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The "Bitter Taste" of Naturalism

EDITH WHARTON'S *THE HOUSE OF MIRTH* AND
DAVID GRAHAM PHILLIPS'S *SUSAN LENOX*

—Donna M. Campbell

ALTHOUGH EDITH WHARTON MIGHT HAVE SHUDDERED AT EDMUND WILSON'S CHARACTERIZATION OF HER AS A "TREMENDOUS BLUESTOCKING," the confident literary judgments she expressed in *The Writing of Fiction*, *A Backward Glance*, and her letters nonetheless depict a critical sensibility sharpened by immersion in the best of classic and contemporary literature (29). One judgment, however, seems initially at odds with Wharton's usual insistence on the importance of form: her lavish praise for a naturalistic novel that has largely been neglected by contemporary critics, David Graham Phillips's *Susan Lenox: Her Fall and Rise* (1917). In 1921, after Sinclair Lewis wrote to congratulate Wharton on winning the Pulitzer Prize, she responded, "Your book [*Main Street*] and *Susan Lenox* (unexpurgated) have been the only things out of America that have made me cease to despair of the republic—of letters" (*Letters* 445). Critics such as Janet Beer Goodwyn and Cynthia Griffin Wolff have framed Wharton's choice as exemplifying her wide-ranging reading in American fiction, with Blake Nevius finding Phillips's work a New Woman novel like *The Custom of the Country* (61) and Elizabeth Ammons an illustration of Wharton's thesis that "marriage enslaves women."¹ In *Edith Wharton's Women: Friends and Rivals*, Susan Goodman observes that "Susan learns what Lily suspects: not much separates the business of marriage from the business of prostitution" (49).

Wharton's affection for and extensive comments about the book suggest that it deserves a much fuller treatment in light of her own work, especially *The House of Mirth*. As a novel of business, working-girl tale, social problem novel, and naturalistic bildungsroman, *Susan Lenox* both incorporates and debunks several popular genres in much the way that *The House of Mirth* blurs the distinctions between conventional society novel and naturalistic exposé. Moreover, as a retrospective commentary on *The House of Mirth*, *Susan Lenox* suggested to Wharton possibilities for naturalism beyond the limited world of "navvies and char-women," possibilities that allowed the frank investigation

of female sexuality in ways that Wharton had hinted at more circumspectly in "Bunner Sisters" and other works. In claiming *Susan Lenox* as a "neglected masterpiece," Wharton promotes the naturalistic novel as an artistically complex means to examine the nexus of sexual display, artistic identity, and economic power at the heart of early twentieth-century culture.

I

Although Cynthia Griffin Wolff notes in *A Feast of Words* that Wharton privately "recommended *Susan Lenox* (the unexpurgated version) to her friends" (365), the earliest of Wharton's published references to *Susan Lenox* occurs in the 1927 *Yale Review* essay "The Great American Novel." Praising Sinclair Lewis for "demolish[ing] the tottering stage-fictions of a lavender-scented New England, a chivalrous South, and a bronco-busting West," Wharton notes that he was nonetheless "not the first discoverer of Main Street":

Over thirty years ago, Robert Grant situated "Unleavened Bread" in the same thoroughfare; and so, a little later, did Frank Norris his "McTeague," and Graham Phillips his "Susan Lenox"—and they were all, as it happens, not only "great American novels," but great novels. But they came before their time, their bitter taste frightened a public long nurtured on ice-cream soda and marshmallows, and a quick growth of oblivion was trained over the dreary nakedness of the scene they had exposed. (648)

Here as elsewhere, Wharton groups Phillips with his American contemporaries; the "thoroughfare" they share is the broad, bare highway of naturalistic representation that cuts through the "sentimental vegetation" of American regionalism. A few years later, Wharton incorporated much of the same material into chapter 7 of *A Backward Glance*, where the first of two references to *Susan Lenox* in that work appears. Although the manuscript version of the chapter does not include the passage, in the published version Wharton expresses her "great admiration for [Robert Grant's] early novel, 'Unleavened Bread,' which, with W. D. Howells's 'A Modern Instance,' was the forerunner of 'Main Street,' of 'Babbitt,' of that unjustly forgotten masterpiece 'Susan Lenox,' of the best of Frank Norris, and of Dreiser's 'American Tragedy'" (894). Discriminating here between the precursors of *Main Street* and other works of American realism, Wharton applies the term "masterpiece" only to Phillips's novel. She reiterates this judgment later in the book, stating her conviction that someday "that . . . neglected masterpiece, Graham Phillips's

'Susan Lenox'" will emerge from obscurity (960). In her correspondence, Wharton was not, of course, necessarily sparing in her use of the term "masterpiece." In one letter to John Hugh Smith, for example, she applies it to works as disparate as Anita Loos's *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* and Lord Rosebery's *Napoleon* within the space of two short pages.² Her manuscript revision of the phrase from "great novel" to "masterpiece" in *A Backward Glance* suggests, however, an attempt to distinguish *Susan Lenox* in some way from the rest, to restore perhaps some of the critical attention, as opposed to notoriety, that she felt had been unjustly denied it.

These tantalizingly brief public statements merely hint at a much more complete explanation of Wharton's engagement with the book, an account that emerges from an unpublished exchange of letters between Wharton and Rutger Jewett, her senior editor at D. Appleton and Company, shortly after she first read the book during the summer of 1920. In the first letter, dated July 28, Wharton dispenses with routine publishing business before devoting this lengthy paragraph to the novel:

I have just read *Susan Lenox*, which I came across accidentally. It is a great book, full of almost all the qualities I most admire in a novelist. I was not particularly interested in Phillips's early books, which seem to me a crude attempt to combine fiction with "social welfare"; and even in *Susan Lenox* there is far too much unnecessary moralizing and lecturing. But the tremendous vitality of the book survives even this drawback, and it remains, on the whole, the most remarkable novel I have read in a long time. I am told that it has been suppressed in America, and if this is so it is an interesting commentary on the fact that the police acts [*sic*] as our literary censors. If it is true that the book is out of circulation, could you unofficially help me to a copy? What a pity that poor Phillips died! May I suggest that when the next edition comes out (as of course it will before long, for such a senseless interdiction will certainly be raised), there should be a serious introduction by a man of letters somewhat more capable of understanding the book and situating it critically where it belongs in English fiction?

This passage answers old questions even as it raises new ones. First, its extensive praise dispels any suggestion that Wharton may have been using "masterpiece" in the qualified fashion implied by the subsequent words "of its kind." Moreover, it confirms, as *A Backward Glance* does not, both the approximate date of Wharton's introduction to this work and her long acquaintance with

Phillips's other novels, although it is not clear what other books of Phillips's Wharton may have read. The existing records of Wharton's library list a second printing of the first edition of *Susan Lenox* as the only novel of Phillips's she owned, an edition she marked with the following handwritten inscription: "Original unexpurgated edition. Given to me by R. B. Jewett September 1920."³ However, her knowledge of Phillips's works dates to at least 1904. Although the letter itself is not extant, the letter book for Charles Scribner's Sons for that year contains summaries of letters to Wharton written by Edward L. Burlingame, editor of *Scribner's Magazine*, and William Crary Brownell, head of the book division at Scribner's. Writing to Wharton on 21 September 1904 about proposed titles for *The House of Mirth*, Burlingame responds to an apparent suggestion on Wharton's part of "The Cost" or "The Year of the Rose" for this work by noting that "*The Cost* has just been used as a title by David Graham Phillips,"⁴ a reference that suggests their mutual acquaintance with Phillips's works.

In his August 16, 1920, response to Wharton's letter praising the work, Jewett echoes her judgment of *Susan Lenox* as a "great book" and caps Wharton's joke about police censorship with a brief anecdote proving that her point was "more true than [she] realize[d]." Wharton replied on September 13, thanking Jewett for sending her an unexpurgated copy of *Susan Lenox*:

When I wrote you about the book I had no idea that an expurgated edition had been published. I confess that I regret it for it seems to me that your position would have been stronger if you had waited until intelligent public opinion compelled the withdrawal of the grotesque censorship. It is indeed a great book, and I wish the preface had been written by some one more worthy of introducing it to the world.

The writer so lacking in worthiness was the popular novelist Robert W. Chambers, whose own light romances *Susan Lenox* herself discards before turning to the meatier fare of Dickens and Balzac. He had been chosen for the task by Phillips's sister, Caroline Phillips Frevort, a personal friend of Chambers. Jewett goes on to explain the circumstances of the "grotesque censorship" in his September 30 reply: "Phillips' sister had charge of the *Susan Lenox* situation. She decided that it was much better to revise a few paragraphs in order to raise the blockade and enable the book to be sold in the open market." The "few paragraphs" Jewett mentions, however, amount to over a hundred pages of excised passages, and the "expurgated" version became a standard reprint edition, followed even in the 1977 Popular Library and

Southern Illinois University Press editions which claim to be "unexpurgated." (Of modern editions, only the two-volume 1968 Gregg Press edition reprints the unexpurgated 1917 text.)

The closest contemporary to Phillips and the best person to write the preface, in fact, might well have been Wharton herself, and the letter may be Wharton's oblique attempt to hint at this to Jewett. Although his life and his path to authorship differ from Wharton's in many respects, in his themes and subjects Phillips resembles his more famous counterpart. Born to a well-to-do Indiana family in 1867, Phillips attended Asbury College, now DePauw University, before transferring to Princeton in 1885. Beginning in 1890 as a journalist for the *New York Sun*, Phillips became a highly paid writer for the *New York World* in 1893, where, as the paper's London correspondent in 1897, he covered the Greek-Turkish confrontation at Velestinos also recorded by correspondents Stephen Crane and Richard Harding Davis.⁵ Phillips gained even greater fame for his pieces in George Horace Lorimer's *Saturday Evening Post*, but his journalistic career reached its pinnacle with his articles advocating political reform, notably one groundbreaking series for Hearst's *Cosmopolitan* magazine: "The Treason of the Senate." Part Progressive-Era reform tract, part popular journalism, "The Treason of the Senate" ran from March through November 1906 and immediately caused a sensation. After the appearance of the first article, an attack on Chauncey Depew, the "railroad senator" from New York, Theodore Roosevelt denounced Phillips and the entire muckraking school of journalism in "The Man with the Muck-Rake," the speech that gave the movement its name. Shaken by the attack, Phillips, who had begun writing novels beginning with the pseudonymously published *The Great God Success* in 1901, now turned to writing fiction for a living. Between 1901 and his death in 1911, he proved himself a prolific novelist whose disciplined work habits and unflagging energy recall Wharton's own, writing a total of twenty-three novels in addition to essays, a play, and journalistic pieces.

In changing modes from nonfiction to fiction, Phillips nonetheless retained his commitment to social criticism. Early novels of business such as *The Cost* (1904) and *The Deluge* (1905) had exposed corruption on Wall Street and in politics, a trend that would continue with *The Plum Tree* (1905), but Phillips gradually turned his investigative talents toward the same topos that Wharton had chosen: the class-bound social world of the American aristocracy and the arrivistes who sought to join its ranks. Published anonymously beginning in February 1905 in *The Saturday Evening Post*, *The Social Secretary*, Phillips's first foray into the genre, was billed as the "true" account of political and social life in Washington, D.C., as told in the diary of the social secretary

to an ambitious Midwestern senator's wife (Filler 84). Despite being characterized as insubstantial—"daintily flavored meringue," according to the *New York Times Saturday Review* for 7 October 1905—it sold over a hundred thousand copies, thus making 1905 a banner year for Phillips as well as for Wharton, whose *House of Mirth* appeared in book form in October. Phillips's book of essays denouncing New York society, *The Reign of Gilt*, was also published in September of that year. Given the sheer number of society-themed works Phillips published in 1905—three novels and a book of essays—it was inevitable that some would be compared with Wharton's *House of Mirth*. In "New York Society Held Up to Scorn in Three New Books: Mrs. Edith Wharton's 'The House of Mirth' a Novel of Remarkable Power—Comedy of Social Life" (*New York Times* 15 Oct. 1905), Phillips's *Reign of Gilt* is described as "forming a *pronunciamento* against American society and its greed of wealth as flamboyant and readable (not as sincere and sensible) as Jeremy Collier's historic 'Short View' in which the amusements of the English Restoration were so vivaciously denounced," while *The House of Mirth* is compared favorably to "a Greek tragedy." The December 1905 issue of Albert Shaw's *Review of Reviews* proclaims a similar judgment on the two authors. Having applauded Wharton's portrait of "the palpable coarseness, the repellent obtrusion, of a blatant, unscrupulous upstart" in *The House of Mirth*, the review blasts Phillips for his positive treatment of the same subject matter in *The Deluge* and pronounces his novel a failure (757). Despite *The House of Mirth*'s positive treatment, such comparative reviews may well have fuelled both Wharton's fear of being thought simply a "society novelist" and her efforts to ensure that her novel not be judged as one more "daintily flavored meringue" for an insatiable but undiscerning public.

Like those of Wharton, Phillips's later novels frequently focus on the role and status of women in society, especially that of the New Woman. With an almost Calvinistic faith in the value of hard work, Phillips drew less than sympathetic portraits of heroines who lazily abandoned all efforts to keep themselves intellectually or physically attractive after marriage, yet his portrayals of clubmen and other male society "parasites" were equally unsparing. His presentation of contemporary social issues shocked readers who were not used to hearing that divorce, exercise, and plastic surgery might improve lives (*Old Wives for New*, 1908) or that an adulterous affair might benefit the restless intellectual woman more than the material comforts of a conventional marriage (*Hungry Heart*, 1909). Like Wharton, Phillips was simultaneously praised and damned for his naturalistic approach. A 1905 review by "E.F.E." of *The House of Mirth* had proclaimed that "Mrs. Wharton out-Howells

Howells; she puts all the realists, all the naturalists, even all the romanticists to shame. Zola may have been more sensational, more gross, more repulsively human, but he was never so exact, so truthful, so absolutely indisputable, as is Mrs. Wharton in 'The House of Mirth.'" The reviewer's recognition of the "bitter taste" beneath the "ice cream soda and marshmallows" of Wharton's society novel matches a similar recognition of the naturalism underlying Phillips's method. In "The Leading American Novelist," an essay for the January 1911 issue of *The Smart Set*, H. L. Mencken praises Phillips for a similar set of naturalistic virtues. Posing the question implied in his title—"Who is he?"—Mencken dismisses Henry James and Wharton from contention with arguments that announce his own critical principles: "James? James is no more an American than the Sultan of Sulu. . . . A lady, perhaps? Mrs. Wharton? See James, Henry." Mencken instead proposes Phillips for the honor:

Novelists succeed among us in proportion as they keep outside the skin. But Mr. Phillips does not bid for success in that way. He boldly ventures upon hazardous psychological laparotomies; he insists upon making indecent cross sections of the American woman; he looks for the roots of ideals, not in the heart, but in the stomach; he orates vociferously all the while he is at work. (163–64)

Mencken's prejudices aside, the image of the dissecting surgeon searching for truth by reading bodies, not minds, recalls similar images of the projects of naturalistic authors dating back to Zola's medical model in "The Experimental Novel" and looks ahead to Phillips's focus on the body in *Susan Lenox*. Even with this new subject matter, however, Phillips did not abandon the society novel entirely, publishing *The Fashionable Adventures of Joshua Craig* in 1909. The accuracy with which Phillips had "dissected" his well-born female protagonist was tragically borne out by subsequent events, of which Wharton's remark about "poor Phillips" suggests that she had knowledge. On January 23, 1911, a man who thought his sister had been satirized in the book approached Phillips outside the Princeton Club and shot him six times before turning the gun on himself. Despite extensive surgery, Phillips died the following day, January 24, 1911—coincidentally Wharton's forty-ninth birthday.

Finally, Wharton's comments about Phillips must also be placed in the context of their shared association with D. Appleton and Company. Wharton's connection with the company, which began with her sale of *The Reef* to the firm in 1912 (Benstock 250) and continued with the publication of *Summer* in July 1917, marked her debut at the firm at the very moment that it was issuing *Susan Lenox* as the last of Phillips's posthumous publications. Indeed, the

dust jacket for *Summer* advertises *Susan Lenox* among Appleton's current offerings as "a courageous picture of American life" (Garrison 196). Wharton's statement that she came upon the work "accidentally" is thus somewhat surprising if not altogether disingenuous, although her war work may well have precluded any knowledge of its notorious publication history. After Phillips's death, *Susan Lenox* first appeared serially in a censored version by *Hearst's Magazine* from June 1915 to January 1917. Publication of the two-volume unexpurgated version in February of that year brought forth a storm of protest, although, as Phillips's friend Arthur Little wrote in 1931, "Phillips never wrote a dirty thought in his life. He made pen pictures of great realism, but there was always a purpose of worthiness back of his pictures. He could never understand why it was necessary in making a picture of dramatic life to give the world the impression that the author believed in Santa Claus."⁶

However, with the *Boston Transcript* calling it "an extremely offensive addition to the literature of pornography" and the February 23, 1917, review in the *New York Times* declaring that "it would have been better for Mr. Phillips' reputation and the reputation of American letters if it had never been published" (Filler 172), the novel was, as Wharton says, subjected to "grotesque censorship." Forced by John Sumner and his Society for the Suppression of Vice to withdraw the book in April 1917, Appleton and Carolyn Phillips Frevert staved off an impending trial on obscenity charges by bringing out a version acceptable to the Society.⁷ In short, the book that Wharton had called a saving grace for "the republic—of letters" was seen by the government and the *New York Times* as contributing to the same republic's destruction.

II

As a retrospective commentary upon *The House of Mirth*, *Susan Lenox* vindicates Wharton's vision in much the same manner that, as Ellen Dupree has argued, "Wharton strongly believed that Loos's depiction of Lorelei 'vindicated' her own portrait of Undine Spragg in *The Custom of the Country*" (Dupree 269). Phillips's novel chronicles five years in the life of its heroine, the "natural daughter of Lorella Lenox" (*Susan Lenox* 1:555) whose sexual ignorance causes her, in one of Phillips's ironic twists on the novel of seduction, to confess to being "betrayed" despite her actual innocence. Forced to marry an uncouth farmer, who rapes her on their wedding night, Susan escapes to Cincinnati on a showboat, where she is befriended by the company manager, Burlingham, and performs as a singer. When Burlingham falls ill, Susan prostitutes herself to earn the \$10 that will ensure his care, only to learn upon her

return to the hospital that he has died. Determined to "learn to be strong," Susan alternates between such self-sacrificing stints of prostitution and what Phillips scathingly terms "honest toil" as a factory worker, singer, cloak model, and, like Lily Bart, hat trimmer.

After moving to New York with her lover, Rod Spenser, and then leaving him when she fears that she is responsible for his failure as a playwright, Susan descends into the naturalistic urban hell of the inner city, a territory that Phillips, like Norris, London, and Crane, hypothesizes as an "internal colony" of the defamiliarized and foreign.⁸ As Phillips constructs it, the city neutralizes outrage and morality into a simple and practical struggle to exist: alcoholism, opium addiction, incest, prostitution, beatings, and death pale into insignificance compared to a corrupt sociopolitical system that forces the weak to prey upon the weaker to survive. Surviving the emotional brutality of weak men like Spenser, Susan next falls prey to the forces of poverty and her own system of ethics. After spending the night with Gideon, a rich businessman who offers to make her his mistress and gives her good practical advice about getting on in the world, Susan rejects him as decisively as Lily Bart rejects Simon Rosedale's similar proposal in *The House of Mirth*. She continues her descent when she is virtually enslaved by Freddie Palmer, a procurer whose combination of physical abuse and sexual attraction she escapes only when she nearly chokes him to death during a pitched battle. Discovered by Brent, a playwright as strong and successful as Spenser is weak, Susan begins acting lessons, only to give them up when she fears Brent has abandoned her. She again meets Freddie Palmer, by this time enormously rich and determined to succeed socially, and travels abroad with him. Learning that Brent had considered her promising as an actress after all, she decides to take up the stage again, after which a jealous Freddie has Brent killed. Susan is left truly free, ironically not because of her own efforts but because Brent has left her his fortune. Thus the "fall and rise" of the title is a progress through parallel careers as Susan sheds her position as "lady," moves through and beyond the "trade of woman" (2:306) and finally transcends gender altogether through her triumphant career on the stage.

In its essential elements, then, *Susan Lenox* reads like a dark mirror version of *The House of Mirth*. The most central parallels between the works concern the three significant types of men in *Susan Lenox*, types that parallel strikingly those in *The House of Mirth*: the ineffectual "artistic" man whose impossible standards of conduct the heroine can never maintain (Rod Spenser, Lawrence Selden); his opposite number, the brutish man whose participation in the world of exchange endangers the heroine's autonomy (Freddie Palmer,

Gus Trenor); and the cultural outsider whose attempts to aid the heroine are tragically at odds with her circumstances (Robert Brent, Simon Rosedale). Like his counterpart Lawrence Selden, Rod Spenser conceives himself to be aesthetically superior both to his profession, journalism, at which he earns a modest living, and to the culture that supports him. After meeting Susan in flight from her forced marriage, Spenser promises but fails to help her escape to Cincinnati. Like Lawrence Selden, whose hypocrisy about his own affairs does not prevent his "sharp shock of disillusionment" at seeing Lily emerge from the Trenors' house at midnight (146), the womanizing Spenser declares that Susan has "killed" his love by telling him of her prostitution. In both novels, the basic narrative pattern is one of approach toward emotional intimacy followed by male disillusionment, retreat into intellectual rationalization, and flight. For example, this pattern informs Selden's response to his and Lily's "golden afternoon" at Bellomont as well as his reaction to the *tableau vivant* and subsequent episode with Gus Trenor. In a similar fashion, Spenser sends his best friend, Drumley, to tell Susan that being "entangled in an intrigue with a woman he is ashamed to love" has hampered his growth as a playwright, after which Susan promptly leaves him (1:494). Such massive failures on Selden's and Spenser's parts do not dissuade the women in these novels from performing their own rescues, however. At her lowest point, Susan discovers the dissolute Spenser in a dive and determines to rescue him, although he has never understood or acknowledged her sacrifice, much as Selden never intuitively grasps Lily Bart's destruction of his letters to Bertha Dorset. Yet the difference between them is telling: Lily's silences, like her sacrifice of both letters and self, allow Selden to retain the illusion that he still lives in the "republic of the spirit" (55) and remains the interpreter of the "word which made all clear" (256). As Candace Waid points out, "Lily . . . cannot stop being a text; Selden has the last word because he is left reading" (43). By contrast, Susan lifts Spenser from utter squalor and encourages his production of plays, but she will neither participate in fictionalizing experience nor permit interpretation: "You've got several false ideas about me. You'll have to get rid of them, if we're to get along. . . . You and I fancied we loved each other for a while. We don't fool ourselves in that way now" (1:337).

Failing to exist as texts in the aesthetic realm, Susan and Lily must reinvent themselves as commodities in the naturalistic world of commerce and "debasement exchange" represented by the novels' businessmen. Brokers of intangibles (the services of women and securities), both Freddie Palmer and Gus Trenor serve as necessary correctives to the destructive fictions of Spenser and Selden, the brutal reality of prostitution that they signal exacting a harsh

toll upon women whose education as "ladies" has ill fitted them to enter the marketplace. Introduced into this realm and possessing only themselves as a medium of exchange, Susan and Lily attempt to keep their market value inflated by infinitely deferring the process, implied by their promise of sexuality, of gratifying their purchasers' desires. Susan successfully accomplishes this balancing act by selling herself sexually yet deliberately maintaining a distinction between the commercial self that she barter, signified by her "working name" of Queenie Brown and the "gray of thought and action" that enters her eyes (1:505), and the inner self, the Susan whose eyes shine violet with emotion. As she tells Freddie, "what I sold was no more myself than—than the coat I'd pawned and drunk up before I did it" (2:494). Susan makes this distinction even within her relationship with Freddie, separating her sexual desire from the business relationship in which he beats her: "Had he—this kindly handsome youth—done that frightful thing? No—no. It was another instance of the unreality of the outward life. *He* had not done it, any more than she—her real self—had suffered it" (2:146). Through her experience with Gus Trenor, Lily also comes to understand the real nature of the transaction of "letting Trenor . . . lean a little nearer and rest his hand reassuringly on hers" (68). Her self-justifying thought that "to a clever girl, it would be easy to hold him by his vanity" (68) differs little from the blunt assessment of Ida, one of Susan's prostitute friends, that "Men are just crazy about themselves. Nothing easier than to fool 'em" (2:120). Recalling her actions after Gus has attacked her, Lily confesses to Gerty that she has prostituted herself emotionally if not technically: "I've sunk lower than the lowest, for I've taken what they take, and not paid as they pay" (132). Unlike Susan, however, Lily labors under a double burden of guilt as she strives to integrate the commercial and the inner self. She asks Gerty whether "bad girls . . . always go from bad to worse" and believes that "there's no turning back—your old self rejects you, and shuts you out" (131). Her error, as Susan points out in another context to Clara, lies in believing that these selves are sequential and mutually exclusive: "If you slipped and fell in the mud—or were thrown into it—you wouldn't say, 'I'm dirty through and through. I can never get clean again'—would you?" (2:330). Clinging to her past selves as she clings to the role of lady, Lily strokes the dresses that preserve "an association . . . in every fold" (236); by contrast, Susan gradually frees herself from past lives as she discards the soiled and ragged clothes of her external self throughout the book.

As the extensive symbolic use of clothing as identity suggests, the construction of class and race in these novels exists in a complex double relation to gender. Inherited, immutable, and inimitable, class bestows the sort of ethical

even more cogently to *Susan Lenox*. If, as Jennifer Fleissner has argued, one defining characteristic of the naturalistic novel is its representation of “the female body as a site of constant *work*, work that defines itself in some way ‘modern’ by virtue of its repetitive, mechanical nature” (82), then Susan’s protracted stints of wage slavery, prostitution, and a type of “natural” acting that Brent makes her repeat mechanically all strikingly suggest the body as (working) machine that Fleissner and also Mark Seltzer have described. In addition, the similar episodes of Lily Bart’s short-lived career in a workroom and the Nettie Struther subplot of *The House of Mirth* suggest both novels’ fleeting debt to serious working-girl novels like Dorothy Richardson’s *The Long Day, the Story of a New York Working Girl* (1905) and the rejection of sentimental fare such as Carrie Meeber discards in *Sister Carrie*—Charlotte M. Brame’s *Dora Thorne* (1883) or Laura Jean Libbey’s *Little Leafy, the Cloak-maker’s Beautiful Daughter: A Romantic Story of a Lovely Working Girl in the City of New York* (1891).¹¹

The final principal way in which Phillips reaffirms Wharton’s vision lies in his complex rearticulation of the relationship between spectacle and spectator. As June Howard demonstrates in *Form and History in American Literary Naturalism*, the concept of the spectator is central to naturalistic form, especially as it allows for both disengagement from and appropriation of the naturalistic scene on the part of audience as well as narrator. Two scenes of spectacle in particular emerge in naturalistic novels from *McTeague* to *Sister Carrie*. The first is that of the focused panoramic gaze at the city, one that takes in squalor as well as splendor. According to Christophe Den Tandt, the former produces not simply the familiar horror ascribed to naturalism but a dual sense of the “oceanic sublime” that is the city’s vitality and a “naturalist sublime” of exhilaration and dread that for naturalist protagonists provides “the otherwise exhilarating contact of the metropolis” that is “superseded by pessimistic feelings of ambivalence, expressed in the gothic terms of horror and wonder . . .” (4). Although much of Lily Bart’s life is spent in urban interiors, her brief foray into the streets after burning Bertha’s letters during the visit to Selden illustrates one version of this feeling:

Lily walked on unconscious of her surroundings. She was still treading the buoyant ether which emanates from the high moments of life. . . . The melancholy pleasure-ground [of Bryant park] was almost deserted when she entered it, and she sank down on an empty bench in the glare of an electric street-lamp. . . . Night had now closed in, and the roar of traffic in Forty-second Street was dying out. (242)

The heightened and symbolic isolation that Lily experiences amidst what Norris had called the “sullen diapason” of city noises recalls also Susan’s similar experience, as Phillips several times presents her gazing across rooms and streets as though recalling the horrors of the city as well as the attributes that made her consider New York her “City of the Sun.”

The second such spectacle common to naturalism is the vision of a woman’s motionless body, often a violated body, but one that is nonetheless extensively described. Broadly speaking, the murdered women’s bodies in *McTeague* (Maria Macapa and Trina McTeague) share this feature of spectacle with Carrie Meeber’s silent little frowning Quakeress. Furthermore, both visions converge in a form barely extant during the time when *The House of Mirth* and *Susan Lenox* were written: the white slave narrative. As Marc Connelly describes the form in *The Response to Prostitution in the Progressive Era*, the plot of the white slave involves an innocent country girl who abandons her home when lured to the city, after which “the insidious white slaver would brutally seduce the girl and install her in a brothel, where she became an enslaved prostitute.”¹² Thrust into national attention by reports like Clifford G. Roe’s *The Great War on White Slavery* (1911), T. P. Curtis’s *Traffic in Women* (1912), and Paul Elliot’s *White Slavery and What It Is* (1910) as well as novels such as Reginald Wright Kauffman’s *House of Bondage* (1910) or *The Girl that Goes Wrong* (1911), the form proposed the bodies of women as a national as well as naturalist spectacle. With the advent of increasing employment opportunities in the cities, the white slave threat also became one way to organize surveillance of daughters and to regulate their behavior. As Clifford Roe exhorts his audience in “The Auctioneer of Souls,” one of the essays in Ernest Bell’s *Fighting the Traffic in Young Girls* (1910), “Girls, look out for the pitfalls. Mothers and fathers, you can’t afford to let your young daughters leave home with strangers unless you want to send them to ruin . . . [.] do not be too anxious to make money, or for the higher position in the social life at the expense of your daughter” (173). Small town families with daughters were advised to be watchful lest their daughters disappear into the hands of “cadets” or procurers, often characterized as foreign born. Although the frequently discussed elegant *tableau vivant* of Lily Bart as Mrs. Lloyd initially seems removed from such scenes,¹³ Margit Stange reads *The House of Mirth* and this scene in particular as a not-so-oblique reference to these ideas: “Standing in front of her audience, her female body showing through her white dress, Lily is like the white slave whose body has the capacity to manifest various identities in the eyes of its beholders and owners (or potential owners). And the plot of Wharton’s novel shades into the white slavery narrative: like the victim of

white slavery, Lily is an unprotected heroine circulating in a market where, if her rightful protector fails to claim her, she falls into the hands of 'alien' marketeers . . ." (96). Stange suggests that on the level of spectacle, at least, the white body and dress create Lily as a text upon which to write one's fantasies. At a more basic level, however, Lily is also, like Susan, an innocent burdened with the persistent innocence of her class, thrust into an unreal and nightmarish city despite her seeming sophistication.

Susan Lenox presents similar spectacles of a woman's motionless body; indeed, the focus on Susan's body generally throughout the novel is incessant and constitutes the novel's major source of signification. Susan herself views it as an instrument and deliberately adorns it in ways that at once announce and mock her choice of profession, adopting a "Broadway" hairstyle, reddened lips, and a clinging, disagreeably sensual perfume that seem at odds with her quiet demeanor. Through these markers that undercut the obvious good breeding that Phillips insists is evident in every gesture, Susan constructs herself as a paradoxical, unreadable text with few cues to her real nature except her eyes—gray for commerce, violet for emotion—and her feet. As the rocking chair with its circular movement comes to signify Carrie's aspirations in *Sister Carrie*, so the images of feet and shoes, described with eroticized, rhapsodic attention by the narrative voice, convey a similar meaning in *Susan Lenox*; linked literally to Susan's incessant walking in quest of clients and figuratively to her movement between worlds, her shoes are never allowed to be down at heel or round-heeled, the latter a slang reference to sexual promiscuity, for she tends to them carefully even in the most desperate circumstances. Despite her almost constant movement as she walks all over New York, Susan is also shown in poses of stillness. The image of Lily posing as a classic work of art for male purchasers is transmuted in the humbler world of *Susan Lenox* into the image of a woman posing for male purchasers as Susan sings before rowdy riverboat crowds and models clothing for Gideon. She recapitulates Lily's experience as an aestheticized object of desire when she tries on Paris fashions for Freddie, who has literally purchased her time as Gus Trenor has sought to do with Lily.

The real *tableaux vivants* in *Susan Lenox*, however, feature quite another presentation of a woman's still body:

When she came to her senses, she was lying sprawled on the far side of the bed. Her head was aching wildly; her body was stiff and sore; her face felt as if it were swollen to many times its normal size. . . . Her face was indeed swollen, but not to actual disfigurement. Under her left eye there was a small cut from which the

blood had oozed to smear and dry upon her left cheek. Upon her throat were faint bluish finger marks. . . . "You are as low as the lowest," she said to her image—not to herself but to her image; for herself seemed spectator merely of that body and soul aching and bleeding and degraded. . . . She turned round to look again at the man who had outraged them. His eyes were open and he was gazing dreamily at her, as smiling and innocent as a child. . . . "You *are* a beauty!" said he. (2:142–43)

and

She awakened in a small, rather dingy room. She was lying on her back with only stockings on. Beyond the foot of the bed was a little bureau at which a man, back full to her, stood in trousers and shirt-sleeves tying his necktie. She saw that he was a rough looking man, coarsely dressed—an artisan or small shop-keeper. Used as she was to the profound indifference of men of all classes and degrees of education and intelligence to what the woman thought—used as she was to this sensual selfishness which men at least in part conceal from their respectable wives, Susan felt a horror of this man who had not minded her unconsciousness. . . . "Hello, pretty!" cried he, genially. "Slept off your jag, have you?" (2:208–9)

The first scene occurs after Freddie has broken Susan's will and forced her into prostituting herself for him. The second, which recalls the white slave tradition, occurs after a "cadet" or recruiter, a "good-looking, darkish youth . . . partly of Jewish blood" (2:205), buys Susan a drugged drink and sells her to the madam of a brothel; in this scene, she discovers that the man who calls her "pretty" is not even the first to have used her body that night when she was unconscious. If *The House of Mirth* alludes to the white slave narrative through delicately allusive tropes of whiteness and figures of economic power, Phillips's use of the conventions is simple, direct, and powerful—the violence, the drugged drinks, the loss of consciousness and even more conspicuous loss of control. The true naturalistic tableau, Phillips suggests, is this scene of the still woman—battered, bruised, raped, and sprawled naked and supine on a bed—subjected to the happy gaze of ownership bestowed by her oblivious and unrepentant purchaser. Significantly, in each case, the man sees not the real Susan but the image he creates; the "beauty" of her body derives from his absolute power over it. Wharton's subtle interweaving of economics and visual ownership thus becomes transformed when potentially viewed through Susan's eyes instead of Lawrence Selden's, Gus Trenor's, and the rest. The

tableau motif shifts as if seen in its true colors for the first time, and *Susan Lenox* appears as a kind of unspeakable or unspoken core for understanding Wharton's more sophisticated work, much like the role that the famous "unpublishable" "Beatrice Palmato" fragment was to have served for one of Wharton's more complexly developed stories. It is this sort of retrospective look—the "backward glance" of recognition—that makes *Susan Lenox* such a compelling and suggestive gloss upon *The House of Mirth* and validates Wharton's claims for its greatness.

III

In one sense, then, *Susan Lenox* is a masterpiece for Wharton not only because it encompasses "tremendous vitality" and "almost all the qualities" she most admired in a novel but because it articulates what *The House of Mirth* leaves unspoken. As the central aesthetic image of *The House of Mirth* is high art and melodrama, the representation of conventional and still images, that of *Susan Lenox* is perversely rendered naturalistic theater, with Susan sympathizing with the "wrong" role of Lola in *Cavalleria Rusticana* and Magda in Ernst Sudermann's *Magda*. Phillips explicates the connections for women between acting, prostitution, and the role of the lady, and Susan's ability to see these clearly enables her to be strong at last. If Lily is an artist of the beautiful, Susan is an artist of the real. *Susan Lenox* thus becomes a mediating presence between creator (Wharton) and character (Lily), a reflection, or perhaps Wharton's revisioning, of Lily—specifically, of a Lily that triumphs.

Further, as a parable of the woman artist, *Susan Lenox* functions as a gloss on Wharton's own apprenticeship. For Susan, the most critical juncture in the novel is her decision to abandon the luxurious life of fashion and house decoration that she shares with Freddie Palmer for the rigors of learning to act. Robert Brent, the great playwright whose tutelage she accepts and whose legacy she carries on after his death, forces her to learn *not* to act—that is, to act in a wooden fashion—until she gains control of her body, the medium of her art. The parallels with Wharton's own apprenticeship are clear, for perfecting the art of packaging and selling the self without selling the soul is the task of lady, prostitute, and artist alike. Synthesizing natural taste, a knowledge of real life, and a disciplined approach to practicing her craft, Susan Lenox masters this task and enacts the death of the lady, to use Elaine Showalter's phrase, and the birth of the female artist. Both Wharton's writings and her admiration for *Susan Lenox* proclaim her success in this arena. If, as Donald Pizer has argued, Wharton's 1920 novel *The Age of Innocence* represents her

naturalism in its perfected state, then *Susan Lenox*, with its themes of sexual display, economic power, and artistic identity, represents her naturalism not perfected but developed in a different direction—a divergent road, one admired but not taken.

NOTES

1. *Edith Wharton's Argument with America* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1980), 155. Ammons also says that Wharton did not specify what "the best of Frank Norris" might be (153), although in "The Great American Novel" Wharton lists *McTeague* in company with the other books that she cites.
2. In her letter of 26 Jan. 1926 to John Hugh Smith, Wharton writes, "My dear, I knew you were worthy of 'Blondes'! How I wish we could talk that masterpiece over. . . . I've just been reading Ld. Rosebery's Napoleon, for the first time since it appeared, nearly 80 years ago; & I find it even greater than I did then. What a masterpiece, that also. . . . I don't know if the blonde's trick of speech is Southern[?]-but I somehow know it's *all right*—& that Undine at last is vindicated!" (box 26, folder 807, Edith Wharton Collection, Beinecke Library, Yale University).
3. *Edith Wharton's Library: A Catalogue*, compiled by George Ramsden, with a foreword by Hermione Lee (Settrington: Stone Trough Books, 1999), 98. At least two other sets of library records exist: the twenty-six-page inventory "Liste des Livres à Jean-Marie" at the Beinecke Library, and "The Library of Edith Wharton (offered for sale)" at the Huntington Library, a list nearly but not wholly identical with Ramsden's *Catalogue*. The first does not mention Phillips, but the second mentions this edition of *Susan Lenox*.
4. Letter Book, box 167, folder 1, Charles Scribner's Sons Archive, Manuscripts Division, Dept. of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.
5. For a complete account of Phillips as a professional journalist, see Christopher Wilson's *The Labor of Words: Literary Professionalism in the Progressive Era* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1985).
6. Letter to Isaac Frederick Marcossou, 29 Dec. 1931 (Manuscripts Division C0140, Dept. of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library). Marcossou, a critic who had also been a close friend of Frank Norris, used some of Little's lengthy letter in *David Graham Phillips: His Life and Times* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1932), although Little was less than pleased with Marcossou's interpretation of Phillips.
7. Several critics discuss the publishing history of *Susan Lenox*. See Louis Filler, *Voice of the Democracy* (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1978), 171–82; Laura Hapke, *Girls Who Went Wrong: Prostitutes in American Fiction 1885–1917* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State U Popular P, 1989), 153–55; Abe Ravitz, *David Graham Phillips* (New York: Twayne, 1966), 141–42; and the introduction to the Gregg Press reprint of the novel (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Gregg Press, 1968). The Gregg Press edition unfortunately does not reproduce the complete title page but lists 1917 as the first edition. In the introduction, however, F.C.S. writes that the novel was issued as a two-volume novel in July 1915 and withdrawn shortly thereafter in response to

- John Sumner's suit. However, Ravitz specifies 1917 as the date for the two-volume version (12), and Hapke gives February 1917 as the date of the unexpurgated version (154). The National Union Catalogue lists 1917 as the date of the first edition.
8. On the concept of the "internal colony," see James R. Giles, *The Naturalistic Inner-City Novel in America: Encounters with the Fat Man* (Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 1995), and June Howard, *Form and History in American Literary Naturalism* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1985).
 9. See especially Wai-Chee Dimock, "'Debasing Exchange': Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*," *PMLA* 100 (Oct. 1985): 783-92, reprinted in *Edith Wharton*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), 123-38; Robert Shulman, "Divided Selves and the Market Society: Politics and Psychology in *The House of Mirth*," *Perspectives on Contemporary Literature* 11 (1985): 10-19; and Barbara Hochman, "The Rewards of Representation: Edith Wharton, Lily Bart, and the Writer/Reader Interchange," *Novel* 24 (Winter 1991): 147-61.
 10. Wharton's debts to evolutionary theory have been well documented. See especially Bert Bender, *The Descent of Love: Darwin and the Theory of Sexual Selection in American Fiction, 1871-1926* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1996); Mary Suzanne Schriber, "Darwin, Wharton, and 'The Descent of Man': Blueprints of American Society," *Studies in Short Fiction* 17 (1980): 31-38; and Maureen Howard, "The Bachelor and the Baby," *The Cambridge Companion to Edith Wharton*, ed. Millicent Bell (New York: Cambridge UP, 1995), 137-56.
 11. For a full discussion of the genre, see Laura Hapke's *Tales of the Working-Girl: Wage-earning Women in American Literature, 1890-1925* (New York: Twayne, 1992).
 12. Marc Connelly, *The Response to Prostitution in the Progressive Era* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1980), 116. See also Barbara Meil Hobson's *Uneasy Virtue: The Politics of Prostitution and the American Reform Tradition* (New York: Basic Books, 1987) and Ruth Rosen's *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900-1918* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1982). Laura Hapke has a helpful discussion of the genre in *Girls Who Went Wrong*.
 13. For example, as Wai-Chee Dimock has shown, in *The House of Mirth*, Lily Bart constructs herself as aesthetic object but becomes instead "human merchandise" (124) most obviously when, posing for the *tableaux vivants*, she markets not only her charm but her figure in the clinging robes of Reynolds's *Mrs. Lloyd*.

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