

The Undecidable Miss Bart: Edith Wharton's Naturalism in *The House of Mirth*

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Lily Bart, Wharton's protagonist in The House of Mirth, describes her relation to society as an "intricate dance," where she must measure her intentions against her impulses to avoid falling "out of time" (38). Although critics have analysed the failure of Lily's mediation between intentions and impulses as a result of her commodification on the turn-of-the-century marriage market, they have not fully developed the narrative connections between time and fate that emphasise the impossibility of managing social demands. A careful analysis of the temporal dynamic that orchestrates Lily's attempt to negotiate the urgency of her impulses against the caution of her intentions yields valuable insight into Wharton's engagement with naturalism. I argue that Wharton's emphasis on the temporal rather than deterministic connotations of fate allows her to nuance the pessimistic ethos of literary naturalism into an affirmation of the unpredictability that governs human nature. While fate frustrates Lily's attempts to meet social demands, it intensifies an inquiry that she expresses early in the novel: "[b]ut why had she [Lily] failed? Was it her own fault or that of destiny?" (22). The House of Mirth offers no definitive answer, affirming the undecidability of Lily's death as the exposure to an unpredictable future. For Wharton, I suggest, this becomes the condition of agency: the exposure to the future allows the self to reckon with time and consider how one should "go on living" within—and despite—the incalculability of fate (251). In this sense, fate allows Wharton not only to experiment with the determinism of naturalist tropes but also to construct her critique of gender and class roles in late nineteenth-century New York aristocracy.

I have to calculate and contrive, and retreat and advance, as if I were going through an intricate dance, where one misstep would throw me hopelessly out of time.

- Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 38

Lily Bart, Wharton's protagonist in *The House of Mirth* (1905), describes her relation to society as an "intricate dance," where she must "calculate and contrive" her impulses and intentions to avoid falling "out of time."¹ Lily's elaborate dance is staged on the ruthless marriage market of late nineteenth-century New York, where time is of essence; unmarried women are often considered redundant once they are past twenty-nine years of age.² Lily's marital prospects are of primary importance, because they represent her ticket to the life of "fastidious aloofness and refinement"

that women of the leisure class are meant to enjoy.³ The ornamental role of women in the aristocratic circles of New York—the social set that Wharton shares with her heroine—is a standing theme in *The House of Mirth* and has rightfully received much critical attention. Wharton scholars have long established the intersections among gender, race, and class in the novel's stark portrayal of a society that objectifies women within the contexts of late capitalism and consumer culture.⁴ While many critics have emphasised the failure of Lily's mediation between intentions and impulses as a result of her commodification, they have not fully developed the narrative connections between time and fate that accentuate Lily's failure to manage the social destiny of a lady of leisure, precipitating her decline from the flashy New York aristocracy to the obscurity of exile. A careful analysis of the temporal dynamic that orchestrates Lily's attempt to negotiate between the urgency of her impulses and the caution of her intentions yields valuable insight into Wharton's experimentation with the naturalist trope of fate. I argue that Wharton's emphasis on the temporal rather than deterministic connotations of fate allows her to nuance the pessimistic ethos of literary naturalism into an affirmation of the unpredictability that governs human nature. The more exposed Lily becomes to the unpredictability of her fate, the more outspoken Wharton becomes in her verdict: the sheltered, predictable life of a lady of leisure is contrary to nature and thus impossible to uphold. Tapping into the limits between the social and the natural, Wharton questions two different sets of conventions: the social register of late nineteenth-century New York and the literary discourse of turn-of-the-century American naturalism.

Wharton's naturalism is often read as a result of her keen engagement with the evolutionary debates of her time. Critics have remarked the influence of nineteenth-century science on Wharton who incorporates various Darwinian tropes and sociobiological motifs in her fiction.⁵ In her analysis of *The House of Mirth*, Claire Preston points out that “[t]hemes suggested to [Wharton] by the evolutionists and the anthropologists and nascent sociologists were not only the metaphors of social organisation such as species, clans, hereditary behaviour patterns, and so on; they also suggested to her principles of boundary and exclusion.”⁶ Wharton aptly sees the influx of change in the socioeconomic landscape of turn-of-the-century America, where upper class mobility threatens a moribund aristocracy, capitalist venture substitutes inherited wealth, and immigration challenges the aspired racial and ethnic purity. In this social milieu, adaptability becomes the key to a struggle for survival modeled upon the laws of a Darwinian universe. While Wharton incorporates these laws skillfully in her plots, she also lingers on tropes that signify the necessity for adapting to nature, such as risk, fate, accident, and chance. In this article, I examine Wharton's naturalism not so much in light of her evolutionary beliefs as in view of her experimentation with the deterministic foundations of the aforementioned tropes. I contend that a recalibration of Wharton's determinism

allows us to nuance the tenuous dynamic of her engagement with late nineteenth-century American literary naturalism.

The deterministic orientation of Wharton's fiction brings her closer to the thematic and narrative structures of turn-of-the-century American naturalist writers. In fact, Wharton is often canonised with authors, such as Theodore Dreiser, Frank Norris, and Stephen Crane,⁷ who follow what George Becker has notoriously called the principles of "pessimistic materialistic determinism."⁸ Although recent scholars have questioned this reductive definition by refining the narrative and thematic expressions of determinism in key naturalist novels (such as *The House of Mirth*), they tend to concur that Wharton's novel remains "an unqualified representation of social determinism in action."⁹ Major critics, such as Donald Pizer, have challenged this view by countering Lily's tragic fate with Wharton's attempt to seek alternative, non-materialistic "forms of belief" that transcend the socioeconomic forces that condition her heroine.¹⁰ While Pizer's interpretation helps us qualify Wharton's naturalist tendencies, it still rests on the conventional assumption that fate is an uncontrollable natural force that human beings need to confront (and transcend). In what follows, I wish to challenge this assumption—and thus complicate Wharton's relation to naturalism—by analysing her re-evaluation of fate as a naturalist trope that both embodies *and* questions the limits of naturalist determinism.¹¹ Drawing on the literary register of naturalism, I suggest, Wharton demonstrates how the natural force of fate frustrates Lily's socially induced tempo between urgency and caution, and triggers her heroine's questioning of the gender and class conditions that determine her social destiny as a lady of leisure.

My analysis develops in three parts: first, I draw a parallel between Lily's social destiny—the prescribed end of becoming a lady of leisure—and her natural fate—her biological death. Even if Lily takes comfort in the predictability of her social ends, she associates the gender conventions of her social class with death: these conventions wither and circumscribe her imagination, turning her aspirations toward a predictable future. Wharton tests the predictability of Lily's future against the vicissitudes of chance that her heroine interprets as the workings of fate, an uncontrollable force that frustrates her attempt to manage urgency and caution. Lily's struggle to decide between the urgency of her impulses and the caution of her intentions leads to her gradual realisation of the impossibility to follow her "intricate dance."¹² The second part of my argument illustrates how Lily's realisation becomes a critique of the false assumptions that define her social destiny, such as the need to know *when* to retreat or advance; this social mandate is impossible to fulfill because of the undecidability of time as an uncontrollable natural force that causes Lily's fatefully delayed "missteps."¹³ While Lily takes the guise of a naturalist heroine who is unable to control inscrutable forces, she wakes up to the role of fate not only as an obstacle to the predictable future of a lady of leisure but also as the opportunity to imagine different ends. As I finally suggest, Lily's death—the

moment that best embodies the undecidability between impulses and intentions—is the culmination of her awareness of fate as the chance for survival, since it asks her to negotiate how to “go on living” beyond the social destiny of the lady of leisure.¹⁴ Even as this negotiation entails a fatality, it leaves the circumstances of Lily’s death undecidable, allowing Wharton to rewrite the closure of biological death as the affirmation of the unpredictability in her heroine’s fate.

In this sense, Wharton offers an affirmative conclusion that reinforces the purpose of her social critique: she turns Lily’s aborted future as a lady of leisure into a testament to the impossibility of upholding social constraints that aspire to control natural forces by determining the future toward predictable ends. In doing so, however, Wharton does not turn Lily into a powerless heroine that resigns herself unquestionably to her fate; neither does she let her novel mold into the “plot of decline,” a naturalist narrative modeled upon the biological conversion from “freshness to exhaustion.”¹⁵ Lily’s downward spiral toward her biological death reinforces—and complicates—an inquiry that she expresses early in the novel: “[b]ut why had she [Lily] failed? Was it her own fault or that of destiny?”¹⁶ *The House of Mirth* offers no definitive answer, affirming the undecidability of Lily Bart as the embodiment of a dynamic questioning that encapsulates both the content and the tone of Wharton’s naturalism: instead of taking naturalist determinism for granted, Wharton turns it into the open-ended ground for sharp social critique and incessant literary experimentation.

LILY’S SOCIAL DESTINY AND THE CONSTRAINED IMAGINATION OF “OLD NEW YORK”¹⁷

Early in *The House of Mirth*, Wharton emphasises that Lily’s social destiny is strictly delimited by the role reserved to the women of her class. As a member of the leisure class, Lily aspires to a wealthy husband and an affluent marriage, leading to a life of “fastidious aloofness and refinement in which every detail should have the finish of a jewel, and the whole should form a harmonious setting to her own jewel-like rareness.”¹⁸ Through marriage, Lily will secure a life of luxury, and will become the jewel to adorn and symbolise this life.¹⁹ Although Wharton’s heroine wishes to be free to use her resources to her taste, she knows that her freedom is subject to one important condition—a successful marriage—that will secure her financial security and, most importantly, a higher degree of social immunity. As Lily puts it, “poor, miserable, marriageable girls” like herself must honour the limits of propriety, whereas married women can follow a fixed, albeit more relaxed, code of behaviour.²⁰ Lily has painfully realised that “it all turned on the tiresome distinction between what a married woman might, and a girl might not, do.”²¹ Hence, marriage

remains the only way for her to negotiate her individual aspirations against the limits of social propriety.

Through her upbringing and observance of social conventions, Lily has acquired an “immense social facility” that allows her to manoeuvre through challenging situations, “adapting herself to others without suffering her own outline to be blurred, the skilled manipulation of all the polished implements of her craft.”²² Wharton’s protagonist wryly calls our attention to the highly demanding skill of adapting herself to social demands: she has to “calculate and contrive, and retreat and advance,” since “one misstep” can jeopardise her carefully planned future of privilege as a lady of leisure.²³ This future is so effectively orchestrated along social expectations that Lily has become unable to imagine what lies beyond these duly kept limits. Presented with the option of marriage early in the novel, Lily resignedly asks whether there is another option, making clear that marriage is not merely *one* option, but rather her *only* option.²⁴ Although Wharton’s protagonist feels the need to try new possibilities, she is unable to picture what these could be, as her imagination is restricted to working along the lines and toward the ends that social expectations have set for her horizon:

There were moments when she longed blindly for anything different, anything strange, remote and untried; but the utmost reach of her imagination did not go beyond picturing her usual life in a new setting. She could not figure herself as anywhere but in a drawing-room, diffusing elegance as a flower sheds perfume.²⁵

Even when Lily longs for something out of the ordinary, she cannot imagine anything beyond her usual expectations. A “new” experience cannot be but a different version of her usual life, since her socially prescribed future is framed within the limits of her present options.

Wharton emphasises Lily’s withered imagination, yet indicates that her heroine is not the only character who is either unable to imagine different possibilities or unwilling to confront their consequences. The most striking example is Percy Gryce, an eligible bachelor, whose arrested imagination has atrophied his response to any stimuli that might take him by surprise. According to Sharon Kim, Gryce’s atrophied sense of spontaneity suggests the influence of the Lamarckian notion of “use-inheritance,” namely, the gradual disappearance of traits that fall into disuse from one generation to the next.²⁶ Lily’s evaluation of Gryce’s limitations corroborates this view: the latter’s lack of imagination has stunted his mental palate in such a way that he “would never learn to distinguish between railway tea and nectar.”²⁷ Wharton stresses the inherited aspect of Gryce’s personal traits: his interest in Americana is only a result of his family inheritance of American art, while his hesitant behaviour is due to his mother’s careful grafting of “prudence and

suspicion” on his “originally reluctant and cautious” nature.²⁸ It is important to note, though, that this inherited suspicion causes not only disuse of imagination but also an acquired sense of instinctive protection against any contingency that would require a spontaneous response. Wharton remarks the viral nature of this instinct that results in a xenophobic reaction against any attempt to trespass the bounds of New York aristocracy.²⁹

For instance, one of the prominent guards of Old New York, Judy Trenor, restricts the privilege of her parties to her close circle of friends, since “life’s too short to spend it in breaking in new people.”³⁰ Calling our attention to Wharton’s use of social anthropology, Claire Preston analyses the tribal demarcations of Lily’s social class: they are based on the tacit endorsement of “a binary system in which the individual in society is categorised as either ‘in’ or ‘not in.’”³¹ As Preston explains, “[o]ne way of establishing tribal enclosure entails definition of boundaries, pales, and margins (spatial and linguistic).”³² I would argue that another way of enforcing enclosure entails the shield of predictability that Wharton tellingly illustrates through the example of Lily’s aunt. Mrs. Peniston observes the “social fluctuations” of “new people” from the sheltered, “secluded watch-tower of her upper window,” yet always with the wish to frame them within her knowledge.³³ From the safe position of the onlooker, Mrs. Peniston keeps record of the “‘new people’ who rose to the surface with each recurring tide, and were either submerged beneath its rush or landed triumphantly beyond the reach of envious breakers.”³⁴ Through the use of a natural metaphor, Wharton describes a Darwinian struggle for survival and adaptability that newcomers undergo in their attempt to break the strictly enforced boundaries of the leisure class. In addition, Wharton draws on the contrast between contingency and predictability to illustrate the defensive linguistic strategies that Mrs. Peniston utilises to keep her fortress intact: the latter’s “retrospective insight” turns the “vicissitudes” of “new people” into an “ultimate fate” that she watches until the fulfillment of their “destiny,” when she can affirm to Grace Stepney—her niece who shares equally limited exposure to anything new—that “she had known exactly what would happen.”³⁵ Wharton thus illustrates a process whereby anything different, contingent, or unknown is defused by the protective shelter of a linguistic code that signifies a cultural fear of exposure and a conscious attempt to turn any deviation into a predetermined schema, as seen through the use of words such as “fate” and “destiny.”

The overwhelming fear of exposure is felt even in the character of Lawrence Selden, the aloof social critic, who confronts Lily with the crude nature of social expediency and offers her freedom from social standards in his “republic of the spirit.”³⁶ Lily retorts, however, that Selden is equally imbued with the social element he disdains: although he refuses to subscribe to elaborate schemes to gain social power, he cannot escape the comfort of predictability instilled in his personality.³⁷ Just like Mrs. Peniston, who is ensconced in the certainty of knowing what will

happen, Selden takes refuge in the prescribed social roles to make sense of Lily's actions: for Selden, all of her actions must be part of a carefully elaborated plan to capture a wealthy husband. Much as he occasionally rejoices in Lily's imprudent impulses, Selden does not question the limits of his expectations concerning Lily's actions. As Wharton points out,

It was much simpler for him to judge Miss Bart by her habitual conduct than by the rare deviations from it which had thrown her so disturbingly in his way; and every act of hers which made the recurrence of such deviations more unlikely, confirmed the sense of relief with which he returned to the conventional view of her.³⁸

Selden seeks this relief after Lily's bold critique of his restrictive "republic," which she sees as a "closed corporation," run by "arbitrary objections in order to keep people out."³⁹ Even though he takes pleasure in showing Lily the way in, Selden feels the need to show her that, "their flight over, he had landed on his feet," recovering the certainty of his habitual views of her actions.⁴⁰

Lily is indeed the character most prone to deviation from the habitual expectations of conduct. Still, like the other members of Old New York, she takes comfort in the freedom from shifts that her predictable future would procure. When Selden's coming to Bellomont adds complications to her flirting with Percy Gryce, or when the former asks to see her after her triumph at the Brys' *tableaux vivants*, Lily is annoyed by his "unforeseen act" that has "added another complication to life."⁴¹ Even her brief surrender to Selden's advances after the *tableaux vivants*, where Lily steals the show with her beauty and captures Selden with her emotion, seems like a dream that needs to be defused by the demands of reality and her intention to find an affluent husband. In fact, Lily takes pride in her ability to further her intentions through "her talent for profiting by the unexpected."⁴² For example, when she surrenders to the impulse of visiting Selden in his apartment, she tries to make the most of her visit by eliciting information that facilitates her intention of pursuing Percy Gryce. According to Selden, Lily's "genius lies in converting impulses into intentions."⁴³ And, for Lily, such genius lies in her knowledge of "how to adapt her pace to the object of pursuit."⁴⁴ Despite her confidence, however, Lily has the reputation of going "too fast."⁴⁵ Judy Trenor becomes the voice of social convention when she urges Lily to manage her pace in flirting with Percy Gryce: in an italicised sentence that anticipates similar advice in Wharton's later work, Judy Trenor insists, "*Oh, Lily, do go slowly.*"⁴⁶ Even though Lily assures Judy—and appeases herself—that she will take this advice, she finds herself chafing under the carefully measured pace that society requires of women. Reflecting on the double gender standards, Lily compares her meticulously contrived marriage plans to Jack Stepney's "impatient" courtship of Gwen Van

Osburgh: “[a]ll Jack has to do to get everything he wants is to keep quiet and let that girl marry him; whereas I have to calculate and contrive, and retreat and advance, as if I were going through an intricate dance, where one misstep would throw me hopelessly out of time.”⁴⁷ Lily takes a serious misstep when she dares to neglect the importance of timely courtship and decides to postpone Gryce’s pursuit; instead of attending church with the latter, she spends time with Selden, causing the envy of her rival, Bertha Dorset, who hastens to fill in Gryce of Lily’s previous affairs and rumoured gambling debts. Lily’s ill-timed courtship sets the tone for subsequent blunders that testify to her failure to manage her impulses and intentions.⁴⁸

The novel traces Lily’s downward spiral from one failure to the next: accumulated gambling debts, aborted marriage suits, and unintended entanglements in affair plots result in her social exile and eventual death. Throughout her decline, we witness Lily’s inability to handle the interplay between urgency and caution that society requires of women and she wryly describes as an “intricate dance.”⁴⁹ For many critics, Lily’s failure to manage this dance is primarily due to the impoverishing effects of her objectification as a lady of leisure. According to Judith Fetterley, this role traps women within a “double standard” that leads to a “double bind”: the qualities for which women are valued deprive them of the ones needed to survive in a patriarchal culture.⁵⁰ Hence, Lily’s attempt to fulfill social expectations is a “culturally induced death trip” that fosters her self-hatred by making her flee “a radical and persistent vision of the self.”⁵¹ Lily is so radically torn between her individual aspirations and social ambitions that she sees her self as split between two separate beings that remain largely at odds. After being confronted with Gus Trenor’s demand for erotic favours in exchange for his help with her dire finances, Lily realises the mistake she has made in taking his help for granted. The demand for caution rises in her in the form of “another self” that “was sharpening her to vigilance, whispering the terrified warning that every word and gesture must be *measured*.”⁵² Her seemingly disembodied self soon turns her sense of defense into self-loathing: “[Lily] seemed a stranger to herself, or rather there two selves in her, the one she had always known, and a new abhorrent being to which it found itself chained.”⁵³ In this moment of epiphany, when Lily loses the shield of measurable caution and feels the consequences of her “missteps,”⁵⁴ she is exposed to a new vision of the world: “[a]ll she looked on was the same and yet changed.”⁵⁵ And what intensifies this difference is a dis-jointed sense of time that mirrors Lily’s deep identity split; in Wharton’s words, “[t]here was a great gulf fixed between today and yesterday. Everything in the past seemed simple, natural, full of daylight—and she [Lily] was alone in a place of darkness and pollution.”⁵⁶ Feeling truly “out of time,”⁵⁷ Lily experiences an emotion of nearly existential loneliness that makes her fearful of the future: she sees the clock on the street—half past eleven—and recoils at the thought of numerous hours left until the following morning. To be able to confront

the next day, Lily needs the comforting compassion of another being. She turns to Gerty Farish as the only being that could help her survive, hoping that she can reach her house before it is too late.⁵⁸

Lily's moment of epiphany comes near the end of the first part of *The House of Mirth*, and brings many thematic and narrative strands in full circle. First, it foregrounds the consequences of Lily's "missteps," highlighting the split between her intentions and impulses as well as her first experience of hopelessness that accompanies the sense of feeling "out of time."⁵⁹ Second, it is the culmination of Wharton's description of her heroine as outside the social tempo between urgency and caution, and clears the way for a more pronounced emphasis on Lily's belatedness throughout the second part of the novel. As the second book unfolds, Lily's downward spiral accelerates, letting her exposed to the seemingly merciless strokes of an inscrutable fate.

LILY'S BELATEDNESS AND THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF SUSTAINING THE SOCIAL TEMPO

Lily's inability to mediate between her intentions and impulses is interestingly described by one of her few female allies, Carry Fisher. Carry points out to Selden that Lily "works like a slave preparing the ground and sowing her seed; but the day she ought to be reaping the harvest she oversleeps herself or goes off on a picnic."⁶⁰ In her attempt to account for this inconsistency, Carry remarks that Lily's actions can often be attributed to "flightiness," while other times they suggest that "at heart, she [Lily] despises the things she's trying for."⁶¹ As Carry concludes, "it's the difficulty of deciding that makes her [Lily] such an interesting study."⁶² For Carry, what arouses interest in Lily is an unaccountable indecision that she explains using temporal register: to reap the benefits of her intentions, Lily must know *when* to control her impulses. If she were able to do so, Wharton's heroine could decide the right moment to act. For instance, she could avail of the right moment to reveal Bertha Dorset's affairs to her husband: "[a] clever woman might know just the right moment to tear off the bandage: but Lily isn't clever in that way."⁶³ As opposed to Lily's inability to take timely action, other characters—including Carry—seem to be more comfortable with managing their time. Bragging about her own skill of deciding the right moment for action, Carry wishes she could use Lily's wasted opportunities. At the same time, Selden uses the pretext of catching his train to avoid any more comments about Lily; right at the moment when Carry is about to reflect further on Lily's untimely decisions, Selden glances at his watch and exclaims, "it's time for my train."⁶⁴

Selden's hasty departure and Carry's reflection on Lily's actions reveal the importance that society accords to managing one's intentions and impulses by

deciding the right moment for action. Rather than conceding the ease of this decision, however, Wharton uses the irony of her pen to question the grounds for Lily's inability to act. Much as Carry tries to explain Lily's untimely actions using the social criteria for urgency and caution, she is unable to do so: Lily flouts all social expectations and illustrates the difficulty of abiding by social standards. In this respect, she embodies a doubt that represents what Carry and the rest of Old New York fear to acknowledge: the right moment between intentions and impulses (as the limit that allows the calculation between caution and urgency) might be nearly undecidable. Though Carry flirts with the possibility of this conclusion, she opts for a conventional interpretation of Lily's behaviour in the sense that she frames Lily's indecision as social incompetence and a study of undecidable limits.⁶⁵ Wharton thus illustrates the strong grip of social conventions even for characters who have dared to question them—Carry Fisher has already challenged gender expectations through her divorce as well as the class barriers of Old New York through her socialist ideas. For all her good will, however, Carry's horizon remains as limited as the rest of her social peers: she fails to extend her reflection on Lily to a deeper critique of the temporal mandates that orchestrate the "intricate dance" of New York aristocracy.⁶⁶

Carry's interpretation of Lily's inability to manage between intentions and impulses has invited various critical responses. For instance, Frances Restuccia has argued that Carry voices Wharton's wish to keep her heroine open to irreducibility while criticising Selden's attempt to frame Lily's impulses as intentions.⁶⁷ Although Restuccia aptly suggests that Carry becomes the vehicle of Wharton's critique, she does not heed the discrepancy between Carry's reflection on Lily's singularity and her eventual retrenchment to social criteria to interpret Lily's actions. Through this discrepancy, however, Wharton introduces the temporal aporia that Lily comes to realise the more she becomes exposed to a series of social intrigues that result in her disinheritance by her aunt and her exile from New York aristocracy.

Demoted to a lower social set and abandoned to her resources, Lily resorts to the anonymity of a dingy boarding house, where she becomes aware of how easily she can lose track of time: "[s]he [has] lost the sense of time, and it [seems] to her as though she [has] not spoken to anyone for days."⁶⁸ As she gets "stranded in a great waste of dis-occupation," Lily comes to a painful, albeit liberating, discovery:

One of the surprises of her [Lily's] unoccupied state was the discovery that time, when it is left to itself and no definite demands are made on it, cannot be trusted to move at any recognised pace. Usually it loiters; but just when one has come to count upon its slowness, it may suddenly break into a wild irrational gallop.⁶⁹

As Wharton notes, it is impossible to tell when the slow passage of time will become a sudden, unaccountable gallop and fail any attempt to rationalise its pace

as a controllable flow with a predictable end. Even if social conventions aspire to put a rein on this gallop, rationalising the unaccountable flow of time into the “intricate dance” of carefully timed advances and retreats,⁷⁰ they do not pay sufficient attention to the inherent unpredictability of human nature, beautifully illustrated through what makes it unforeseeable, that is, time itself. It is consequently impossible to predict the right moment for action, because time resists such rationalisation. In this sense, Lily’s steps toward becoming a lady of leisure are inevitably “misstep[s]” that are always already “out of time,”⁷¹ because the decision between impulses and intentions is predicated upon an inherently undecidable moment between urgency and calculation. This is what Jacques Derrida describes as a “moment without moment,” when precipitation and deferral “incorporate one another at the moment of excluding one another.”⁷² This is the “instant of an instant that is canceled out, this infinite speed contracted into a sort of absolute halt or haste,” which also explains “why one always feels late, and that therefore, at the same time, one always yields to precipitation.”⁷³ Lily seems to be caught in this very aporia that Wharton describes as a “fatalistic sense of being drawn from one wrong turning to another, without ever perceiving the right road till it was too late to take it.”⁷⁴ As the novel progresses, this temporal aporia becomes increasingly acute. For example, Lily is unintentionally entangled in an affair plot, from which she extricates herself “*in time* to save her self-respect, but *too late* for public vindication.”⁷⁵

In fact, Wharton presents Lily’s ultimate chance for personal and public vindication as one that is already temporally cancelled. In her final, dramatic meeting with Selden, Lily points out that “[i]t was too late for happiness.”⁷⁶ Despite the charged atmosphere of undercurrent emotion between Selden and Lily, they fail to rekindle the mutual flame of their love: Selden’s flame seems to have died, while Lily’s passion survives “like an imperishable flame.”⁷⁷ For its asynchronous coordinates, this is a moment of reciprocal truth. As Wharton points out, “[t]he external aspect of the situation had vanished for him [Selden] as completely as for her [Lily]: he felt it only as one of those rare moments which lift the veil from their faces as they pass.”⁷⁸ In its ethereal passing, time annuls the complacency of the present by opening this moment to the future: it fills Selden with “a strange sense of foreboding” that makes him wonder what will happen, even if Lily denies that anything should happen at present.⁷⁹ Through her enigmatic responses, Lily seems to admit a sense of powerlessness that echoes her recent realisation about the unpredictability of the future. At the same time, she looks toward the past and confesses that the moment when Selden’s love could have saved her is “gone,” and “it was [her] who let it go.”⁸⁰ Yet right when she appears resigned to the past, Lily turns toward the future. Her next sentence—“[a]nd one must go on living”⁸¹—is an acknowledgment of survival through an attempt to gather the pieces of her identity: her “old self” might “live on” in Selden’s “presence,” but “it must still continue to be hers.”⁸² Lily’s self-possession, albeit mediated through Selden and her past,

confronts her with the necessity to take hold of her future. Saying goodbye to Selden, she takes leave to “go on living.”⁸³

The last two chapters of *The House of Mirth* take place in a temporal suspension, where Lily’s silent nights—hushed by her increasing use of chloral—alternate with her lonely wanderings in the streets and her accidental encounter with Nettie Struther, the working-class woman that Lily has helped earlier in the novel. Wharton describes Nettie as a rehabilitated “fallen woman” that has managed to weather controversy and find happiness in the affective bonds of a family hearth. Lily’s short respite in Nettie’s kitchen, where she finds comfort in the latter’s family, is tinged with sentimental overtones: Nettie’s baby is couched in Lily’s arms while the fire warms up a small but exceptionally tidy kitchen. The sentimental structure of emotion in this scene seems at odds with Wharton’s realistic portrayal of the ruthless economy of emotion in Old New York. Yet, as Hildegard Hoeller suggests, “the ‘excess’ of sentimental voices and genre conventions” offers Wharton the “artistic medium” to express female desires and concerns that are central to her “‘economic’ realist voice and view of the world.”⁸⁴ For Hoeller, “[e]xcess as a form of uncalculated expenditure, or uncalculated giving, is a powerful notion in a market-oriented ideology,” becoming a “form of anarchy in a market-oriented society.”⁸⁵ Hoeller is right to point out that, whereas Wharton tries to distance herself from the sentimental tradition of nineteenth-century women writers, she makes ingenious use of such tropes as domesticity and motherhood to heighten the contrast between an uncalculated economy of sympathy and the calculated absence of emotion in capitalism.⁸⁶ At the same time, I wish to add, the contrast between calculation and excess allows Wharton to draw the thematic and narrative preamble to Lily’s final confrontation with the demand to negotiate between the calculation of her intentions and the urgency of her impulses. Lily’s final attempt at this negotiation, though, is freed from the strictly prescribed social tempo. Rather, it takes place within the context of her recent awareness that the unpredictability of time is the inscrutable force that destabilises social conventions and exposes her to a struggle with fate. Nettie’s story is a glimpse into the possibility that “whatever fate the future reserved for her [Lily], she would not be cast into the refuse-heap without a struggle.”⁸⁷

THE UNDECIDABLE MISS BART AND HER INCALCULABLE FUTURE

The fervour of Lily’s decision to struggle with her future becomes attenuated upon her return to the boarding house. As she hastens to her room, Lily seems resigned to the fate of living in a boarding house, and decides that “she must learn to fall in with the conditions of the life.”⁸⁸ Socially disenfranchised, economically destitute, and emotionally alone in the alien surroundings of an inhospitable

boarding house, Lily fits neatly into the garment of a naturalist heroine who has been unable to cope with her social destiny and feels helpless before her fate. Wharton makes repeated use of natural metaphors to stress Lily's helplessness in an inscrutable universe. For instance, she describes her protagonist as "an organism as helpless out of its narrow range as the sea-anemone torn from the rock," and "a screw or a cog in the great machine ... called life."⁸⁹ Most of these metaphors ring with Darwinian connotations. Claire Preston notes the metaphor of the hot-house, which "stands for the fragility of individual life-forms in the natural competition and selection environment of the social ecosystem."⁹⁰ In this respect, not only is Lily powerless to survive, but she is also deprived of the physiological and psychological equipment that is necessary for survival. Preston suggests:

[L]ike the transplanted anemone to which she is compared, she [Lily] possesses no adaptive abilities, but is instead burdened with vestigial spiritual organs which positively hamper her chances of survival; once outside the specialised conditions of the social hot-house, she is at the mercy of circumstances which leave her literally to wither and die.⁹¹

Preston is correct in pointing out Lily's lack of adaptability that compromises her survival in a Darwinian universe. In fact, when Lily does evince signs of adaptive behaviour, it is at the expense of her intentions: "[h]er faculty for adapting herself, for entering into other people's feelings, if it served her now and then in small contingencies, hampered her in the decisive moments of life."⁹² If Lily possesses no adaptive faculties, then her decision to "fall in with the conditions of the life" echoes with her hopeless resignation and becomes the prelude to her end.⁹³ The culminating dynamic between Lily and her fate, however, reconfigures Lily's attitude of resigning despair into an affirmative concert with fate insofar as the unpredictability of time should allow her exposure to the possibility for survival.

Lily's acknowledgement to Selden that "one must go on living" follows her concession that the moment of happiness "is gone" and "it [is] [her] who let it go."⁹⁴ This remark sketches a dynamic interchange between Lily and time, which becomes the condition for surviving the finality that Lily experiences in the present moment: Selden's love is dead and the moment of happiness is gone. If one should keep living—as Wharton is suggesting through Lily—one must let go of the present and look to the future. Yet, in order to do so, one must also surrender themselves to the risk of exposure to the unpredictability of the future. For Wharton, I argue, this becomes the very condition of agency: the exposure to the future allows the self to reckon with time and consider how one should "go on living"⁹⁵ within (and despite) the uncontrollable limits of an incalculable fate.

Lily's attempt to reckon with time and negotiate with fate is most obvious in her final decision to take an increased dose of chloral, in order to deal with her

inability to sleep. At this uncanny moment, Lily feels “more strangely confronted with her fate”: “the terrible silence and emptiness seemed to symbolize her future—she felt as though the house, the street, the world were all empty, and she alone left sentient in a lifeless universe.”⁹⁶ In a sudden precipitation, the future looms threatening before Lily: “the next day pressed close upon her, and on its heels came the days that were to follow—they swarmed about her like a shrieking mob. She must shut them out for a few hours; she must take a brief bath of oblivion.”⁹⁷ At this crucial moment, Lily must negotiate between the urgency of the future and the need to defer its threat. Her way of negotiation is highly symbolic of the measured calculation that has always been demanded of Lily’s actions: she must be cautious in the amount of drops in the glass without going over the advisable limit. Although Lily has been careful in following this advice—she has been gradually raising the dose to the highest limit—she eventually decides to counter the pharmacist’s recommendation and risk a higher dose.

Taking an increased dose of the medicine, however, does not constitute Lily’s refusal to face the future but rather her ultimate acknowledgement of the unpredictability of her fate, since “the action of the drug was incalculable” and “[s]he knew she took a slight risk” by exceeding the limit.”⁹⁸ Rather than a resigned attitude to chance, Lily’s final act is the culmination of the dynamic encounter with fate she has had throughout the novel: Lily’s vulnerability to the “buffeting of chances” has “kept her in an attitude of uneasy alertness toward every possibility of life” at the same time that it has “increased her longing for shelter.”⁹⁹ Although “[a]ny definite situation” should have been “more tolerable” for Lily, it would not have earned her the chance at being “an expert in making the most of the unexpected.”¹⁰⁰ If this chance is also a threat—Wharton is clear that the exposure to fate involves “humiliating contingencies”¹⁰¹—it still becomes the opportunity to manage what society requires, that is, the limit between impulses and intentions that is expected of a lady of leisure. In this sense, Lily’s exposure to the incalculability of fate enables her to “calculate and contrive” according to social standards while keeping her from fulfilling her social destiny.¹⁰² In fact, while Lily cannot take shelter in the predictability of a conventionally leisurely future, she can have a chance at weathering the unpredictable vicissitudes of chance that destabilise the fixed temporal mandates of her contemporary gender and class roles. And Lily’s final decision to “go on living”¹⁰³ through an incalculable risk makes her vulnerable to the unpredictability of fate insofar as she has moved beyond the predictability of social roles. Thus, her decision is not a suicidal act of despair against the role of the lady of leisure but rather the final attempt to challenge this role by questioning its terms, namely, by assuming the very thing it denies women—agency.

Such agency is not based on the interest that Lily raises on the market, as Walter Benn Michaels has argued in his New Historicist account of *The House of Mirth*. According to his reading, Lily’s act of taking the chloral is the ultimate

expression of the attempt to increase her value on the market by transferring the incalculability of the drug to her action and arousing speculation on herself.¹⁰⁴ Lily embodies what Michaels sees as constitutive of writing itself, that is, the “speculative self-interest” that works by putting subjectivity on the market.¹⁰⁵ And Wharton’s text works as (or, rather, *with*) the market by giving Lily a self that is possible only as a commodity for exchange. Much as Michaels’s argument offers fascinating insight into the discursive influence of capitalist structures, it overrides the possibility that authorship might eventually question the socioeconomic context by rewriting the self as critically aware of *how* to work with forces it cannot transcend. In *The House of Mirth*, Lily has gained this awareness through her exposure to fate, which has made her question the foundation and the horizon of social expectations. Though her agency comes at a death toll, it is substituted by Wharton’s authorial pen that offers Lily the undecidability of the future as what it takes to go on living: Wharton’s protagonist takes on the unpredictability of fate to challenge the constrained imagination of Old New York and elude conventional interpretations of her enigmatic actions.

Lily’s enigmatic figure elicits surprise from the members of Old New York throughout the novel.¹⁰⁶ *The House of Mirth* begins with Selden pausing in surprise at the sight of Lily Bart. He is also surprised at the spontaneity of her consent to go to his apartment and her objection to being bantered about her suitors. Wharton points out that “Gus Trenor seemed surprised, and not wholly unrelieved to see [Lily]” at the station while “Rosedale was seized afresh by the poignant surprise of her beauty.”¹⁰⁷ Lily keeps the ability to surprise even after her death, when Selden arrives at the boarding house to confront a series of surprises: “it came as a sharp surprise to him that the door should open so promptly,” and “[i]t was still more of a surprise to see, as he entered, that it had been opened by Gerty Farish.”¹⁰⁸ He also found “[t]o his surprise” that all Lily’s bills had been receipted and “discovered with astonishment that, in spite of [a] recent accession of funds, the balance had already declined to a few dollars.”¹⁰⁹ Selden’s initial observation about Lily anticipates her role throughout the novel: there is “nothing new about Lily Bart,”¹¹⁰ because Wharton’s heroine embodies the very reason for embracing the new, the promise of making interesting what otherwise seems mundane. This is why Selden “could never see her without a faint movement of interest,” and “it was characteristic of her [Lily] that she always roused speculation, that her simplest acts seemed the result of far-reaching intentions.”¹¹¹ Although by the end of the novel Lily’s interest is appraised in economic terms—Selden reduces Lily’s enigma to the fiscal balance between her “recent accession of funds” and the remaining “few dollars”¹¹²—it holds a different currency for Wharton: Lily invites speculation insofar as she incites the imagination and questions the closed horizon of Old New York with the unpredictability of her impulses and the undecidability of her actions.

The end of *The House of Mirth* sustains the link between the undecidable character of Lily's actions and the unpredictable flow of time that Wharton has drawn throughout the novel. What is more, it confirms the incalculability of time as part of a fate that continues to resist any rationalisation into a predictable temporal schema. As Selden reaches the boarding house, he arrives too late to prevent Lily's death, and Wharton reiterates that "the moment had been *fated* to pass from them before they could seize it."¹¹³ Wharton's conclusion confirms her view of fate as inherently defined by a temporal undecidability that turns the present moment already past and throws her characters inevitably "out of time."¹¹⁴ In this sense, Lily's failure to know the right moment between the urgency of her impulses and the caution of her intentions is less of the result of her inability to handle fortuitous circumstances than the proof of a temporal aporia that makes any attempt at controlling the future inherently impossible. While this interpretation allows extenuating circumstances for Lily's failure, it presents the reader with an additional dilemma: does Wharton allow her protagonist any sense of agency or does she leave Lily at the mercy of uncontrollable forces that determine her future?

The temporal underpinnings that Wharton attributes to fate qualify her ambivalent relation to the social and biological determinism of literary naturalism. Though Wharton sees her characters as products of social and biological forces that condition individual growth, she is wary of the mechanistic worldview that a full-blown determinism might foster. As scholars have noted, Wharton's fiction negotiates the social Darwinist tenor of early twentieth-century American naturalism against the morality of nineteenth-century European realism that claimed her literary sympathies.¹¹⁵ According to Paul Ohler, Wharton was opposed to "presentations of determinism that portrayed society as necessarily reflecting natural processes, for this only fed back into the perception that social Darwinism described a relation between nature and culture that was absolute."¹¹⁶ As Ohler suggests, Wharton qualifies the determinist resonance of her fiction by politicising the connection between nature and culture; his insightful reading of *The House of Mirth* fleshes out Wharton's attempt to demonstrate the expedient use of natural selection to legitimise "cultural attitudes that permit Lily to be viewed as disposable."¹¹⁷ To criticise the ruthless frivolity of the "irresponsible pleasure-seekers" of *The House of Mirth*, Wharton must draw "dramatic significance" from what the "frivolity" of this society destroys.¹¹⁸ And if the expedient frivolity of this society destroys Lily—proving the devastating effects of unqualified social Darwinism in action—how can Wharton question this attitude without becoming complicit in her heroine's destruction? In other words, how can Wharton describe Lily's future as socially and biologically determined, while allowing her protagonist a space of agency within conditions she is unable to control?¹¹⁹

This question is the ground for Wharton's experimentation with the naturalist genre. As Donna Campbell remarks, Wharton uses her creative resources to expand

the subject matter of naturalism beyond the lower classes and nuance the photographic objectivity of the naturalist method through her sophisticated narrative voice and striking complexity of anthropological metaphors.¹²⁰ To this account of Wharton's innovations, I wish to add her skillful use of naturalist tropes in a way that both expresses *and* deconstructs their deterministic foundation. In *The House of Mirth*, Wharton experiments with the undecidable temporality of fate that she uses metonymically for the impossibility to capture the present and delimit the future. Whereas this impossibility makes Lily vulnerable to the temporal vicissitudes of fate, it helps her reflect on a question she would have been otherwise unable to ask, that is, *why* she has failed; as Wharton's heroine wonders early in the novel, "[is] it her [Lily's] own fault or that of destiny?"¹²¹ Taken at face value, Lily's question echoes the reader's uncertainty about the inconsistency of Lily's actions. Given Wharton's experimentation with determinism, however, this question sets the tone for Wharton's engagement with naturalism in *The House of Mirth*: naturalism becomes a fitting genre for Wharton's novel insofar as it helps her express why this question should admit no answer. For Wharton, the undecidability of Lily's fate helps her heroine ponder the limits of agency and allows the reader to reflect on the social and biological forces that determine Lily's future. Much as this future is biologically stunted and socially conditioned, it sustains Lily's need—and the reader's desire—to know how to confront what remains inherently undecidable, namely, the incalculability of time.

By fostering this desire and frustrating the answer, Wharton criticises the finality of the naturalist plot of decline, rationalised upon models of temporality that reflect a linear, biological dissolution.¹²² As I have shown in hopes of sparking further inquiry into Wharton's engagement with temporal tropes, the finality of Lily's biological death is supplanted by the undecidable temporality that has characterised her heroine's story throughout the novel. Frances Restuccia has pointed out that Wharton keeps Lily's story essentially irreducible: it can be neither told from the beginning nor explained according to the conventional apprehensions of what constitutes an origin, a cause, or an account of a person's life.¹²³ It seems to me, though, that Wharton goes one step further in protecting the irreducibility of Lily's story by turning the latter's aborted future into a dynamic inquiry about time as a trope for the incalculability that governs human fate. If this fate denies the shelter of foreknowledge, it gives the time to wonder how to "go on living."¹²⁴ And, for Wharton, this is the time for decision and the space for agency.

NOTES

¹ Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth*. (New York: Dover, 2002), 38.

² Early in the novel, Wharton points out that Lily is rumoured to have turned twenty-nine (2). In her article “The Death of the Lady (Novelist): Wharton’s *House of Mirth*,” Elaine Showalter reads Wharton’s novel as a “novel of the woman of thirty” that addresses the problem of female maturation in terms of narrative representation (*Representations* 9 [1985]: 133-49, 133). Though I share Showalter’s purpose—to illustrate Wharton’s authorial challenge to the temporal constraints of her contemporary gender roles—I approach the issue from a different perspective, that is, Wharton’s manipulation of naturalist tropes to foreground her social critique.

³ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 73.

⁴ On the influence of socioeconomic discourses on the novel, see also Elizabeth Ammons, *Edith Wharton’s Argument with America*. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1980); Wai Chee Dimock, “Debasing Exchange: Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*,” *PMLA* 100 (1985): 783-92; and Walter Benn Michaels, *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987). For representative readings of *The House of Mirth* from a feminist standpoint, see Judith Fetterley, “‘The Temptation to be a Beautiful Object’: Double Standard and Double Bind in *The House of Mirth*,” *Studies in American Fiction* 5.2 (1977): 199-211; and Cynthia Griffin Wolff, “Lily Bart and the Beautiful Death,” *American Literature* 46.1 (1974): 16-40.

⁵ Paul Ohler traces the influence of Charles Darwin, T. H. Huxley, and Herbert Spencer on Wharton’s aesthetic and narrative patterns (*Edith Wharton’s “Evolutionary Conception”: Darwinian Allegory in Her Major Novels* [New York and London: Routledge, 2006]), while Claire Preston analyses extensively the role of sociological and anthropological theories on Wharton’s portrayal of her contemporary social mores (*Edith Wharton’s Social Register* [London: Macmillan, 2000]). See also Judith Saunders’s insightful reading of Wharton’s fiction from a Darwinian perspective (*Reading Edith Wharton Through a Darwinian Lens: Evolutionary Biological Issues in Her Fiction* [Jefferson: McFarland, 2009]). For analyses of the influence of Lamarckian and neo-Lamarckian theories on *The House of Mirth*, see Sharon Kim, “Lamarckism and the Construction of Transcendence in *The House of Mirth*,” *Studies in the Novel* 38.2 (2006): 187-210; and Laura Saltz, “‘The Vision-Building Faculty’: Naturalistic Vision in *The House of Mirth*,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 57.1 (2011): 17-46.

⁶ Preston, *Social Register*, 56.

⁷ For instance, Alan Price compares and contrasts Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* with *The House of Mirth* ("Lily Bart and Carrie Meeber: Cultural Sisters," *American Literary Realism: 1870-1910* 13 [1980]: 238-45); and Paul Ohler draws parallels between Wharton's novel and Stephen Crane's "The Open Boat" (*Darwinian Allegory*, 189). See also Pizer for a detailed analysis of Wharton's novel in relation to the conventions of late nineteenth-century American literary naturalism ("The Naturalism of Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*," *Twentieth Century Literature* 41.2 [1995]: 241-48); and Michaels (*Gold Standard*) for a seminal reading of Wharton's naturalism in the context of her contemporary capitalist discourse.

⁸ George J. Becker, "Introduction: Modern Realism as a Literary Movement." In *Documents of Modern Literary Realism*, edited by George J. Becker, 3-38 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 35. For similar readings of American literary naturalism, see Malcolm Cowley, "A Natural History of American Naturalism." In *Documents of Modern Literary Realism*, 429-51; V. L. Parrington, *The Beginnings of Critical Realism in America 1860-1920* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1930); and Philip Rahv, "Notes on the Decline of Naturalism." In *Documents of Modern Literary Realism*, 579-90.

⁹ Pizer, "Wharton's *The House of Mirth*," 242. On recent re-evaluations of American literary naturalism, see also June Howard's excellent overview of the history of the genre ("Sand in Your Mouth: Naturalism and Other Genres." In *The Oxford Handbook of American Literary Naturalism*, edited by Keith Newlin, 92-103 [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011]); and Eric Carl Link's redefinition of American naturalism as an appropriation of deterministic principles on a *thematic* level ("Defining American Naturalism." In *The Oxford Handbook of American Literary Naturalism*, 71-91; *The Vast and Terrible Drama: American Literary Naturalism in the Late Nineteenth Century* [Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004]).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 243. Pizer reads such transcendent modes of belief in the final scenes of the novel, where Nettie Struther, the working class girl that Lily had helped, offers Lily a momentary respite of human affection in her kitchen, and Lawrence Selden, the man that Lily seems to love, continues to believe in a human union that transcends death. In what follows I complicate Pizer's reading by nuancing the concept of fate in Lily's death. For a different approach to Wharton's expression of transcendence, see Kim who argues that Wharton uses evolutionary language to turn a religious concept of transcendence into an objective, empirical one that secures the transmission of history and culture.

¹¹ Few scholars have lingered on Wharton's use of time and fate as a concerted challenge to naturalist principles in *The House of Mirth*. Richard Kaye's reading of the novel is an exception; Kaye examines the textual history of Wharton's novel, concluding that Wharton's revisions in the galley proofs place increasing emphasis on Lily's death as a result of "fatefully delayed timing" ("Textual Hermeneutics and

Belated Male Heroism: Edith Wharton's Revisions of *The House of Mirth* and the Resistance to American Literary Naturalism," *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 52.3 [1995]: 87-116, 92). My analysis differs from Kaye's both in its conclusion and its purpose: while he means to establish the importance of Wharton's revisions in her compromise between nineteenth-century European realism and turn-of-the-century American naturalism, I focus on Wharton's experimentation with naturalist tropes to redefine our understanding of determinism (and Wharton's important contribution to the conventions of American literary naturalism).

¹² Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 38.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 251. The concept of survival I will be using is informed by Jacques Derrida's reading of the "event" as the unpredictable arrival of the other that is threatening, albeit necessary, since the self can only hope to achieve the desired plenitude of presence in relation to *and* in difference from the other. This contradiction is both triggered and failed by an "instant of impossible synchrony" (Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, translated by Rachel Bowlby [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000], 81) when "one must, at the same time, defer, keep a distance, linger and rush" (Derrida, "The Deconstruction of Actuality." In *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971-2001*, translated and edited by Elizabeth Rottenberg, 85-116 [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002], 92). The aporia of time thus sustains the undecidability of the event and our exposure to the unpredictability of its arrival.

¹⁵ Philip Fisher, *Hard Facts: Setting and Form in the American Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 172.

¹⁶ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 22.

¹⁷ In 1924, Wharton published a collection of four novellas under the title *Old New York*, describing the aristocratic society of New York from the 1840s to the 1870s (New York: Scribner, 1995). Here I will be using the term "Old New York" to refer to the privileged world of the New York aristocracy during the latter part of the nineteenth century—a world largely sustained by inherited wealth and strictly delimited by tradition and convention.

¹⁸ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 73.

¹⁹ For an excellent discussion of marriage as a patriarchal institution and Lily's role as a "lady of leisure," see Ammons (*Argument with America*). See also Thorstein Veblen's seminal theorisation of the leisure class and his analysis of gender in the context of conspicuous consumption in *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* (New York: Macmillan, 1899).

²⁰ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 4.

²¹ Ibid., 64.

²² Ibid., 192.

²³ Ibid., 38.

²⁴ Ibid., 6.

²⁵ Ibid., 81.

²⁶ “The Construction of Transcendence,” 193-94.

²⁷ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 14.

²⁸ Ibid., 17.

²⁹ Wharton scholars have pointed out the conflict between hereditary biological impulses and socially constructed instincts in Wharton’s oeuvre. For instance, see Nancy Bentley, *The Ethnography of Manners: Hawthorne, James, Wharton* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Ohler; and Jennie Kassanoff, *Edith Wharton and the Politics of Race* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004). I agree that the use of biological and evolutionary theories is indispensable in understanding Wharton’s reference to instincts and impulses as well as the complexity of the conflict between nature and culture. At the same time, I wish to expand the effects of culturally induced “instincts” beyond a strictly evolutionary framework and read Old New York’s fear of exposure as an infringement on an inevitable exposure to difference. As I show later, Wharton uses naturalist tropes, such as the inscrutability of fate, to illustrate both the inevitability of this exposure and its necessity for a future beyond social demands.

³⁰ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 112.

³¹ *Social Register*, 5. Wharton utilises similar tribal demarcations in other novels, such as *The Custom of the Country* (New York: Penguin, 2006; originally published 1913) and *The Age of Innocence* (New York: Penguin, 1996; originally published 1920).

³² Ibid.

³³ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 97.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid. For many critics, *The House of Mirth* expresses an important historical moment, the siege of the Old Hudson families by the self-made middle class. See, for instance, Diana Trilling’s analysis of Simon Rosedale as the prototype of the self-made financier (“*The House of Mirth Revisited*.” In *Edith Wharton: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Irving Howe, 103-18 [New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1962]). Rosedale also challenges the Anglo-Saxon identity of Old New York through his Jewish background. For more on Wharton and race, see Elizabeth Ammons, “Edith Wharton and the Issue of Race.” In *The Cambridge Companion to Edith Wharton*, edited by Millicent Bell, 68-86 (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Christopher Gair, “The Crumbling Structure of ‘Appearances’: Representation and Authenticity in *The House of Mirth* and *The Custom of the Country*.” In *Edith Wharton’s The House of Mirth: A Casebook*, edited by Carol Singley, 271-97 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); and Jennie Kassanoff (*Politics of Race*;

“Extinction, Taxidermy, Tableaux Vivants: Staging Race and Class in *The House of Mirth*.” In *Edith Wharton’s The House of Mirth: A Casebook*, 299-330).

³⁶ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 54.

³⁷ Selden’s attitude—characterised by aloof hesitation, remote observation, and unwillingness for action—is typical of many male characters in Wharton’s fiction. See, for instance, Newland Archer in *The Age of Innocence*. Wharton describes Selden as a “negative hero” to her friend, Sara Norton (R. W. B. Lewis, *Edith Wharton: A Biography* [New York: Harper and Row, 1975], 155; 159 qtd. in Linda Wagner-Martin, “*The House of Mirth*: A Novel of Admonition.” In *Edith Wharton’s The House of Mirth: A Casebook*, 126). In her insightful analysis of Lamarckian patterns in *The House of Mirth*, Kim reads Selden as an exception to the crass, dull sensibility of Old New York, as he has inherited a “perceptive sensibility instead of simply reiterating social forms” (199). In my analysis, Selden is not as different from the rest of society as he claims to be; I read his character as indicative of his culture’s fear of exposure and the influence of socially inherited and culturally sustained codes of behaviour.

³⁸ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 220.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 35. The italics are found in the original. Wharton reiterates the importance of social pace in similarly italicised sentences in *The Custom of the Country*. See, for instance, Mrs. Heeny’s advice to Undine Spragg: “*Go steady, Undine!*” (16).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁴⁸ In his New Historicist reading of *The House of Mirth (Gold Standard)*, Walter Benn Michaels argues that Lily’s surrender to her impulses suggests her attraction to the risk of speculation. For Michaels, the love of risk is so pervasive in the novel that it becomes the cornerstone of morality and the foundation of an agency that is based on surrender to the “economic, erotic, and moral charm of actions marked by an irreducible discrepancy between intention and effect” (230). Michaels’s controversial argument emphasises the importance of the marketplace in the construction of subjectivity and the discourse of authorship. Though I agree with Michaels on the discursive construction of Lily’s subjectivity and Wharton’s authorship, I read Lily’s oscillation between impulses and intentions as indicative of her attraction to the incalculability of the inscrutable temporality of fate.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁵⁰ “Double Standard,” 206. Lily’s split sense of identity has invited much critical discussion. For instance, Candace Waid suggests that Lily flees the part of her self that is associated with the illicit eroticism of characters like the literary-minded Bertha Dorset (*Edith Wharton’s Letters from the Underworld: Fiction of Women and Writing* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991], 46), while Kathleen Moore emphasises Lily’s “anti-self” that looks toward a non-material reality that recalls the idealised internal self of romance (“Edith Wharton’s Lily Bart and the Subject of Agency,” *Edith Wharton Review* 19.1 [2003]: 8-15, 11). Carol Baker Saporita also offers an interesting analysis of Lily’s split self as Wharton’s revision of techniques of literary doubling (“Female Doubling: The Other Lily Bart in Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*,” *Papers on Language and Literature* 29.4 [1993]: 371-94). In a different vein, Jennie Kassanoff argues that Lily’s inability to relate to her self implies “the instability of race as an ontological category” in a world where distinctions between the natural and the cultural have collapsed (“Staging Race and Class,” 315).

⁵¹ Fetterley, “Double Standard,” 208; 209.

⁵² Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 118. The emphasis is mine.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁵⁸ Though Lily arrives in time to catch Gerty before the latter goes to bed, she arrives too late to prevent Gerty’s envy of Selden’s feelings toward her.

⁵⁹ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 38.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 152.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ I use the terms “indecision” and “undecidability” in a different sense than other Wharton scholars. For example, Richard Kaye uses these terms to describe the coquettish wavering behaviour that both males and females exhibit in Wharton’s fiction, including *The House of Mirth* (“Edith Wharton and the ‘New Gomorrahs’ of Paris: Homosexuality, Flirtation, and Incestuous Desire in *The Reef*,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 43.4 [1997]: 860-97). Kaye reads such wavering as indicative of a flirtatious desire that experiments with unsanctioned forms of self and negotiates between social identity and illegitimate desire. In my account, Lily’s wavering introduces her to the undecidability of time that becomes the necessary condition for her awareness of fate as the exposure to the unpredictability of the future.

⁶⁶ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 38.

⁶⁷ Frances Restuccia, "The Name of the Lily: Edith Wharton's Feminism(s)," *Contemporary Literature* 28.2 (1987): 223-38, 231. It is important to note that Restuccia emphasises Lily's "conceptual oscillation between fate and luck" as a resistance to Selden's monolithic interpretations that convey "simple fatalism" (231). Thus, she problematises Wharton's use of naturalist tropes with regard to gender. Her reading, however, addresses mostly Wharton's feminist concerns and their implications for feminist theory without having a wider resonance for Wharton's engagement with naturalism and her contribution to a critical redefinition of the genre.

⁶⁸ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 245.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 246.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, 81.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁷⁴ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 103.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 230. The emphases are mine.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 250.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 251.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 252.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 251.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Ibid.*, 252.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 251.

⁸⁴ Hildegard Hoeller, *Edith Wharton's Dialogue with Realism and Sentimental Fiction* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), xii.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁸⁶ Hoeller's excellent analysis of the dynamic between calculation and excess foregrounds a productive exchange between realism and sentimentality in Wharton's fiction that allows a broader understanding of the generic complexity in the latter's oeuvre. In fact, Hoeller's study has refocused the critical discussion of Wharton's sentimentalism from a staunch, albeit sometimes failed, attempt to distance herself fully from the sentimental tradition to a more qualified dialogue between Wharton's work and her contemporary genres. A detailed analysis of the sentimental strains in *The House of Mirth* is beyond the scope of my argument. I share, however, Hoeller's impulse to offer a more nuanced understanding of Wharton's realism with regard to late nineteenth-century genres, and I am using the schema between calculated intention and incalculable urgency to illustrate

Wharton's revision of naturalist determinism. For more on Wharton and the sentimental tradition of nineteenth-century women writers, see Robin Beaty, "Lilies that Fester: Sentimentality in *The House of Mirth*," *College Literature* 14.3 (1987): 263-75; Elaine Showalter; and Cynthia Griffin Wolff (*A Feast of Words* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977]; "Beautiful Death").

⁸⁷ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 254.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 257.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 244-45; and 250.

⁹⁰ *Social Register*, 50. Preston analyses the scene of *tableaux vivants* as another instance of a sheltered, make-believe environment, where Lily can feel she has agency over the Darwinian ecosystem of accident and chance (52). For Preston, Lily is unequipped to survive, even though she develops a rising awareness of her Darwinian surroundings and her inability to master it. Though I concur with Preston's reading of Darwinian tropes, I take Wharton's use of Darwinian contingency a step further; rather than an unpredictably hostile force, chance becomes an affirmative part of human fate insofar as it allows the possibility of remaining exposed to the possibility for survival.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁹² Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 42.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 257.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 251.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 261.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 262.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.* Lily's decision to increase the dose of chloral lends itself to various interpretations. For instance, Walter Benn Michaels reads Lily's risky attitude as the culmination of her attraction to the speculative practices of the market. For different readings, see Jennie Kassanoff (*Politics of Race*), who contextualises Lily's death within Wharton's nativist politics and the attempt to preserve Lily as a rare, endangered species; Sharon Kim, who interprets Lily's death as a recapitulation of Wharton's Lamarckian theories and the construction of factitious transcendence; Thomas Loebel, who offers a Levinasian reading of Lily's death ("Beyond Her Self." In *New Essays on The House of Mirth*, edited by Deborah Esch, 107-32 [Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001]; and Paul Ohler, who sees Lily's acceptance of chance as "an elemental aspect of the enduring, *real* natural world in which she [Lily] lives" as opposed to "the optimistic, progressive, and often cruel social Darwinism of the new elite" (*Darwinian Allegory*, 81-82).

⁹⁹ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 78.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² Ibid., 38.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 251.

¹⁰⁴ Michaels, *Gold Standard*, 233.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 241.

¹⁰⁶ In this sense, Lily stands in stark contrast to most characters of Old New York as well as other female characters in Wharton's later fiction. For instance, in *The Age of Innocence*, Newland Archer reflects that May Welland will never cause him any surprise "by an unexpected mood, by a new idea, a weakness, a cruelty, or an emotion" (243).

¹⁰⁷ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 64; 235.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 264.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 267.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 1.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid., 267.

¹¹³ Ibid., 268. The emphasis is mine.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 38.

¹¹⁵ In his analysis of Wharton's revisions to the galley proofs of *The House of Mirth*, Richard Kaye points out that Wharton's increasing emphasis on the fateful influence of uncontrollable natural forces testifies to her shifting sympathies toward a more deterministic view of the world ("Textual Hermeneutics").

¹¹⁶ *Darwinian Allegory*, 9.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 50. Ohler's careful reading of *The House of Mirth* teases out Wharton's critique of popular interpretations of social Darwinism as well as expedient uses of Spencerian theories that account for social competition as a necessary result of natural selection.

¹¹⁸ Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (New York: Touchstone, 1998; originally published 1933), 207.

¹¹⁹ In her influential reading of *The House of Mirth*, Wai Chee Dimock argues that Wharton allows no possibility of resistance against the arbitrary rules of an inescapable social and sexual economy. In a different vein, Elaine Showalter suggests that Wharton cannot let Lily survive insofar as the former should be able to outgrow nineteenth-century models of women's culture and authorship.

¹²⁰ Donna Campbell, "Naturalism." In *Edith Wharton in Context*, edited by Laura Rattray, 353-63 (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 360.

¹²¹ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 22. The emphasis is mine.

¹²² For more on the biological determinism that underlies plots of decline, see Philip Fisher, *Hard Facts*; and June Howard, *Form and History in American Literary Naturalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985). Jennifer Fleissner makes an

interesting case of Wharton's challenge to this plot through Lily's drifting, oscillating motion (*Women, Compulsion, Modernity: The Moment of American Naturalism* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004]).

¹²³ Restuccia, "The Name of the Lily," 228.

¹²⁴ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 251.

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