tries to induce Percy Gryce to purchase her, and if she had succeeded she would have been “to him what his Americana had hitherto been, the one possession in which he took sufficient pride to spend money on it” (49). Much later, as she forces herself to accept Rosedale’s attentions, she consoles herself by calculating “the price he would have to pay” (253). Lily is clearly caught up in the ethos of exchange. And yet her repeated and sometimes intentional failure to find a buyer, her ultimate refusal to realize her “asset” (34)—as her mother designates her beauty—makes her something of a rebel. She is not much of a rebel, of course, and that is precisely the point. For Lily’s “rebellion,” in its very feebleness and limitation, attests to the frightening power of the marketplace. It attests as well to Wharton’s own politics, to her bleakness of vision in the face of a totalizing system she finds at once detestable and inevitable.

The persistent talk of “cost” and “payment” in The House of Mirth raises the question of currency. How does one compute the “cost” of an action, what constitutes a “debt,” and in what form must “payments” be made? Money, the standard medium of exchange, is not the only currency in circulation. Trenor clearly does not wish to be paid back with a check. In fact, “payment in kind” is never expected in transactions in the social marketplace, and this unspoken rule makes for a plethora of business opportunities. A “society” dinner, for instance, is worth its weight in gold. Since the likes of Rosedale habitually “giv[e] away a half-a-million tip for a dinner” (82), Jack Stepney regularly “pay[s] his debts in dinner invitations” (16). Others—even those who protest—eventually follow Stepney’s example, for the simple reason that Rosedale is “placing Wall Street under obligations which only Fifth Avenue could repay” (240). There are other expenses, other debts, and other means of payment as well. Lily’s visit to Selden’s bachelor apartment is a “luxury”
that is “going to cost her rather more than she could afford” (15). Still she might have “purchased [Rosedale's] silence” if she had only allowed him to take her to the train station, since “to be seen walking down the platform at the crowded afternoon hour in the company of Miss Lily Bart would have been money in his pocket” (15). Business, in the social world, operates by what we might call the commodification of social intercourse.1 Everything has a price, must be paid for, just as—on the opposite end—everything can be made to “count as” money, to be dealt out and accepted in lieu of cash. Dispensed in this manner, social gestures lose their initial character and figure only as exchange values: the dinner invitations, for Stepney and Rosedale, presumably have no meaning except as surrogate cash payments. A social world predicated on business ethics is an essentially reductive world, and the power of money lies not so much in its pristine form as in its claim as a model, in its ability to define other things in its own image.2 The fluidity of currencies in The House of Mirth, the apparently endless business possibilities, attests to the reduction of human experiences to abstract equivalents for exchange (see Marx 35–93; chs. 1–2).

The principle of exchange, the idea that one has to “pay” for what one gets, lays claim to a kind of quid pro quo justice, and it is this justice, this “fair play,” that Trenor demands from Lily. What he does not (or chooses not to) recognize is that what he calls “fair” is by no means self-evident and certainly not computable on an absolute scale. The problem stems, of course, from the rate of exchange, from the way prices are fixed. After all, why should a single dinner cost Rosedale a tip worth half a million (why not a quarter of a million, or a million)? And, for that matter, why should a ride in the park not be sufficient “payment” for the money Lily owes Trenor? In both instances, the “price” for the received benefit could easily have been otherwise, since the rate of exchange is altogether variable, altogether an artificial stipulation. In other words, two items might be yoked in one equation, pronounced of equal worth, but their “equality” will always remain imputed rather than inherent. Prices will remain arbitrary as long as the exchange rests on a negotiated parity between the exchange items—negotiated according to the bargaining powers of the contracting parties. Not everyone pays a half million dollars for a dinner invitation. Some pay nothing at all. The manipulatable rate of exchange makes it a treacherous model for “fair play.” Lily “owes” Trenor the payment that he now demands only according to his rate of exchange—not hers—and his ability to set the rate and impose it on Lily says nothing about fairness, only something about power.

Power in The House of Mirth, many critics have suggested, is patriarchal.3 They are right, no doubt, about the basis for power, insofar as power is economic and insofar as money making is a male prerogative, but the actual wielders of power in the book are often not men but women. On the whole, Wharton is interested less in the etiology of power than in the way power comports itself, in the mode and manner of its workings. She is most interested, that is to say, in the mediated and socialized forms of power, power that women do enjoy and that they use skillfully and sometimes brutally. Within the orbits of exchange, power resides in the ability to define the terms of exchange, to make one thing “equal” to another. That privilege belongs, obviously, to only one of the partners, and this intrinsic inequity gives the lie to Trenor’s notion of fairness. A presumed model of justice and mutuality, exchange really grows out of an imbalance of power, which it in turn reconstitutes. Its “fair play” is in fact a fiction masking a deeper reality of unfairness, for the rate of exchange is no more than a tautological reflection of the inequity that is the condition as well as the result of its operations.

Nowhere is the injustice of exchange more clearly demonstrated than on board the Sabrina. Lily’s presence on the yacht is, as everyone recognizes, simply a business arrangement. “We all know that’s what Bertha brought her abroad for,” Carry Fisher observes. “When Bertha wants to have a good time, she has to provide occupation for George . . . and of course Lily’s present business is to keep him blind” (189–90). Afterward Lily seems to realize this fact equally well: “That was what she was ‘there for’: it was the price she had chosen to pay for three months of luxury and freedom from care” (227). But the “price” turns out to be steeper than Lily thinks, for she pays eventually with her good name and, indirectly, with her aunt’s inheritance. The luxurious yacht cruise is a rotten deal for Lily, but it remains a “deal.” And without deviating from the model of exchange, Bertha has managed to get her money’s worth from Lily; she has simply managed to get
away with a good bargain. Like Trenor, Bertha has come up with a rate of exchange to suit herself; unlike Trenor, she is eminently successful in exacting payments from Lily. Thanks to her adroit management, the reconciliation with her husband is “effected at [Lily’s] expense” (243). Bertha has got everything she wants without any significant expenditure. This feat is all the more remarkable because—if the logic of exchange were to be faithfully followed—she ought to have paid a heavy price for her affair with Ned Silverton. But Bertha, in her “cold determination to escape [the] consequences” of her actions, has raised nonpayment to an art.

Bertha’s success summarizes the contradiction that energizes and sustains the system of exchange. The art of nonpayment requires, after all, the most brazen sort of doublethink. The principle that enables Bertha to collect payments from Lily is the same principle that enables her to shrug off her own debts, and Bertha’s ability to master that contradiction entitles her to her considerable rewards. For doublethink is the very essence of the exchange system, a system in which use and abuse are the same thing, in which legislations violate and violations legislate, in which, to play by the rules, one must break the rules. Doublethink explains why a system based on exchange should have nonpayment as its secret motto.

“The hatred of expenditure,” Georges Bataille has written, “is the raison d’être of and the justification for the bourgeoisie” (73). Bertha Dorset’s bold miserliness—her absolute refusal to “pay”—is therefore only the extreme and ruthless version of a prevailing stinginess, observable in duller and stodgier persons. A case in point is Mrs. Peniston, Lily’s aunt. She is quite willing to give her niece room and board and occasional checks for clothes in return for “the reward to which disinterestedness is entitled” (36). But she is loath to give anything else. “When I offered you a home, I didn’t undertake to pay your gambling debts,” she informs Lily (172). Apparently she is not ready for other kinds of expenditure either. When Lily intimates that she has “had worries,” Mrs. Peniston “shut[s] her lips with the snap of a purse closing against a beggar” (170). Obviously no spendthrift, emotional or otherwise, Mrs. Peniston manages her affections economically and keeps her obligations minimal. Both her generosity and her forbearance have limits, which Lily in time exceeds. Mrs. Peniston has not bargained for the troubles Lily gets into, and she “recognize[s] no obligation” to help (172). But she is quick to detect any breach of contract on Lily’s side and to retaliate accordingly. Nothing can be more logical than her eventual decision to disinherit her niece. Since Lily has failed to meet her obligations, Mrs. Peniston sees no reason to meet hers. If there is something hard and mechanical in the aunt’s moral accounting, it is no more than what is considered “just” (222) among those who stick to business principles. Mrs. Peniston is not alone in turning away from Lily. Her conditional affection parodies that of another character. In the same chapter in which Lily looks in vain to her aunt for help, she also waits in vain for Lawrence Selden to come to her (ch. 15).

Selden has other things in common with Lily’s aunt aside from their shared abandonment of Lily. Like Mrs. Peniston, who chooses to be a “looker-on” in life (120), Selden relishes his “spectatorship” and “indolent amusement” (8). In the opening scene we find him amused in just this way: he is “divert[ed]” by Lily, “enjoy[ing]” her “as a spectator” (4) “with a purely impersonal enjoyment” (10). Unlike Mrs. Peniston, however, Selden does not always remain a spectator. He has had his share of action (an affair with Bertha Dorset, for instance), and even in his indolent enjoyment of Lily he is not without other intentions. For Selden also happens to be a connoisseur, an investor in aesthetic objects, a man equipped with the “lingering, appraising, inventorial mind of the experienced collector” (Wolff 12). Selden collects, Wharton explains, “as much as a man may who has no money to spend”; now and then he “pick[s] up something in the rubbish heap, and [he goes] and look[s] on at the big sales” (10). Selden remains a spectator when he cannot afford to buy, but he is not averse to pocketing little tidbits when they can be had for a small price. The investor picks up where the spectator leaves off, and in making the most of his resources, in getting the most from exchange, Selden shows more speculative instinct than he would like to admit.

“Speculation” is precisely what draws Selden to Lily. “[H]e could never see her without a faint movement of interest,” we learn as soon as the novel opens; “it was characteristic of her that she always roused speculation” (3). Selden is “interested[ed]” in Lily—curious about what she will do—but he is “interested” also in another sense, as every investor would be in an eminently collect-
ible item. To be sure, Selden is not half as crude as the others: while they notice Lily’s “outline” (138), he admires the “modelling of her little ear, the crisp upward wave of her hair,” “the thick planting of her straight black lashes” (5), and “her hand, polished as a bit of old ivory, with its slender pink nails” (7). Lily would have been a valuable acquisition, and Selden knows it. “Ah, well, there must be plenty of capital on the lookout for such an investment” (12), he muses as they discuss her marriage prospects. Selden himself, apparently, has no such “capital” to “invest” and chooses simply to look on. His “admiring spectatorship” (68) costs him nothing, involves “no risks” (74), and allows him to enjoy the goods without the responsibility of paying for them.

Why does Selden not invest in Lily? On the face of it, he cannot afford to: he has “nothing to give” her (72). That is true as far as money goes, but money is not the only asset in Selden’s portfolio, nor does he always count himself indigent. What holds him back, indeed, is not so much the thought of having “nothing to give” as the thought of what he might have to lose. And Selden stands to lose a great deal. His currency is not money, of course, but spiritual stocks, and in this currency he has been saving and hoarding for so long that he is afraid there might be “a chance of his having to pay up” (151). If he has so far kept his riches to himself, he has done so “not from any poverty of feeling” (151) but from a conscious sense of his accumulated wealth and from a determination to safeguard that wealth. Lily now presents him with an opportunity to “invest,” and the question for Selden is whether she can be trusted with his emotional capital, whether he can “stake his faith” on her (320). The quandary he faces is not unlike that of his friends on the stock exchange, and the way he settles the question puts him in good company, which is to say, the company of the nonpayers, the company of Mrs. Peniston and Bertha Dorset.6

Selden is loath to part with his assets in the hazardous business of exchange. This self-serving conservatism comes through most vividly in a seemingly jesting moment between him and Lily:

“Do you want to marry me?” she asked.
He broke into a laugh. “No, I don’t want to—but perhaps I should if you did!”

Never is romance so unpassionate, so bluntly contractual. “Perhaps I should if you did”—the niggardly proposition epitomizes Selden’s love for Lily. He will not propose to her until he knows that she will accept him; indeed, he will not love her until he knows that she will love him in return, until he can be “as sure of her surrender as of his own” (153). Short of this assurance—and all through the book Selden is never completely sure—he will not part with his spiritual capital; he will not take “risks” with it. For Selden love is a form of exchange, and he will hear of nothing but profits.

The discipline of business determines which of the two roles, spectator or investor, Selden chooses to play. The spectator turns into the investor at the point where returns are guaranteed. These, then, are the two faces of the speculator—for Selden is no less business-minded when he “looks on” than when he “picks up” a find—and their equal congeniality enables him to perform some heady emotional flip-flops. As a spectator Selden remains cynically amused by Lily; as an investor he seeks to acquire her hand. Disparate as these sentiments may seem, for Selden they are both “options,” to be taken up or put aside at will, and he trades options with daunting facility. Meeting him for the first time after Bellomont, Lily is struck by his having “gone back without an effort to the footing on which they had stood before their last talk together” (94). But such adaptability is to be expected from someone who computes his love as if it were on a balance sheet, “proportion[ing]” his expenditure to anticipated returns (307). Selden’s “speculation” is the sort that will brook no risks (and certainly no losses), and Lily is simply not a sound enough investment for him. The sight of her emerging late at night from the Trenor house shatters his slim confidence, and Selden is quick to pull out. When they meet again he has once more become a spectator. In Monte Carlo he can “give his admiration the freer play because so little personal feeling remained in it” (216), and he sticks to this convenient role all through Lily’s subsequent troubles.

Still, the investor in Selden is not quite willing to give up. As the book closes he is ready to make another move, to trust once again to his “sense of adventure” (324). Of course, he arrives just a few hours too late for the adventure to take off, but even that unfortunate fact has no meaning for him except as a “loss” to himself. Faced with Lily’s death, he will only “accuse himself for hav-
ing failed to reach the height of his opportunity” (329). Selden does not seem aware of his responsibility—of his complicity—in her death. Like Mrs. Peniston, he “recognize[s] no obligation” toward Lily’s welfare and accords himself no blame for her demise. Indeed, the worst thing that Selden can say about himself is that he has not been enterprising enough, that he has missed his “opportunity.” And so he remains, to the end, a closet speculator. Selden’s lament is one that Rosedale would have understood and might even have made himself. The “republic of the spirit” turns out to be less a republic than a refined replica of the social marketplace, of which Selden is a full participating member.7

Selden is a “negative hero,” then, as Wharton herself admits, not a high-minded dissident but very much “one of them” (73).8 Like the others, he too exudes a cold stinginess, a desire for acquisition without risk and without expenditure. It is not Selden but Lily, the woman he tutors and scolds, who comes closest to breaking away from the rules and premises of the marketplace. Lily is also, of course, the only one who pays routinely and scrupulously, and often with currency she can little afford. “You think we live on the rich, rather than with them,” Lily observes to Gerty, “and so we do, in a sense—but it’s a privilege we have to pay for!” (266). She is right. It is no accident that the one who pays most regularly is also the one with the scantest means, for nonpayment, as we have seen, is a privilege of the powerful, those who fix the rate of exchange. Lily is therefore the obverse of, and the needed complement to, three characters: Bertha Dorset, who avoids paying by making others foot the bill; Mrs. Peniston, who scrimps on her obligations; and Lawrence Selden, who pulls out when the deal seems overly risky. “Paying” is Lily’s habitual way of being, and she is at it almost as soon as the book opens. It is she, not Selden, who has to “pay so dearly for” her visit to his apartment (15). Lily goes on to pay for her stay at Bellomont by performing “social drudgery” for Mrs. Trenor (39) as well as by incurring gambling debts. She pays for her momentary truancy from Percy Gryce. She pays Trenor, though not to his satisfaction. She pays Bertha for the cruise on the Sabrina, just as she pays Norma Hatch for her brief stay at the Emporium Hotel. And she pays, finally, for those extravagant sentiments she permits herself to feel toward Selden.9

Lily’s dutiful payments are altogether in keeping with the principle of exchange. She is merely doing what the system requires of her, what she is supposed to. And yet—such is the irony of exchange—it is precisely this strict compliance that marks her as a deviant. Lily is working, after all, within a system in which nonpayment is the norm, in which violation is the only mode of conformity. She is penalized, then, not for breaking the rules but for observing them.10 This sort of absurdity is the logic of nightmare, but it is just this absurd logic that makes the exchange system work. In its disfiguring light Lily’s “rebellion” takes on the correspondingly absurd form of playing by the rules, of rebellion by submission.

Lily’s paradoxical conformity and deviance come across most clearly in her dealings with Trenor. Having taken almost nine thousand dollars from him and finding her obligation “not the sort . . . one could remain under” (292), she proceeds to settle her debt as soon as she receives her aunt’s legacy—a decision that “cleans [her] out altogether,” as Rosedale rather indelicately puts it (292). In repaying Trenor, Lily is indeed complying with the rules of exchange, but she is also challenging the very basis of exchange. Trenor never expects to be paid back in quite this way. “Payment in kind,” the most primitive form of barter economy, has no place in a highly developed social marketplace, which trades on the putative equivalence between disparate entities. By paying back the exact monetary amount, by equating nine thousand dollars with nine thousand dollars, Lily at once obeys the principle of exchange and reduces it to tautology. Her nine-thousand-dollar debt is now just that: a nine-thousand-dollar debt, not some ill-defined and possibly limitless obligation. In other words, by making money its own equivalent, Lily reduces it to its own terms and defies its purchasing power. She has understood what it means to live under the “intolerable obligation” of an all-consuming system of exchange, and she now tries to exorcise its influence by facing up to what she owes—in all the crudeness and brutality of its cash amount—just to rescue from its dominion the other strands of her life. What appears as a gesture of submission turns out to be a gesture of defiance, for by adhering literally to the terms of exchange Lily turns the system on its head. And yet, as every reader must recognize, defiance of this sort is ultimately unavailing. The exchange system can eas-
ily accommodate rebellion like Lily's: Trenor, no doubt, will take the money and even circulate it anew. Lily's action hurts no one but herself. It remains a challenge to the exchange system in spirit but not in fact.

When Lily returns the money, her rebellion by submission assumes its final and characteristically self-defeating form, the only form it is permitted to take within the exchange system. We see the beginning of that pattern in her earlier and grateful submission assumes its final and characteristically self-defeating form, the only form it is permitted to take within the exchange system. We see the beginning of that pattern in her earlier and grateful submission amid other business errors. The more serious one (from a practical point of view) concerns the disposition of Bertha's letters. These are valuable assets, and Rosedale, the consummate businessman, has no doubt about how Lily should use them. "The wonder to me is that you've waited so long to get square with that woman, when you've had the power in your hands," he declares (257). After all, Bertha had saved her own skin "at Lily's expense," she "owes" Lily, and nothing would be more natural than an attempt to right the balance. Of course, there are different ways of "getting even" (258). Going to Bertha's husband with proof of her infidelity could be one way, but from a "purely business view of the question" Rosedale does not recommend this method, since "in a deal like that, nobody comes out with perfectly clean hands" (258). He has a much better "deal" in mind. Lily is to use the letters not to destroy Bertha but to cow her, to "get [her] into line" (259). Unlike the other deal, a risky business, this one is guaranteed to work:

[Rosedale's plan] reduced the transaction to a private understanding, of which no third person need have the remotest hint. Put by Rosedale in terms of business-like give-and-take, this understanding took on the harmless air of a mutual accommodation, like a transfer of property or a revision of boundary lines. It certainly simplified life to view it as a perpetual adjustment, a play of party politics, in which every concession had the recognized equivalent; Lily's tired mind was fascinated by this escape from fluctuating ethical estimates into a region of concrete weights and measures. (259)

Properly managed, even revenge can become a form of exchange. And in the hands of Rosedale, exchange will be very good business indeed—completely without risk, with profits guaranteed. Lily's grievances are to be paid back with "recognized equivalent[s]"; they are to count as credits with which to exact payment (and indeed interest) from the offending party. The past wrongs are to be set right by a little "adjustment" between the two women in the form of a "private transaction," a "transfer of property," from which Lily is to be—for once—the receiving rather than the paying party.
Lily has not always been averse to righting her balance. Much earlier, when she was contemplating marriage to Percy Gryce, she had looked forward to the “old scores she would pay off as well as old benefits she could return” (49). Still, she cannot bring herself to use Bertha’s letters. Even though Rosedale will not carry her unless she is “reconciled” with Bertha and “rehabilitated” in society and even though marriage is her only remaining hope, Lily cannot carry out the “private transaction” he has so plainly laid out. To strike a deal with Bertha, Lily is required not only to “trade on [Selden’s] name and profit by a secret from his past” (304) but to “trade on” and “profit by” her past wrongs. Rosedale’s method represents the ultimate commodification of experience, the reduction and quantification of moral outrage into “concrete weights and measures” for exchange. Lily cannot do it. This, too, is a business opportunity she must reject. If she refuses to pay her debts with surrogate money, she also refuses to “cash in” on her injuries. Since she will not make Bertha “pay back” what Bertha “owes” her, she must leave the imbalance between herself and Bertha unredressed. What Lily is rejecting is not so much the idea of revenge as the degradation of revenge in the arena of exchange.

As Lily leaves Selden’s apartment, she quietly slides the packet of letters into the fire. Rosedale would have been horrified. Her last “asset” is now destroyed and with it any hope of rehabilitation. But Lily has not planned to burn the letters—she does so on the spur of the moment—and her sudden decision probably has something to do with another mistake she makes during the same visit, the mistake of indulging in “the passion of her soul” (309). Hardly anyone else in the book has been guilty of this mistake, and it becomes all the more startling against the background of Selden’s tepid civilities. He offers her tea—that amount of hospitality at my command,” he tells her. Lily sees that “her presence [is] becoming an embarrassment to him,” she notices his “light tone” and his all-too-evident “linger[ing] in the conventional outskirts of word-play and evasion” (305-06). But his demeanor no longer holds her back; for once she can accept the disparity between her sentiments and his. In Wharton’s wonderful phrase, Lily has “passed beyond the phase of well-bred reciprocity, in which every demonstration must be scrupulously proportioned to the emotion it elicits” (307). In destroying Bertha’s letters, she is offering Selden a great deal more than he has offered her or will ever offer her. But Lily no longer weighs and “proportion[s]” her feelings; she is no longer deterred by thoughts of “profits” and “returns.” As she throws away her love in an act of wanton expenditure, she is making what is perhaps her most eloquent protest against the ethics of exchange.

And yet this protest, like her other ones, is ultimately futile, ultimately contained, absorbed, and exploited by the very system against which it is directed. The exchange system has room for money foolishly returned and loans foolishly refused, just as it has room for sentiments foolishly indulged in. Far from being a threat to the system, Lily’s gesture of defiance merely recapitulates its assignation—merely reaffirms its sovereignty—for in giving Selden more than she gets from him, Lily is simply reverting to her customary role within the exchange system: her role as the one who “pays.”

Even more ironically, Lily’s extraordinary expenditure, like her previous ones, is not valued by those who benefit from it; it literally goes unnoticed. For a man who prides himself on his spectatorship, Selden is surprisingly blind to the moral drama unfolding before his very eyes. “When she rose, he fancied that he saw her draw something from her dress and drop it into the fire; but he hardly noticed the gesture at the time” (310). The gesture will never be noticed; it is not meant to be. Lily’s delicacy of feeling, her rectitude and generosity—all these are lost on Selden. They will always be unrecognized, unrewarded even by his gratitude. But that, too, is only to be expected. For the nobility of her action surely lies in its fruitlessness, in its utter lack of material consequence, in its erasure from history.

With her death Lily’s moral triumph evaporates as if it had never taken place. In the last chapter of The House of Mirth, Wharton presents us with the spectacle of Selden rummaging through Lily’s papers, fretting over the check made out to Trenor, feeling sorry for himself—and remaining, all the while, abysmally ignorant of what she has done for his sake. Wharton could not have written a stronger or more bitter commentary on the loneliness and futility of Lily’s “rebellion.” But even if her secret had somehow been revealed, it would have made no sense to her friends. They would have dismissed it as a species of folly. Private morality is finally defenseless against an ex-
change system that dissolves the language of morality into its own harsh, brassy parlance. Within this totalizing system moral rectitude simply counts as another exchange value, another commodity—and an insanely expensive one, as it turns out. For this ultimate luxury Lily pays change system that dissolves the language of morality into its own harsh, brassy parlance.

Within this totalizing system moral rectitude sim-translation into the idiom of the marketplace, merely figure as moments of ill-advised improvidence, altogether in keeping with her lifelong habit of spending “more than she could afford” (15). Morality, in The House of Mirth, provides no transcendental language, no alternative way of being, but feeds directly into the mechanisms of the marketplace. Lily’s rebellion, which appeals to and presupposes a transcendent moral order, is doomed for that very reason.

“A frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys. Its tragic implication lies in its power of debasing people and ideas,” Wharton once said about The House of Mirth (Backward 207). Such debasement and destructiveness she conveys with devastating clarity. Her difficulty arises only when she is confronted with the need to imagine an alternative to the exchange system, a positive ideal to complement her ringing critique. To do so Wharton can only invoke an absent ideal—something that it has never been Lily’s privilege to experience:

And as [Lily] looked back she saw that there had never been a time when she had had any 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 had 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.

Wharton’s image of the sanctified ancestral home, like the house of custom and ceremony Yeats prays for, is a quintessentially aristocratic ideal. As metaphor and as fact, the ancestral house stands aloof, in all its feudal strength, from the contemporary world of commodities, the world of “the wares / Peddled in the thorough-fares.” It is Wharton’s fantasy of a transcendent order, for an organic life based on “blood” and “root[s]” is indeed antithetical to the mechanical exchange of capitalism. Wharton’s critique of the marketplace is essentially an aristocratic critique, a critique from the standpoint of “early pieties,” “grave endearing traditions,” and “inherited passions and loyalties.” And yet, even as she articulates her ideal, she sees that it does not exist, will not exist, and indeed has never existed, either in her own experience or in Lily’s. The ideal is declared impossible even as it is invoked. The ancestral home is no alternative to the commodified “house of mirth,” irrevocably present and here to stay.

Still, Wharton is not quite willing to give up the idea of transcendence. She finally compromises, ingenuously if not altogether convincingly, by grafting her ideal on a lower social order, the working class. The fantasized ancestral house does appear in the book after all, if only in the modernized and modified form of a working-class tenement. And to the occupant of this humble habitation, Nettie Struther, Wharton entrusts her vision of a life antithetical to the one she condemns. It is in Nettie’s kitchen that Lily catches her “first glimpse of the continuity of life.” She sees in Nettie someone who seems “to have reached the central truth of existence” (319). It is not clear how Nettie accomplishes that feat (aside from her good fortune in having found a trusting husband); nor is it clear how her haphazard life as a wage laborer can withstand the ravages of the marketplace. As an ideal, Nettie remains curiously unsubstantiated, curiously unexamined: Wharton seems to have suspended her ironic incisiveness, her withering sense of all that entrap and compromises the human spirit. She does not look more closely at Nettie, one suspects, because she cannot afford to. Wharton is not completely persuaded by the virtues of the working class, nor is she altogether sympathetic to their causes. Even though she looks instinctively to the “poor little working girl” (319) in her search for a redemptive figure, she sees Nettie less as the representative of the working class than as the embodiment of a private ideal—Wharton’s ideal. Nettie, then, is to be from the working class but not too militantly,
not too clamorously of it. To be all that Wharton wants her to be, Nettie must be abstracted from the all-contaminating exchange system. She must be romanticized and, to some extent, insulated—transported, in short, from the social realm into another realm, what we might call the realm of nature, a realm Wharton metaphorically invokes. Nettie’s makeshift tenement, Wharton would have us believe, has “the frail, audacious permanence of a bird’s nest built on the edge of a cliff” (320). As an organic force, a principle of tenacity and continuity, Nettie takes her place within the “permanence” of natural history, at once more primitive and (Wharton hopes) more enduring than the exchange system.

A “naturalized” working class represents Wharton’s best hope for an organic life beyond the marketplace. It is the only romanticism she permits herself in the book, but even this ideal is not always easy to sustain. On a number of occasions—most particularly when Nettie expresses her innocent hope that her daughter (“Marry Anto’nette”) will grow up to be just like Lily—we see the corrosive vision of the ironist subverting the “alternative” she has so painstakingly set up. The book is fueled, then, by an almost exclusively critical energy directed at the marketplace Wharton disdains. She can only confusedly gesture toward a redeeming alternative: for her, the house of mirth has no exit.

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Notes

1 Most recent critics have related commodification to gender issues. See Montgomery 897; Ammons 33; and Wershoven 56. But women are hardly the only ones turned into commodities; indeed, the entire fabric of social intercourse is, in my view, commodified.

2 Trilling observes that “The House of Mirth is always and passionately a money story” (122). While agreeing with her assessment, I would argue that the power of money lies not so much in its crude form—in a bank account, for example—as in its ability to engender a certain way of being.

3 This assumption informs some of the best criticism on The House of Mirth. See, for instance, Fetterley’s article and Wolff 109-33.

4 For an interesting discussion of spectatorship as a product of commodity culture, see Agnew.

5 No less than the other men, Selden “objectifies” Lily in his aesthetic appreciation—a point several critics have made. See, for instance, Wolff 120-33 and Wershoven 46.

6 Wharton does not seem to differentiate the various modes of activity within the marketplace. She does not, for instance, distinguish between speculation and production or between finance capital and industrial capital; she assigns them a single label: “business.” In this regard she is considerably less sophisticated than some of her contemporaries—Dreiser, for instance—who discriminate among different kinds of business as well as different kinds of businessmen (see, e.g., Michaels).

7 Wolff also sees the last chapter as an ironic commentary on Selden. While she emphasizes Selden’s “esthetic sentimentality” (132-33), I emphasize his business-mindedness.

8 Wharton referred to Selden as a “negative hero” in a letter to Sara Norton, 26 Oct. 1906, Wharton Archives, Beinecke Library, Yale U, New Haven, qtd. in Wolff 111.

9 Lily’s conscientious bookkeeping is imaged in two parallel scenes—one at the beginning of the novel and the other at the end—in which she anxiously pores over her checkbook. She is the only character caught in that activity.

10 In another context, Fetterley has written that “Lily can be what she is supposed to be only at the cost of being what she is supposed to be” (208). Fetterley is speaking of the “double standard and double bind” inherent in the aesthetic feminine ideal to which Lily is subjected, but the same absurd logic applies to her role in the exchange system.

11 Davidson has noted that Lily’s “finer sensibilities prove to be a definite liability” (10). Those “finer sensibilities” prove to be especially damaging, I would argue, when they prevent Lily from achieving the doublethink essential to exchange.

12 That point seems to have struck Lily as well. For her, “the essential baseness of the act lay in its freedom from risk” (260).

13 In emphasizing Lily’s moral stance, I am departing implicitly from Wolff’s characterization of Lily as someone whose “sense of ‘self’ is confirmed only when she elicits reactions from others” and who otherwise suffers from an “inner emptiness” (128). The scruples Lily feels toward the end of the book could not have come from anyone else. No one else is making decisions like hers, and no one expects her to make them.

14 The peculiar poignancy of this scene might have something to do with Wharton’s own memory of “her disappointment at the word not spoken” during her early romance with Walter Berry. Since Wharton herself was known as “Lily” during her Newport days, and since at least one of her acquaintances—Winthrop Chanler—recognized “Walter Berry [as] the hero” of The House of Mirth, the biographical interest of the scene is more than negligible. See Lewis 48-50, 153.

15 Wharton, Howe writes, “believed [that] what the heart desires brings with it a price—and often an exorbitant price,” and he suggests that she would have responded with “sardonic pleasure” to these lines by Auden: “Every farthing of the cost / All the bitter stars foretell / Shall be paid” (Howe 18). He does not, however, fully examine why Wharton thought that everything should have a price.
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16 An opposing view is that Lily's moral insight is her ultimate vindication. See Wershoven 42, 58 and McDowell 43–44. I differ from these critics in seeing morality in The House of Mirth not as an autonomous or transcendent order but as a subordinate part of the exchange system.

17 In “A Prayer for My Daughter” Yeats, like Wharton, images a house sanctified against the corruption of the marketplace:

And may her bridegroom bring her to a house
Where all's accustomed, ceremonious;
For arrogance and hatred are the wares
Peddled in the thoroughfares.

18 Wharton seems to pit the bourgeoisie against both the aristocracy and the working class. While her assumption is never articulated, it nevertheless makes her something of an involuntary Marxist in her vision of history.

19 Trilling makes the interesting observation that Wharton's “commitment to the democratic principle, if it can be said to have existed at all, existed only in a much transmogrified form” (114).

Works Cited


