

“THIS MYSTERIOUS MIASMA”: ENVIRONMENTAL RISK, EDITH  
WHARTON, AND THE LITERATURE OF BAD AIR

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“This Mysterious Miasma” is a critical study of the literary and cultural history of American miasma from 1865-1995. I begin with an analysis of Roman fever in Henry James’ *Daisy Miller* and Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Marble Faun*. I argue that American anxieties about Roman fever were consistently intertwined with concerns about the corrosion of literary value. This twining of literary and miasmatic concerns does not end when what science historian Peter Thorsheim calls “the miasma era” concludes in the 1890s. Indeed, I argue that literary criticism has been too quick to take bacteriology at its word, misreading the scientific ascendancy of germ theory as evidence of a parallel metaphoric ascendancy. These misreadings overlook the presence of a pre-bacterial rhetoric in post-bacterial America. As recent social histories of hygiene and sanitation have suggested, early twentieth century domestic reformers, principally women, retained the miasmatic narratives bacteriology denounced, investing bad air with complex gendered meaning; I argue that this investment is also crucial to environmental language in early twentieth century fiction. To make this point, I focus on Edith Wharton, whose work is a fertile source of what I call the miasmatic hypothesis— the proposition that female subjects are shaped by the environmental risks which make them legible in the first place. Through readings of bad air in Wharton’s canonical fiction, including *The House of Mirth* and “Roman Fever,” as well as her minor fiction, *Sanctuary* and *Twilight Sleep*, I demonstrate that

her environments pose both aesthetic and physical risks, and that her characters come into relief according to their technique for negotiating the competing demands of different kinds of risk. My final chapters describe the rhetoric of bad air at work in late twentieth century legal and epidemiological discussions of gender and sexuality. I elaborate the political stakes of miasma narratives in environmental illness, which I discuss in the context of Todd Haynes' 1995 film *Safe*. I also analyze the language of the hostile work environment in sexual harassment law. Ultimately, I conclude that current miasmatic rhetorics tend to obfuscate rather than articulate the gendered complexities of psycho-social interaction, and thus become harmful to the causes of social justice they were designed to address.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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## Introduction

### “This Mysterious Miasma”: The Literary Logic of Bad Air

#### I. This Mysterious Miasma

The cover of the October 12, 2003 *New York Times Magazine* warns: “There’s a Killer haunting America’s inner cities. Not drugs. Not handguns. But...stress? The New Ghetto Miasma.” The accompanying article, more subtle than the sensationalist cover predicts, attempts to account for the elevated levels of a range of chronic illnesses in poor urban neighborhoods. The author, Helen Epstein, explains “I wanted to talk to families...who had recently moved out of the slums. Did the move affect their health? And if so, why? Did people experience less stress? Did they eat better food? Breathe better air? What might their experiences tell me about the mysterious miasma of contemporary poverty?” (98). In the course of her essay, Epstein answers in the affirmative to each of her opening questions. And yet, surprisingly, she retains the language of miasma and looks explicitly to the mid-nineteenth century for a descriptive model:

In some ways, our public health institutions are in the same position they were in 150 years ago. In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, public health boards were established to fight the great killers of the day—cholera and tuberculosis. The poor were more susceptible to those diseases then, just as they are more susceptible to chronic diseases now. And then, as now, the reasons were unknown. Some...maintained that the afflictions of poverty were environmental. A stinking mass of invisible vapor, referred to as ‘miasma,’ hung in the air over the slums. (76)

So why does Epstein invite the return of this “mysterious miasma” as a descriptive model? Her analysis implies that contemporary language for explaining the etiology of illnesses in poor neighborhoods—particularly illnesses which present according to a complex complicity between the body and the environment it occupies—is itself impoverished. Indeed, her reintroduction of the language of miasma to the scene of epidemiological interpretation is an attempt to counter the etiological insistence that disease must have one primary source—a gene, a virus, or a bacteria. She wants to find a way of articulating a model of overdetermination to a popular readership that understands medical science in terms of single-source bacteriological explanations: “We don’t have a germ theory for chronic diseases like stroke, heart disease, diabetes and cancer...Clearly we need to examine this miasma with a different kind of microscope” (77).

Just what sort of microscope does an analysis of miasma require? I contend that miasma has both a literary and a medical history, and that, furthermore, these two histories are intertwined. Epstein’s approach represents, I would suggest, an attempt to reintroduce a literary dimension to epidemiology sacrificed to bacteriological thinking. Miasma theory was—and is again now—an interlocking narrative approach: it allows a series of stories—physiological, medical, psychic and aesthetic—to be told simultaneously. It is worth noting here that Epstein is herself a molecular biologist: presumably she knows a little something about both the power and the limits of the microscope. It is her recognition of these limits that inspires her to develop a descriptive language that seems, in looking for a model of overdetermination, to reach for the literary: “health problems became concentrated in the most deprived areas, as if the miasma were condensing over them” (104). What is the rhetorical force of the as if? It seems to indicate a reluctance to decide whether miasma is literal or metaphorical: indeed, it is in this interactive space between the two registers—what we might also call the scientific and the literary—that this dissertation positions itself. While Epstein invites the return of a literary dimension to

modern epidemiological narrative, I am making a parallel claim for literary criticism: I am proposing that literary criticism would benefit from a more nuanced relationship to miasmatic narratives of environmental risk.

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, what historian Peter Thorsheim calls “the miasma era,” “most people...believed that the most serious contaminant in the air was miasma, an airborne substance thought to be produced by decomposing biological material...According to some, even a single breath of impure air could cause illness and death. Sources of miasma appeared ubiquitous; contemporaries traced it to stagnant marshes, garbage, horse manure, burial grounds, and the products of human respiration” (10). By the end of the nineteenth century, the miasmatic theory of disease had been supplanted by bacteriology and was, scientifically speaking, no longer considered valid. As one of the first American bacteriologists asserted in 1890, “We no longer grope after some mysterious, intangible thing, before which we must bow down or burn something, as if it were a demon we must exorcise” (cited in Tomes 7). But miasmatic logic continued to hold sway among popular domestic reformers, principally women, in the early twentieth century. The newly formed domestic sciences, which focused on educating housewives about sanitary practices, retained the uncertainty which bacteriologists shed: domestic science was not entirely interested in dispensing with the mysterious and intangible and resisted the move from a model of complexity and overdetermination to a model of single-source linearity. In 1914 one philanthropist expressed concern about an experimental study of ventilation that his own foundation had funded: “It was rather absurd to expend so much money proving that bad air is not harmful’ because ‘even if they proved it, we would not believe it” (Tomes 228). The refusal to “believe it”—even in the face of overwhelming scientific evidence—was a function of the reluctance to abandon the possibility of productive work within the face of theoretical impasse. Insofar as miasma was a theory of

overdetermination, it allowed for movement without resolution: miasma allowed one to work at the impasse of environmental and biological etiology. If bacteriology could claim to have discovered a resolution of the impasse by naming the bacterial source of pathogenic environments, it was also, in its narrow articulation of the relationship between subject and environment, an elimination of all non-laboratory environmental factors. It claimed, then to resolve the impasse between biology and environment without actually doing so, leaving a sense of melancholic irresolution in its wake—an irresolution which could no longer be a space of movement but only a space of denial. Miasmatic thinking allowed for a consideration of the social space, of the aesthetic space, of the psychic space. Bacteriology insisted that it was all just germs.

But despite bacteriology's claims, the productive ambiguity of the miasmatic nonetheless carried over into the early twentieth century domestic sciences as they were sharply distinguished from the bacteriological sciences: miasma became a marker of gender in addition to a source of imaginative articulations of environmental relationships. Bad air underwent something of a split: it became domesticated and feminized, put into service of the sanitary and domestic sciences which were primarily the province of middle-class women and the hygiene campaigns they initiated, even while it was dismissed by clinical medicine and science.

This split informed not only debates about medical authority, but also the aesthetic debates of late realist American literary culture, which I examine in the context of the work of Edith Wharton. I approach Wharton not as an imperfect realist or a difficult feminist, but as a writer who articulates ambivalent relationships to both aesthetic and political structures through a language of miasma and sanitation. Wharton's emphasis on the impact of the physical environment becomes a compassionate alternative to the laboratory, a way of keeping environmental influence—and with it gender and psychic complexity—on the table: her work provides a particularly rich articulation of both the

possibilities and the risks intrinsic to a literary language of miasma and environmental management. Wharton's work is a fertile source of what I call the miasmatic hypothesis—the proposition that subjects are shaped, however amorphously, by the environmental risks which make them legible in the first place. While Wharton's early fiction speaks to both the continued appeal of miasmatic thinking and to the particular literary investments such language references, her late work embodies the risks of the environmental impasse that a miasmatic model can invite: she moves from a position of miasmatic open-endedness to one of resignation. In this way, she represents both the historical possibilities and the limitations of the miasmatic model. In her critique of the logic that the world can be managed through simultaneous attention to the psychic and the environmental, Wharton prefigures the logic of environmental control articulated by current narratives of environmental illness that I address in my final chapter, and thus helps illuminate the political and aesthetic stakes of these narratives.

## **II. Henry James and the Nosology of the New Novel**

The relationship between models of aesthetics and models of medicine has rather a long history. As he traces this history, Lawrence Rothfield, in his study *Vital Signs: Medical Realism in Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, argues for the rhetorical relationship between medical models and mimetic aesthetics:

One need not refer back to the Greeks for warrants to investigate the relation between medicine and mimetic fiction. Within the self-realizations of nineteenth-century realist fiction and its close cousins, there are ample indications that some sorts of linkages exist...given the traditional theoretical association of diagnosis with mimesis, therapy

with threnody, there would seem to be ample reason to examine medicine...as a constitutive element of the realistic novel. (14)

Curiously, however, Rothfield suggests that the collaboration between science and aesthetics is limited to what he calls the “clinical body,” and does not include what we might call the atmospheric body:

In the absence of the body, James redefines the self purely as consciousness of relations and impressions. We may thus speak of an empiricity of the impressions in James, analogous to the empiricity of the physical in his predecessors...As James himself puts it: ‘If experience consists of impressions, it may be said that impressions are experience, just as (have we not seen it?) they are the very air we breathe.’ Edmund Wilson, for one, found such a ‘psychological atmosphere’ bad for his respiration; James’ later novels, he complained, are filled with ‘the Jamesian gas rather than with detail and background.’ (166)

What is peculiar here is the way both Wilson and Rothfield, through his reading of Wilson, explain the displacement of the physical body in James through a language of air, breath and atmosphere. But why doesn’t breathing qualify as an instance of embodiment? Why makes air purely metaphorical, or distinct from “the physical?” For in the case of Wharton and James, to abandon “the clinical body”—the body as it is was understood according to professional medicine—may be not to abandon the body entirely. Nor does it necessitate, as Rothfield suggests, a turn to modernist aesthetics. Rather, both Wharton and James reconfigure the relationship between the body and the text not by modernizing it, but rather by anachronizing it, by returning to an older model of atmosphere: the body is a miasmatic body—a body of gas—rather than a clinical body, but it is still, I would suggest, a body. The language of air and atmosphere signals not the complete displacement of embodiment, but rather a different understanding of the body’s

embeddedness in its environment. James understands the body—and, as I shall explain below, the new novel as well—according to the miasmatic hypothesis: both the novel and the subject emerge according to the environmental risks which make them legible as subjects.

In the “The New Novel,” first published in *The Times Literary Supplement* in March and April of 1914, Henry James is a critic at his most crotchety—and most full of “Jamesian gas”—as he travesties the state of contemporary fiction by means of a series of extravagantly extended metaphors. These metaphors are drawn primarily from the realms of housekeeping and sanitary science; even the much-maligned “slice of life” metaphor (a source of irritation for Wharton, as well) is rather insistently domesticated, buttered and jellied into weary submission.<sup>1</sup>

The essay begins as a defense of criticism as such against the pathology of populism, the “incurable democratic suspicion of the selective and comparative principles” (126). The negligent exercise of criticism, argues James, in a state “so much in abeyance,” has produced an unhappy (and unsanitary) situation: the “flat reversion to instinct alone” works to “block up the ingress” of the “great flood of awareness” leaving us to “sit in stale and shrinking waters” (125).

The new novelists, according to James, engage in “the search for freshness, and above all closeness. To this nearer view of commoner things Mr. Wells, say, and Mr. Arnold Bennett, and in their degree, under the infection communicated, Mr. D.H.

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<sup>1</sup> The critic has “so great a preference for being pleased over not being, that you may again and again see him assist with avidity at the attempt of the slice of life to butter itself thick. Its explanation that it *is* a slice of life and pretends to be nothing else figures for us, say, while we watch, the jam super-added to the butter. ... the principle of selection having been involved at the worst or the least, one would suppose, in any approach whatever to the loaf of life with the *arriere-pensee* of a slice. There being no question of a slice upon which the further question of where and how to cut it does not wait, the office of method, the idea of choice and comparison, have occupied the ground from the first. This makes clear, to a moment’s reflection, that there can be no such thing as an amorphous slice ... How can a slice of life be anything but illustrational of the loaf, and how can illustration not immediately bristle with every sign of the extracted and related state?” (144-145).

Lawrence and Mr. Gilbert Canaan,” all suspect that “the sentimental key... might fit into no door or window opening on freshness at all” (130). Freshness, alas, is somewhat harder to come by for the critic of the new novel, as James everywhere encounters the miasmatic stink of overcrowded, under-edited narrative, deriding “The air and the very smell of packed actuality in the subject matter” where density of factual detail (what James calls “saturation) stands in for form or structure (131). In the same vein, James identifies a mistaken adherence to mimetic integrity aromatically: “Mr. Arnold Bennett, Mr. Gilbert Canaan, Mr. D.H. Lawrence, fairly smell of the real, just as...Mr. Hugh Walpole smell[s] of the romantic; we have sufficiently noted that, once on the scent, we are capable of pushing ahead” (146). One can only assume that the scent James tracks is none too pleasing. In its persistent use of bad air metaphor, James’s account of the new novel seems to borrow from sanitary science: “miasma theory...suggested that people could use their own senses to protect themselves from unhealthy conditions. As Edwin Chadwick, Britain’s leading public health expert put it in 1846, ‘All smell is disease’” (Thorsheim 12). By using the sense of smell as a figure for literary discrimination, James gestures towards a reconciliation of democracy and criticism by using democracy against itself. That is, the populism of sanitary science is here used to counteract the anti-elitism of popular aesthetics: Jamesian gas becomes, then, a model of critical practice.

There is, James suggests while using a rhetoric of public health, but one hygienic exception to the pitiably over-saturated popular novel, one which does not pollute its “resources” through over-use, but rather refines and purifies them from their “crude” form:

The exception we speak of would be Mrs. Wharton’s “Custom of the Country,” in which, as in this lady’s other fictions, we recognize the happy fact of an abuse of no one of the resources it enjoys at the

expense of the others...She too clearly has a saturation...we have it from her not in the crude state, but in the extract... Her step, without straying, encounters the living analogy. (154)

According to James imagery, then, the health of metaphor—"the living analogy"—in Wharton's work is bound up with the conditions of sanitation. Metaphor seemed taxed to extremity within the system of sanitary writing: it is at odds with itself, both necessary and excessive. James' account of the merits of *The Custom of the Country* suggests that questions of origin are at stake in the literary language of sanitation:

*The Custom of the Country* is an eminent sort of tonic value most opposed to that baffled relation between "the subject-matter and its emergence" which we find constituted by the circumvolutions of [Conrad's] 'Chance.' Mrs. Wharton's reaction in presence of the aspects of life hitherto, it would seem, mainly exposed to her is for the most part the ironic—to which we gather that these particular aspects have so much ministered. (155)

Significantly, the conditions of the emergence of the subjects of *Custom of the Country* are quite literally sanitary conditions, conditions which act as a corrective to James's "stale and shrinking waters." As Wharton's narrator explains

Mr. Spragg had come to Apex as a poor boy, and their early married life had been a protracted struggle, darkened by domestic affliction. Two of their three children had died of typhoid in the epidemic which devastated Apex before the new water-works were built; and this calamity, by causing Mr. Spragg to resolve that thereafter Apex should drink pure water, had led directly to the founding of his fortunes. He had taken over some of poor father's land for a bad debt, and when he got up the Pure Water move, the

company voted to buy the land and build a new reservoir up there: and after that we began to be better off. (Wharton 84)

The members of the Spragg family—the central characters of the novel which James praises for the clarity of its account of emergence—owe their wealth (and it is this very fortune which enables the narrative) to the business of sanitation<sup>2</sup>: they produce “Pure Water” —a pet term, incidentally, of sanitary and domestic science. And the terms James uses to celebrate the novel continue the hygienic thread, indeed, make little sense without it: “*The Custom of the Country* is at any rate consistently, almost scientifically satiric... we move in an air purged at a stroke of the old sentimental and romantic values, with the maximum waste of perversions, and we shall not have to state what this makes for in the way of esthetic refreshment and relief” (155).

James’ refreshment and relief—like a cool glass of (pure) water in the midst of the “stinking water” of bad fiction—stays firmly grounded on the terrain of miasmatic metaphor. It is a relief which is only available according to the miasmatic hypothesis: Wharton’s novel, and the criticism which it inspires, emerge as a response to risks of environmental contamination which constitute the subject matter of both texts.

### **III. As Old as the Hills: The Critical Language of Bad Air**

James is not alone in his loaded use of a critical miasmatic language: indeed, Jamesian gas contributes to the atmosphere of contemporary criticism, as well. But if James pushes his miasmatic metaphors to their limits, contemporary critics seem to breeze through such images: the miasmatic hypothesis becomes so implicit as to be

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<sup>2</sup> Like Lily Bart’s suitor Percy Gryce in *The House of Mirth*, the Spraggs owe their fortune—and thus the characters owe their identities—to the business of sanitation. Mrs. Manford, the central character of Wharton’s late novel *Twilight Sleep* and also the product of new wealth—is equally fixated on sanitary and antimicrobial technologies. The question I take up in Chapter Three is why Wharton repeatedly identifies new wealth with sanitation.

unremarkable. For instance, in her essay on “Modernisms and Feminisms,” included in the 2007 *Cambridge Companion to Feminist Literary Theory*, Katherine Mullin makes the claim that “Studies of literary modernism tend to focus on the period 1890 to 1930 as the years where a new kind of writing emerged, one characterized by new aesthetic codes, unprecedented experimentation with literary form, and radical transformations in social, philosophical, and cultural themes.” While This common definition of modernism, she explains, has limitations, it is also valuable because it emphasizes modernism's “historical coincidence with feminism” (136). If we are in the business of correlations, we could note, as well, that the dates Mullin uses to demarcate modernism coincide not only with the first stage of feminism, but also with another, not unrelated, era: as historian Nancy Tomes puts it “Our modern conceptions of governmental responsibility for public health date back to this period, from 1890 to 1930, which is often referred to as the ‘golden era’ of the American public health movement (6). The relevance of this correlation suggests itself when, in describing the role of masculinity in modernist manifestos, Mullin cites the following two examples:

F.T. Marinetti...insists upon the heroic masculinity of the Futurist project:’ We will glorify war—the world’s only **hygiene**—militarism, patriotism, the destructive gestures of freedom bringers, beautiful ideas worth dying for, and scorn for women.’ Marianetti’s vision of a modernism emphatically gendered male became part of a discernible trend. Wyndham Lewis’s short lived Vorticist journal *Blast* similarly invited readers to ‘Blast years 1837-1900 / Blast...RHETORIC OF ENUNCH AND STYLIST / SENTIMENTAL **HYGIENICS**.’ Like Marianetti’s Manifesto, *Blast* associated the new modernist age with virility and potency, the Victorian era with effeminacy and sentimentality.’ (137 emphasis mine)

Mullin's point is clear: both manifestos articulate their aesthetic vision through a denunciation of women and femininity. But there is at least one other rhetorical feature the two statements share: both articulate modernism as a reaction to the "hygienic"<sup>3</sup>. While the first dismisses the hygienic as of a piece with the "sentimental" (and thus presumably effeminate: are we then meant to read "sentimental hygienics" as a description of femininity?), the second unexpectedly reappropriates hygiene for masculinity, suggesting at the very least that the term represents a site of tension or conflicted meaning. But this is not a tension Mullin addresses: despite the repetition of the language of hygiene/hygenics in these two manifestos (and she returns to these manifestos several times in the course of her essay), she makes no mention of this coincidence. Mullin, then, seems to assume that the relationship between the "emphatically gendered" and the hygienic is too transparent to merit discussion. If the hygienic is unread in the first manifesto because it is too obvious in its association with the feminine, that obviousness would seem to be undone in the second manifesto by the pairing of the hygienic with the masculine. As Mullin's own examples illustrate, and as this dissertation argues, the relationship between the language of hygiene, gender, and literary form is not obvious at all.

Even less obvious is why, as I shall demonstrate in this introduction, when bad air appears at the scene of literary interpretation, it is almost never remarked upon directly; literary critics tend to either treat miasmatic and sanitary metaphor as instances of a more general language of disease or, as in the above example, overlook the presence of such language altogether. Significantly, hygienic language is particularly likely to occur within literary criticism when there is a question about the possibility of correlating an inside and outside or a problematic relationship between the socio-political and the aesthetic. In this way, bad air becomes a way of naming a relationship

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between a subject and environment or a literature and culture—often both— without committing to a causal narrative—it enacts the problem of reading correlation in a different and less deterministic idiom.

In the influential essay “Semiology and Rhetoric,” Paul De Man enacts a reversal of the gendered and critical value of the hygienic metaphor similar to the one visible in the movement from the first Modernist manifesto to the second:

Like the grandmother in Proust’s novel, ceaselessly driving the young Marcel out into the garden, away from the unhealthy inwardness of his closeted reading, critics cry out for the fresh air of referential meaning...it is no wonder that the reconciliation of form and meaning seems so attractive. The attraction of reconciliation is the elective breeding ground of false models and metaphors; it accounts for the metaphorical model of literature as a kind of box which separates an inside from an outside...the recurrent debate opposing intrinsic to extrinsic criticism stands under the aegis of an inside/outside metaphor that has never been seriously questioned. (123)

The distance [between formalist and referential criticism] was never so great in England and the United States, which does not mean, however, that we may be able, in this country, to dispense with a preventative semiological hygiene altogether. (124)

De Man reverses the value associated with “hygiene,” but does not abandon the metaphor. This reversal of value is contingent upon the association of the grandmother with miasmatic thinking, which works as both an identification and a disidentification. When de Man begins by dismissing the critical search for referential meaning as an outdated drive (likened to “the grandmother,” which might make us question the equation between

simplistic critics and tiresome old women) for curative fresh air, he seems to be assuming that the very notion of a fresh air cure—a tenet of miasmatic theory—is similarly outdated. And yet his images—deliberately tired metaphors which still circulate nonetheless—continue to operate according to that same nineteenth century logic. For de Man does not exactly claim that circulation is not the issue, rather, he claims that that what was imagined to be palliative is in fact quite the opposite: “fresh air” does not minister to “unhealthy inwardness,” but is instead the “breeding ground of false models and metaphors.” De Man reverses the logic of the curative powers of “fresh air,” but the metaphor, in inverted form, continues to circulate in his prose. So we thus remain squarely on the terrain of this one particular “false metaphor.” But in what sense is it false?

According to Barbara Johnson’s reading of de Man in her essay “Rigorous Unreliability”: “The opposition between disease and health... appears in de Man’s description of those who try to drive readers out of the unhealthy inwardness of the prison-house of language. But the fresh air of referentiality seems to spawn diseases of its own, which de Man, later in the essay, proposes to combat by developing some ‘preventative semiological hygiene’” (21). Johnson’s playful extension of de Man’s language, then, indirectly reads him as something of a miasmist, as one who “combats” airborne diseases with the weapons of rhetorical sanitation. Indeed, Johnson’s language ups the ante by reading air as an agent which “spawns diseases of its own”: she then confirms the metaphorical relationship even as she later dismisses it.

For in the next sentence, Johnson dispenses with the sanitarian metaphor, explaining de Man’s images according to his own language, as the enactment of a “Nietzschean value-seduction: “De Man is employing, quite ironically, the value-seductions of a vocabulary of sickness and health in order, literarily, to reverse the value-seductions of a certain sort of literary criticism” (22). But is the language of sanitation and hygiene quite the same as a language of sickness and health? Sanitary science is perhaps

better described as a theory of health and disease than an instance of it: hygienics generates a *particular* “vocabulary of sickness and health,” and those are the particulars I’d like here to attend to. For this vocabulary is clearly important to Johnson, as she reiterates it once more, this time without benefit of quotation, asking “What then are the consequences for de Man’s semiological hygiene?” (22). This is, I think a very good question.

For Johnson’s analysis repeats and yet refuses de Man’s resignification of miasmatic images by reading them as examples of the deliberate reversals proper to a Nietzschean value system. In Nietzsche, bad air is indeed a recurrent source of imagery, as is disease, yet they are not quite the same images. Indeed, it might make sense to distinguish Nietzsche’s miasmatic images from his rhetoric of illness. Consider the following passage from *The Genealogy of Morals*:

What is it exactly than I find so totally unbearable? Something which I cannot deal with on my own, which makes me choke and feel faint? Bad air! Bad air! It's when something which has failed comes close to me, when I have to smell the entrails of a failed soul! Apart from that what can we not endure by way of need, deprivation, bad weather, infirmity, hardship, loneliness? (Nietzsche 28)

Bad air, according to this passage, exists at a distance from disease: it is all-encompassing, a figure for what cannot be escaped and cannot be tolerated. “Infirmity,” on the other hand, is, apparently, among the class of manageable tribulations. For Nietzsche, then, bad air is, metaphorically speaking, not an instance of disease, but rather its opposite. By identifying the language of sanitation as part of the language of sickness and health, then, Johnson participates in an unacknowledged chain of miasmatic transmission; the images continue to reproduce themselves, both in spite of and through Johnson’s refusal to recognize their presence. Miasma may not, scientifically speaking,

explain contagion, but within this critical exchange it certainly behaves contagiously, contributing to the critical atmosphere without actually becoming a critical object.

This is rather a satisfying metaphorical moment, given the context, for the intransigence of metaphor in literary analysis is one of the subjects of de Man's essay: "The recurrent debate opposing intrinsic to extrinsic criticism stands under the aegis of an inside/outside metaphor that has never been seriously questioned. Metaphors are much more tenacious than facts, and I certainly don't intend to dislodge this age-old model in one short expository essay" (123). So while miasma lost ground to the twentieth century laboratory, miasmatic metaphors held their own in the literary, proving, as de Man predicted, "far more tenacious" than their scientific antecedents. Indeed, de Man's essay quite knowingly performs the very tenacity he critiques, proliferating metaphors, and particularly miasmatic metaphors, in order to question the legitimacy of referential literary models. De Man's use of hygienic language at the moment where the inside/outside metaphor is explicitly called into question suggests the continued persistence of sanitary logic as an alternative or supplementary logic, as a way of articulating a form of reading other than the mimetic.

In the modernist examples, the language of sanitation disrupts the argument about the correlation between modernism form and feminist politics: "Hygienics" emerges at the moment when Mullin makes a claim for the coincidence of politics and aesthetics. For de Man, the metaphor works to unsettle the gender neutrality of his argument: the sanitarian grandmother's affiliation with referential critics links a relation to form with a particular kind of person. The hygienic, then, interrupts the relationship between feminism and form that constitutes Mullin's topic, while it indirectly re-introduces the possibility of politics to the formalist argument that de Man articulates as a move away from the critical wish to correlate the text and the political.

I propose that the interpretive conceit of a literary inside/social outside which de Man critiques owes something to the particular formulation of the relationship between the indoors and the outside developed in sanitary science. It is striking then, that bad air appears, in de Man, Johnson, and Mullin at the scene of literary interpretation, and in particular of the negotiations between literary aesthetics and the social world, negotiations which are structured according to an inside/outside metaphor or to a critique of such a metaphor. In even broader terms, I would suggest that the spatial language with which claims of literary reference tend to be arbitrated is situated within a rhetorical system which leans on miasmatic assumptions about space and circulation for its metaphorical cohesion.

The same rhetorical structure appears throughout the work of Edith Wharton. In the opening paragraphs of *The House of Mirth*, anxieties about the status of the subject are articulated through a language of environment and speculation: “her desultory air perplexed him. She stood apart from the crowd, letting it drift by her to the platform or the street, and wearing an air of irresolution which might, as he surmised, be the mask of a very definite purpose. There was nothing new about Lily Bart, yet one could never see her without a faint movement of interest: it was characteristic of her that she always roused speculation” (3). The fusion of critical and environmental language—speculation and air— is also central to “Semiology and Rhetoric.” De Man writes: “I merely wish to speculate on a different set of terms, perhaps less simple in their differential relationship than the strictly polar, binary opposition between inside and outside, and therefore less likely to enter into the easy play of chiasmic reversals. I derive these terms (which are as old as the hills) pragmatically from the observation of developments and debates in recent critical methodology” (123). While Wharton puts terms similar to de Man’s into play at the outset of the novel, her solution is not quite to enact a “chiasmic reversal,” nor is it to “speculate on a different set of terms” which is, she suggests, a privilege proper to

masculinity. Wharton's character does indeed crave fresh air, but in a rather different fashion: "Do take me some where for a breath of air... So many people come up to town on a Monday, and one is sure to meet a lot of bores. I'm as old as the hills, of course, and it ought not to make any difference; but if *I'm* old enough, you're not," she objected gaily. I'm dying for tea—but isn't there a quieter place? (4).

By invoking and identifying with "the hills", Lily poses the critical question about her own origins—was she born this way or was she socially formed? She thus reframes the relationship between inside and outside, while at the same time reminding us of the difficulty of correlating the two. Lily Bart shares more with de Man's grammar and rhetoric than age: she lives her life as an alternative to the inside/outside model, and, as I shall explain in Chapter Two, she does so at great cost.

While the biblical reference (itself an analogy between the subject and the environment) retains the sense of etiological undecidability crucial for Wharton, then, it also takes on a gendered cast, as well. The distinction Lily draws between herself and Selden—"if I'm old enough, than you're not"—although avowedly a matter of age, is in fact a matter of sex: the issue is not that Lily is chronologically older than Selden, but rather that she is a woman. And as such, she has a narrower scope for novelty. While sex "ought not to make any difference," clearly it does: Lily own representational powers are limited to the recirculation of tired images. I suggest we read Lily's statement as at once the invocation of a cliché and the identification with one. Lily does not simply compare herself to the hills; she forms an equivalency between the "I" and "as old as the hills" by identifying not just with the hills, but with the cliché itself. Her sometimes suitor Selden, however, fails to take the hint. He refuses to accept Lily's identification with cliché, searching—in vain—for a new metaphor to suit her: "He was aware that the qualities distinguishing her from the herd of her sex were chiefly external: as though a fine glaze of beauty and fastidiousness had been applied to vulgar clay. Yet the analogy left him

unsatisfied, for a coarse texture will not take a high finish; and was it not possible that the material was fine, but that circumstance had fashioned it into a futile shape?" (5). While Selden refuses to grant Lily any claim to innovation "there was nothing new about Lily Bart," he nonetheless still believes in his own capacity to invent novel metaphors about her—to find an analogy which leaves him satisfied—this is, I would suggest, represented as a gendered privilege.

In both de Man and Wharton, then, the speakers wish for fresh new air even as the air itself is declared to be anything but—to be, in fact, "as old as the hills." Appropriately, the cliché is itself as old as the hills of which it speaks: it comes from Job xv. 7: "Art thou the first man that was born? or wast thou made before the hills?" This is an evocative reference for de Man to make in the context of his essay: the absence of a clear origin contributes to the impossibility of determining which of two meanings—the literal or the figurative—prevails. This particular cliché, this over-circulated metaphor, is the ambiguous answer to a forgotten rhetorical (and theological) question, an inquiry into the nature of human origins. It also stages a question with which this dissertation is concerned: how does the articulation of the literary subject depend upon a nineteenth century understanding of an environmental relation (the hills)?

In using a dead metaphor which stages a question about human origins in the context of an analysis of the relationship between text and context, de Man pairs the two inquiries which, in their coexistence, tend to mark the appearance of miasmatic language: questions about the relationship between the text and its outside accompany questions about the subject and, in a different sense, its outside. Furthermore, the importance of this figure for both Wharton and de Man suggests a complex intimacy between the dead or dying metaphor and what I'd call the miasmatic hypothesis—the proposition that the subject is shaped, however amorphously, by the environmental risks which constitute, to recall James, its conditions of emergence.

#### IV.

My departure point for this study is the American Italianate fiction of the 1860's, a significant source of influence for Wharton and also the last literary moment prior to the ascendance of bacteriology, when miasmatic thinking still retained scientific credibility. In Chapter One, I trace the early history of American literary miasma as it informs Wharton's work by discussing the role of Roman fever in the fiction of Henry James and Nathaniel Hawthorne. Scientifically speaking, miasma was in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, still understood as a legitimate form of epidemiology, and thus still a legitimate mode of literary inquiry. But as I shall demonstrate through selective readings of *The Marble Faun* and *Daisy Miller*, even before bad air lost its scientific credibility, it was already infused with a concern about the loss of literary and aesthetic meaning: it was, in this sense, always part of a narrative about literary loss.

In chapter two I discuss Wharton's novel *The House of Mirth* as well as her interior design guide, *The Decoration of Houses* as texts which attempt to negotiate the gendered stakes of an attention to environmental influence—an influence which Wharton is both thoroughly invested in and ambivalent about: she wants to retain the sanitarian commitment to environment while shedding the gendered meaning of such a commitment. In chapter three I discuss two of Wharton's minor novels—*Sanctuary* (1903) and *Twilight Sleep* (1927)—as spaces of first possibility and then resignation. Both hope and the absence of hope are, for Wharton, linked to the impossibility of considering environmental influence without recourse to either an underinclusive bacteriological account or a miasmatic rhetoric both gendered and outdated. Wharton's ambivalence is, I suggest, a particularly imaginative rendering of a broader literary and cultural concern: how can one account for the role of environment in the formation of the subject without

recourse to a model which already assumes that the subject is gendered before being acted upon? Bad air becomes, for Wharton, an image which figures this political impasse.

In its emphasis on impasse, Wharton's late work prefigures the complexity and the risks of environmental management articulated by current narratives of environmental illness, the narratives that I will discuss in Chapter Four, a reading of Todd Haynes's 1995 film, *Safe*. As historian Nancy Tomes remarks "The findings of [contemporary] environmental health sciences have led to a curious rebirth of the house disease concept" (263): the last chapter and the final coda of my dissertation discuss this curious rebirth—which I date around 1980<sup>4</sup>—in the context of environmental illness and sexual harassment law. Chapter Four explains the re-emergence of the logic of bad air at the end of the twentieth century in the context of environmental illness and *Safe* (which is set in the mid 1980's) where the peculiar reciprocity between theories of the self and theories of the environment suggest possibilities beyond self-beratement and hopeless resignation. In my final coda, I elaborate the political stakes of the return of bad air narratives in the context of both environmental illnesses—in particular sick building syndrome and "the new ghetto miasma"—and contemporary sexual harassment law.

The female protagonists in each of the texts I examine—from *Daisy Miller* and *The Marble Faun* through Carol White in *Safe* and the litigants in sexual harassment suits—all emerge under miasmatic conditions. And what's more, this logic continues to shape the understanding of the subjects of environmental illness and sexual harassment: contemporary injured subjects become legible through a hostile or punishing environment.

For as I have suggested, contemporary culture has become newly enamored of the narrative logic of miasma. In a late modern world skeptical about the explanatory power of medical models—one that longs for "a different kind of microscope"—a revised

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<sup>4</sup> Note that both De Man's *Allegories of Reading*—which includes "Semiotics and Rhetoric" and Katherine MacKinnon's *Sexual Harassment of Working Women*—which is credited as the first articulation of the hostile work environment standard—were both published in 1979.

version of miasmatic theory provides a language for the complex role of atmosphere in the formation of the gendered subject. The ambiguity of the mechanism through which the air acts upon the subject in miasma theory has returned in contemporary accounts of environmental illnesses and hostile work environments—this ambiguity is at once productive and obfuscating, both nostalgic and forward looking. The representation of bad air at work in accounts of environmental illness and sexual harassment indicates that the logic of miasma has resurfaced at a moment when the logic of—to use a more contemporary idiom—both social construction and bacteriology seem, in isolation, inadequate or unsatisfying. The expansion of miasmatic thinking into the thinking of “the new ghetto miasma” suggests not a cooling but rather an intensification of the desire to develop complex models of environmental and medical narrative. But the new legal critiques of the hostile work environment standard suggest that miasmatic logic has grown more intense, and also, perhaps, more worrisome. For while Epstein attempts to reintroduce complexity and overdetermination to contemporary understandings of etiology, sexual harassment law demonstrates that the miasmatic model of risk has its own risks. I argue that we need to examine these models carefully in order to avoid converting overdetermination into obfuscation.

## CHAPTER 1

### “From a Sanitary Point of View”: Literary Value and Roman Fever

A January 2008 article in *The London Times* entitled “Fumes made me go lowbrow, says writer” explains:

A prize-winning novelist has won a settlement of more than £100,000 after she claimed to have become so intoxicated by fumes from a nearby shoe factory that she was reduced to writing thrillers...She told *The Times* that the fumes were so bad that she was unable to concentrate on writing her highbrow novel, *Cool Wind from the Future*, and instead wrote a brutal crime story, *Bleedout*, which she found easier. (Malvern)

The fumes are held responsible for turning literary fiction into pulp fiction: the author in question, Joan Brady, understands bad air as the agent of the loss of literary value, a loss which she explains as a move from “the highbrow” to popular crime fiction. *The Times* article repeats the populist move Brady makes by concluding with the opening sentence of each of Brady’s two novels: readers are invited to judge for themselves if she has fact turned lowbrow. But we might observe that the title of Brady’s “highbrow” novel is itself an image of air circulation: how does the benign literary “Cool Wind” transform into the pulpy novel of “fumes”?

In this chapter, I follow this peculiar narrative of bad air and literary value back to nineteenth century American fiction and argue that the literary is not just a locus for miasmatic metaphor—the literary, and particularly a concern about the loss of literary and aesthetic value in the face of what is imagined as the corruptive influence of popular tastes — is in fact figured by miasmatic metaphor. According to my reading, the literary novel as

figured in American Italianate fiction is already a fiction of fumes: the trajectory of literary loss that Brady relays is only the most recent articulation of a narrative in which bad air demarcates the space between the current degraded state of art and its imagined former glory.

This is a narrative which also structures Edith Wharton's late short story "Roman Fever," first published in 1934 and still her most widely reproduced, which is often read as an allegory for a ravaged culture and for Wharton's alienation from that culture.<sup>5</sup> Read from the perspective of what the narrator of Henry James's *Daisy Miller* calls "a sanitary point of view," it becomes legible as an allegory for the literary loss sustained by the enfeebling of atmospheric metaphor: it is a story which represents literary history through the lens of bad air.

The story opens as two American tourists, both of whom are wealthy New York women with adult daughters, tensely enjoy a view of the Coliseum. As Mrs. Slade explains to her traveling companion Mrs. Ansley, "I was just thinking... what different things Rome stands for to each generation of travellers. To our grandmothers, Roman fever; to our mothers, sentimental dangers—how we used to be guarded!—to our daughters, no more dangers than the middle of Main Street. They don't know it, but how much they're missing!" (10). Malarial threat is both mourned and romanticized as the mothers lament the loss of risk-laden air. Indeed, they seem to mourn the loss of Roman fever metaphor. The end, first of a scientific credence in the correspondence between bad air and fever, then between bad air and sentiment, of the inability of the pathogenic to represent the emotional, is narrated as a melancholic loss—a loss the younger generation cannot mourn because they don't recognize that it has occurred. Mrs. Ansley and Mrs. Slade insist upon her own malarial heritage as a corrective to what their daughters lack:

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Dale Bauer's "Edith Wharton's 'Roman Fever': A Rune of History."

‘Whenever I look at the Forum from up here, I remember that story about a great-aunt of yours, wasn’t she? A dreadfully wicked great-aunt?’

‘Oh yes; Great Aunt Harriet. The one who was supposed to have sent her sister out to the Forum after sunset...the poor little sister caught the fever and died.’ (15)

“That story,” which sounds suspiciously, I would suggest, like *Daisy Miller*, situates Wharton’s own story as itself a great-niece of James’s canonical novella: Wharton uses a narrative of malaria to establish her own literary genealogy: it is this genealogy that I will pursue in this chapter. For “Roman Fever,” a narrative miasmically invested in literary history, at once mourns the loss of malarial metaphor of the sort found in *Daisy Miller*, and then resurrects the metaphor, turning malaria into a metaphor for its very impossibility. Wharton’s story is about the loss sustained by those who mourn malarial metaphor’s death, who resent a moderate approach to reading, one deprived of the pleasures of “sentimental dangers.” In this chapter I trace the literary history of these dangers and suggest that, even as miasma represents literary possibility, it also represents the loss which necessitates the literary in the first place.

Sanitary crusader Edwin Chadwick famously told the 1846 Parliamentary committee investigating the London sewage problem, “all smell is disease”;<sup>6</sup> in the shorthand of American Italianate fiction, it is perhaps equally true that all smell is art. As Nathaniel Hawthorne explains one of the opening chapters of *The Marble Faun* “The courtyard and staircase of a palace, built three hundred years ago, are a peculiar feature of

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<sup>6</sup> “The increased importance attributed to the phenomenon of air by chemistry and medical theories of infection” meant that “the nose...warns us against poisonous substances. Even more important, the sense of smell locates hidden dangers in the atmosphere...the nose anticipates dangers; it recognizes from a distance both harmful mold and the presence of miasmas” (Foul & Fragrant 7).

modern Rome...from pillar to pillar are strewn fragments of antique statues, headless and legless torsos, and busts that have invariably lost—what it might be well if living men could lay aside, in that unfragrant atmosphere—the nose” (32).

Henry James cleans up the olfactory metaphor to describe the Italian atmosphere in his 1875 novel *Roderick Hudson*: “Florence in midsummer was perfectly void of travelers and the dense little city gave forth its aesthetic aroma with a larger frankness, as the nightingale sings when the listeners have departed” (461). For the Americans summering in Florence, art is not just in the air, art transforms the air itself into an aesthetic experience. But air no longer figures a traveler’s delight for James—indeed, it becomes malevolent—when, some thirty years later, it is applied to early twentieth century New York. In *The American Scene*, first published in 1907, James describes his own travel to New York and the two Manhattan churches surrounded by “sky-scrappers” which: “Illustrate again supremely your grasped truth of the *comparative* character, in such conditions, of beauty and of interest. The special standard they may or may not square with signifies, you fell, not a jot: all you know, and want to know, is that they are probably menaced—some horrible voice of the air has murmured it” (93).

“Horrible...air” has, as James suggests, an essentially “comparative character”: it serves to mark the difference between the ideal or pristine, and the sullied and mundane. On (or perhaps above) American soil, bad air becomes the carrier for a disembodied “voice” of aesthetic malice. The threat of poor architecture—architecture hopelessly contaminated by “interest”—is communicated through airborne malevolence which portends the ominous triumph of interest over beauty. The menace grows yet more profound—transforming from a voice in the air to some (perhaps lowbrow) quality of the air itself—as James explains that

The flaw in the harmony, was, more than anything else, that sinister voice in the air of which I have spoken, the fact that one could stand there,

vibrating to such impressions, only to remember the suspended danger, the possibility of the doom... what an air to live in, the shuddering pilgrim mused, the air in which such fears are not misplaced. (94).

While it may be tempting to identify crass American taste as the source of atmospheric toxicity, as James himself does,<sup>7</sup> this is not quite the whole story. For, on the one hand, both James, and as I will argue in the next chapter, Edith Wharton, designate American “interest” as the force which turns the “aesthetic aroma” into something far less palatable. But as the following passages from *The Marble Faun* and *Daisy Miller* will demonstrate, bad air and aesthetic air are intertwined from the moment air is aestheticized: there is no atmosphere of pure art that is then sullied by malaria. Rather, air transmits an idealized fantasy of art precisely to the extent that it transmits danger: in a more robust sense, then, the “character” of bad air metaphors is always essentially comparative.

The fascination Italy—and particularly Rome—held for American artists and writers of the nineteenth century has been the subject of numerous critical treatments.<sup>8</sup> What I would like to do, however, is make a limited inquiry into one feature of this literature critical to the history of miasmatic metaphor: the tendency of American Italianate fiction of the nineteenth century to aestheticize morbid air and atmosphere. This tendency

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<sup>7</sup> The appreciation of New York architecture is but a deluded and denigrated copy of its Italian ancestors: “Wonderful enough, in New York, to find one’s self, in a charming and considerably dim ‘old’ church, hushed to admiration before a great religious picture; the sensation, for the moment, upset the facts. The hot light, outside, might have been that of an Italian piazzetta” (93). James suggests that it is the values of New York itself which serves to corrupt the specifically Italian modes of art appreciation: “The attempt to take the aesthetic view is invariably blighted sooner or later by their most salient characteristic, *the* feature that speaks loudest for the economic idea... If quiet interspaces, always half the architectural battle, exist no more in such a structural scheme than quiet tones, blest breathing-spaces, for the most part, in New York conversations, so the reason is, demonstrably, that the building can’t afford them” (95).

<sup>8</sup> See for example, *Roman Holidays: American Writers and Artists in Nineteenth-Century Italy*, eds. Robert Martin and Leland Person U of Iowa P, Iowa City, IA, 2002; Wright, Nathalia. *American Novelists in Italy*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1965; Brooks, Van Wyck. *The Dream of Arcadia: The American Writer and Artist in Italy 1760-1915*. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1958; Baker, Paul R. *The Fortunate Pilgrims: Americans in Italy 1800-1860*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964.

is of course a response to—but is also in excess of—any real risk of Roman fever. In the Italian fictions of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Henry James, malarial metaphors mark moments of contested literary history: air becomes malignant when literary origins become contentious. Indeed, the very attempt to trace the onset of literary miasma itself participates in a nostalgic cycle, for Roman fever is an infinitely refracted image, existing as a marker for a fantasmatic space of pure literature, uncorrupted by the interventions of science, history, or, worst of all, bad (and all too often, American) taste.

How far back can one trace this imagery? It's difficult to say. Because in this literature aesthetic air is always already bad air, there is no clean or original metaphor from which to begin; there is no moment when the malarial metaphor, as an image of corruption, is not itself already corrupt. In one of the numerous travelogues of the period, William Mitchell Gillespie's *Rome: As Seen by a New Yorker in 1843-4*: "Rome is the home of all Art, and therefore the country of Artists of all nations... It is scarcely a metaphor to say that one inhales the spirit of Art in every breath that one draws from the atmosphere of the Eternal city" (175). Even as early as the 1840's, it seems, Rome both inspires and muddies the terms of the analogy between air and art: the metaphor is dead or dying (indeed, "is scarcely a metaphor" at all) from its very inception.

Although James suggests that the architecture of malice is a new and particularly American construction, it seems strikingly similar to formulations found in *The Marble Faun*: "Rome, at this season, is pervaded and overhung with atmospheric terrors, and insulated with a charmed and deadly circle" (192). The poetic and the miasmatic (the "charmed" and the "deadly") lean on each other for definition; this risk of injury is always implicit in—indeed is fundamental to—miasmatic metaphor, which always understands the aesthetic object as formed under conditions of atmospheric risk. James's threatened churches bespeak not a shift, but rather a reterritorialization: they represent the American version of Hawthorne's Rome, bounded by a "deadly circle" of airborne menace.

In *The Marble Faun* it is precisely this sense of “suspended danger” transmitted by bad air which allows art to come into relief. Hawthorne puts bad air into service in order to preserve an idealist fantasy of lost aesthetic integrity, a fantasy of an art which exists prior to and independent of money and commerce; in Rome, miasma makes perfect beauty available to the American onlookers who mourn its corruption.:

The final charm is bestowed by the Malaria. There is a piercing, thrilling, delicious kind of regret in the idea of so much beauty thrown away, or only enjoyable at its half-development, in winter and early spring, and never to be dwelt amongst as the home-scenery of any human being. For if you come hither in summer, and stray through these glades in the golden sunset, Fever walks arm in arm with you, and Death awaits you at the end of the dim vista. Thus the scene is like Eden in its loveliness; like Eden, too, in the fatal spell that removes it beyond the scope of man’s actual possessions. (Hawthorne 63)

Malaria marks the spot of a lost beauty, one which was or could have been, it allows for aesthetic idealization which is at once deadly and Edenic. Indeed, Hawthorne’s version of Eden is unavailable not because of sin, but rather, because of the atmospheric risks that cordon off the space of the ideal aesthetic and render literary Eden as illusory:

The thickly populated centre of the city, indeed, is never affected by the feverish influence that lies in wait in the Compagna, like a besieging foe, and nightly haunts those beautiful lawns and woodlands, around the suburban villas, just at the season that they most resemble Paradise. What the flaming sword was to the first Eden, such is the malaria to these sweet gardens and groves... They are but illusions, therefore, like the show of gleaming waters and shadowy foliage, in a desert. (296)

Similar images recur throughout Hawthorne's text. For *The Marble Faun*—while in no way a novel *about* Roman fever—has what might be understood as a malarial origin. For not only did Hawthorne write his “Romance” while living in Rome, but his daughter, Una, contracted a severe case of malaria during this same period. Hawthorne's biographers point to an even more intimate link between the fever and the novel, for Hawthorne apparently began *The Marble Faun* the day after Una's malaria first appeared: “When Una fell sick, Hawthorne adopted his characteristic recourse in the face of acute psychic stress: he started writing. The day immediately following the first onset of her fever he set to work in earnest on his romance about the Praxiteles satyr” (Herbert 259). The novel is, in some sense, a symptom of both malarial and aesthetic conditions: the romantic novel, apparently, begins only after the fever sets in.

Hawthorne may well have suffered from “acute psychic stress” over Una's illness, but this distress seemed to find an outlet not just in the writing of romance, but, reciprocally, in the writing of his daughter as if she were a romantic heroine: the malarial and the literary refer back to one another in an endless cycle of influence. In *The French and Italian Notebooks*, for example, Hawthorne casts his daughter's malarial infection as a form of poetic inspiration:

Una has taken what seems to be the Roman fever by sitting down to sketch the Coliseum. It is not a severe attack, yet attended with fits of exceeding discomfort, occasional comatoseness, and even delirium to the extent of making the poor child talk in rhythmical measure, like a tragic heroine—as if the fever lifted her feet off the earth. (495)

And Hawthorne repeats this language in *The Marble Faun*'s postscript, as the artful but intrinsically compromised malarial terms with which he described his daughter in *The Notebooks* are the same terms with which he described his characters, explaining that he:

can have succeeded but imperfectly, at best, in throwing about this Romance the kind of atmosphere essential to the effect at which he aimed. He designed the story and the characters to bear, of course, a certain relationship to human nature and human life, but still to be so artfully and airily removed from our mundane sphere. (416)

Both Hawthorne's text and his daughter seem subject to the concerted and reciprocal influence of art and air: "Artfully and airily," both *Una* and *The Marble Faun* become literary by virtue of becoming both malarial and fantastic. Hawthorne seems to propose a parallel relationship between his "imperfect" Romance and ideal literature, on the one hand, and malaria and ideal geography, on the other—both are defined against a background of malarial circumscription. The "Certain relationship," then, between "the story" and "human life" is prevented from being mimetic by the intervention of bad air, which here stands in for the non-mimetic or speculative. Miasma, then, is both limiting and enabling: it represents, for Hawthorne, an invisible fortress against "mundane" forms of representation, which allows imperfection to register as creative virtue—and, indeed, as literature—under atmospheric distress.

It is this sense of atmospheric distress that tends to be missing from accounts of Hawthorne's relationship to literary form. As, for example, literary theorist Judith Glazener explains, Hawthorne's relationship to the project of American realism is related aesthetically and politically, but not miasmically to questions of form: Hawthorne's "choice to set his romance in Italy...was a choice to set his Rome-ance in it's etymological and representational home, which was also a place where ancient art forms thrived and were esteemed. Hawthorne's setting allowed him to highlight the provincialism and narrowness of the versions of nationalism and connoisseurship being used to promote realism in the United States" and "allowed Hawthorne to dramatize his own and his culture's ambivalence about mimetic projects of the kind realism

signaled”(66). But Glazener’s intelligent account seems, however, to overlook the fact that Hawthorne presents this “place where ancient art forms thrived and were esteemed” as a place—and an art form—already corrupted. For ancient art forms “thrive” in a very particular sense—they thrive, like his fiction, on a diet of malarial decay:

If we consider the present city as connected with the ancient one, it is only because we find it is built over its grave. A depth of thirty feet of soil has covered up the Rome of ancient days, so that it lies like the dead corpse of a giant, decaying for centuries, with no survivor mighty enough to bury it...its thousands of evil smells, mixed up with the fragrance of rich incense, diffused from as many censers; its little life, deriving feeble nutriment from what has long been dead. (97)

For Hawthorne, then, both personally and historically, bad air is enabling of literary practice: his Rome, and his romance, feed upon a steady diet of “evil smells.”

The prominence of Roman fever in Hawthorne’s Italianate fiction is not, historically speaking, terribly surprising, given that, as one literary historian explains, “Travelers were warned of the *malaria* in Rome, in the surrounding Compagna, and in the Pontine Marshes to the south. The “Roman Fever” had given the city a bad name for the summer months, though it was felt that by taking necessary precautions a visitor could safely reside there even during the hot spell. Since malaria was attributed to noxious gases issuing from the earth, an upper story of a building was strongly advised” (Baker 24).<sup>9</sup> But, as I am suggesting, if the city had developed “a bad name” from Roman Fever, it has also developed a bad name for provoking literary cliché: according to another historian, “These were the days when Byron was casting over Italy a spell that for two generations

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<sup>9</sup> Hawthorne makes this advice romantic by installing the character Hilda above the fray in a “dove cote.” Says Miriam to Hilda: “You breathe sweet air, above all the evil scents of Rome” (The Marble Faun 46).

enchanted tourists, who could not enter the Coliseum without declaiming the poet's lines or stand for a moment unByronized on the Palatine hill" (Van Wyck 31).

Indeed, one of the features of Byronization in the nineteenth century travelogue is a comparative statement of one's superior sensitivities, of one's ability to rise above (in many cases, quite literally) the pull of cliché. As one travel rhapsodizes: "I wandered for hours, climbing to the topmost arches to avoid an English party, whose ladies were giggling and babbling below in profane desecration of the influences of the spot. In such scenes, one's mind becomes infused and incorporated with the geniuses of the place and I could almost fancy myself an old Roman" (Gillepie 23). He then, as if on cue, cites the famed lines from *Manfred*. Writes another late nineteenth American traveler: "It is not a landscape, a city, or a simple bird's-eye view that is seen from the summit of the precipitous walls of this crater, but the unnumbered illustrations of the greatest book in history, a spectacle that you regard with the sensations of one who dreams a dream peopled by apparitions" (Wey 40). For Americans, Rome, and the Coliseum in particular, registers as insistently textual—indeed, as more textual than real.

Hawthorne confronts this problem of Byronization directly when he writes, in *The Marble Faun*, that "Byron's celebrated description is better than reality. He beheld the scene with his mind's eye, through the witchery of many intervening years, and faintly illuminated it, as if with starlight, instead of this broad glow of moonshine" (136). If there is a certain celebratory quality to this reference, one which would seem to support Glazener's argument that Hawthorne imagines pre-realism as a loftier literary moment (which here looks to be Romanticism), that celebration is cut short a few paragraphs later when Hawthorne concludes: "To make the end of our description, a red twinkle of light was visible amid the breadth of shadows...It indicated a party of English or Americans, paying the inevitable visit by moonlight, and exalting themselves with raptures that were Byron's, not their own" (*Marble Faun* 139). The description which is "better than

reality,” is denigrated shortly thereafter by the mishandling of Anglo-American tourists: what should have superseded reality has become worse than reality, has become, in fact, a cliché.

There is something oddly prophetic about Hawthorne’s observations about the appropriation of Byron: for as James would later note in his study on Hawthorne, *The Marble Faun* would itself eventually become a favorite source for the hackneyed insights of the Anglo-American tourist. The novel, James wrote, constitutes “part of the intellectual equipment of the Anglo-Saxon visitor to Rome, and is read by every English-speaking traveller who goes there, or who expects to go” (*Hawthorne* 165). As one recent critic notes, “Booksellers began to prepare special copies with photographs of the sights tipped in, and publishers soon produced editions with interleaved reproductions of such pictures...the New York Times reviewer wondered whether the writer had not first intended a nonfiction work of ‘descriptive criticism’ and he predicted the novel’s use as a guidebook” (Bell 356). The prosaic use of Byron which Hawthorne’s novel critiques has come home to roost: it is now *The Marble Faun* that allows the “Anglo-Saxon visitor” to thrill with “raptures...not their own.”

The Byron lines have ceased, at some level, to have content, one need only mention Byron (references may not include actual lines of poetry), the citation is no longer, then, lyrical, but indexical. And by the time James publishes *Daisy Miller*, references to the Coliseum and to ‘Manfred’ (to reference one is implicitly to reference the other) assume, like Rome itself, another, competing symbolic value. Winterbourne, Daisy Miller’s expatriate American suitor, explains the problem thus:

As he stood there he began to murmur Byron’s famous lines, out of ‘Manfred’; but before he had finished his quotation, he remembered that if nocturnal meditations in the Colossuem are recommended by poets, they are deprecated by the doctors. The historic atmosphere was there, certainly;

but the historic atmosphere, scientifically considered, was no better than a villainous miasma. (312)

Like point of view, “villainous” is language better suited to descriptions of literature (and in particular of the characters of romance) than disease: Winterbourne’s language has the effect of aestheticizing the sanitary model. In that for Americans the Coliseum becomes a figure for malarial danger just as the invocation of Byron at the site of the coliseum becomes a figure for sublime art appreciation, the one sullies the other. The use (or, perhaps, misuse) of romantic literature to express sentiment becomes bound up with what is foul and infectious.

By the time James makes use of it, then, the *Manfred* reference is not just a figure for aesthetic experience, but a cliché of aesthetic experience. The hackneyed nature of the reference is made clear by the substitution of the miasmatic for the aesthetic: the moment when the contemplation of the Coliseum becomes a malarial reference instead of a poetic one is the moment where the reference is itself revealed to be sick. But, in some sense, this revelation is staged: the aesthetic air has always been bad air.

It is fitting that Roman fever, an image which might to be said, if not to originate, then at least to have grown robust in the coliseum is repeatedly linked to forms of antagonism. But while malarial Rome is, for Hawthorne, the ground upon which an aesthetic battle unfolds, for James, the combatants are a bit different: *Daisy Miller* is about two warring sensibilities—New American wealth is pitted against old expatriate restraint. The crudely nouveau riche Miller family (from, of course, upstate New York) is partial to atmospheric explanations for their assorted maladies. When remonstrated for his overindulgence in candy, Daisy’s cantankerous younger brother Randolph explains “I haven’t got any teeth to hurt. They have all come out...I can’t help it. It’s this old Europe. It’s the climate that makes them come out. In America, they didn’t come out. It’s these

hotels” (50); the “dreadfully nervous” (69) Mrs. Miller complains “I suffer from the liver...I think it’s the climate; it’s less bracing than Schenectady” (82).

Their bad manners seem to run parallel to their bad science, to their ill-placed belief in bad air. The irony of the Miller family’s climatic explanations for a range of maladies is that they all turn out to be erroneous—except for when the air is in fact dangerous. That is, Randolph’s lost teeth and Mrs. Miller’s biliousness are both rather doubtfully attributed to “the climate” of “old Europe,” while the demonstrably malarial atmosphere of the Coliseum is blithely disregarded.

Winterbourne himself adopts a stance which, when convenient, mimics that of American sanitary science by pitting the doctors against the aesthetes. Compare American sanitary scientist Ellen Richards’ language to Winterbourne’s: “**From a sanitary point of view**, the most important of the three living ingredients of dust is that called bacteria...They are heavier than the air and settle from it in an hour or two, when it is dry and still. They are quietly resting on this page you are reading” (77 emphasis mine). Richards’ bacteria become instantly, magically literary: they, like the words themselves, lie on the page awaiting interpretation. If Richardson aestheticizes sanitation, Winterbourne sanitizes aesthetics: “Winterbourne had begun to think of the craziness, **from a sanitary point of view**, of a delicate young girl lounging away the evening in this nest of malaria. What if she were a clever little reprobate? That was no reason for her dying of the *pernicosa*” (313 emphasis mine). Despite the medical logic of the argument Winterbourne mentally advances, the language in which he makes his case is remarkably literary. If we consider “point of view” as a term from literary criticism, we are then left with “sanitary” as a perspective from which narrative can be told. The very word—sanitary—which designates a particular scientific practice, functions here as the technical name for a form of literary narration. And a specifically American name at that. For as Winterbourne speaks, his language goes increasingly native: he moves from the decidedly

Anglo-American “sanitary” to the naturalized English term “malaria,” to the palpably Italian—that is, yet to be Anglicized—“pernicosa.” In a gesture of repatriation, Winterbourne takes the immigrant malaria and insists that it be returned to its home language. Winterbourne attempts to exert similar control over Daisy’s itinerary, as he warns her of the risks of visiting the Coliseum after dark:

‘All the evening,’ she answered gently, ‘I never saw anything so pretty.’

‘I am afraid,’ said Winterbourne, ‘that you will not think Roman fever very pretty. This is the way people catch it.’...

‘I never was sick, and I don’t mean to be!’ the Signorina declared. ‘I don’t look much like it, but I’m healthy. I was bound to see the Colosseum by moonlight; I should have wanted to go home without that; and we have had the most beautiful time, haven’t we, Mr. Giovinelli! If there’s any danger, Eugenio can give me some pills. He has some splendid pills.’

‘I should advise you,’ said Winterbourne, ‘to drive home right now and take one!’ (112)

Here, too, Winterbourne describes malaria aesthetically, but in this case he does so in part to admonish Daisy for her overvaluation of the aesthetic, or at least, for valuing the wrong aesthetic (and perhaps, in Mr. Giovinelli, the wrong man): this is something of an anti-romantic moment. And what’s more, the medical argument becomes, for Winterbourne, a form of chauvinism: by trumping art with hygiene he seeks to master Daisy’s aesthetic—and sexual—commitments. Daisy resists such interventions, arguing: “‘I don’t care... whether I have Roman fever or not!’ (113). Where Winterbourne endorses the “sanitary point of view,” cautioning Daisy to depart immediately, Daisy, insisting, instead, on doing what is “pretty” and “beautiful,” is rewarded for her commitment to the aesthetic with a fatal case of malaria. This is the moment of ascendance of the sullied aesthetic—the aesthetic tinged with “the sanitary”—over the pure beauty advocated by Daisy.

But whether Winterbourne's position is ultimately victorious seems debatable. And James's own allegiances seem more compatible with Daisy's position when he insists, in the preface to the *New York Edition* (1907) of *Daisy Miller*, that "my little exhibition is made to no degree whatever in critical but, quite inordinately and extravagantly, in poetical terms" and that "my supposedly typical little figure was of course pure poetry." It is as if James is arguing that, some twenty years later, "the poets" have in fact reclaimed the terrain previously won by "the doctors." And as I argue in the next chapter, the renegotiation of this relationship is part of the project of *The House of Mirth*, which is both indebted to and uncomfortable with the cooperation of the medical and the aesthetic. That James takes pains, in the preface, to insist on the independence of the poetic, whereas, in the novella itself, Daisy's commitment to the pure aesthetic is punishable by death, suggests that the negotiation of this relationship was an ongoing concern for American fiction.

But if Daisy was to be punished for her naïve commitment to the aesthetic—or at least, to a problematic aesthetic—she was not the only one. According to John Hay, a poet and critic contemporary to James, the author may himself have been miasmically infected, as the sanitary point of view provides incomplete prophylaxis: "By the way, how James is catching it for his 'point of view'" (John Hay 93).

If James removes the fever from the air, Howells, in his criticism of James, removes the danger from the fever, by explaining that Roman fever is nothing but a form of wanderlust:

the stroll through the gate of San Lorenzo out upon the Campagna... tempts and tempts the sojourner at Rome, until he at last must go and see—if it will give him the fever. And alas! There I caught the Roman fever—the longing that burns one who has once been to Rome to go again—that will not be cured by the cool contemptuous things he may think or say; that fills

him with fond memories of its fascination and makes it forever desired.

(Howells 146)

Trying to neutralize the pathological language that accompanies the American traveler in Rome, Howells translates the malarial into the aesthetic: Roman fever becomes a desire for the repetition of fondly recalled aesthetic experiences. This translation sets the stage for the transformation of Daisy Miller, as well, into yet another “ghost” of antiquity: “I could well fancy her discoverer feeling a pang of desolation to find no longer in the living world this lovely creature, who perished as it were from her own impossibility, and whose faded ghost has no habitat but in his faithful page” (Howells 166). The “ghost” has shifted residences and been repatriated: she has been transplanted from the ancient ruins of Hawthorne’s Rome to the literary ruins of James. Howells attempts to rewrite history, shifting it onto terrain both literary and American, and continuing the endless cycle through which the literary evolves into the tourist’s imaginative equipment. Howells reads “Daisy Miller” both mythically and epidemiologically, casting her not as a victim of malaria, but rather as the source of a novel form of odorous air, and thus as a form of literary malaria: “she was...a flavor of new-world conditions imparting its wilding fragrance to that strange environment as freely as to its native air” (166). Daisy Miller, here, figures as a “new-world” version of an ancient mythology: America’s answer to the ancient transformation myths, Daisy is, through an ancient Roman methodology, horticulturally granted immortality. Howells uses this micro-mythology of Daisy to Americanize and aestheticize the malaria which for Hawthorne, was so thoroughly Italian: he turns Roman fever into a “wilding fragrance” particular to the Americas, and works to re-entrench the miasmatic narrative of literary origin.

The twining of these infectious and literary histories is not erased as it makes the transatlantic crossing. And once again, Hawthorne turns out to be prescient on this matter, predicting that “the page” itself will prove an agent of transmission:

Here sits (dropping upon simple marble bench, in the treacherous sunshine) the consumptive girl, whose friends have brought her, for cure, to a climate that instills poison even into its very purest breath...But, not to meddle with history—that which our narrative is not otherwise concerned, than that the very dust of Rome is historic, and inevitably settles on our page, and mingles with our ink. (*Marble Faun* 89)

So, in anticipation of my second chapter, what happens when “the dust of Rome” spills over onto the twentieth century American page? It looks, I would suggest, something like this: “Mrs. Peniston rose abruptly, and, advancing to the ornamental clock surmounted by a helmeted Minerva, which, throned on the chimney-piece between two malachite vases, passed her handkerchief between the helmet and visor. ‘I knew it—the parlour-maid never dusts there!’” (*The House of Mirth* 108). The “helmeted Minerva” is but one of several Roman reproductions with which the filth-phobic, aged Aunt of *The House of Mirth* adorns her parlor—a reproduction of The Dying Gladiator (also, appropriately, famously celebrated by Byron<sup>10</sup>) also holds a prominent position on the parlor: he keeps watch over the religious (and, it seems, particularly Roman Catholic) cleaning rituals of Lily Bart’s aunt, Mrs. Peniston:

On the tenth day of the month the blinds of her Fifth Avenue residence were drawn up, and the eyes of the Dying Gladiator in bronze who occupied the drawing-room window resumed their survey of that deserted thoroughfare. The first two weeks after her return represented to Mrs. Peniston the domestic equivalent of religious retreat. She ‘went through’ the linen and blankets in the precise spirit of the penitent exploring the

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<sup>10</sup> See Brooks, Van Wyck. *The Dream of Arcadia: American Writers and artists in Italy 1760-1915*. New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1958, p.19

inner folds of conscience; she sought for moth as the stricken soul seeks for lurking infirmities. The topmost shelf of every closet was made to yield up its secret...and, as a final stage of the lustral rites, the entire house was swathed in penitential and deluged with expiatory soapsuds. (Wharton 98)

Wharton's irritation with Roman references extends to their literary overcirculation and oversaturation, as well, for the final neoclassical reproduction in Mrs. Peniston's parlor, a portrait of Beatrice of Cenci reads as something of a parody of Hawthorne's rapturous description of the same painting in *The Marble Faun*:

The eyes were large and brown, and met those of the spectator, but evidently with a strange, ineffectual effort to escape. There was a slight redness about the eyelids, so that you would question whether or no the girl had been weeping. The whole face was quiet; there was no distortion or disturbance of any single feature...but, in fact, it was the saddest picture ever painted or conceived; it involved an unfathomable depth of sorrow. (Hawthorne 55)

But, while this icon of wounded femininity was aspirational to Hawthorne's characters, it has nothing to say to Lily Bart. Indeed, it mocks her:

The two ladies went upstairs to the sitting-room, where Mrs. Peniston seated herself in her black satin arm-chair with the tufted buttons, beside a bead table bearing a bronze box with a miniature of Beatrice Cenci on the lid. Lily felt for these objects the same distaste which the prisoner may entertain for the fittings of the court-room. It was here that her aunt received her rare confidences, and the pink-eyed smirk of the turbaned Beatrice was associated in her mind with the gradual fading of the smile from Mrs. Peniston's lips. (Wharton 169)

Wharton's Roman reproductions are uncannily alive and, like James's "horrible voice," actively menacing—they watch and smirk, keeping guard over Victorian proprieties, both ethical and aesthetic. If, in the Roman fictions of James and Hawthorne, the originals were admired and studied by visiting Americans, now the roles are reversed: it the Roman reproductions which seem to keep tabs on their filth-phobic owners.

These over-reproduced Roman art objects produce an atmosphere as toxic as the climate from which they hail, but with a critical difference: by the early twentieth century, the mortal threat of malaria has transformed into a miasma of bad American taste. The Victorian neo-classical aesthetic has hung around too long and has grown both lowbrow and punishing. Victorian art even brings with it (to recall the "fumes" of crime fiction with which I opened) the taint of criminality: the image of Beatrice adorns the ethical court in which Lily's actions are judged. In deriding Roman reproductions according to a model of bad air—Roman Fever—which, in the American domestic novel is itself something of a Roman reproduction, Wharton has created for herself a double-bind: she parodies the "religious" fervor of Aunt Peniston's hygienic hunt for dust and infestation while at the same time using the hygienic logic of bad air to describe the deleterious effect of stuffy drawing rooms and over-circulated Roman art.

It is the American version of this double-bind that I examine in the next chapter: how does Wharton represent, in *The House of Mirth*, the artfulness of her work—as distinct from medicalized accounts of literary efficiency and utility—while still holding onto the advantages of populist social thinking about the role of atmosphere and environment? How does she benefit from the open-ended and suggestive application of miasmatic metaphor without participating in the cycle of literary devaluation and overcirculation that she deplors?

**Chapter Two**  
**“Compassion Holding Its Breath”:**  
**Sick Buildings and Suffocating Atmospheres in *The House of Mirth***

**I.**

In *Allergic to the Twentieth Century: The Explosion in Environmental Allergies—from Sick Buildings to Multiple Chemical Sensitivity*, an account typical of contemporary popular discussions of a cluster of maladies loosely termed environmental illness, Peter Radetsky writes:

Since World War II the use of chemically based products and pesticides has increased exponentially. New clothing, new carpeting, cleaning products, cosmetics, computer printers, copy machines, mothballs, particle board, plywood, pesticides, perfumes, deodorizers... the list of products that incorporate and exude synthetic chemicals goes on and on. And our increasingly tightly constructed buildings do a terrific job of trapping these chemicals and keeping them inside, where a population that increasingly lives indoors can encounter them—thus sick building syndrome. New office buildings, with their central heating and air conditioning and sealed windows, have been likened to upright airtight submarines. (14)

Rather than speaking to the science of this description, I'd instead like to consider the suggestive intersection of three thematic concerns—pathological air, toxic objects, and interior architecture. For these concerns, taken together, are not original to the discourse of environmental illness, but rather, represent both a return to an earlier model of epidemiology: nineteenth century miasmatic theory. As influential sanitary scientist Ellen Richards, anticipating the terms of Radetsky's description by nearly a century, warns

“Many of man’s present physical troubles are due to the roof over his head confining the warmed, used-up air, which would escape freely if there were an opening provided. The first law of sanitation requires the removal of all wastes. Once-breathed air is as much of a waste as once-used water, and should be allowed to escape” (1910 27).

Formulations of environmental illness, then, owe something to both the theory of miasma and the sanitary measures it inspired. Much as nineteenth century proponents of miasmatic theory identified noxious air as the cause of diseases like malaria (literally, bad air), environmental illness tends to be attributed to a nonspecific, chemically induced change in the air or atmosphere localized by blocked ventilation. The “peculiar” or mystifying component of the original miasmatic logic rhetorically re-emerges in the hazy work performed by the “thus” (“thus sick building syndrome”) which, in Radetsky’s account, forges the link—linguistically, if not logically—between building and pathology. The very name Radetsky prefers—“sick building syndrome”—functions according to a rhetorical structure, which, as I hope to show, is also consistent with its nineteenth century predecessor. The logic of the term would seem to be both metaphorical and anthropomorphic: a building can only be “sick” in so far as it is modeled after a body. But in naming the disease after the edifice, this discourse muddies the distinction between sick bodies and sick buildings by making it difficult to determine, rhetorically, at least, to whom or what the syndrome belongs: it is unclear if the building itself is afflicted or if it merely induces affliction in its inhabitants. The very collapse here precipitated between what, in rhetorical terms, we might identify as the tenor and the vehicle of pathological analogism—the building and the body—is a linguistic effect of an interpretive epistemology obsessed by problems of closeness and overproximity. If the building is no longer strictly anthropomorphized, or simply *like* a sick person, but is also the seat and subject of disease, this has everything to do with what Radetsky calls “trapping,” with the

“upright airtight” closing off of circulation between the inside and the outside of both the building and the terms of analogy.

Although she is less interested in the work than the home environment, Nancy Tomes, in her excellent study of the cultural work of sanitary science, *The Gospel of Germs*, identifies certain sympathy between nineteenth and twentieth century theories of architectural pathology:

The findings of [contemporary] environmental health sciences have led to a curious rebirth of the house disease concept. Researchers have uncovered a host of dangers lurking in the American household, including asbestos, lead paint, pesticide-tainted water, radon gas, and electromagnetic waves.

Although it is framed in terms of a chemical rather than microbial threat, the modern notion of the ‘sick building’ has striking parallels to the late nineteenth-century conception of the ‘house disease’ (263).

This passage is interesting both in its historical observation and in its rhetoric. For Tomes, rather unexpectedly, repeats the logic of miasma in accounting for the emergence of “the sick building”: the only explanation she offers for its existence is as a “curious rebirth,” as if, like the miasmatic vapors lurking beneath the surface, house disease simply required the dredging up performed by the “environmental health sciences” to be reanimated.

The rhetorical operations animating both Tomes’ and Radetsky’s texts cannot be derived exclusively from popular epidemiological writing, as they also appear to owe something to the conventions of realist fiction, which has both historical and conceptual affiliations with sanitary science.

For the turn of the twentieth century was a moment of both rhetorical and ideological cooperation between the articulation of literary fiction and the articulation of medical science. Proponents of literary realism, committed to defending the author as a skilled professional, drew on “analogies between authors and physicians, who exemplified

the new and more powerful form professionalism began to take after midcentury” (Glazener 110). Such analogies are based in a shared ideology, for realism and the public health movement shared a similar vision of the social field; proponents of both movements were entangled in desires to democratize American culture through the universal maintenance of, on the one hand, sanitary homes and, on the other, correct aesthetics. William Howells’ desire to smooth over class conflicts through what he called a “democracy in literature,” paralleled public health workers’ attempts to spread the “gospel” of germ theory to poor and rural women. As Nancy Tomes explains, “many converts to the germ theory” believed deeply in a ‘chain of disease,’ a ‘socialism of the microbe’ that linked all members of American society together” (12). This mutual sympathy between bacteriology and realist aesthetics was further articulated in taste-making periodicals like *Scribner’s*, which favored metaphors representing realism’s medicinal function: realism was imagined as a healthy dose of mimetic economy for literary appetites compromised by the excesses of sentimental fiction (Glazener 135). The language of sentiment was not attacked by literary critics alone: the new public health of the early 1900’s positioned itself as “a rejection of a feminized ‘sentimental sanitarianism’”—including the miasmatic theories sanitarians endorsed—in favor of a “more manly laboratory science” (Tomes 241).<sup>11</sup>

The murkiness of the distinction between bodies and buildings critical to the logic of sick building syndrome is based on an ambiguity which, according to Mark Seltzer, stands as “one of the central concerns of the American novel in [the late nineteenth century]: a concern about the status of persons, as subjects and as living property, and, collaterally, a concern about the status of material things, such as chairs or tables, or, more anxiously, bodies” (48). In the broadest terms, it is in the collapse of analogical distance

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<sup>11</sup> Realism’s scientific alliances were not limited to bacteriology: a number of critics have correlated realism and emergent scientific and medical technologies (x-rays, photography, microscopes, etc.). See Lisa Cartwright, Nancy Glazener, Ken Warren.

that I would locate the continuity from mid-nineteenth century miasmatic theory to contemporary logics of environmental illness. The discursive erasure of the distance between bodies and furniture is aesthetically registered as a shift in the literary language of domestic pathology: furnishings cease to behave like bodies—to be sick by analogy—and become themselves a source of toxicity<sup>12</sup>.

As I shall argue here, early twentieth century fiction, and in particular the early work of Edith Wharton, stands as an important midpoint between the moment of sanitarianism and contemporary popular environmental science: the outlines and rhetorical operations of environmental illness are already at work in her novel. Her work speaks to both the continued appeal of miasmatic thinking and to the particular literary investments such language references. *The House of Mirth*, as it follows the social, economic, and physical decline of New York socialite Lily Bart, who has a perpetually allergic reaction to her physical and aesthetic environment, provides a means of understanding what might be at stake in the contemporary language of toxic environments. Indeed, *The House of Mirth*—as it insists on an understanding of the environment as overdetermined and multidimensional, provides a means of explaining why toxic environments have reappeared as a cultural rhetoric. For as she suggests that the alliances formed between literary aesthetics and the bacteriological laboratory worked too well, Wharton elaborates the political and aesthetic advantages of returning to an older model of epidemiology: her persistent recall of miasmatic metaphors in the era of bacteriology, in a lingering adherence to a scientifically discredited atmospheric and environmentalist model, fights bacteriological fiction with a resistant strain of sanitary sentiment. Wharton's metaphors mingle competing aesthetics and contradictory epidemiologies to interrupt the intimacy

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<sup>12</sup> Indeed, one of the novelistic examples cited by Seltzer—a passage from Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*—features a chair sick strictly by analogy: “It had a turn from quacking and squeaking, - that chair had, - either from having taken cold in early life, or from some asthmatic affection, or perhaps from some nervous derangement” (48).

between the literary and the laboratory proper to high realism. And—despite her notoriously complicated relationship to feminism—it interferes with that intimacy in a feminist fashion. Miasmatic references form an alignment, albeit an ambivalent one, with the sanitary and hygienic sciences which had been, despite their limitations, spaces for women’s social and economic participation.

For Wharton, the right to an imaginative use of scientific language was indeed a feminist issue. Her contention, in the following passage from a 1902 review of the work of George Eliot, is that women and men do not have equal access to scientific metaphor:

The principle charge against her appears to be that she was to[o] ‘scientific,’ that she sterilised her imagination and deformed her style by the study of biology and metaphysics...George Eliot was simply the cultivated reader, and her biological acquirements differed in degree, rather than in kind, from those of, for instance, Tennyson, who is acknowledged to have enlarged the range of poetic imagery by his use of metaphors and analogies drawn from the discoveries of modern science...and almost all the famous scientific hypotheses have an imaginative boldness and beauty which justify the metaphor...Goethe...Milton...Is it because these were men, while George Eliot was a woman, that she is reprov’d for venturing on ground they did not fear to tread? (“George Eliot”).

But notice here Wharton’s ambivalence on the relationship between the “boldness and beauty” of the metaphor, on the one hand, and the rigor of “study” and “cultivation” on the other. This ambivalence expresses itself in Wharton’s own use of scientific metaphors: she seems to privilege the suggestive, open-ended language of atmospheric influence over more modern figures of laboratory science. In this way, Wharton reflects medical historian Regina Morantz-Sanchez’s account of the persistence of miasmatic explanations long after the lessons of the laboratory had been widely disseminated:

One of the most bewildering controversies to twentieth-century observers remains the reluctance of many nineteenth century physicians and public-health advocates—known as sanitarians—to accept the discoveries of the bacteriologists. How could such men and women persist in speaking of ‘effluvia,’ ‘miasma,’ and ‘filth’ when the precise experimentation of Pasteur, Koch, and their followers had, by reproducing various diseases in the laboratory and identifying various ‘germs,’ ushered in the concept of ‘specific etiology?’ To make sense of the sanitarians’ objections, we must remember that bacteriological concepts called into question an older and deeply internalized view of disease that was holistic in scope. (187)

And while, as I shall make clear in the next section, Wharton is highly critical of Victorian design itself, she seems nonetheless to admire the role the Victorians ascribed to design. As one history of interior design explains, “The pervasive environmentalism of the Victorians with their belief that the individual’s outlook could be molded by his [domestic] surroundings thus continued on past the turn of the century” (Clark 153). Wharton’s early writing—itself a form of pervasive environmentalism—is one such space of continuation. Resisting the elimination of sources and influences simply because they can’t be verified in the laboratory, Wharton, like contemporary theorists of environmental illness, retains something of the logic of Victorian environmentalism; her narration of the very real impact of the aesthetic environment on the individual aligns her with the Victorian sanitarians rather than with the bacteriologists. Indeed, references to “the laboratory” in *The House of Mirth* index an absence of compassion: to Gerty Farish, Lily “seemed like some cruel creature experimenting in a laboratory” (162). The comforts offered by the right sort of domestic environment, however, are treated with at least as much pathos as parody:

To a torn heart uncomforted by human nearness, a room may open up almost human arms, and the being to whom no four walls mean more than any others is, at such hours, expatriate everywhere. Lily had no heart to lean on. Her relation to her aunt was as superficial as that of chance lodgers who pass on the stairs...What Lily craved was the darkness made by enfolding arms, the silence which is not solitude, but compassion holding its breath. (148)

Wharton's emphasis on the impact of the decorative, particularly as it infuses and constricts the very air her characters breathe, becomes a compassionate alternative to the laboratory, a way of keeping environmental influence—and with it gender and psychic complexity—on the table.

## II.

Certainly I am not the first to remark upon the profusion of suffocation images in Wharton's prose. Cynthia Griffin Wolff reads Wharton's images of suffocation as representations of Wharton's own history of psychosomatic lung problems:

When Edith Wharton was very young she sustained neglect at what Erik Erikson has called the oral-respiratory-sensory stage. When she was an adult...her illnesses had to do with breathing (she had repeated attacks of bronchitis and asthma, and acute reactions to heat and cold (she was, in the broadest sense, morbidly vulnerable to atmosphere. (15)

Wolff then concludes that “the unresolved crises of this period have left a residue—a language that instinctively turns to evocations of heat and cold or starvation and suffocation” (24). More recently, Candace Waid attributes the language of suffocation in Wharton's work to a personal and familial history. In the ghost stories, she writes

Wharton explores...a repressed story about women who become unquiet ghosts because they cannot have a voice. Wharton's family had a history of weak lungs; many of her relatives died of tuberculosis. Wharton herself may have inherited some of her breathing difficulties from the Jones family; she suffered from debilitating hay fever and asthma, which may have been psychosomatic, at least in part...Wharton was haunted by the fear that she would not be able to breathe...In the ghost stories, the fear of inarticulateness becomes more directly a fear of the loss of breath. (177)

This sort of direct physiological interpretation of Wharton's suffocation metaphors—where the literary world neatly reflects the physical world—seems to miss part of the point: it is precisely the direct correspondence between the medical and the literary that Wharton's figures problematize.

On the other hand, it doesn't seem quite right to interpret images of suffocation as purely a figure for something else, as does Amy Kaplan, for whom foul air is always a figure for social anxiety:

Throughout the novel, wealth means having the power to hide these loose ends, to render invisible the work on which one's existence depends. Lily herself has a horror of cleaning smells and to the sight of rumpled dresses the morning after a party because these sensations attest both to her dependence on those beneath her and her own proximity to a sphere of servitude. She finds one of the worst aspects of life in the boardinghouse to be the smell of cooking that seeps into her room, the absence of boundaries that keep put of sight her own means of subsistence. (101)

While this analysis seems largely accurate, it neglects the sanitary side of Lily's disgust: it moves immediately to a metaphorical discussion of social boundaries, treating smell and air as exclusively metaphoric, as a figural rendering of the more important issue of social

space. While the biographical readings seem to take Wharton's images too literally, Amy Kaplan's reading renders them fully metaphorical: I would like to navigate a middle ground, and suggest that the force of Wharton's images of suffocating physical space encode moments of both dual reference—that is, to both the literal and the literary—and also to the frustration of that duality.

Consider the following passage: “She lay back and looked about the poor slit of a room with a renewal of physical distaste. The outer air, penned between high buildings, brought no freshness through the windows, steam-heat was beginning to sing in a coil of dingy pipes, and a smell of cooking penetrated the crack of the door” (*House of Mirth* 168). While Lily's exposure to bad air certainly operates here as a metaphor for her declining social capital, it also operates quite literally. Lily believes that exposure to unventilated smells of cooking is physically hazardous; that she can find no relief from the cooking smells in the “outer air” because it is “penned between high buildings” represents a mortal danger as well as a social failure. And here again, Lily registers both aerial assaults aesthetically: in a perversion of her former attention to style, the bad air itself is what must count as literature (it is, after all, “penned”) and for music Lily must make do with the “steam-heat...sing[ing] in a coil of dingy pipes.” Part of what is so appalling, to her, is that hygienic assaults are indistinguishable from aesthetic ones. In the world of the boarding house, where stale air is what is penned, and steam heat is what sings, the aesthetic and the miasmatic are one and the same.

### III.

Suffocation was a prominent idiom in the public health movement. As Ellen Richards, one of the late Victorian popularizers of sanitary science, writes in a best-selling book entitled *The Chemistry of Cooking and Cleaning*:

Our houses are full of air all the time. No more can come on until some has gone out. In breathing, we use up a little, but it is immediately replaced by expired air, which is impure. Were there no exits for this air, no pure air could enter, and we should soon die of slow suffocation. The better built the house the quicker the suffocation, unless special provision be made for a current of fresh air to push out the bad... Therefore the air of all rooms must be often and completely changed, either by special systems of ventilation, or by intelligent action in the opening of doors and windows. (1907 85)

But Wharton's work encodes respiratory problems of a rather more ambiguous nature. In her autobiography, *A Backward Glance*, Wharton recalls that "One of the most depressing impressions of my childhood is my recollection of the intolerable ugliness of New York, the untended streets and the narrow houses so lacking in external dignity, so crammed with smug and suffocating upholstery" (55). Her phrasing leaves open the question of who—or what—is the subject of suffocation: does the upholstery deprive people of breath, or is the furniture itself—suffering from a lack of air? This confusion of the terms of what would otherwise be a fairly conventional anthropomorphic analogy is consistent with Wharton's anxious representation of the more generalized upheaval of her social world. In *The House of Mirth*, it is the newly wealthy—those who seem to be both the agents and the beneficiaries of the free flow of capital—who seem particularly liable to inhabit treacherously stuffy spaces.

Lily's suitor, Simon Rosedale, suspect not only because he has come by his wealth recently and on the stock market, but because he is a Jew, is described as "A plump rosy man of the blond Jewish type, with smart London clothes fitting him like upholstery, and a small sidelong eyes which gave him the air of appraising people as if they were bric-a-brac" (14). This is not a simple analogy between a human subject and

a material object, for there is a general confusion, in this passage, between tenor and vehicle. Rosedale is likened to upholstery, and yet his regard transforms other people into household decorations. He operates, in the course of the passage, on both sides of the analogy: he is, alternately, the subject and object of the same class of metaphor. The promiscuity of these analogical terms seems to have an immediate respiratory effect on Lily: her encounter with Rosedale's "air of appraisal" seems to rob her of her own air, for "heedless of his protestations, she sprang into the rescuing vehicle, and called out a breathless order to the driver" (15).

But this rescue, like all the others in the novel, is only a temporary palliative. During another layover in her slow fall from grace, Lily is briefly employed as the secretary of aspiring Western socialite Norma Hatch, whose social rituals are as alien to Lily as the hotels in which they are practiced:

The environment in which Lily found herself was as strange to her as its inhabitants. She was unacquainted with the world of the fashionable New York hotel—a world over-heated, over-upholstered and over-fitted with mechanical appliances for the gratification of fantastic requirements... Through this atmosphere of torrid splendour moved wan beings as richly upholstered as the furniture. (274)

The overwhelming influence of the stuffy hotel environment, an environment which is "over" the limits of taste in every sense, is illustrated by the apparently infectious nature of the upholstery: what is first described as an "over-upholstered" space has, by the end of the passage, transformed the beings—"richly upholstered as the furniture"—who dwell there. The nouveau riche excess of the "fantastic" hotel environment produces upholstered bodies according to a vampiric logic: the drapery draws its "rich" hue from the people it drapes, while the bodies so graced are left "wan." The body made morbid by upholstery is

a neat inversion of Stowe's rocking chair: rather than the furniture taking on human traits, people—subject to an enervating environmental influence—become like the furniture.

If there is an implicit gothic logic in the above example, that logic is all the more stark in Wharton's first book, the *Decoration of Houses*, a guide to tasteful decoration for the urban upper class. Here the upholsterer is cast as the sinister emissary of an overstuffed underworld: "house-decoration has come to be regarded as a black art by those who have seen their rooms subjected to the manipulations of the modern upholsterer" (xx). The situation looks even more grim in the chapter devoted to drawing-rooms (the disposition of which is a source of particular anxiety for Wharton), where "The modern upholsterer pads and puffs his seats as if they were to form the furniture of a lunatic's cell; and then, having expanded them to such dimensions that they cannot be moved without effort, perches their dropsical bodies on four little casters" (128). The machinations of the modern upholsterer, it seems, would make lunatics of us all.

The intimacy, in the above examples, between upholstery and mortal risk (whether it be to the furniture or those who dare to perch upon it) makes a certain etymological sense: well into the nineteenth century, the word "upholder"—which is itself a variant of upholsterer—referred both to those who prepared bodies for burial and those who refurbished furniture. Indeed, to this day it is the task of the upholsterer to prepare the lining of the coffin. This double duty describes the despondent scene of Lily's disinheritance, which transpires, fittingly, in the drawing-room: "Miss Bart and Gerty found themselves almost alone in the purple drawing-room, which more than ever, in its stuffy dimness, resembled a well-kept family vault, in which the last corpse had just been decently deposited" (224).

That Lily should be disinherited in a "stuffy" drawing-room is particularly apt and particularly cruel. For in the opening chapters of the *House of Mirth*, Lily Bart commits an act of self-sabotage in the name of fresh air: she brings wealthy bachelor

Percy Gryce to the brink of a marriage proposal, only to stand him up in order to go for a walk: “I thought, after all, that the air might do me good” (67). That Lily would fail to stay the course in wooing Gryce comes as no great shock, for

She had been bored all the afternoon by Percy Gryce—the mere thought seemed to awaken an echo of his droning voice—but she could not ignore him on the morrow, she must follow up on her success, must submit to more boredom...all on the bare chance that he might ultimately decide to do her the honor of boring her for life. (25)

In that the boredom produced by contact with Gryce is so stifling that it can only be conveyed by a triple repetition of the word—“bored...boredom...boring”—it seems an apt bit of punning that Gryce also owes his fortune to stuffiness, albeit stuffiness of a different order: “After attaining his majority, and coming into the fortune which the late Mr. Gryce had made out of a patent device for excluding fresh air from hotels, the young man continued to live with his mother in Albany” (22). Nor does Wharton let this pun lie dormant, for Gryce, ever anxious about his personal health, is hypochondriacally fearful of any air which is *not* stuffy, as he “Always connected outer air with ideas of exposure” (67).<sup>13</sup>

The ease with which we can identify this pun on stuffy, however, still begs the question: how did we come to linguistically associate bad taste with bad air and compromised respiration? The OED indicates that “stuffy” began to signify “ill-ventilated, close” rooms and “air...wanting in freshness” around 1850, “persons...affected with a sensation of stoppage or obstruction in the organs of breathing” around 1870, and “prim, formal, strait-laced...boring, conventional” around

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<sup>13</sup> Poor Percy Gryce is not only boring in triplicate, he’s also at a grave geographic disadvantage: he hails from Albany. Atmospheric hypochondria serves for both Wharton and James (recall that Daisy Miller’s family is from Schenectady) the same referential function as upstate New York: intimacy with either almost always connotes an incurable relationship to the tedious.

1890. We can thus loosely designate 1890 as the moment when stuffy could describe either an atmospheric, a medical, or an aesthetic condition. The source of the Gryce fortune may be a pun, then, but it is a pun which only becomes available around 1890, not coincidentally the date cultural historians designate as the beginning of the golden era of the American public health movement.<sup>14</sup>

I suspect that Percy Gryce, in both name and deed, may have been based on a particular figure from the public health movement—nineteenth century sanitary entrepreneur E. E. Rice, who made his fortune as the inventor of “Rice’s Patented Ventilation System.” Rice installed his device in the homes of two senators, one of whom urged President Garfield to follow suit and make the White House a “healthy habitation” (Tomes 71). In modeling Gryce after Rice, Wharton makes one notable revision: while Rice’s device promises to circulate fresh air into buildings, Percy Gryce’s father makes his fortune by *excluding* fresh air. Gryce’s fortune, then, comes from maintaining a strict division between interior and exterior atmospheres: his wealth circulates precisely to the extent that air does not.<sup>15</sup>

I would like to propose that the multiple forms of Gryce stuffiness illustrate an important feature of Wharton’s critique of late realist culture: she is discomfited by the overlap of interior and exterior states. This overlap is a reflection of the reciprocity between late nineteenth century models of medicine and models of realist aesthetics.<sup>16</sup> Percy Gryce—whose fortune, physical self-governance, and aesthetic sense are all

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<sup>14</sup> “Our modern conceptions of governmental responsibility for public health date back to this period, from 1890 to 1930, which is often referred to as the ‘golden era’ of the American public health movement (Tomes 7). For what it’s worth, the span of Wharton’s work may not fit neatly into a traditional literary period, it does fit into the map directly onto era of public health.

<sup>15</sup> “From the 1880’s onward, entrepreneurs and manufacturers of all sorts realized that the fear of the microbe could be effectively exploited to sell a wealth of goods and services...For all their invocations of laboratory authority to sell their products, manufacturers and advertisers displayed no deep allegiance to the scruples of science.” (Tomes 11). In some sense, then, we can read Gryce’s fortune as built on laboratory authority.

<sup>16</sup> See Lawrence Rothfield, *Vital Signs: Medical Realism in Nineteenth-Century Fiction*; Nancy Glazener, *Reading for Realism*; Amy Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism*.

organized around a want of circulation—is the satiric subject of an analogical linguistic culture which tends to obscure the distinctions between, on the one hand, body and environment, and on the other, science and style. He is the anemic offspring of a suffocating linguistic order.

#### IV.

Although *The Decoration of Houses* includes separate chapters dedicated to the design of sitting-rooms, drawing-rooms, ball-rooms, bedrooms, dining-rooms, and even nurseries, Wharton pays little attention to the rooms targeted by, to use Tomes's excellent coinage, the "septiconscious." She omits any discussion whatever of the proper appointments for kitchens, includes only a scant paragraph on the design of bathrooms, and seems rather insistent on attending only to the aesthetics—not the hygienics—of the water-closet: "The chief fault of the American bathroom is that, however splendid the materials used, the treatment is seldom architectural" (172). While Wharton is clearly familiar with the sanitary argument, she proposes that it be employed as a means to an aesthetic end:

Floors of [brick or stone] have the merit of not only being more architectural in character, more solid and more durable, but also easier to keep clean. This should especially commend them to the hygienically-minded American housekeeper, since floors that may be washed are better suited to our climate than those which must be covered with a nailed-down carpet. (99)

Wharton is at best a reluctant populist: her snide reference to the "hygienically-minded" distances her from both the democratic aims of style and sanitation and the possibility that the aims of the one are synonymous with the aims of the other. It is hard to imagine

that she would have been moved by the argument of the writer who, in a 1900 editorial from the magazine *Puck* condemned those who defended the trailing skirt in the name of style, insisting that “nothing unhygienic could ever be beautiful” (Tomes 160). Wharton may have been a proponent of modern design, but she was not particularly fond of the popular justifications for that design. She had, then, to argue for a clean, modern aesthetic and at the same time argue that that aesthetic had more than hygiene to recommend it. While Wharton sharply criticized the intricate surface ornamentation and general fussiness of Victorian design, she resisted the collapse of style into hygiene, the very collapse responsible for the Progressive belief that “these traits represented not merely defective taste, but also a reckless disregard for health because they attracted germs and dust” (Tomes 159).

Of gilding, for instance, (a particularly resonant term, of course, in a discussion of Lily), Wharton writes “The deterioration of gilding is one of the most striking examples of the modern disregard of quality and execution...the result is a plague of liquid gilding.” And as poor (read: Victorian) taste is articulated through an idiom of contagion, the work of decorative reform then becomes the work of public health. The decorative reformer, according to Wharton, must promote “those forms of art which minister...to the aesthetic sense” (196). The Victorian aesthetic which Wharton endeavors to treat in *The Decoration of Houses* finds its literary correlate in the metaphors of disease. For the trace of Victorian metaphors, an elaborate analogism which keeps pristine the distinction between the tenor and vehicle of domestic pathological metaphor, exists in *The House of Mirth* as the province of Mrs. Peniston, Lily Bart’s aged aunt, guardian, and ambassador from the world of old New York. Mrs. Peniston’s domestic activities—which she takes very seriously—are recounted through tidy disease similes; in house cleaning “She sought for moths as the stricken soul seeks for lurking infirmities”(98). Conversely, her morality is represented through

comparisons to her housekeeping: “Mrs. Peniston had kept her imagination shrouded, like the drawing room furniture” (123). Of Lily’s rumored indiscretions with a married man we are told: “The mere idea of immorality was as offensive to Mrs. Peniston as a smell of cooking in the drawing-room...Mrs. Peniston felt as if there had been a contagious illness in the house, and she was doomed to sit shivering among her contaminated furniture” (127).

These often elaborate pathological conceits mirror the excessive flourishes (what Wharton elsewhere calls the “superficial graces” (*Decoration* 198) of the furnishings among which Mrs. Peniston shivers. Something of a vehicle for Wharton’s own program of decorative reform, then, Mrs. Peniston’s interior design is represented as a travesty of taste to which Lily registers a physical reaction:

As was always the case with her, this moral repulsion found a physical outlet in a quickened distaste for her surroundings. She revolted from the complacent ugliness of Mrs. Peniston’s black walnut, from the slippery gloss of the vestibule tiles, and the mingled odor of sapolio and furniture polish that met her at the door. (99)

If Mrs. Peniston sees her own furniture as sick, it is because it has been “contaminated” by the “immorality” of her niece’s liaisons. Lily, however, does not apprehend a clear distinction between aesthetic and bodily debility, nor between aesthetic and moral failure. For her, there is no middle term: the moral does not infect the decorative, rather bad taste is itself the primary ethical problem, and a problem which “always” finds a “physical outlet.” When Lily claims in the first chapter “If I could just do over my aunt’s drawing-room I know I should be a better person,” she does not just analogize moral character to domestic interior, but claims that they are one and the same (8).

The elderly aunt's moral sensibilities, her taste in decor, and her relationship to pathological metaphor all are marked as dated and Victorian: she selects, renders metaphorical, and pathologizes furniture just as a Stowe character might, and thus stands as a counterpoint to Lily's distinctly modern relationship to style and pathology. For while both women exhibit what I'm tempted to dub a proto-chemical sensitivity to fuming furniture, Mrs. Peniston consistently reacts via simile—"as a smell of cooking"—while Lily reacts directly to the furniture polish itself.

## V.

In rhetorical theory, the difference between simile and metaphor is sometimes explained through a thematic of proximity. In that the two terms of a comparison, when brought into relation through metaphor, lack the addition of what Derrida calls the "prosthesis" of the comparison-term (239), they are thus said to be closer than the terms of the simile: "a metaphor is a compressed simile" (Davidson 36), or, metaphor is "a condensed simile, meaning that A is (like) B" (Brogan). Furthermore, the deterioration of metaphor into dead metaphor (the figure which has "fossilized...in ordinary usage" (Brogan 184) to the extent that it is scarcely recognizable as metaphor) also takes place according to a spatial logic. As Paul Ricoeur argues, a metaphor comes into being when two formerly disparate terms gain a semantic proximity: "It is as though a change of distance between meanings occurred within a logical space. The new pertinence or congruence proper to a meaningful metaphoric utterance proceeds from a kind of semantic proximity which suddenly obtains between two terms in spite of their distance" (145). What I am proposing, then, is that those two terms lose their claim to metaphoricity at the moment when distance is erased entirely—when they become too close to admit of difference or distinction. For if, as Ricoeur further

suggests, “Remoteness is preserved within proximity. To see the like is to see the same in spite of, and through, the different” (146), the dead metaphor can be understood as the place of *over*-proximity, the place where the tension between similarity and difference has collapsed.

*The House of Mirth* thematizes this collapse between as both typical and pathological, a twinned logic which puts the collapse of distinctions between inside and outside, identity and difference, at the heart of Wharton’s argument with late realist figuration. For as she grows more desperate and disconsolate, Lily Bart is also increasingly apt to collapse occupant into environment: Lily is “more than ever conscious of the steepness and narrowness of Gerty’s stairs, and of the cramped blind-alley of life to which they led. Dull stairs destined to be mounted by dull people” (263). The perfect fit of bodies to environment, the effacement of any marked difference between the two, is represented as characteristic of both Lily’s failing health and the death of pathological metaphor. After mounting the shabby stairs, Gerty tells Lily “I’m sure you must be ill,” to which Lily hysterically responds by insisting on the relays between looks and health, interior and looks: “Do I look ill? Does my face show it?...What a horrid looking-glass—it’s all blotched and discolored. Any one would look ghastly in it!...You stupid dear, why do you say such odious things to me? It’s enough to make one ill to be told that one looks so! And looking ill means looking ugly!” (266). Lily’s outburst, precipitated by the “cramped” domestic conditions, is turned into a problem of metaphor when she puts her relationship to parasitic, professional sociality in the following terms: “It doesn’t sound very amusing, does it? And it isn’t—I’m sick to death of it! And yet the thought of giving it all up nearly kills me” (267). The peculiar conjunction here of literal and figural sickness, to be sick and to be sick of, works to efface the distinction between the tenor and vehicle of pathological metaphor by collapsing them into each other under

cramped linguistic conditions: to (further) condense the above passage, Lily is so sick that she is sick. The overproximity of the literal and figural is mirrored by the impossibility of adequately deciphering subject from environment. The impossibility of distinction is articulated in the banal or collapsed metaphoricity of disease not only because they share the problem of closeness and poor ventilation, but also because shared metaphor is itself the problem.

The difficulty in distinguishing the literal from the figural use of pathological language, in the above instance is particularly telling in that the expression employed—to be sick of—is itself already a dead metaphor.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, *to be sick of* seems to propose itself as an exemplary dead metaphor in that it conveys the very sense of what it is here illustrating formally—the boredom of over-exposure. The dead metaphor, then, behaves something like Lily Bart herself: it has been too much circulated, has, to repeat Walter Benn Michaels’s assessment of Lily Bart, lost its “interest.”<sup>18</sup> Indeed, Lily herself seems to illustrate the trajectory of figural becoming-dead in that she is both made and broken by social circulation, by her relation to competing systems of wealth and propriety. Her figural potential, her capacity to

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<sup>17</sup> Derrida’s assessment of the structure of dead metaphor, while less inclined to uphold a firm distinction between dead and animate figures, seeks to demonstrate that it is not possible to decide between literal and figural language in philosophy by recourse to a thematic of capital circulation, or what he describes as a double-gestured linguistic “*usure*” intrinsic to metaphor: “erasure by rubbing, exhaustion, crumbling away, certainly; but also the supplementary product of a capital, the exchange which far from losing the original investment would fructify its initial wealth...additional interest, linguistic surplus value” (210). Thus, likening the figure to a coin, Derrida is able to argue both that “the figure becomes a metaphor when philosophical language puts it into circulation,” and that the identifiable metaphor, the “‘original figure’...has been worn away, effaced, polished in the circulation of the philosophical concept” (211). The dead metaphor, then, would be one for which “additional interest” fails to accrue.

<sup>18</sup> In the novel’s opening paragraph, Selden “could never see her without a faint movement of interest; it was characteristic of her that she always roused speculation” (3). But by the time of their strained encounter in the Riviera, Selden notes that “a subtle change had passed over the quality of her beauty. Then it had a transparency through which the fluctuations of the spirit were sometimes tragically visible: now its impenetrable surface suggested a process of crystallization...it seemed like that moment of pause and arrest when the warm fluidity of youth is chilled into its final shape” (192). Like the fossilized metaphor, Lily’s “crystallized” face signifies, for Selden, a fixing of meaning which signals an end to figural suggestion.

make art through suggestion and placement is curtailed by her excessive circulation. As she explains to Lawrence Selden “I’ve been around too long—people are getting tired of me” (9).<sup>19</sup>

Percy Gryce may be constituted through the structure of suffocation, but it is Selden, Lily’s suitor of limited means, whose speech is suffused with metaphors of air and breath. Upon finding, after an extended separation, that he is to encounter Miss Bart once again, Selden’s logical thinking deteriorates into a metaphorical mess:

It was not, alas, a clean rush of waves they had to win through, but a clogging morass of old associations and habits, and for the moment its vapours were in his throat. But he would see clearer, breathe freer in her presence: she was at once the dead weight at his breast and the spar which should float them to safety. He smiled at the whirl of metaphor with which he was trying to build up a defense. (159)

The “whirl of metaphor” is a metaphor of metaphor: Selden tries to combat the “dead weight”—the dead metaphor that is Lily—with a hyperproduction of images of air, water, and suffocation. And under Selden’s tutelage, Lily, too, learns to associate air and aesthetics. In the ironically pastoral moment in which Lily awaits Selden’s company, her delight in the Autumn scene is explained as an aesthetic pleasure which allows her to breathe deeply:

Lily had no real intimacy with nature, but she had a passion for the appropriate and could be keenly sensitive to a scene which was the fitting background of her own sensations. The landscape outspread below her seemed an enlargement of her present mood, and she found something of herself in its calmness, its breadth, its long free

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<sup>19</sup> Wayne Booth identifies novelty as the as determinant of metaphoric life-cycle: “New metaphors are good; the newer the better; old ones are clichés, if they are not so old that they are actually dead, in which case they don’t matter unless we happen to remember the etymology” (54).

reaches... There were in her at the moment two beings, one drawing deep breaths of freedom and exhilaration, the other gasping for air in a little black prisonhouse of fears. But gradually the captive's gasps grew fainter, or the other paid less heed to them: the horizon expanded, the air grew stronger, the free spirit quavered for flight. (64)

"Breadth," as a highly aestheticized experience of nature, is precisely what gives Lily the ability to draw breath, to medicate the asthmatic self with something which tentatively approximates love.

Lily is but briefly allowed to linger in this expansive horizon before Selden re-introduces capital to the metaphoric mix, making air stand in for money rather than aestheticized sentiment: "You might as well say that the only way not to think about air is to have enough to breathe. That is true enough in a sense; but your lungs are thinking about air even if you're not. And so it is with rich people—they may not be thinking about money, but they're breathing it all the while; take them into another element and see how they squirm and gasp!" (69). What starts out as a straightforward analogy—air is to the lungs as money is to the wealthy —becomes, by the end of the exposition, oddly muddled: the rich no longer think about money *like* air, they breathe money itself. Selden's rather uncanny appropriation of Lily's interiorized breath metaphor, then, is not just a borrowing, but a dismantling of the terms of circulatory analogy. His hybridized breath image effects, in the course of his exegesis, an erasure of the comparison term, narrowing the gap between the two terms of the analogy. This demonstration of figural narrowing, in that it corresponds to both the capitalizing of Lily's aesthetic air, and a displacement of "deep breaths" by "gasps," works to hedge the narrative closer to a fatally closed system: the asthmagenic miasma of corporate wealth is here represented catachrestically, through a

mixed and messy metaphor which aggressively erases the gap between the terms of comparison, leaving little space for an aesthetics uncorrupted by capital.

The two choices facing Lily Bart are both rendered as corporate and circulatory; to marry a Gryce or a Rosedale, to occupy a house of mirth—which as Michaels points out, is a nickname for a firm traded openly on the New York Stock Exchange (225)—or, to follow the “signposts” to Selden’s “republic of the spirit” (*House* 68). It is Lily herself who applies the image of corporate circulation (presciently insisting on the substitution of corporation for nation) to Selden’s republic: “why do you call your republic a republic? It is a close corporation, and you create arbitrary objections to keep other people out” (71). The close corporation—“a corporation whose shares are not publicly traded” (Michaels 226)—is thus the circulatory opposite of the house of mirth in that it prohibits the free movement of its holdings. Lily’s two choices, then, are distinct as corporate metaphors primarily in the amount of movement they permit, and her predicament is thus defined quite early in the novel as an impossible decision about which kind of circulatory system—open or closed—she is to dwell within.<sup>20</sup>

Lily asthmatically experiences just how close is Selden’s corporation when she contemplates the material dimensions of a life lived in the Republic of the spirit—or, in more concrete terms, Gerty Farish’s apartment—which is presented to her as the sort of domestic environment she should expect as the wife of a man like Lawrence Selden. What Lily (however dubiously) terms the “poverty” of Gerty’s domesticity is likened at the novel’s outset to the problem of insufficient air: “No, she was not made

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<sup>20</sup> Charles Rosenberg points to an interesting relationship between the language of capital and miasma in 19<sup>th</sup> century New York City: “Dust and rubbish were to be gathered into a pile in the middle of the gutter from which place they were to be collected by the municipality. An item of Tammany graft or inefficiency, this collection was usually neglected; and appropriately, the decomposing mass of filth which adorned the middle of the streets was called ‘corporation pie’ (New Yorkers, it should be noted, ordinarily referred to their municipal government as the Corporation)” (17).

for mean and shabby surroundings, for the squalid compromises of poverty. Her whole being dilated in the atmosphere of luxury; it was the background she required, the only climate she could breath in” (25). The early Lily, then, after cycling through a series of metaphors—dilation, formal composition, and finally respiration—reacts asthmatically to Gerty’s “hideous wallpaper.” Luxury, itself, is both the context and the content of her required air, and the “squalid” spaces represented by Gerty’s apartment repeat the two-step pathogenesis of sick building syndrome, first producing aesthetic toxins with poor taste and diminished resources, then shutting them up in “cramped flats.” It is hard not to hear a condensed realist novel lurking within this cramped space, a narrative of grim if plucky feminine financial struggle in the vein of *Sister Carrie* or—in this sense, we can understand Lily as rejecting not just Gerty’s domestic milieu, but her fictional one as well: in refusing Gerty’s domesticity, Lily also refuses to be the heroine of a “mean and shabby” realist novel.

Nor is Lily able to transform herself into a sentimental heroine. She flirts, however, with the possibility. Late in the novel, a broken Lily encounters Nettie Struther, a working-class young women who previously “had lung trouble” (312). Although Lily initially has trouble recalling Nettie’s face, she then remembers: “The episode of Nettie Crane’s timely rescue from disease had been one of the most satisfying incidents of her connection with Gerty’s charitable work. She had furnished the girl with the means to go to a sanatorium in the mountains” (312) and accepts an invitation to visit her “extraordinarily small and almost miraculously clean” apartment (313). According to one critic, “the scene in Nettie Struthers’s kitchen is... a change...in genre. Wharton openly shifts her novel out of a realist space and into a sentimental space” (Hoeller 117).

Nettie, it seems, was prey to the particular mixture of both miasmatic and sentimental dangers to which Wharton will later refer in “Roman Fever”: “You see I

wasn't only *sick* that time you sent me off—I was dreadfully unhappy too. I'd known a gentleman where I was employed...it pretty near killed me when he went away" (315). Unlike Lily, however, Nettie seems able to resist the collapse of metaphor to which Lily is subject; where Lily conflates the distinction between the metaphorical and literal meaning of "sick," Nettie insists that Lily see heartbreak as epistemologically distinct from infection—"You see I wasn't only *sick*." Nettie Crane thus represents the link between the sentimental and the miasmatic. She allows Lily to indulge her sentimental desire by sending her to a sanatorium, a treatment based on the assumption that fresh air would help treat tubercular lungs.<sup>21</sup> The treatment is successful on two fronts: the sanatorium succeeds in restoring Nettie's health, while sentiment succeeds in temporarily restoring meaning for Lily—she is connected to what she imagines to be the real world outside of society, outside of the text. The failure of the interlude with Nettie to provide Lily with any but a temporary palliative suggests that neither the sentimental form, nor the atmospheric model of medicine it would seem to reach for can simply be reconstituted. Nettie represents an ideal collaboration between aesthetic and medical practice, a solution which is unavailable to Lily Bart. In a peculiar reversal of fortune, then, Nettie, first saved from lung disease herself, now attempts, however futilely, to teach Lily how to keep her metaphors from suffocating her.

## VI.

As the story of Lily Bart is unambiguous about the particular susceptibility of women to illness in a capitalist system where vitality is linked to interest and circulation,

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<sup>21</sup> "The idea that fresh air and rest could cure tuberculosis led many physicians to advise their patients to move out to the country...this assumption was also the basis of the excellent work of Dr. Edward Trudeau, who founded a tuberculosis sanatorium at Saranac Lake, New York, in 1876. His success eventually led to the founding of hundreds of similar institutions over the next forty years and stimulated an entire fresh air movement" (Duffy 198).

we can begin to imagine how contemporary environmental illnesses, and most notably sick building syndrome, inherit the realist logic of gender and disease. And this is an urgent concern: for as Radetsky notes, some eighty percent of those diagnosed as environmentally ill are women (15).

Indeed, popular prophet of hysteria, and according to some accounts,<sup>22</sup> at one point Wharton's own doctor, S. Weir Mitchell, speaks to the gendered link between collapsed analogism and asthmatic capital in his 1888 text, *Doctor and Patient*. His terms, furthermore, help to underscore the extent to which Selden's refusal to allow Lily to breathe deeply is symptomatic of a broader cultural concern about the gendered relationship between place and pathology. Mitchell writes,

When a loving relative undertakes to nurse one dear to herself through a protracted illness, she subjects herself to just such conditions of peril as fall upon a man staggering under financial adversity. The analogy to which I refer is curiously complete...In both there is the combination of anxiety with physical and mental overwork...in women overtaxing the emotional centers is apt to result in the development of some form of breakdown...your good wife or mother thinks that when she has sickness at home she should not be seen out of doors. (123)

Mitchell's formulation does more than mimic the narrative of Lily Bart's genesis-in-illness (although it is worth noting that Lily's youth is primarily recounted as a training in ruin and breakdown)<sup>23</sup>. For like the dead metaphor, "the curiously complete" analogy, in so far

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<sup>22</sup> Hermione Lee's recent biography of Edith Wharton has called this longstanding claim into question, arguing that the evidence that Wharton was treated by Mitchell is at best "inconclusive" (79).

<sup>23</sup> "What is the matter, Hudson? Are you ill?" said Mrs. Bart severely... "Are you ill?" she repeated. "Ill?—No, I'm ruined," he said" (32).

Interestingly, Wharton later suggests that Lily's over developed relationship to specularly (and thus implicitly her conflation of interior and exterior states) is to some degree a function of being denied the chance to fully participate in the curious analogy—to 'nurse one dear to herself': "If [Lily] could have performed any little services for him... the filial instinct might have stirred in her; but her pity, finding no active expression, remained in a state of spectatorship... It was a relief to Lily when her father died" (33).

as its terms of comparison are too close to admit of adequate difference, is also in danger of rhetorical collapse. In that Mitchell imagines ministrations the province of women, and financial ruin of men, the neat symmetry of a sexual division of labor is what yields this too perfect analogy.

There is a great deal more to be said (and no doubt more than I can say here) about how contemporary sick office buildings are erected upon analogies of sexual difference.<sup>24</sup> But I nonetheless want to take this opportunity to insist upon the intimacy between corporatized contagion and gender to counter Walter Benn Michaels' influential argument that capital should rightfully supplant gender as the primary pathogen of embodied psycho-social malaise. In *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism*, Michaels employs Mitchell to discredit the argument that hysteria is properly a disease of femininity, proposing instead that it be reimagined as a disease of capital: "It is essential to note that Mitchell never really thought of hysteria as an exclusively feminine disease...perhaps we should regard hysteria as a disease not of women or even of doctors, but of the middle-class market to which doctors and women, manufacturers and railway officials all belonged" (25). While Michaels is correct in that social malady is linked to production, he unnecessarily declares that the relationship between sexual difference and capital is one of mutual exclusivity. It is quite the opposite. As Wharton's use of malarial metaphor illustrates, the mutual dependencies between the language of work and the pathologies of difference are precisely what must be treated. Circulatory collapse needs to be read as the modern aesthetic negotiation of the sickly relationship between gendered bodies and working spaces, and as such, the literary precursor to contemporary representations of environmental illness.

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<sup>24</sup> Michelle Murphy's 2006 study, *Sick Building Syndrome and the Problem of Uncertainty*, articulates this relationship brilliantly.

### Chapter 3

#### **Bad Air or Bad Heir?: Edith Wharton and the Genealogy of Miasma**

Edith Wharton has never rested comfortably within the category of realism, and, despite recent critical studies which point to elements of sentimentalism in her fiction, Wharton seems poorly contained by that category, as well. Her work may have had an impact on the American novelists of the 20's and 30's, but it doesn't seem to align well at all with our understanding of modernism. She is consistent neither in her feminist sentiments nor in her conservative ones. But then Wharton exceptionalism is as old as Wharton criticism. And Wharton critics continue to find an impressive number of ways to argue that "the only accurate classification of Wharton is that she evaded classification" (Somers 155). Two recent and well-received titles tell versions of the story: *Apart from Modernism: Edith Wharton, Politics and Fiction before World War I* (2005) and *Edith Wharton's Dialogue with Realism and Sentimental Fiction* (2000). This is not a story that requires another retelling. So rather than contributing to the literature of Wharton exceptionalism by mapping the ways in which she looks to be not quite a realist, sentimental, or modernist writer, I'd like to propose a different technique. I approach Wharton not as an imperfect realist, a difficult feminist, or a reluctant modernist, but as a writer who articulates the difficult relationship between aesthetic and political structures through a language of miasma and sanitation.

In this chapter, I use the perspective of the domestic science movement to discuss two of Wharton's minor novels which, published in 1903 and 1927, bookend her career as a novelist and are read (or in this case, scarcely read), respectively, as among her most sentimental and her most modernist. Taken together, these two novels

demonstrate a curious consistency in Wharton's preoccupations—as well as her progressive disillusionment—with the proto-feminist possibility of asserting a felicitous influence on the subject through the shaping of the environment. Both of these novels are, in somewhat different senses, bad air novels, as both are organized around maternal attempts to manage risky environments. In *Sanctuary*, young widow Kate Orme attempts to train her “tainted” son by shaping his environment. As she saves her son from his bad genes, Kate also saves herself, finding, in the social-scientific principles of sanitary science, a refuge from “the flagellation of her thoughts” (56): *Sanctuary* proposes environmental management as an alternative to maternal self-beratement. But in *Twilight Sleep*, despite a vigilant attention to the details of air circulation, hygienics, and interior design, there is no longer any escape from punishing environments. For as she describes the failed attempts of a New York socialite Pauline Manford to manage her family's lives by managing their environments, Wharton's satiric narrative voice itself becomes berating. The science of controllable environment is, in this late novel, but one of a litany of failed technologies of the subject: *Twilight Sleep* skewers both models of affecting the subject from the inside (the psychoanalytic and the spiritualist) and the model of influencing the subject from the outside (the hygienic and the decorative). If *Sanctuary* represents hope for the miasmic possibility of shaping the person through influencing the environment, *Twilight Sleep* represents the collapse of this hope.

## I. The Science of Controllable Environments: *Sanctuary* and Interior Architecture

In order to illustrate the absurdity of distinguishing between constitutional and traumatic sources of neurosis, Sigmund Freud analogizes the origin of neuroses to the conception of children. He asks:

Are neuroses exogenous or endogenous illnesses? Are they the inevitable result of a particular constitution or the product of certain detrimental (traumatic) experiences in life?...This dilemma seems to me no more sensible on the whole than another I might put to you: does a baby come about through being begotten by its father or conceived by its mother? (431)

Freud claims that trying to distinguish between external and internal sources of illness is as absurd as trying to distinguish between maternally begotten and paternally begotten children; Wharton's early fiction implies that the two inquiries have rather more in common than absurdity.

For insensible though Freud may believe his questions to be, they are questions which Kate Orme, the character at the center of Wharton's 1903 novella *Sanctuary*, insists she can answer. *Sanctuary* insists not only on the possibility of separating the constitutional from the experiential, but also on the very distinction that Freud uses to illustrate the rhetorical quality of his original question: the narrative of *Sanctuary* follows from Kate's conviction that she can counteract the pathological tendencies of her child's flawed genetic inheritance, an inheritance which is exclusively patrilineal. As the mother, Kate seems to make no genetic contribution whatever: she believes that her role in her child's development will be purely one of environmental influence

and correction.<sup>25</sup> *Sanctuary* is a novella about an over-invested, high-stakes experiment: the language and the character both approach the project with a measure of desire—and a measure of ecstasy.

In the recent study *Edith Wharton's Dialogue with Realism and Sentimental Fiction*, Hildegard Hoeller, citing the critical preference for realism over sentimentalism, suggests that Wharton's minor works are also her more sentimental works: "Critics...following their own taste for literary realism and their distaste for sentimental fiction...have concentrated on Wharton's mastery of the former tradition and have glanced only, and with considerable embarrassment, at her 'lapse' into the latter" (ix).

Relying on a familiar distinction between the social constructedness of the realist character and the interior self-production of the sentimental character, Hoeller argues that "While realist characters are constructed as products of their environment, sentimental characters are products of their inner feelings" (Hoeller 25). One of the problems with this distinction, well-entrenched though it may be,<sup>26</sup> is that it forecloses any consideration of a literary relationship to environmental influence which is not necessarily aligned with a particular aesthetic practice. In the case of Wharton, opposing sentimental literature to realism ignores the role of environmental influence on the literary characters that populate what Hoeller considers her sentimental novels. It also subsumes one of the central problems Wharton's early novels grapple with: is the subject a product of genetic inheritance or environmental influence?

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<sup>25</sup> The course of the novella, and indeed, its dramatic tension, depend upon Kate's ability to successfully segregate the maternal and the cultural from the paternal and the natural. One of the surprising features of Wharton's rendition of the contest between nature and culture is that she inverts the gendering of the terms analyzed in, for example Sherry Ortner's influential article "If Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?": rather than identifying the female and maternal with nature, and the male and paternal with culture, this novella begins from the opposite assumption.

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs* and Shirley Samuels, *The Culture of Sentiment*.

Perhaps Hoeller's insistence on the hostility of sentimental literature to the influence of environment has something to do with why *Sanctuary* is entirely (and surprisingly, given her thematic interests) absent from her study. For this early work, a story of a mother's attempt to prevent her son from repeating the crimes of his father, is as rich in the sentimental themes Holler discusses (maternity, family, sacrifice) as any in Wharton's oeuvre—indeed, *Sanctuary* is—with one notable exception—derided for its sentimentalism by the few critics who discuss it.

But then, *Sanctuary* is a novel most Wharton critics treat with distaste, if at all. In her influential study of Wharton, *A Feast of Words*, Cynthia Griffin Wolff does not discuss *Sanctuary* in the body of her critical study of Wharton, but instead consigns the novel to a footnote. A selective critical amnesia, she explains, is the only way to manage *Sanctuary*:

Not to mince words, *Sanctuary* is a really bad little novel. Edith Wharton didn't like it—not even while she was writing it (it came to be known as 'sank' around The Mount during its composition.) It was not a great commercial failure and did not noticeably impair her reputation, but it was forgotten immediately by its author, and it will mercifully be forgotten here. (422)

The “bad little novel,” in a sullied recapitulation of its title metaphor, becomes a dumping ground for the criminality dwelling in the midst of Wharton's oeuvre—it becomes the illicitly sentimental counterpart, the literary thug, of the more upstanding novel which immediately followed it, *The House of Mirth*. Wolff attempts to manage the potential contagion of *Sanctuary* (fortunately, it did not “impair” Wharton's reputation) by segregating it in a footnote, and Elizabeth Ammons seems particularly vexed by *Sanctuary*'s proximity to *The House of Mirth*: “With *The House of Mirth*, Edith Wharton finally enjoyed her first complete success: a politically sophisticated,

commercially popular novel. Two years before *The House of Mirth*, however, Wharton published *Sanctuary*. It is not a good book” (20).

In both Wolff’s and Ammons’ accounts, the novel, tainted by its mediocrity, is “mercifully” provided with the very thing it names—sanctuary. The literary text is subject to a medico-juridical logic, as the critic insists that her segregationist punishment—oblivion, permanent quarantine—is in fact tempered with mercy. It is as if literary history both disavows and reproduces {the sanitarian logic of quarantine}: the text is removed from popular circulation because of its alleged aesthetic malignancy, where, moldering in the fetid air of its sequestration, its grow ever more malarial, ever more toxic.<sup>27</sup>

To make matters worse, the novel is not, according to Wolff and Ammons, just physically unwell, but also suffers from a form of dementia: “This is” writes Ammons, “feminine self-sacrifice gone berserk” (21). Angela Salas’s recent rehabilitative reading (one of only two articles of the past 30 years to substantially address *Sanctuary*)<sup>28</sup> steps in to defend the book’s sanity by arguing that the book is not psychotic but merely mimetic of an unwell culture: “*Sanctuary* . . . compellingly reveals the pressure placed on women in the nineteenth century to subordinate their lives and dreams to the social order” (131). Casting her essay as an attempt to protect the text unjustly chastised for being a “bad little novella” from further critical spankings, Salas argues that

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<sup>27</sup> Appropriately, quarantine is precisely what the central character, Kate Orme, prescribes for her damaged offspring: “her small means, and the care of the boy’s education served as a pretext for secluding herself in a socially remote suburb” (76).

<sup>28</sup> *Twilight Sleep* does not fare much better—there are a total of four articles specific to the novel, and most try to place it in the context of the concerns and aesthetics of modernism; see Jennifer Haystock “Marriage and Modernism in Edith Wharton’s *Twilight Sleep*” and Dale M. Bauer, *Edith Wharton’s Brave New Politics*. As Jean C. Griffith writes her in 2006 article “‘Lita is-Jazz’: The Harlem Renaissance, Cabaret Culture, and Racial Amalgamation in Edith Wharton’s *Twilight Sleep*,” “*Twilight Sleep* has consistently suffered from a lack of critical scrutiny” (74),

Too many Wharton scholars and their readers share an entrenched belief that *Sanctuary* (1903) is a bad little novella. Superficially quite different from much of Wharton's other fiction, this text has been systematically derided, ignored, and reduced to the status of footnote. [Despite being] A perfectly interesting and even compelling novella.  
(121)

But Salas never quite defends her initial accusation of critical injustice. Her rather tepid praise seems to be at least as concerned with the book's moral values as with its aesthetics values:

My paper will suggest an alternative way of reading of *Sanctuary*, a way which will permit Wharton aficionados to accept *Sanctuary* as a perfectly respectable work, even if not of the same artistic power as Wharton's later work. My premise is that the assumptions about motherhood operative in *Sanctuary* were perfectly operable contemporary assumptions at the time of the novel's composition.  
(121)

Sounding more like a Wharton character than a Wharton critic, Salas seems to defend the book's right to enter certain social spaces. What's more, in claiming that *Sanctuary* is a "respectable" rather than a "bad" book because it proceeds from "perfectly operable assumptions" Salas implies the book is, in the end, defensible because it is realistic: it has a mimetic rather than a sentimental relationship to culture. So even if *Sanctuary* lacks "artistic power" its limited artistry deserves respect because it is safely within the bounds of realism. Salas's language continues the habit of treating *Sanctuary* as a medical problem by suggesting that the novel's sentimental transgressions have a surgical solution: the novel may be ill, but at least it suffers from an "operable" condition. Salas concludes her essay with the modest claim that she is

“not convinced that the novella is unrealistic” (131). Both the book and its critic seem to aspire to nothing more than accurate description and proper placement among the respectable class of books.

It seems, then, that the limited critical literature on *Sanctuary*, entangled in a medicalized relation to aesthetics, pronounces *Sanctuary* as either pathological in its sentimentality—“In *Sanctuary*, Wharton, for whatever reason... attempts a sentimental fiction about feminine self-sacrifice and fails miserably” (Ammons 22)—or, in the rehabilitative reading, as realism misdiagnosed. Readings of this novella, then, tend to place it within three grids: good/bad, realistic/sentimental, nature/nurture. I am arguing that none of these works very well. The novel’s relationship to both aesthetics and social theory owe more to the models of sanitary science than to genre models, hence it is better understood not as a realist or sentimental novel, nor as simply a bad novel. Rather than debate whether the novel has literary merit either because or in spite of its relationship to the conventions of realism, I’d like to shift the terms of the discussion. I’d like to read *Sanctuary*, then, as having a certain sanitary merit, as being not so much a bad novel as a bad air novel.

For Wharton proves to be legible less as a sentimentalist than as an environmentalist: *Sanctuary* tells a story of a mother who believes that she can form her son’s character by managing his surroundings. The mother in question, Kate Orme, approaches parenting from a revised position described, in *Daisy Miller*, as “a sanitary point of view.” Kate represents an Americanized logic of the ideologically laden Roman fever which vanquished James’s title character: her last name is an anagram of Rome, suggesting the scrambled domestication of malarial logic. Sanitary science, itself something of a scrambled and domesticated form of miasmatic theory, provides Wharton with a particularly American model of disinterested maternal

intimacy: it allows her to articulate the possibility of human contact and desire through the philanthropic language of environmental reform.

While I am not suggesting that Wharton quite adopts the thinking of the sanitary scientists, the tensions in her narrative come into relief when put into conversation with that thinking. In particular, I would point to the work of Ellen Richards, chemist and influential founder of the Home Economics movement, who, in 1910 published the treatise and handbook *Euthenics*, in which she advocates for the improvement of “the race” through the improvement of the environment. Richards subtitles her book “The Science of Controllable Environment,” a description equally applicable to the experiment undertaken by the protagonist of *Sanctuary*. Richards’ book opens with a series of axioms distinguishing eugenics from euthenics:

Eugenics deals with race improvement through heredity.

Euthenics deals with race improvement through environment.

Eugenics is hygiene for future generations.

Euthenics is hygiene for the present generation.

Eugenics must await careful investigation.

Euthenics has immediate opportunity.

Euthenics precedes eugenics, developing better men now, and thus inevitably creating a better race of men in the future. (xviii)

Richards tweaks the more familiar nature/nurture formula in order to privilege both presentist and sanitary concerns: “Human vitality depends upon two primary conditions—heredity and hygiene—or conditions preceding birth and conditions during life” (*Euthenics* vii). Upon introducing the language of heredity, however, Richards quickly dismisses it, instead privileging hygiene. And in describing the role

of domestic environment, she explicitly positions eugenics as a counter-theory to Darwinian natural selection<sup>29</sup>:

Shall man yield himself to the tendencies of natural selection and be modified out of existence by the pressure of his environment, or shall he turn upon himself some of the knowledge of Nature's forces he has gained and by "conscious evolution" begin an adaptation of the environment to the organism? For we no longer hold with Robert Owen and the socialists that man is necessarily controlled and moulded by his surroundings, that he is absolutely subject to the laws of animal evolution. (*Cost of Shelter* 6)

Like Richards in both thinking and in affect, an ecstatic Kate specifically invokes a Darwinian logic in order to suggest that she can, ultimately, conquer it: “If she had taught him to set an exaggerated value on ideal rewards, was that not but a shifting of the danger-point upon which her fears had always hung? She trembled sometimes to think how little love and a lifelong vigilance had availed in the deflecting of inherited tendencies” (80). Trembling with the scope of her insight, Kate understands “inherited tendencies” as a test of faith: nature poses a direct challenge to the “vigilance” of the invested—perhaps over-invested—mother. For Richards, and for Kate Orme, as well, the particular contribution women make to the health of the species comes not in the form of sexual selection, but rather, in the form of domestic environmental mediation.

Wharton was, as I argued in the previous chapter, particularly attentive to domestic environment. Her first published book, *The Decoration of Houses*, was not a

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<sup>29</sup> Wharton has, for better or for worse, recently received the attention of literary critics who identify themselves as Darwinian. See *Edith Wharton's 'Evolutionary Conception'* by Paul Ohler. His argument seems ill-suited, however, to *Sanctuary*.

work of fiction, but rather, of interior design, or what she called “interior architecture.”

As she explains it:

In the average house the architect’s task seems virtually confined to the elevations and the floor-plan...when this work is done, the upholsterer is called in to ‘decorate’ and furnish the rooms. As a result of this division of labor, house-decoration has ceased to be a branch of architecture. ...The confusion resulting from these unscientific methods has reflected itself in the lay mind...The attempt to remedy this deficiency in some slight degree has made it necessary to dwell at length upon the strictly architectural principles which controlled the work of old decorators. (xxi)

*Sanctuary* can be read as an attempt to translate both these “strictly architectural principles” and the excitement with which they are articulated into a philosophy of child-rearing. In *The Decoration of Houses*, Wharton uses a natal metaphor to describe the creation of a building: “Only a return to architectural principles can raise the decoration of houses to the level of the past. Vasari said of the Farnesina palace that it was not built, but really born—non murato ma veramente nato” (198). *Sanctuary* reverses this logic, by using architectural language models to narrate the development of a man, who, in this case, is born in one form but built into another. Like the aestheticized forms of miasma pervasive in James and Hawthorne, the design championed in *The Decoration of Houses* is Italianate, and the narrative is one of the American corruption of Italian design. In a different sense, then, *Sanctuary* is also a book of interior architecture: Kate Orme tries to construct her son’s inner life.

Devastated by the discovery that Denis, her fiancée, had conspired to deny his brother’s illegitimate child his rightful inheritance (a denial which results in the mother’s suicide) Kate determines that he must have some sort of irrevocable moral

flaw. She imagines her (at this point, still hypothetical) maternity as a project both architectural and reparative:

Denis would marry some one else...He would marry a girl who trusted him and leaned on him...And with this deception between them, their child would be born: born to an inheritance of secret weakness, a vice of moral fibre, as it might be born with some hideous moral taint which would destroy it before the cause could be detected. Well, and what of it? Was she to hold herself responsible? Were not thousands of children born with some unsuspected taint? Ah, but what if here was one that she could save? What if she...should reconstruct from its ruins this vision of protecting maternity—if her love for her lover should be, not lost, but transformed, enlarged, into this passion of charity for his race? If she might expiate and redeem his fault by becoming a refuge from its consequences? (66)

Kate aims to rebuild, to tear down the tainted “ruins” and resurrect in its place a “refuge” that will be built in her own image rather than in the image of her corrupt husband. Her vision of “protecting maternity” takes on a particular philanthropic and architectural form; Kate models her maternity on the sanitary settlement house, envisioning a style of motherhood which, rather being governed by the private logic of sentiment, is instead organized by an ecstatic form of social consciousness—the “passion of charity.” She applies the logic of social and sanitary reform on a local scale, devoting her life to the sanitation of her son’s compromised moral environment, and thus erecting a monument to the “thousands of children who could not be saved” in the form of the one who can.

The settlement house movement “had an upper-middle class character that embodied not only progressive sentiments of female emancipation—but also a smug

sense of superiority...the settlement house was an elite, selective outpost...By ‘settling’ among the less fortunate, educated women could transmit middle-class values and practices to the urban poor and newly-arrived immigrants” (Sivulka 6). Wharton’s elite architectural mission, as articulated in *The Decoration of Houses*, shares something of the settlement house movement’s trickle-down philosophy.<sup>30</sup> Wharton writes: “If it be granted that a reform in house-decoration, if not necessary, is at least desirable, it must be admitted that such reform can originate only with those whose means permit of any experiments which their taste may suggest. When the rich man demands good architecture his neighbors will get it too” (Decoration xxi). At best a reluctant reformer, Wharton nonetheless takes up the reformist mantle, as does her character Kate. For in *Sanctuary*, it is in this idiom of municipal housekeeping that Kate explains her discovery of her fiancée’s double dealing:

She had begun to perceive that the fair surface of life was honeycombed by a vast system of moral sewage. Every respectable household had its special arrangements for the private disposal of family scandals; it was only among the reckless and improvident that such hygienic precautions were neglected. Who was she to pass judgment on the merits of such a system? The social health must be preserved. (60)

While the skeptical tone of this description makes it clear that the hygienic model is ethically problematic, Kate’s transformation of this logic into an impassioned experiment in child-rearing, one shot through with the language of both belief and desire, indicates that Wharton nonetheless sees a system organized by environmental

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<sup>30</sup> As a recent Wharton biographer notes “It is hard to take *The Decoration of Houses* quite seriously now. It has such high-handed prejudices...it is so sure of being right...But the book is not just about décor; it is about how to live your life” (Hermione Lee 135).

logics as potentially transformative. Like the settlement house movement, the novel repeatedly insists on the parallel between physical and psychical architecture. In a move which makes the prominence of the architectural metaphor difficult to ignore, Kate “took the decisive step of transplanting [her son] to the Beaux Arts” (77)—to training as a professional architect.

Kate’s child-rearing experiment is offered as an alternative to punishing thoughts: she avoids self-beratement by turning to environmental architecture. This turn is articulated as a respite from thinking: immediately before the revelation that she can repair the ravages of her husband’s misdealings, Kate describes her psychic space as one of self-abuse: “it seemed to her that the flagellation of her thoughts must have left visible traces” (56). Architectural imagery recurs throughout the novella in the context of maimed and bloodied appendages—the threat of injury and violence seems always to accompany the ravages of bad design. After discovering her fiancée’s dishonesty:

For here, at last, life lay before her as it was: not brave, garlanded and victorious, but naked, grovelling and diseased, dragging its maimed limbs through the mud, yet lifting piteous hands to the stars. Love itself, once throned on the alter of dreams, how it stole to her now, storm-beaten and scarred, pleading for the shelter of her breast! (63)

Transforming her body into a building, Kate imagines that the appropriate treatment for “diseased...maimed limbs” is residence in the medicinal “shelter of her breast.” The logic of her metaphors, here, is consistent with Ellen Richards’ soft architecture—her account of the importance of the home environment—as both invoke the broken limb to express the need for appropriate shelter: “The environment is, more largely than we think, the house and the manner of life it forces upon us...If unsuited to this need, it irritates and deforms character, as a plaster cast compresses a limb encased in

it” (Richards *The Cost of Shelter* 7). Kate seems to take this advice rather to heart: from broken limbs to bleeding fingers, her own body seems to be at stake. Both Kate’s relationship to her body and to her son are forged through injurious environments. For whenever her vision falters, she renovates both the architectural metaphor and the design itself:

Then she had been enclosed in the narrow limits of her maternal interests; now the barriers of her self were broken down...she saw that her love for her boy had come to be merely a kind of extended egotism. Love had narrowed instead of widening her, had rebuilt between herself and life the very walls which, years and years before, she had laid low with bleeding fingers. (109)

Kate wrests some measure of control out of the punishing “walls,” transforming self-flagellation into a form of ecstatic experience: “Before this strange extension of her love all the old limitations seemed to fall. Something had cleft to the surface of self, and there welled up the mysterious primal influences, the sacrificial instincts of her sex, a passion of spiritual motherhood that made her long to fling herself between the unborn child and its fate” (67). In keeping with the “spiritual” and “primal” nature of Kate’s version of motherhood—a kind of compensatory culturalism—the troublesome father is magically, silently disposed of in the ellipsis between Parts One and Two. The reader, spared any details, is informed only parenthetically that “Dick was naturally expansive in his close intimacy with his mother—an intimacy fostered by his father’s early death—”(73). Kate is left free—if, it seems, just barely intact—to enact her desire and her frustrated architectural ambitions, through her son.

But as Dick’s architectural prowess threatens to prove less than stunning, however, so, too, does his mother’s: both have built monuments that seem to lack a certain structural (not to say moral) integrity: “Long familiarity with the technicalities

of her son's profession made it easy for her to translate the stenographic jargon of the office...And when the door closed on the architect she was left face to face with the fact that her son, unknown to anyone but herself, was using Darrow's drawings to complete his work" (156). Wharton, is quite explicit, then, in remarking upon Kate's technical knowledge of architecture: architecture may be a "jargon," but it is a jargon comprehensible to Kate. In an oddly literal transmutation, Kate's failure to soundly create her son's moral structure is revealed by her son's theft of another architect's design. In moments of doubt, Kate repeatedly refers to her parenting in architectural terms: "Her faith and hope had been marsh-lights luring her to the wilderness, her love a vain edifice reared on shifting ground" (167). The narrative counters bad design with better design—for design, itself, Wharton still has hope.

And Kate's architectural vision is, at the novella's conclusion, treated to a limited form of vindication. After a Faustian struggle with temptation, Dick chooses to retreat to the rude shelter of his mother's breast rather than plagiarize the grand blueprints left behind by his dead friend. Dick may be a rickety monument, but his mother's body proves to be somewhat more reliable, and even provided structural reinforcements:

'You've come—you've come—he said, stretching his hands to her; and all at once she had him in her breast as a shelter.

'You wanted me?' she whispered as she held him.

He looked up at her, tired, breathless, with the white radiance of the runner near the goal. 'I had you, dear!' he said smiling strangely on her; and her heart gave a great leap of understanding. (180)

In this "strangely" athletic moment of "breathless" communions and "great leaps," the descriptive language seems to reach for some form of religious experience that the

narrative does not quite offer. *Sanctuary* provides Kate with a fantasy of reparative child-rearing as a corrective to the “flagellation of her thoughts.”

If Kate does not quite become her son’s atmosphere, she does become a perfect reader of it: “The circumstances of her past had made of her a moral barometer responding to the faintest fluctuations of atmosphere, and years of anxious meditations had familiarized her with the form which her son’s temptations were likely to take” (122).<sup>31</sup> Kate’s uncanny maternal meteorology carries another sort of tantalizing risk: her barometrical ability is linked to the threat of illicit sexual practice when her “nearness” is articulated in a language which flirts with incest. The maternal love which aspires to fully control the atmosphere ends up articulating itself in romantic terms. Kate Orme’s experiment is, after all, based on an attempted substitution of her son for the “lover”: What if...her love for her lover should be not lost, but transformed, enlarged, into this passion of charity for his race? If she might expiate and redeem his fault by becoming a refuge from its consequences? Before this strange extension of her love all the old limitations seemed to fall” (66). The “strange extension” of her love, which sounds at once like non-normative desire and, at the same time, like experimental building design, might be understood as an imperfect sublimation, as Kate “never knew afterwards how she reached this mystic climax of effacement” (67). This passion for the “race” is consistent with both the language and the politics of eugenics, as Richards warns that for the sake of “control of man’s environment for his own good...But it is certain that the individual must delegate more or less of his so-called rights for the sake of the race” (*Eugenics* 132).

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<sup>31</sup> The image of the human barometer reappears in *The House of Mirth*: Gus Trenor is described as “a perfect barometer—he always knows when Bertha is going to—“To fall?”” (44).

The final act of this drama is not just a test of Dick's training, both architectural and moral, but also a test of Kate's faith: "She felt as if she had fallen by the way, spent and broken in a struggle of which even its object had been unconscious. She had tried to deflect the natural course of events, she had sacrificed her personal happiness to a fantastic ideal of duty, and it was her punishment to be left alone with her failure, outside of the normal current of human strivings and regrets" (157). The terms in which Wharton describes this suggest at least as much awe as disdain—Wharton is fascinated by this character's exceptional faith (it is "outside of the normal") and her spiritualized desire in her duty to reform her son's tainted character. The sanitarian "gospel of germs" them, is translated here into an atmospheric gospel for which Wharton seems to have some sort of respect. The language of "punishment" suggests that Wharton imagines this to be a functioning ethical and disciplinary economy, one she does not need to intervene into by dispensing her own form of narrative discipline. The language of the "spiritual" acts in this novella as an indicator of possibility, an open-endedness and a space for fantasy and desire which Wharton still sees within the language of environment.

At the novella's conclusion, Kate rebounds from this setback, snatching victory out of the jaws of nature and thereby asserting the structural soundness of her own monument to environmental culture: "I fought it off till to-night, but when I came back to finish the work you were there again—and suddenly you weren't an obstacle any longer, but a refuge—and I crawled into your arms as I used to" (183). In repeating the language of her mother's initial formulation of her architectural experiment—"refuge"—Dick confirms that Kate has succeeded in converting her body into atmosphere: she has successfully etherized her own maternity, but at great personal cost. What is often read, then, as the novel's glaring sentimentalism and thus its glaring failure—its dubious representation of an excessively self-sacrificial

mother—may in fact be its strength: *Sanctuary* quite convincingly narrates both the terrific personal cost and the tremendous and sexualized appeal of aspiring to fully control the physical environment which forms the subject, and in this way anticipates the nightmare of “total environment” that forms the bitter world of Wharton’s late novel *Twilight Sleep*.

## II. *Twilight Sleep*-From Aesthetics to Anesthetics

In *Sanctuary*, Wharton was still debating the relative force of genes and environment, but by the time she writes the 1927 novel *Twilight Sleep*, she seems to have given up on influencing either. Her frustration with the failure of affluent post-war culture to sustain the conditions for intimacy registers as a petulant satirizing of all contemporary technologies of the subject—be they cosmetic, hygienic, psychoanalytic, or spiritualist. *Twilight Sleep*, a profoundly satiric novel, chronicles the doomed attempts at intimacy of the wealthy Manford family. Matriarch Pauline Manford—a proponent of all and all forms of social and personal improvement—attempts to manage the social and philanthropic lives of her second husband, Dexter, her daughter Nona, and her son Jim, the product of her first marriage to Arthur Wyant, a faded and alcoholic member of the old New York aristocracy. Jim has married Lita, a fame-hungry flapper. The novel comes to a melodramatic climax when Arthur Wyant interrupts a tryst between his son's wife, Lita, and his former wife's husband, Dexter; Arthur Wyant accidentally shoots and wounds Nona. The affair between Lita and Dexter is concealed from Pauline, and the novel ends with the family dispersal.

The novel opens with Pauline Manford’s morning itinerary—“7:30 Mental Uplift. 7:45 Breakfast. 8. Psycho-analysis. 8.15 See cook. 8:30 Silent Meditation. 8:45 Facial massage. 9. Man with Persian Miniatures”—and, in the course of the narrative, Wharton

will proceed to travesty each and every item on Pauline's agenda. Where *Sanctuary* wishes to parse the exogenous from the endogenous, Wharton's late work betrays a thoroughgoing disinclination to wrestle any longer with questions of origin. *Twilight Sleep* is not a novel of undecidability; it is a novel of resignation. This novel marks a shift, in Wharton's work, from a limited faith in the environmental relationships articulated in both architectural and reformist social models to resigned abandonment: *Twilight Sleep* insists that managerial relationships to space and environment have only a catastrophic effect on intimacy.

In one of the many chiasmatic reversals that characterizes the literary rhetoric of miasma, *Twilight Sleep* is not only a bad air novel not only in the sense of Ellen Richards, but also, in the sense of Friedrich Nietzsche: "But enough! Enough! I can't endure it any more. Bad air! Bad air! This workshop where man fabricates ideals—it seems to me it stinks from nothing but lies" (32). Wharton's tone in this novel is nearly as plaintive, and certainly as repetitious. *Twilight Sleep*, then, is a novel of petulant, punishing environments. There is no longer any possibility of sanctuary: bad air is berating, and forms of belief are nothing but self-deception and chicanery.

While *The House of Mirth* questions the wisdom of conflating the medical and the aesthetic, in *Twilight Sleep*, Wharton writes a world governed by her own worst-case scenario: art and medicine collapse into a nether world of political apathy and anesthetic absence. Rather than maintaining the independence of reformist and aesthetic models, *Twilight Sleep* fuses the two: Wharton abandons philanthropy, aesthetics, and any attempt to distinguish the one from the other.

*Sanctuary* is about a mother who risks feeling too much; *Twilight Sleep*—the title itself a euphemism for a thoroughly anaesthetized childbirth—is about a pair of mothers, wealthy New York socialite Mrs. Manford and her flapper daughter-in-law Lita, who can feel nothing at all. As it tells the story of Mrs. Manford's attempts to bring both her

children and her husband back into her control, *Twilight Sleep* details a move from intimacy as stifling to intimacy as non-existent: an anxiety about stuffy atmosphere evolves into one so well managed and ventilated that it blows intimacy (not to say art and politics) right out its perfectly-placed windows: “she...had allotted the requisite space per couple as carefully as if they had been counting cubic feet in a hospital. The ventilation was perfect too; neither draughts nor stuffiness” (73). Pauline’s air control is flawless, but this has ceased to matter. She has lost the link between the environment and its occupants: she does not manage her children’s environments in order to shape their characters, as does Kate Orme, but rather as an end in and of itself. In Wharton’s rendition of 1920’s upper-class New York, the form of intimate discourse remains, but the content has been occupied entirely by the minutiae of domestic management: “Intimacy, for her, meant the tireless discussion of facts, not necessarily of a domestic order, but definite and palpable facts...In confidence, she preferred the homelier themes, and would have enjoyed best of all being tender and gay about the coal cellar, or reticent and brave about the leak in the boiler” (169). The absence of affect or intimacy parallels what Wharton understands as the absence of “Beauty,” which is nothing but an empty ideal:

All she asked was that nothing should ‘hurt’ her: she had the blind dread of physical pain common also to most of the women of her set. But all of that was so easily managed nowadays: Mrs. Manford...of course knew the most perfect ‘Twilight Sleep’ establishment in the country...and Lita drifted into motherhood...’Of course there ought to be no Pain...nothing but Beauty...It ought to be one of the loveliest, most poetic things in the world to have a baby,’ Mrs. Manford declared. (18)

“Beauty” and “poetry” have ceased to refer to the aesthetic, signifying nothing but efficiency and the absence of pain. Anesthetics, suggests Wharton, have supplanted aesthetics: art has been replaced by emptiness. As Wharton grows more cynical, her

names grow more transparent: Man-Ford reads as a description of an assembly-line humanity. And in case we might have missed the mass-production reference, Wharton makes it explicit, describing Mrs. Manford as articulating the above pronouncement “in that bright efficient voice which made loveliness and poetry sound like the attributes of an advanced industrial society, and babies something to be turned out in series like Fords” (18).

The structure of belief is, as in *Sanctuary*, still organized around maternity, but this structure has been emptied of any content: “Whatever the question dealt with, these ladies always seemed to be the same, and always advocated with equal zeal Birth Control and unlimited maternity, free love or the return to the traditions of the American home; and neither they or Mrs. Manford seemed aware that there was anything contradictory in these doctrines. All they know was that they were determined to force certain persons to do things that those persons preferred not to do” (11). Hers is a self-canceling maternity and a contentless commitment to the compulsory. The fact of speech-making is what matters to Mrs. Manford, to the position of the organization for which she stumps she is wholly indifferent. But Wharton does not seem immune from Mrs. Manford’s failure to discriminate, rather, Wharton is the negative version of Mrs. Manford’s inability to tell the difference: Mrs. Manford advocates all causes, and Wharton is equally indiscriminate—she simply dismisses all causes. The more Wharton attempts to condemn Mrs. Manford, the more she ends up looking like her mirror image; the line between narrative beratement and self-beratement grows increasingly indistinct.

The critique of stuffy Victorian interiors is familiar in Wharton’s oeuvre, but here she adds yet another turn of the screw, questioning not just the style of the room itself, but also questioning the very desire to critique the style: “It embodied the New York luxury of the ‘seventies in every ponderous detail, from the huge cabbage roses of the Aubusson carpet to the triple layer of curtains designed to protect the aristocracy of the brown-stone

age from the plebian intrusion of light and air” (200). Some twenty years after she articulated similar concerns in *The House of Mirth*, Wharton can’t resist returning to a critique of old New York decorative and hygienic orthodoxies, yet no longer can she replace those orthodoxies with any alternative. Nona calls the old-fashioned decorations “Queer dead rubbish,”<sup>32</sup> but yet “queerer still that, at the moment and in that house, Nona’s uncanny detachment should permit her to smile at it! Where indeed—she wondered again, did one’s own personality end, and that of others, of people, landscapes, chairs or spectacle-cases, begin?” (201). A critique of stifling décor, then, evolves into a meditation on the dangers of such of critique and the “uncanny detachment” such a critique implies. Every attempt at corrective substitution results in further disintegration: there is no option left, is *Twilight Sleep*, but passivity, quietude or resignation.

Although Wharton is no Benjaminian, the domestic world of *Twilight Sleep* bears a striking resemblance to anaesthetizing interior spaces that Susan Buck-Morss describes, in “Aesthetics and Anesthetics: Walter Benjamin’s Artwork Essay Reconsidered,” as proper to nineteenth century bourgeois interiors, where

furnishings provided a phantasmagoria of textures, tones, and sensual pleasures that immersed the home-dweller in a total environment, a privatized fantasy world that functioned as a protective shield for the senses and sensibilities of this new ruling class...It has the effect of anaesthetizing the organism, not through numbing, but through flooding the senses. (22)

Jennie A. Kassanoff connects Buck-Morss’ account of Benjamin and *Twilight Sleep* in *Edith Wharton and the Politics of Race*. She argues that “Despite her early compassion for Lily Bart, the chloral-addicted heroine of *The House of Mirth*,

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<sup>32</sup> It is hard not to be reminded here of the narrator of “The Yellow Wall-Paper” who remarks that she is composing on “queer dead paper.”

Wharton grew increasingly disillusioned with anesthesia as a response to modern experience. In *Twilight Sleep*...she begins to correlate medical anesthesia with political apathy.” I am suggesting that Wharton’s disillusionment with anesthesia is inseparable from her disillusionment with antiseptics and the form of environmental control it implies. *Twilight Sleep* denounces the eutenic and philanthropic models of environmental control entirely, representing the science of “total environment” as an anesthetic horror. This disillusionment has a melancholic character—Wharton seems unable to mourn the loss of the ideal, and this inability expresses itself in a narrative beratement which comes increasingly close to a form of self-beratement. For unlike in *The House of Mirth*, where clean new design seems to offer a palliative to the stuffy bourgeois interior, in *Twilight Sleep* the sleek modern space is every bit as deadening—even deadly—as the overdone Victorian space. Not even the pets survive Lita’s “cubist” drawing-room:

for all its studied effects, its rather nervous attention to ‘values,’ complementary colours, and the things the modern decorator lies awake over, more like the waiting room of a glorified railway station than the setting of an established way of life. Nothing in it seemed at home or at ease—from the early kakemono of a bearded sage, on walls of pale buff silk, to the three morning irises isolated in a white Snug vase in the desert of an otherwise empty table. The only life in the room was contributed by the agitations of the exotic goldfish...and they too were but transients, since Lita insisted on having the aquarium illuminated night and day with electric bulbs, and the sleepless fish were always dying off and having to be replaced. (31)

The serial death of the fish is unmarked and unnamed—this form of unexceptional and non-specific death has come to characterize the modern drawing room to which

heroines of previous Wharton narratives looked for relief. But these are fish, after all—even death, and unmourned death at that, has become a bad joke.

The ideology of sanitary science comes under direct attack in the novel<sup>33</sup>, and “the hygienically-minded American housekeeper” (99) who attracts Wharton’s passing if derisive attention in *The Decoration of Houses* is given center stage in *Twilight Sleep*. The wealthy New York housewife in question, Pauline Manford, is characterized by her “cool hygienic scent” (67) and her tireless attempts to “de-microbe” her environment. Her disenchanted husband remarks:

In another moment, he knew, she would find some pretext for assuring herself, by the application of a gloved finger-tip, that there was no dust on desk or mantelpiece. She had very nearly obliged him, when he moved into his new office, to have concave surfaces, as in a hospital ward or a hygienic nursery. She had adopted with enthusiasm the idea of the concave tiling fitted into every cove and angle, so there were no corners anywhere to catch the dust. People’s lives ought to be like that: with no corners in them. She wanted to de-microbe life. (55)

Her own bedroom represents just such an antiseptic space: “Standing before the tall threefold mirror in her dressing room, she glanced into the huge bathroom beyond—which looked like a biological laboratory, with its white tiles, polished pipes, weighing machines, mysterious appliances for douches, gymnastics and ‘physical culture’” (23). Physical culture, Wharton’s dubious scare quotes imply, has supplanted a more generous sort of culture: Mrs. Manford cultivates the body at the expense of the spirit. The readiness with which Mrs. Manford equalizes moral and hygienic concerns is the subject of frequent and pitiless narrative commentary. The compulsive repetition of this

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<sup>33</sup> Also under attack, here, is anything non-European: Wharton may disdain the environmental logic of Euthenics, but she retains, unfortunately, its racist underpinnings. Such is one of the disappointments of working on Wharton. Kassanoff’s study.

commentary suggests that something about this character defies Wharton's authorial management: it is as if she is berating a disobedient puppy, who remains infuriatingly oblivious to its own transgressions. We are told that "Any form of untidiness, moral or material, was unpleasant to her" (82); Mr. Manford remarks of his wife and domestic science peers, "Your mother and her friends would like to teach the whole world how to say its prayers and brush its teeth" (11); and indeed, "Pauline herself could conceive of nothing more shocking than a social organization which did not recognize divorce, and let all kinds of domestic evils fester undisturbed, instead of having people's lives disinfected and whitewashed at regular intervals, like the cellar" (22). She insists that

It was as if, in the beaming determination of the middle-aged, one and all of them, to ignore sorrow and evil, 'think them away' as superannuated bogies, survival of some obsolete European superstition unworthy of enlightened Americans, to whom plumbing and dentistry had given higher standards, and bifocals glasses a clearer view of the universe. (45)

In all of these instances, Mrs. Manford reads as a parody of both the hygienic details and the "democratic" ambitions of the national eugenics advocated by the likes of Ellen Richards, who insists that "Not through compulsion, but through democratic idealism consciously working through common interests, will be brought about the right conditions, the control of the environment" (vii). Wharton travesties the logic that control produces freedom throughout the novel, as when Mrs. Manford counsels her daughter Nona that "I sometimes think you'd be happier if you interested yourself a little more in other people...in all the big humanitarian movements that make one so proud to be an American. Don't you think it's glorious to belong to the only country where everybody is absolutely free, and yet we're all made to do exactly what is best for us?" (191). The logic of bad air is, apparently, just so much bad air. For there is nothing new about the sanitary logic Mrs. Manford advocates here—and indeed, most of Wharton's earlier

novels contain references to sanitary science—but none with either the consistency or the affect of this novel: the frequency of Wharton’s commentary suggests that there is something unresolved in her relationship to these images and the doctrine which accompanies it.

For in addition to reading as a satire of sanitarian philosophy, Mrs. Manford also reads as a satire of Wharton’s own interest in influencing home decoration:

The young people certainly felt no corresponding desire to set the houses of others in order. Why shouldn’t the Bolivians have earthquakes if they chose to live in Bolivia? And why must Pauline Manford lie awake over it in New York, and have to learn a new set of Mahatma exercises to dispel the resulting wrinkles? ‘I suppose if we feel like that it’s really because we’re too lazy to care,’ Nona reflected, with her incorrigible honesty. (12)

By articulating her pitiless critique of Mrs. Manford in language which recalls her earlier publications specifically engineered to instruct others in the niceties of arranging their own homes, Wharton implicates herself in the anesthetizing history of sanitary science and controllable environments. For it is not “purity,” but rather, anesthesia that result from thorough antisepsis: the homes in *Twilight Sleep* confuse disinfection and desensitization, destroying feeling when they intend only to destroy bacteria. Mrs. Manford is equally fascinated with logics of antisepsis in both the religious and the hygienic registers: “The Mahatma was one of the leaders of the new movement: The Return to Purity, he called it” (96). The “purity” advocated by the sanitarians has here evolved into shamanistic pseudo-religion, and a racialized one at that. The ideal of purity, whether it be Victorian, sanitary, or new-age, is savaged at every opportunity:

She had sacrificed herself...to the stupid ideal of an obstinate woman who managed to impress people by dressing up her egotism in formulas of philanthropy and piety. Because Aggie was forever going to church, and

bossing the committees of Old Women's Homes and Rest-Cures for Consumptives, she was allowed a license of cruelty which would have damned the frivolous. Destroying two lives to preserve her own ideal of Purity! (178)

The public philanthropy of even the anemic representative of old New York is merely a cover for private cruelty. Like Lily Bart, one of Aggie's chosen causes is the Rest-Cure for Consumptives, suggesting that Lily's brief flight into philanthropy as a means of repairing the ravages of selfish living has now been entirely abandoned as a plausible remedy.

This parody degenerates into even more blunt commentary articulated by Pauline's (second) husband: "The philanthropy was what he most hated: all these expensive plans for moral forcible feeding, for compelling everybody to be cleaner, stronger, healthier and happier than they would have been by the unaided light of Nature" (162). That Wharton credits the critique of hygienic and philanthropic thinking to Mrs. Manford's otherwise thoroughly unsympathetic husband speaks to her disenchantment with the gendered forms of environmental influence, including her own attempts, she puts at the center of *Sanctuary's* narrative: rather than killing off the inconvenient husband, Wharton makes him her ally in the novel's insistent forms of beratement and "uncanny" criticism.

The question of how the subject emerges is no longer something Wharton wishes to consider. In *Twilight Sleep*, she represents sanitary science and psychoanalysis with equal derision: both are for, her, failed technologies of the subject. Five years prior to the publication of *Twilight Sleep*, Wharton in a 1922 letter (as quoted in Ohler, p. 189), directs a friend "not to befuddle [her]...with Freudianism & all its jargon. She'd take to it like a duck to sewerage. And what she wants to develop is the conscious, and not grub after the subconscious." The "jargon" Wharton herself uses to address the inside/outside problem is more sanitary than psychoanalytic; indeed, Wharton here falls back on the language of

sanitation (grub, sewerage) to discourage “Freudianism.” And yet there is no available discourse to replace the psychoanalytic, as the medical alternative Dexter Manford suggests is offered only sardonically: “Echoes of the new Freudian doctrine, perhaps rather confusedly apprehended, had strengthened her faith in the salutariness of ‘talking things over,’ and she longed to urge this remedy on Dexter; but the last time she had done so he had wounded her by replying that he preferred an aperient” (116). The only corrective to psychoanalysis, it seems, is scatology: Freud is a little worse than shit. Wharton finds the sciences of both psychic and domestic interiors inadequate to the task of describing the complexities of human interaction. And perhaps Wharton is fed up with language (and with her own writing) itself—it is all so much “jargon” and there is nothing to be gained from “talking things over.” But far from dismissing these metaphors, Wharton overinvests them: she uses the fruitless hunts for the microbe and for psychic truth to narrate the apparently inescapable failure of human relation.

There is no learning curve in this novel; despite the punishing tone of the narration, Pauline Manford remains thoroughly unreformed. Indeed, Pauline manages tragedy at the novel’s conclusion not by abandoning faddishness, but by turning towards yet another false prophet. Her final fascination is with the “Scientific Initiate,” who counsels her to exert more inner control if she wants to influence her surroundings: “Those were the Scientific Initiate’s very words: “We manufacture sorrow as we do all the other toxins” (295). In an uncanny anticipation of late twentieth century ideologies of self-help<sup>34</sup>, Mrs. Manford tries to confront trauma by changing her thinking. If self-help narratives suggest that one can change the outside by fixing the inside, Wharton suggest that change from the outside in is as untenable

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<sup>34</sup> The current self-help best-seller, *The Secret*, reproduces the logic of the Scientific Initiate almost exactly.

as change from the inside out. The management of the subject is, for Wharton, a lost cause.

In her critique of the logic that the world can be managed through simultaneous attention to the psychic and the environmental, Wharton prefigures the logic of environmental control articulated by current narratives of environmental illness, the very narratives that I will discuss in the final chapter, a reading of Todd Haynes's 1994 film, *Safe*. In *Safe*, the reciprocity between theories of the self and theories of the environment that inform the contemporary discussions of environmental injury is pushed to its limits, pushed so far, in fact, as to suggest possibilities beyond self-beratement and hopeless resignation.

## Chapter Four

### Environmental Illness and Impasse in *Safe*

#### I.

In puzzling over the death drive Wilhelm Reich asked, “Where does the misery come from?”<sup>35</sup> And according to Jacqueline Rose (1993), responses to this question tend to frame answers in terms of a psychic inside – the violence of psychic life, of the death drive – and a social outside – the violence of the event or of ideology (p. 90). It is this very framing, this insistence on strict division between the psychic and the social, between the inside and the outside, which, Rose argues, produces “the real violence.” Rose then makes the case for feminist psychoanalysis by suggesting that “feminism...may be in a...position to recast this problem, refusing the rigid polarity of inside and outside together with the absolute and fixed image of sexual difference which comes with it” (p. 93).

For anyone struggling to understand the cluster of maladies loosely grouped under the heading “environmental illness,” Reich’s question—and, as this chapter argues, Rose’s response to it—is surprisingly resonant. The problematic question of etiology in environmental illness follows a trajectory similar to the one Rose details: those who believe themselves to be environmentally ill—most of whom are women—tend to name external sources in both the chemical toxins of the modern industrial world, and, to a lesser extent, the physicians who refuse to acknowledge or treat their

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<sup>35</sup>Wilhelm Reich, as quoted in Rose (1986), 16. See also Rose (1993), 15-40. That Rose revisits this question speaks to its continued pertinence.

disorder. Skeptics of environmental illness tend to locate its etiology in internal sources, namely psychological dysfunction. To complicate matters, a partisan position does not guarantee that the disease's source occupy particular spatial coordinates: we can, for example, understand psychological dysfunction as either originally psychic (the internal-internal position) or as originally social (the internal-external position). And so on.

In this essay, I will examine the representations of identity and environmental illness in the 1995 film *Safe*. As it tells the story of a Southern California housewife who suffers from environmental illness, *Safe* asks if identities shaped by a relationship to a particular form of physical disability or suffering are subject to the same forms of impasse and disidentification as are sexual differences. *Safe* asks difficult questions about a disease which—even in its very name—foregrounds the spatial logic of diagnosis: How do we speak about forms of bodily suffering which refuse to conform neatly to etiological or spatial coordinates? What kinds of treatment are called for in response to suffering which is not clearly somatic, psychic, or psychosomatic—when we simply can't know? In *Safe*, the reciprocity between theories of the self and theories of the environment that inform the contemporary discussions of environmental injury is pushed to its limits, pushed so far, in fact, as to suggest possibilities beyond self-beratement and hopeless resignation.

In trying to interpret the film *Safe* and its sick protagonist, Carol White, we are confronted repeatedly with largely unanswerable questions about the source of her misery. For rather than producing definitive answers, *Safe* reads the origins of environmental illness as ultimately and tragically undecidable. Put differently, *Safe* gives those of us thinking about physical suffering what Rose (1986) argues psychoanalysis brings to feminism through “the concept of a divided subjectivity”: “the right to an impasse” (p. 15). If the messiness of fantasy and the unconscious can

be used to argue for the right to identify incompletely, ambivalently, or not at all with particular forms of gender and desire, perhaps diagnoses might be experienced with similar forms of ambivalence. Insofar as diagnostic status can function as a vector of identification, why wouldn't it be possible to argue for the right to a diagnostic impasse?

I don't mean, however, to imply that the relationship between sexual and diagnostic identities is neatly analogical: it is, like the unconscious itself, rather more complicated than that. Indeed, *Safe* presents a world (a world, I would suggest, not entirely fantastical) in which bodily suffering seems always—and yet always imprecisely—caught up with sexual identity.

In *Safe*, moments of impasse register the ambivalent or unknowable as both political necessity and as painful irresolution. The prolongation of Carol White's suffering—which seems to have neither origin nor cure—produces an ethical dilemma for the viewer in the form of a wish for speedy closure, no matter how incomplete or arbitrary. As viewers we want to fill in the emptiness of Carol's desire with our own desire—our desire that she find a comprehensive diagnosis. In this way, *Safe* gives rise to what Barbara Johnson – in a reading of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* – calls “the suspicion...that it is precisely the therapeutic haste towards closure that works in a countertherapeutic way” (p. 34). Perhaps, then, we need to attend more closely to our own spectatorial desire in order to resist reading Carol White as simply a subject who needs to be equipped with the proper pathological form, who needs, in other words, only appropriate diagnosis and treatment. Although Carol's hunt for the right treatment seems initially to suggest we are watching a film whose narrative is organized around the quest for medical truth—a narrative which will present disease as beginning, the journey towards medical knowledge as the body, and correct diagnosis as the triumphant resolution—we eventually come to realize that

there will be no such closure. Indeed, when Carol settles on a diagnosis, rather than improving, her condition quite rapidly deteriorates. While classic illness narratives “reveal a profound complicity between aesthetics and medicine,” (Johnson, p.18) *Safe* problematizes this complicity by refusing both narrative and therapeutic closure.

So if Carol White doesn't simply require the right medicine, does she instead require the right politics? Would feminism provide her with a healthier identity, one which provides an alternative to an identity based in illness by articulating a relationship between gender and disease? Such questions initially seem productive, for in its early nods to “The Yellow Wallpaper,” *Safe* promises to expose the new and insidious ways women are pathologized in the name of therapy. Recall that in “The Yellow Wallpaper,” the tragic psychological consequences of a diagnosis and a treatment regime (neurasthenia and the rest cure, respectively) follow directly from a rigid understanding of sexual difference: Gilman's protagonist goes crazy because she is treated differently, because she is treated like a woman. If—as Gilman herself contended—“The Yellow Wallpaper” aimed to foster skepticism about the wisdom of sex-specific treatment regimes<sup>36</sup> by suggesting that hysterical patients would be better served by gender equity than by the rest cure, *Safe* seems at moments to imply that Carol, too, would benefit from politics rather than medical or psychiatric therapy. Perhaps, then, if Carol could develop a language of critique, if she could name the forces of patriarchy and capital which contribute to her suffering, she would then assuage it.

As the film progresses, however, it begins to seem that such hopes are in vain. For rather than propose feminist critical analysis as cure, *Safe* allegorizes a historical

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<sup>36</sup> In “Why I wrote the Yellow Wallpaper” Gilman writes: “I...sent a copy to the physician who so nearly drove me mad...[the story] was intended to save people from being driven crazy, and it worked” (p. 349).

moment in which the turn to hysteria—productive though it has been—as a way of understanding the relationship between disease and femininity—not to say feminism and psychoanalysis—has itself reached something of an impasse. *Safe* asks us to overcome a certain form of hysterical blindness: we need, that is, to see beyond hysteria. For environmental illness is not, as some have suggested,<sup>37</sup> best understood as the new hysteria: locating the exclusive source of the disease as the unmediated and undifferentiated social oppression of women is not, in this case, an adequate feminist strategy.<sup>38</sup> So what is?

To begin with, I would propose that it is precisely the feminist psychoanalytic reading that needs to resist presuming that what Carol White really needs is feminism. In part because she is the classic bourgeois analysand, Carol can be a deeply vexing character for the purposes of a contemporary feminist analysis: a wealthy San Fernando Valley housewife with a household staff, she is aggravatingly passive, unable to complete sentences, and seems utterly without desire. Yet her pain is palpable and it demands treatment. In fact, it is only her encounters with failed therapies, her experiences of diagnostic impasse, that open up a space for feminist reading, a reading which must exist at the provisional boundaries between the psychic and the social, between the inside and the outside. Insofar as “the realm of sexuality messes up what can be thought of in any straightforward sense as causality” (Rose 98), there is, in *Safe*, a difficult relationship between illness and sexual identity which cannot be reduced to a narrative of cause and effect. Perhaps it is for this reason that a critical treatment of Carol always risks slipping into what Johnson calls a

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<sup>37</sup> “Hysteria has not died. It has just be relabeled for a new era... In the 1990’s, the United States has become the hot zone of psychogenic diseases, new and mutating forms of hysteria amplified by modern communications and fin de siècle anxieties. Contemporary hysterical patients blame external sources—a virus, sexual molestation, chemical warfare, satanic conspiracy, alien infiltration—for psychic problems” (Showalter, p. 4).

<sup>38</sup> The scenes representing Carol’s economic privilege—in particular her condescending treatment of her Hispanic maid—draw particular attention to this issue.

“feminism...structured no less therapeutically than the normalizing patriarchal therapies it is designed to combat” (34).

To avoid producing a totalizing reading of Carol White, I would propose that it is precisely her problematic status as a subject of feminism that needs to be foregrounded in a feminist reading. Identity exists, in *Safe*, only as a deferred question. Illnesses linked to sexual identities – hysteria, anorexia, and AIDS – are repeatedly invoked in the film but never come either to name, or, importantly, to allegorize Carol’s suffering. Rather, these diseases function metonymically, engaging with the diagnosis Carol eventually does come to inhabit (however uncomfortably) – environmental illness – and pointing to Carol’s identificatory impasse. The problem of habitation often stands in for the problem of illness: in *Safe*, conversations which would, in a conventional narrative film about illness, disclose truths of identity and sickness, instead compulsively return to a topos of interior decor. The endless returns to household space, as the interiority which can be articulated, insistently recollect the identity and the allusive illness which resist articulation. And like the thematics, the cinematography of *Safe* masters domestic interiors in a way that the film can not – or will not – master identity. Domestic spaces are endlessly overelaborated, while psychic space is alarmingly underelaborated. The camera tends to be placed farther away from the actors than the conventions of the standard long shot would dictate, often remaining stationary while actors move in and out of its reach. The cinematographic stasis foregrounds the limits of intelligibility that obtain for both Carol’s illness and her identity.

And if, as I want to argue, the origins of her illness are radically unlocatable, the filmic machinery cannot use illness to provide Carol with psychic interiority. And here, *Safe* departs radically from the predictable disease melodrama: disease does not provide depth, diagnosis does not confer meaning. For in *Safe*, illness and interiority

are coextensive not in their elaboration of meaning, but in their resistance to representation.

In the opening scenes of the film, Carol is less chronically ill than chronically insipid. As she dutifully cycles through a regimen of luncheons, health clubs, hair salons, and baby showers, absence of affect is perhaps her only marked quality. For example, in a post-aerobic locker-room discussion:

Friend 1: You know, Carol, you do not sweat.

Friend 2: Ooh, I hate you.

Carol: I know, it's true.

Friend 2: No, it's great.

As this exchange slyly hints, Carol is a character we “know” to “hate.” Indeed, as a wealthy and pampered housewife, she is precisely the kind of character whose initial complaints of ill-health under the rubric of “stress” are designed to be dismissed as the hysterical manifestations of idle privilege. The register of the early scenes of *Safe* reads as uncomplicated irony because Carol seems so fully knowable and fully detestable. And while I'm reluctant to concur with the assessment of Carol's co-aerobicist, that this hatred is “great,” I do think that an acknowledgement of the difficulty in identifying with Carol must be made explicit: for it is this difficulty which initially makes diagnostic closure seem easy. Carol does not seem, at this moment, to have *earned* the right to an impasse. We want, in these early scenes, to treat Carol as she treats her maid, repeating simple words in multiple (diagnostic) languages because we are not sure she's capable of understanding us. As this scene predicts, what is most “true” about Carol is absence: she “do[es] not” respond. But as Carol grows sicker, treating this absence becomes progressively more difficult, and imagining that we can definitively name or fill it becomes more politically precarious. The dramatic

physiological events – severe respiratory attacks, a nosebleed, and finally, a seizure – are cunningly scripted so as to make it unclear what it is, exactly, that produced them.

## *II. There's no place like home...*

**“I used to feel...that I could always hop into that chair and be safe.”**

*-The Yellow Wallpaper*

To begin examining the problem with a feminist diagnostics, I want to return to “The Yellow Wallpaper,” a text which Haynes both offers up and disallows as an analogy to his own filmic narrative. Both texts locate pathological drama at the porous boundary between social space and psychic space. More specifically, the progressive maladies of both Carol and the narrator of “The Yellow Wallpaper” can be charted through the escalation of the anxious relations they maintain with their domestic interiors and the slippages that occur between domestic and psychic interior spaces. As Carol becomes more infirm, she finds that her furniture is making her sick: “our beautiful new couch – totally toxic.” She next attempts to craft a “safe space” in her home, lined with plastic and furnished exclusively with undyed cotton. This too, proves inadequate, and her final attempt at depathologizing her interior finds her living in a “porcelain-lined igloo” in a creepy new age treatment center.

In “The Yellow Wallpaper,” the narrator displaces a discussion of the relationship between her illness and coercive therapy onto an aesthetic protest: “John says the very worst thing I can do is to think about my condition...So I will let it alone and talk about the house” (Gilman, p.4). What begins as a relationship of aesthetic antipathy towards the wallpaper in the bedroom to which her husband confines her – “I never saw a worse paper in my life” (p.5) – shifts to one of projective animation – “it is like a woman stooping and creeping about behind that

pattern” (p.11) – to psychosis – “I suppose I shall have to get back behind that pattern” (p.17). The narrator’s relationship to her interior enables an acting-out of the protests which she cannot otherwise voice to her husband. Significantly, however, she does repeatedly voice protest (“Personally, I disagree with their ideas”) to the reader, articulations of a subjectivity which, for reasons I will explore, remain unavailable to Carol White. And unenviable though her fate may be, Gilman’s narrator fights the violent divide of the psychic and the social with violence of her own: she tears down the wallpaper. This act of protest can be read as such only because Gilman’s narrator at least distinguishes between her subjectivity and her domestic interior before fusing the two: from the beginning Carol White’s only narratable interior is a domestic one. *Safe* represents a kind of perversion of the relationship between interior and gender which obtains in “The Yellow Wallpaper”—that is, if in the story the wallpaper becomes a screen onto which unnamable psychic interiors get projected, in the film, domestic space does not act as a screen for psychic interior, but rather replaces it entirely.

Like Gilman’s narrator, whose husband “does not believe” that she is sick (p.3), Carol’s first attempt at treatment takes the unproductive form of a visit to the family doctor whose diagnosis is “I really don’t see anything wrong with you, Carol.” When she persists, he directs her to a psychiatrist, a “specialist better suited to stress-related conditions.” In their session, the parasitic relationship between Carol’s interiority and her domestic space begins to emerge:

Psychiatrist: Do you work?

Carol: No I’m a house-...um...I’m a... a homemaker. I’m working on some designs for our house, though, in my spare time.

Carol’s over-identification with her living space becomes tragicomic: in trying to replace “housewife” with “homemaker” she names herself “a house.” If her abortive

substitution was motivated by some awareness of a more current usage, it also seems inflected not so much by the popular feminism that would advocate the use of homemaker over housewife, but rather by a guilt at the absence of a popular feminism: Carol seems dimly aware that housewife is no longer the preferred term, but is unable to associate that shift with any particular (feminist) logic. She seems to imagine that she should have better ways to describe her position, but instead of finding this other language compulsively repeats “house...home...house.” In reiterating “house,” the term degraded by its pairing with the unspeakable “wife,” Carol retracts her original retraction. Her utterance stands as a moment of negative identity: her language is serially self-correcting. Even Carol’s triple invocation is not quite right: in reaching towards home she seems only to move farther away.

While the agonizing awkwardness of the dialogue sufficiently establishes Carol’s alienation from the terms of self-revelation, the framing of this scene implicates the viewer in both medical scrutiny and in Carol’s discomfort at such scrutiny. In one of the rare instances in the film of the intersubjective shot-reverse-shot, the camera is placed in the theatrically vast gulf separating the black leather couch on which Carol rigidly perches, and the therapist’s imposing desk. The distance between the camera and the actors, rather than easing connection, ironizes the conceit of intersubjectivity by minimizing the prominence of the actors. The elaboration of the room’s furnishings, in conjunction with the failed elaboration of Carol’s psychology, functions as a remainder of the perverse relations, here, between figure and ground: attempts to bring out the self can only bring out the setting. Small, pink, and motionless, Carol appears as a misplaced piece of furniture, and the problem becomes, once again, a matter of discordant interior decorating. And as the camera returns to Carol for an answer to the psychiatrist’s final question, “What’s going on in you?,” it zooms in, a movement which seems to predict an intimate revelation, the long-awaited explication

of interiority. But instead of disclosure, only silent unease ensues. The viewer is here made complicit with disciplinary therapy: our pleasure is suspended by the absence of speech or movement, and like the therapist, we want to compel her to talk.

And in the rare moments when Carol does talk, even as she reproduces the conventions of confession and disclosure, she still yields little in the way of psychic information. The first of only two self-reflective speeches Carol offers in the film comes not through conversation, but through a voice-over of the text of a letter she writes in bed:

My name is Carol White. And I live in Southern California. I saw your notice at the health club near my house and decided to write and tell you a little bit about myself. For some time now I have not been feeling up to par. I was hoping your organization might be able to help. I'm originally from Texas, although have lived in the LA area for most of my life. I had asthma as a child, but it never really got in the way of school or recreation. I've always thought of myself as someone with a pretty normal upbringing, and as basically a healthy person. But for the past several months this, this has all started to change. Suddenly, I find myself feeling sick.

As the last sentence of her letter indicates, Carol seeks to “find herself” by “feeling sick.” In her search for self in suffering, Carol mimics therapeutic structures of revelation and disclosure, but seems able only to produce empty details. The stage has been set for a confession of childhood trauma, yet she has nothing to confess.

The ambiguous placement of the phrase “this has all started to change” suggests that Carol is engaged in a reassessment not just of her status as “healthy” but also as changes she names feeling sick. By invoking asthma (the only reference to it or to any medical history in the film), Carol opens up a metonymic link: her current

illness has some overlapping relationship to childhood allergic hypersensitivity. But Carol only mentions asthma, she does not cite it as originary, nor does she endow it with diagnostic or explanatory force. Rather, the invocation of asthma, here, suggests that Carol is beginning to substitute an identity based on interior space for one based on illness. Her insistence that asthma “never really got in the way” protests against disease’s capacity to produce identity, while simultaneously calling upon that very capacity in an attempt to narrate “a little about [her]self.”

Indeed, the very act of bed-bound writing associatively ties Carol to the classic hysteric. Carol’s flat, sparsely detailed text could not be more different from the lively text produced by Gilman’s narrator. Yet, oddly, Carol nonetheless comes to occupy the position of the bed-bound hysteric when her husband interrupts. There is no explicit proviso against Carol’s writing, but like Gilman’s narrator, who reports “There comes John, and I must put this away – he hates to have me write a word” (p.5), Carol behaves furtively when discovered in the act of writing illness. The difference is that Carol has nothing to hide. Indeed, the writing of “sick” seems to conjure her husband Greg into the room: it is as if he sensed that Carol was on the verge of making a disclosure. As Greg opens the door onto the bedroom, the music and the pen stop simultaneously, and the camera pauses on the stalled nib:

Greg: What are you doing?

Carol: I was writing this...Um... (pause)...I don’t even...(pause)...Oh god, what is this?

Greg: What?

Carol: Where am I? Right now?

Greg: We’re in our house. Greg and Carol’s house.

While her previous attacks had been respiratory, this attack is epist(l)emological. So unsettling is Greg’s entrance, that Carol first can’t say what she was writing, and then

seems unclear as to whether she was writing at all. As in the psychiatrist's office, Carol turns to her location in an interior when asked to account for herself, but now finds that location inscrutable. The power of "sick" is such that its presence erases even the domestic interior to which Carol previously had recourse when articulating identity.

And indeed, the movement of interior erasure is continued when Carol attends the information session hosted by the organization to which, in the scene described above, she wrote to for help. The video which she watches opens with a bold graphical statement which carries interpellative force: "Q: WHO ARE YOU?," and as the video continues, it answers its own question with "what you most likely are is one of the vastly growing number of people who suffer from environmental illness." The power of this low-budget presentation to define Carol is cemented by the relentless pathologizing of interior spaces: as Carol is told who she is, she is also told that the spaces which previously provided her with a surrogate identity are toxic. In offering up a diagnosis, the video promises relief in the form of both identity and community, but in return for this salvation, demands that Carol relinquish any identity not defined by environmental illness. The proselytizing politics of the so-called movement into which Carol stumbles prohibit anything like ambivalence: the diagnostic insistence of the faceless voice from the video sounds very much like "the real violence." It also sounds uncomfortably like a parody of the very desire for closure the film earlier solicited from us.

Carol's relationship to identity takes a referential turn during a group therapy session at Wrenwood, the cultish New Mexico "retreat" which Carol finds through the promotional video. While the philosophies and treatment practices of Wrenwood are, at best, dubious, they nonetheless seem to be of some appeal to Carol. As the

residents lie on their backs in pairs, head-to-head, in an exercise designed to foster intimacy, they are told:

Leader: Now Speaker number two: Describe to your friend a room you remember having as a child.

Carol: Ummm....ummm....this....I guess this one I had...was....had yellow wallpaper...and...

The ostensible objective of this exercise, to trade personal histories by nostalgically narrating childhood space, would seem to be well-suited to Carol's propensity for domestic interiors. Yet the effort is nearly unmanageable for her: the voices of others describing their rooms permeate the scene long before Carol is able to begin speaking. Her inability to recall or recount her bedroom marks her difference from the rest of the environmentally ill, and this difference positions her as incompletely identified by her illness. More striking, though, is that the language she does eventually find, "I had...yellow wallpaper," renders her childhood citational. Her history can only be narrated in reference to another text, and in this moment, we are confronted with the limits of the film's capacity to explicate. That is, we are made to know that the film, itself, does not know what happened to Carol in the past or what is happening to her now.

What the film does know, this scene suggests, is that Carol has inherited the representational codes of the turn-of-the-century hysteric: she grew up in a culture decorated with yellow wallpaper. That Carol's only recollection of childhood, rhetorically imposed as nostalgia, also reminds us of precisely that to which Carol does not have access – a kind of feminist protest. As I suggested earlier, the possibility of reading Carol as the victim of masculinist treatment regimes is vexed by the absence of a formulation, on her part, of a link between being a sick woman and being mistreated (by male doctors, by her husband, by the social structure). When we,

as viewers, make that link for her, we risk forcibly resolving the impasse, thus reproducing the precipitous diagnostics that the film critiques.

The insertion of “The Yellow Wallpaper” into the space of Carol’s memory marks a longing for an earlier feminism, a lost politics which the coercive logic of Wrenwood, with its ideology of personal responsibility for illness, makes impossible. For while “The Yellow Wallpaper” politicized illness by positing a relationship between neurosis as a female malady and middle-class women’s oppression, the folks at Wrenwood are intent on disbanding any identity-based alliance by insisting that “the only person who can make you sick is you, whatever the sickness.” The aggressive turn inwards advocated by the holistic healing at Wrenwood is dangerous both because it refuses to relinquish the impulse to treat the environment as masterable and because it refuses political identity. The obsessive control exercised over living space at Wrenwood claims to screen out environmental contaminants, and so to reduce all suffering to a fully knowable and de-politicized interiority; this regime fails as treatment just as it fails at politics. Wrenwood further undermines easy solutions, then, by making a simple fusion model—the happy idea that a neat cooperation between the psychic and the environmental will produce an equally neat cure—utterly untenable. And yet the continued urgency of developing a model of illness capable of theorizing the overdetermined connections among bodies, identities, and environments is announced by the sound of sirens which interrupt Carol’s memory: one of Wrenwood’s inhabitants has died.

### ***III. Environmental Illness as Metaphor?***

**“A Colonial mansion, a hereditary estate, I would say a haunted house and reach the height of romantic felicity – but that would be asking too much of fate. Still I will proudly declare that there is something queer about it.”**

**-“*The Yellow Wallpaper*”**

In the reviews immediately following its national release, *Safe* was repeatedly read as a film about AIDS. The reviewer for *The San Francisco Examiner*, for example, claims “*Safe* is the latest – and perhaps the best – film that deals with the AIDS crisis solely through analogy” (Walters). While AIDS is referenced, in *Safe*, both iconographically and directly, the relationship between AIDS and Carol’s environmental illness cannot felicitously be reduced to analogue. This is not to say that *Safe* is not about AIDS, but rather, that it is not exclusively about AIDS. And yet it is often received as such: as Todd Haynes explains, “I’m often asked if this film is a metaphor for AIDS. Or: Are you really trying to make a film about AIDS? Or: Why didn’t you make a film about AIDS?” (Kirkland). That the film is able to consistently invite readings of Carol as analogue, however, stands in evidence of the tremendous drive towards meaning and mastery that her illness provokes.

I wonder, as well, if the temptation to read *Safe* as *really* about AIDS is a way of recuperating the politically potent linkages between disease and identity that are so troubled in *Safe*. It is, I suspect, not entirely irrelevant that the historical moment in which *Safe* is set – 1987 – is also the year ACT UP (to which, incidentally, *Safe*’s creator, Todd Haynes, belongs) was founded. For while AIDS had a catalytic effect upon both queer activism and queer theory – on political and intellectual practices – environmental illness holds out no such promise for Carol White – for a subject. But is there a viable way of treating Carol—as a patient or as an object of critical analysis—

without forcing her into a sexual identity? By point of contrast to AIDS and AIDS activism, I think *Safe* is grappling with just this question. To continue thinking about the kind of hold illness-as-identity *does* have on Carol, I want to look at the way desire and sexual identity are figured as absence, and then return to the film's manipulation of AIDS, a signifier that seems to move in and out of that absented space.

In *Safe*'s opening scene, a black Mercedes pulls into an eerily lit three-car garage. As Carol and Greg emerge from the vehicle:

Carol: (*sneezes*)

Greg: Bless you.

Carol: (hugs herself) It's freezing in here.

The scene moves into the bedroom, where the camera, suspended above, watches Greg steadily working atop a stoic Carol, whose sexual participation is limited to a maternal patting of Greg's back. All we can learn about Carol's desire from this scene (and it is the only sex scene in the film) is that it seems to be minimally engaged. And while the trope of the housewife bored by conjugal sex would seem to predict (as it has in so many mainstream films) a future awakening, no such liberation of desire occurs in the film. Like so much about Carol's character, we really can know only what we don't know. What the timing of this scene does tell us, though, is that the nascent presence of an illness linked to habitat – the sneeze which acts as a kind of visual pun on frigidity – prefigures an absence of desire. In the space of the film, Carol's desire, like her subjectivity, exists as always already faded.

The first allusion to AIDS, like the first sign of disease, also occurs quite early in the film, before Carol's symptoms begins to escalate. In one scene, Carol pays a visit to her friend Linda in order to borrow a self-help book, and is somberly ushered inside with the words "something has happened":

Carol: How old was he?

Linda: Five years older. He was the oldest of my  
mom's kids.

Carol: It ummm...wasn't...

Linda: No...that's what everyone keeps... not at all...cause he wasn't  
married.

Carol: Right.

Linda: Its just so unreal. Did you see the den?

Carol: At your party...it's gorgeous.

Linda: I'm suing the contractor...you don't even want to know

The move I want to make here – the move, as we shall see in a later scene, Carol, herself, eventually makes – is to insert AIDS into the ellipses. In this conversation, the silence in the silence=death equation is literalized as the two women talk around “it.” Of course, the act of designating illness as “unreal” is not sufficient to make it disappear. Nor does the attempt to displace the negotiation of death and disease with a discussion of interior renovations succeed in allowing them to forget that which they “don't...want to know.” As I have argued, both these strategies, denial and displacement, are tried on Carol, and both fail utterly

That the management of AIDS in this sequence prefigures later treatments of environmental illness does not work as analogy, but rather, establishes the rhetoric of illness as a practice of deferral. For when Carol is compelled to speak about her own illness and treatment, she cannot name Environmental illness directly, but can name AIDS. The speech to which I am referring takes place at the conclusion of the film, during the impromptu birthday party at Wrenwood:

You pulled me through a really hard period. Anyway I couldn't have  
done it without you. I don't know what I'm saying. Just that... I'm

really hating myself before I came here... So I'm trying to see myself hopefully more as I am. More positive, like seeing the pluses, like I think its slowly opening up now, people's minds... like educating and... and AIDS and... and other types of diseases cause, cause and it... it is ... it is a disease cause it's out there, we just have to be more aware of it, make people more aware of it, even ourselves like going... reading labels and and going into buildings...

Her speech, wrenching to watch in its stammering awkwardness, is composed of an at best semi-coherent string of phrases which echo the promotional propaganda of Wrenwood. The rhetoric of self-hatred finds its source in a group therapy session, and the discourse of awareness parrots the infomercial which introduced Carol to Wrenwood in the first place. Carol's tenuous synthesis of the language fragments that surround her seems to be another form of environmental pathology: her speech, like her body, is both painfully symptomatic and painfully indeterminate.

Less easily traced, however, is Carol's invocation of AIDS as compared to the missing mention of her own diagnosis. Before relocating to Wrenwood, Carol made the defiant proclamation to her husband and doctor "I have a chemical impairment." But now she appears less certain. And, indeed, the film seems less certain: in the scene immediately preceding the birthday speech, Carol coughs and then extricates herself from Greg's embrace explaining, "I think it might be your cologne." "Honey," Greg replies, "I'm not wearing any cologne." The failure of chemical logic, here, mirrors the omission of the names Environmental illness or Multiple Chemical Sensitivity from Carol's birthday speech, suggesting that the name has lost its comprehensive diagnostic—and political—power.

Absence and negativity subtend her speech. AIDS exists in it to mark, metonymically, the absence of satisfactory diagnosis. Linked to the absence of a label

is the absence of an intelligible identity: as Carol says, “I’m trying to see myself...more positive.” If we take “positive” to mean that which can be named, claimed, or made communicable, Carol’s uncertain attempt at self-perception is legible only as it fades away: it is only in the identification of negativity, of subjectivity as unavailable, of impasse, that Carol can speak of self and sickness. Lest this claim be mistaken for a callous celebration of the unintelligible and the untreatable (and thus as a disavowal of all that is painful and unsettling in Carol’s silences), I would here want to recall Rose’s (1986) reminder that the “right to an impasse” must stop short of “reifying the idea of a pure fragmentation which would be as futile as it would be psychically unmanageable for the subject” (Rose, p.14). To acknowledge the right to an impasse—to claim that sometimes irresolution is better than forceful resolution—is not to dismiss the pain that accompanies illegibility.

Nonetheless, I want to hold onto the idea that a particular relationship between sexual and diagnostic impasse is what is at stake in *Safe*. In the course of the film, the disease that seems initially to stand in for an unavailable or inarticulate sexual identity ends up reenacting the very impasse it was called upon to correct. Carol’s turn to disease as a means of narrating identity and giving shape to desire fails to provide her with anything like definition. Rather, she is left with yet another set of unanswerable questions, another register of uncertain names and epistemologies.

As Carol’s unhappy search for a diagnostic identity that will allow her a cure makes so apparent, we cannot easily dismiss the psychic need for diagnosis, nor can we abandon the search for ethical models of pathology that allow for, without utterly overtaking, the crucial psychic space medical experiences have come to occupy. And if rigid diagnosis is inadequate, so too is the attempted corrective in the celebratory recourse to fluidity or “pure fragmentation.” Carol is no postmodern heroine. That pathology can come—however provisionally—to represent and make narratable

psychic life need not also mean, of course, that disease represents a desirable or even adequate remission from the problem of sexual identity. But still it will not do to roundly dismiss models of sexual and psychic life indebted to models of pathology *because* they are so indebted: it is this space of impasse and overdetermination that a feminist practice of reading illness must, however uncomfortably, inhabit.

In Carol's case, the movement is not from impasse to resolution, but from one impasse to another. Here, impasse marks not failure in the classic sense, but a contentious negotiation between the psychic and the social, a negotiation which must, however painfully, sometimes be allowed to break down. Where "The Yellow Wallpaper" narrates a breakdown that could have been prevented, *Safe* narrates what happens when we insist that *all* breakdowns can be prevented. *Safe* asks us to occupy a position of diagnostic agnosticism; the film makes the startling suggestion that sometimes the only way to be ethical is not to know. And it is at this moment of not knowing that feminist treatment—the analysis of a problem without a resolution, the management of a disease without a name—must begin to function as an end in its own right.

## Conclusion

### Sexual Harassment and the Legal Language of Hostile Environments

This project began as a question about the re-emergence in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century of what seems to be an oddly literary—and oddly dated—nineteenth century model for understanding the interaction between subject and environment in popular science. As I argued in the Introduction, miasma, insofar as it encourages the reading of environment as multidimensional—as social, psychic, aesthetic, and medical at the same time—can function as a challenge to the limits of single-source narratives: Barbara Epstein uses the language of miasma to challenge the limits of narrowly bacteriological explanations for chronic diseases in poor urban neighborhoods, claiming that we “We don’t have a germ theory for chronic diseases like stroke, heart disease, diabetes and cancer...we need to examine this miasma with a different kind of microscope” (77). This dissertation argues that literary studies, as well, needs to develop a different kind of microscope to examine miasmatic imagery.

In this conclusion I suggest that a miasmatic idiom also structures legal conceptions of injury. I mark the emergence—around 1980—of a legal articulation of a miasmatic environment which forms the subject through the infliction of injuries: the hostile work environment. The evolution of the hostile work environment shares some of the logic of environmental illness, a diagnosis I examine in Chapter Four, which also emerged around 1980<sup>39</sup>. The phrase “hostile work environment”—a formulation developed by Catherine MacKinnon as a means of naming forms of workplace sex discrimination that are not “quid pro quo” in structure—first appears in the EEOC

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<sup>39</sup> As one science historian remarks, “Before 1980, sick building syndrome did not exist” (Murphy 2)

workplace guidelines of 1980<sup>40</sup>. This appearance, then, is contemporaneous with the emergence of an epidemiological critique of the conditions of modern homes and office buildings: both are articulated in an idiom of pathological environment—an idiom, in other words, of bad air. In the 1980s and 1990s, most of those diagnosed with environmental illness and its correlate, sick building syndrome, were middle-class women; of course, women were also the subjects of late twentieth century sexual harassment legislation.

My argument that the hostile work environment functions as a miasmatic model of gender-based injury is indebted to the work of political theorist Wendy Brown, who argues that the late modern subject has come to depend, thoroughly and destructively, on a concept of identity-based injuries and the compensations of state-sponsored (that is, legislative and juridical ) modes of redress for those injuries. The logic and language of bad air, however, would seem to revise or at least complicate what Brown describes as a search for the source of suffering. What happens when the agent of injury is nothing less than the air we breathe? How does the circuit of suffering and redress look when the agent of injury is named as the environment itself? These are questions that legal scholarship has yet to address, and which I will begin to address here. I am, then, interested in those moments where the agent of identity-based, and particularly gender-based injury is located not in an individual subject or even institution, but is given instead rather more vague—and more miasmatic—atmospheric coordinates.

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<sup>40</sup> “Harassment on the basis of sex is a violation of section 703 of title VII. Unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical contact of a sexual nature constitute sexual harassment when...such conduct has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with an individual’s work performance or creating an intimidating, hostile, or offensive working environment” (1604.11).

One of the key texts here, of course, is Catherine MacKinnon's *Sexual Harassment of Working Women*.<sup>41</sup> While many feminist critics have outlined the limits of Mackinnon's formulation of pornography, I would like to put that critique in the context of another formulation also credited to her—the hostile work environment. In both formulations, MacKinnon articulates a female subject formed by her availability to injury: hostile work environment standards then, like pornography, assume a subject formed in an injurious fashion. Brown argues

MacKinnon implies, and many feminists agree, that women are in greater need of social equality and political protection than of freedom... While the effort to replace liberalism's abstract formulation of equality with legal recognitions of injurious social stratifications is understandable, what such arguments do not query is whether legal 'protection' for a certain injury-forming identity discursively entrenches the injury-identity connection that it denounces. Might such protection codify within the law the very powerlessness it means to redress? (21)

I think that a variant of Brown's question is also appropriate for the hostile work environment standard: might the language of hostile environments work, in sexual harassment law, to entrench the action of the assaultive environments it means to correct by defining women as workers who are liable to be injured by sexually assaultive environments? I would suggest that part of the power of MacKinnon's formulation is its reworking of the assaultive environment idiom in terms of sexual language: this reworking, while often critiqued for its formulation of the assaultive

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<sup>41</sup> While legal criticism universally attributes the concept of the hostile work environment to MacKinnon, and in particular to *Sexual Harassment of Working Women*, the phrase does not, curiously enough, ever actually appear in her book. While one lawyer has suggested to me that the phrase may have originated in testimony MacKinnon gave before Congress in its 1980 hearings reviewing the EEOC standards of 1980, I have so far been unable to gain access to the transcripts of these hearings.

nature of sex, needs also to be critiqued in terms of its formulation of the assaultive nature of environment itself.

As I indicate here, environmental illness and sexual harassment law share a language; they also share a history. For, in different ways, sick building syndrome and sexual harassment law both developed miasmatic language to articulate a shared goal: both originate in attempts to de-segregate the work place. In her historical account of the development of sexual harassment law, Reva Siegel marks the late 1970's as the beginning of contemporary harassment law because "An active second-wave women's movement was actively asserting women's right to partake in traditionally male practices, preserves, and prerogatives in matters of work...At stake was the gendered character of work itself...sexualized attention emerged as a weapon in this turf war, a means of making women feel so unwelcome they would eventually leave" (19). Similarly, as science historian Michelle Murphy explains "Office buildings in the twentieth century were deeply gendered spaces...Beginning in the 1970's and through the 1980's—the decades when sick building syndrome erupted—office workers could draw on resurgent feminisms to challenge this gendered division of labor. Thus, protests over the environmental conditions in nonindustrial workplaces happened contemporaneously with accusations of gender oppression" (5). In both legal and public health discourses, then, the naming of an assaultive environment enables a critique of the discriminatory conditions which produced that environment in the first place.

But, in a curious reversal, Vicki Schultz's analysis of the employer response to sexual harassment litigation suggests that hostile environment standards have encouraged the prohibition of any sexual speech in the workplace at the expense of ignoring gendered segregation—and discrimination—itsself: "in the hands of organizational actors, the concept of sex harassment has been given a direction of its

own, diverted from the larger goals of employment discrimination law” (Schultz 2003 2064). I would like to suggest that it is specifically the language of assaultive environments that has, in the corporate applications of sexual harassment law, become as much a source of obfuscation as one of redress. If the formulation of sick building syndrome allowed women to name the effects of discrimination, the formulation of hostile work environments has, it seems, now begun to allow for the displacement of such critiques.<sup>42</sup>

The use of sanitary idioms may itself participate in the phenomenon Schultz describes: the language of hostile environments anticipate—even facilitates—the interpretations which have ultimately rendered it underinclusive. The language of environmental injury relays a sanitarian logic—a logic which was both the source and the limitation of women’s civic participation in public health discourses of the nineteenth century—into the contemporary legal arena. There are consequences for contemporary legal arguments built upon this logic, particularly when the history of this logic remains invisible. Legal history provides a context for the role of environment in sexual harassment legislation, even as it seems to ignore the language of that context. According to legal historian Judith Resnick

Harassment law has always been predicated on moving beyond extant rules of law and cultural assumptions. Imagine that workplace safety is once again understood as a central obligation of government. Regulation of occupational safety and hazards might comprehend that, in addition to risk of injury from poorly designed or malfunctioning machines, from air in need of filtration, and from work spaces that

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<sup>42</sup> Schultz suggests that sexual harassment law, in that it seems to be disproportionately applied to the sexual speech of men of color, may even have “unleashed a discriminatory force of its own” (2003 2063).

cause back and eye strain, workers are also at risk of injury from unsafe interpersonal interactions. (265)

Resnick, then, suggests that conceptions of environmental injury provided a legal means of “moving beyond...cultural assumptions” about women in the workplace: sexual harassment law was initially a way of moving beyond a legal and interpretive impasse. Indeed, she is proposing that the inadequacies of sexual harassment law could be remedied by a more explicit emphasis on the environment itself through the incorporation of sexual harassment into more expansive paradigms of worker safety. Curiously, however, the history of the language of the hostile environment standard remains unexplored in legal criticism.

This is a significant because, despite their shared environmental logic, popular science and legal applications of the assaultive force of miasma have headed in two different directions: science histories seem to value the history and open-endedness of miasma, while the courts have rendered assaultive environments in a narrow and limited fashion. These narrow legal interpretations are, I propose, in part a function of the disinclination of legal critics to take into account the nineteenth century origins of the language of bad air and assaultive environments. I am proposing, then, that Resnick’s suggestion should be accompanied by a parallel inquiry into the nature of not only the applications, but also into the language of the formulation of the hostile work environment.

The contemporary cultural applications of my dissertation’s reading of the literary language of bad air extend beyond literary criticism: the miasmatic hypothesis—the proposition that subjects are shaped by the environmental risks which make them legible in the first place—structures sexual harassment law, as well. I would suggest, however, the potential of the bad air narrative to account for multidimensionality has been eviscerated in contemporary legal applications: the assaultive environment,

initially imagined as a means of encoding a multitude of discriminatory factors under one heading, has now managed to reduce a range of discriminatory factors to one—sexual language and overture—while still operating according to a misleading language of complexity. Thus I conclude that deployments of the miasmatic idiom within sexual harassment law now contribute to an obfuscation rather than an articulation of the complexities of psycho-social interaction, and become themselves harmful to the causes of social justice they were designed to address.

An attention to the language itself of the hostile work environment standard — what I have called a literary style of reading bad air—may provide an interpretive means of moving beyond the current emphasis on sexualized environments in the application of sexual harassment law—what legal theorist Vicki Schultz (perhaps the preeminent feminist legal critic of sexual harassment law) calls “the sexual desire-dominance paradigm.” A literary style of reading bad air bad air may help interrupt the danger that the hostile environment can become, when read narrowly as sexual speech, can act to obfuscate rather than address non-sexual forms of gender discrimination. It demands that one to attend to the ways the language of the hostile environment has been politically mobilized, and thus emphasizes the complex forces which contribute to the creation of the discriminatory environment in the first place. If the language of the hostile environment is to remain a constructive part of sexual harassment law, it must reclaim a commitment to explaining the complexities of discriminatory environments, rather than defining them as primarily sexual.

I am making two distinct but related observations about the rhetoric of bad air in sexual harassment law: first, that the language of hostile environments has a gendered history embedded in Victorian women’s domestic activism that is not consistent with contemporary feminist aims and second, that this language, despite its limitations, initially allowed for an expansive “moving beyond” quid pro quo forms of

harassment, an interpretive scope which has since been compromised. For rather than acting as a means of making sexual harassment actionable by including sexual overture and language as one of many discriminatory behaviors, current formulations of the hostile work environment over-emphasize sexual language and under-emphasize sexual discrimination which takes other forms. This underemphasis, I suggest, is in part due to an older model of a miasmatic gendered identity which defined the female subject as formed through environmental injury and originated in women's domestic activism of the nineteenth century. By retaining the older model of gender while abandoning the overdetermined interpretive model, contemporary legal miasma has reproduced the dangers of miasmatic language while eliminating the benefits of an inclusive model: instead of allowing for a more expansive definition of sex discrimination, the interpretations of the hostile environment have become overly focused on sexual speech. Making this point in her assessment the state of sexual harassment law in an influential 1998 article entitled "Reconceptualizing Sexual Harassment" Schultz challenges what she calls "the sexual desire-dominance paradigm":

the courts have restricted the conception of hostile work environment harassment to male-female sexual advances and other explicitly sexualized actions perceived to be driven by sexual designs. In doing so, courts have created a framework that is underinclusive. By defining the essence of harassment as sexual advances, the paradigm has obscured—and excluded—some of the most pervasive forms of gender hostility experienced on a day-to-day basis by many women (and men) in the workplace. (1681)

But rather than constituting a break with the original intention of the hostile work environment standard, as Schultz argues, I would suggest that the underinclusive

winnowing down of “environment” to sexual overture is consistent with the long discursive history of assaultive environments that I analyzed in Chapters Two and Three, environments always understood as sexualized or sex-specific agents of aggression.

In both legal and public health discourses, then, the naming of an assaultive environment enables a critique of the discriminatory conditions which produced that environment in the first place. Schultz’s analysis of the employer response to sexual harassment litigation, however, suggests that hostile environment standards have encouraged the prohibition of any sexual speech in the workplace at the expense of ignoring gendered segregation—and discrimination—itsself: “in the hands of organizational actors, the concept of sex harassment has been given a direction of its own, diverted from the larger goals of employment discrimination law” (Schultz 2003 2064). I would add that it is specifically the language of assaultive environments that has, in the corporate applications of sexual harassment law, become as much a source of obfuscation as one of redress. If the formulation of sick building syndrome allowed women to name the effects of discrimination, the formulation of hostile work environments has, it seems, now begun to allow for the displacement of such critiques.<sup>43</sup>

I suggest that the ease with which these displacements have occurred may be related to the origins of the language of assaultive environments itself, a language which originates in late nineteenth and early twentieth century women’s activism. Siegel indicates that the logic of the nineteenth century settlement house, which I address in Chapter Three, was instrumental to early legal attempts to address sex-based employment discrimination:

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<sup>43</sup> Schultz suggests that sexual harassment law, in that it seems to be disproportionately applied to the sexual speech of men of color, may even have “unleashed a discriminatory force of its own” (2003 2063).

In 1908, settlement workers...took a saloon-keeper to court who fired a young barmaid when he discovered that she was about to bear a child by him; after losing the case, Abbott and Breckinridge turned to organizing immigrant protective associations” in the model of the “settlement movement. (Siegel 7)

Suggestive as this history is, however, Siegel does not take it up. And, indeed, I would suggest that legal theory has yet to fully interrogate the political consequences of the origins of this language of gendered environmental assault. The settlement house movement Siegel cites was indebted to the emerging domestic sciences for much of its language, and much of this language understood environments as fundamentally hostile if not properly managed by women. For example, in 1912 Ellen Richards, one of the founders of home economics who I discuss at length in Chapter Three, called her practice “the science of controllable environment.” Home economics, I argued, was a form of knowledge organized around the prevention of environmental injury. One of the legacies, then, of domestic science is that environments, incorrectly managed, can hurt women, and this idea is itself the product of a nineteenth century discourse which encoded a gendered division of labor into the language of social activism by proposing that women could participate in the social arena only if the social was understood according to a logic “municipal housekeeping”—as an enlarged version of the household; this gendered division of labor may still be present within the very language designed to combat it. In other words, if the language of assaultive environments is based upon home economics, upon a logic that fundamentally imagined women at home, then there may be a problem with a theory of women at work already based on this privatized vision.

As Schultz elaborates in a suggestively titled 2003 essay “The Sanitized Workplace” the tendency of corporate sexual harassment policies to forbid any sexual

language comes at the expense of both the psychic lives of employees and at the same time has discouraged companies from pursuing gender-based discrimination which does not assume a sexual form. I would argue that the very language of the hostile environment exacerbates this latter tendency by identifying an amorphous agent—the environment—at the expense of identifying other more concrete forms of discrimination—including, according to Schultz

characterizing the work as appropriate for men only; denigrating women's performance or ability to master the job; providing patronizing forms of help in performing the job; withholding the training, information, or opportunity to learn to do the job well; engaging in deliberate work sabotage; providing sexist evaluations of women's performance or denying them deserved promotions; isolating women from the social networks that confer a sense of belonging; denying women the perks or privileges that are required for success; assigning women sex-stereotyped service tasks that lie outside the job description (such as cleaning or serving coffee): engaging in taunting, pranks, and other forms of hazing designed to remind women that they are different and out of place. (1687)

The legal priority of hostile environments means that the discriminatory behaviors listed above are now only actionable based on a separate “disparate treatment” claim: this has served, Schultz argues, to make sex discrimination cases without a sexual component very difficult to win. An overly limited style of reading miasma functions, then, as a source of obfuscation of discrimination. While feminist legal scholars originally used the language of injurious environments as a way of naming indirect forms of discrimination, this language now serves the opposite effect: it has become a means of clouding over the very same discriminatory behaviors it was designed to

make actionable. Bad air has ceased to make discrimination more visible, and has instead become a legal basis for ignoring it altogether.

The irony of Schultz's title is that she uses the sanitary idiom as a way of trying to critique what we might call the sanitary effects of a language of hostile environments. Her title, I think, gets to the heart of the problem: it may not be possible to critique the failure of the hostile work environment standard to effectively address discrimination when the language of the critique is itself a holdover from a nineteenth century model of difference. Schultz argues that it was not sexual prurience so much as a Taylorist commitment to excising "unproductive" sexual behaviors that has contributed to the corporate interpretation of hostile environment as a sexual environment: "Our commitment to workplace asexuality is... a legacy of our historic commitment to a certain conception of organized rationality. It wasn't Victorian churchwomen, but twentieth-century organization men who took the lead in creating the asexual imperative" (2062). But Victorian women play a larger part here than Schultz acknowledges: the sanitary idiom that forms her title is a legacy of nineteenth century public health, not organization rationality. Perhaps, though, it is not so much public morality campaigns as it public health campaigns that constitute the relevant point of reference. Schultz's insistence that Victorian women have nothing to do with the problem seems to re-enact the masculinist claims to the irrelevance of miasmatic thinking, and, as a result, dismisses the gendered experiences that she intends to make legally visible. This makes it all the more difficult to imagine hostile work environment standards without imagining desexualization: if one discounts what Schultz refers to as corporate "sanitization campaigns," how can one then account for the fully human worker that she wants employers to support? In other words, if we are to effectively reconceive of hostile environments, we need to at least consider the vision of sex and gender that they have historically stood for. I would suggest that

feminist legal scholarship might benefit from reckoning with sanitary history rather than dismissing it.

For if miasmatic narratives have value, it is because they introduce the possibility of telling multiple narratives simultaneously without requiring the narrator to commit to one narrative over the other. But the underinclusive winnowing down of hostile work environments to sexual language, at the expense of the recognition of other forms of workplace discrimination, suggests that workplace interpretations of the hostile work environment standard have in fact managed to use the language of miasma while doing away with the model of multi-dimensional interpretation that gave that language value in the first place. The only way for this language to retain its political utility as a non-reductive form of analysis is to reintroduce what I have called a literary style of reading bad air.

The miasmatic language of the hostile work environment no longer encodes an attempt to name a multitude of discriminatory causes in one phrase, but instead reduces a variety of causes to one cause under the heading of multitude. The hostile work environment has become simply the sexual environment, and this redefinition of environment is itself hostile to the cause of workplace justice. The return of a newly narrow understanding of miasmatic environments, then, is not one we should welcome. If sexual harassment law is to retain the language of assaultive environments, it must commit itself to an analysis of the various ways that work environments can produce discriminatory results. It is the reintroduction of a historicized, feminist, and political miasma to the scene of interpretation that this dissertation has attempted: while I do not think that we can eradicate the potent cultural logic of miasma, I do think we can influence the methodology with which it is read.

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