White Liberal Identity, Literary Pedagogy, and Classic Realism

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Published by The Ohio State University Press


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Members of this Left find America unforgivable. . . . This leads them to step back from their country and, as they say, “theorize it.” . . . It leads them to prefer knowledge to hope.

American academic feminism operates out of fear, I believe, of repeating the definitional exclusions, violences, and imaginative lapses of feminism since ’68, of repeating American/white feminism’s imperialist, racist, heterosexist, class-biased, culture-bound, and overoptimistic parochialism.
—Lauren Berlant, “’68, or Something”

Knowledge, Theory, and Paralysis

Richard Rorty and Lauren Berlant share similar worries about today’s academic Left. Both are concerned that certain forms of knowledge and theory currently influencing many on the academic Left also act as constraints on the Left’s vital tasks of imagining and constructing a better future. Both Rorty and Berlant want to combat the intellectual, emotional, and political blockages, the tendencies towards inertia and risk avoidance, that they see as byproducts of intellectuals’ dwelling on past failures or mistakes. Berlant finds a fear of making political mistakes on the academic Left, as well as suspicion of and even hostility toward the utopian energies associated with the “revolutionary projects” of the 1960s, which many leftist academics today dismiss as naïve and narcissistic. ¹ Rorty insists that a generation of academic leftists has become obsessed with the United States’ failure to live up to its democratic, egalitarian promise. He
worry that, in the minds of these intellectuals, “the two-hundred year history of the United States—indeed, the history of the European and American peoples since the Enlightenment—has been pervaded by hypocrisy and self-deception.”

Possessing no hope that their country can be authentically changed, Rorty claims, leftist intellectuals in the United States find a posture of “national self-mockery and self-disgust” more congenial than any attempt at democratic political action. But such emotions are luxuries, Rorty insists, “which agents—either individuals or nations—cannot afford.”

Despite meaningful differences in their perspectives and aims, Rorty and Berlant together help frame what became an increasingly problematic question for me as I researched and wrote earlier chapters of this book. What did it mean that my work seemed to be participating in, maybe even contributing to, a feeling that I also recognize on the academic Left, not least as an intimate facet of my own political subjectivity: the feeling that we know too much to act effectively? Among other things, as Berlant indicates, we know that 1960s radicals were indeed overly naïve in their beliefs about social, economic, and political change. We know that some of their worst failures were due to the fact that they did not sufficiently theorize power, subjectivity, or representation. We also know that putative liberation movements have sometimes rested on the continuing oppression of others.

Our well-informed anxieties, based as they are on some of the most compelling historical and theoretical knowledge that we have acquired, can debilitate thought and action. Although such feelings no doubt affect people in different forms and to varying degrees, it is safe to say that many leftist academics at least sometimes feel paralyzed because: 1) they have difficulty imagining that whatever they do as scholars and teachers will ever bring about meaningful social change, and 2) they cannot help but recognize ways in which they themselves will inevitably continue to participate in—and to benefit from—regimes of social, economic, or epistemological injustice.

Wendy Brown’s explication of Walter Benjamin’s term “Left melancholy” describes a stance that previous chapters of this book might be read as supporting. “Left melancholy” characterizes “a Left that has become more attached to its impossibility than to its potential fruitfulness.” In her discussion of liberal guilt, Julie Ellison emphasizes that the “liberal superego demands direct action,” but at the same time it assures us that our actions are useless or worse. This is why, “in the throes of liberal guilt, all action becomes gesture, expressive of a desire to effect change or offer help that is never sufficient to the scale of the problem. Actions are carried out in sorrow. One is sorry in advance for the social consequences of one’s acts.” Although
I hope that my previous chapters are not reducible merely to such a stance, I have indeed elaborated upon, for example, the “impossibility” of a white antiracist teacher of *Huck Finn*. I have argued that the University of Texas, and by implication other universities, are constitutively unable to confront that the Enlightenment commitments defining their mission, as well as the ongoing quotidian practices sustaining their institutional existence, might both be inextricable from white supremacy. I have sought to demonstrate that, in culturally symptomatic cases, achieving more liberated, more progressive-seeming gender identities for white men and women participates in a complex dynamic of displacing representational and material burdens onto racial and national others. Nonetheless, I hope in this final chapter to develop at least some beginnings of a response to the essential question that emerges from both Rorty’s book and Berlant’s essay: Given all of our knowledge and theory, how do leftist intellectuals retain what Berlant calls a “radical openness” at least toward the act of continuing to think about “possibilities” for “broadscale social transformation.”

In what follows, I link liberal guilt and its potential for paralysis together with the fear of political error, failure, and humiliation whose constraining effects Berlant addresses; with Left melancholy as Brown understands it; and with the forms of knowledge and theory that Rorty sees as so energizing to political agency. Treating these phenomena as continuous with one another involves certain slippages of definition. Yet guilt, humiliation, and melancholy share many attributes, including self-denigration and difficulty moving or even looking toward a future different from the past. As for liberal guilt’s relationship with knowledge and theory, Ellison’s illuminating history of the phenomenon explains that it has long had a symbiotic relationship with both: “Guilt spawns theory. As the structuring of painfully interrelated information, theory induces guilt.” The more systematically we come to understand our own position in unjust, pain-causing structures, the more implicated, hamstrung, and guilty we feel. And the guiltier we feel, the more theorizing we do.

Ellison traces liberal guilt’s emergence as a culturally prominent category to the eighteenth century. Theatrical and literary forms increasingly offered access to “a concept of nation, empire, economy, or some other system that was understood to produce suffering for some and privilege for others,” particularly racialized others. She argues that, both on and off the stage, educated white “men of sensibility” emotively displayed their “moral embarrassment,” including literal tears of sympathy shed over “the pain caused by political arrangements from which artists and intellectuals knowingly benefited but at the same time could not control.” Today, as George Packer writes, liberal guilt “leaves people with the best will in the world feel[ing] thoroughly enmeshed in the current arrangements and
powerless to do more than express a vague wish..." As a result, we find ourselves allowing chronic social ills to go untreated, enduring "them with the self-contempt of a man who can’t stop overeating even though his joints are swollen with gout and his face keeps breaking out."11

Many on both the Right and the Left see liberal guilt as functioning ideologically in support of exploitative relations. They take its meaning to be: "As long as I feel sufficiently guilty, I can retain both my material privileges and my personal virtue."12 Although Ellison does not entirely reject this interpretation of liberal guilt as self-excusing, self-aggrandizing bad faith, she also insists on taking it seriously as a multivalent phenomenon.13 If liberal guilt spurs, as it often does, the continuing production of more complex and nuanced forms of understanding, then, Ellison argues, the potentially salutary effects of that understanding should never simply be dismissed. Bruce Robbins concurs, insisting that there are many good reasons today to nurture even the "constraints, obscurities, hesitations, and self-questionings" imposed by liberal guilt and its related forms of awareness, which usefully temper our urges toward the "illusory satisfactions of immediate action in a domain of ostensible political transparency and ethical universality."14 Berlant observes that academic feminism’s urgent desire to avoid reiterating harmful academic and political practices has helped propel the field toward cultivating "importantly non-optimistic relations to global capitalist forms, to national identities, to liberal promises for universal suffrage."15 And for critic Daniel Born, the “alteration of the liberal voice from confidence to despair, from prescription to guilt,” which he finds occurring in such nineteenth-century English novelists as Dickens and Eliot, “signals an enlargement and maturation of liberal concern.” The effect on the writers’ middle-class audiences was to bring home “the necessity of enlarging [their] sense of social breakdown to encompass social and not merely individual terms of explanation.”16

Yet most commentators equally recognize the perils of "paralysis and inertia" that lie just on the other side of our knowledge about overarching systems in which we are implicated.17 The challenge, then, is how to remain infiltrated and instructed by what Ellison calls our “complicated awareness”—whether of the disturbing history of white middle-class “liberation” movements, or of our own implication in both local and global economies of exploitation—without being politically immobilized by that awareness.

Choosing against Liberal Guilt?

Rorty’s own recommendation, drawn from his reading both of the American pragmatist tradition in philosophy and of canonical American literature, is that we should self-consciously choose Hope in Place of
Knowledge, the title of a 1999 collection of lectures. Leftist intellectuals must determine to replace any “shared knowledge of what is already real with social hope for what might become real.”

We must opt to believe that meaningful social change lies within our grasp. To counter the influence of overly negative understandings of the United States, Rorty celebrates a long-standing liberal view of American exceptionalism, which holds that “America has always been a future-oriented country, a country which delights in the fact that it invented itself in the relatively recent past.” To enable a progressive political vision and the possibility of acting on that vision, leftist intellectuals must embrace a quintessentially American “willingness to turn one’s back both on the past and on the attempt of the classical philosophy of Europe to ground the past in the eternal.” We should just say no to modes of knowledge or theory that might induce feelings of cynicism, despair, or political pessimism.

As I have tried to demonstrate in this book, however, a future-oriented determination to regard the past as a time distinct from our own now—a determination which would seem to allow us to make ever-increasing “progress” in separating ourselves from what we find unacceptable in the past—renders us obtuse to the past’s persistently shaping effects on our institutions and ourselves. Such misrecognition ensures that the past will continue covertly to rub against the present, producing both continuing injustices and uncomfortable pleasures. Moreover, to trade our guilt- or despair-inducing knowledge “of what is already real” in return for “social hope for what might become real” (or for that matter even to bracket off negatively or ironically charged knowledge for our private moments, as Rorty elsewhere recommends) is not a psychological exchange achievable within anything except the most impoverished versions of the psyche found in inspirational self-help books, with titles such as *Good-Bye to Guilt.* Especially when “knowledge” of one’s own (liberal) guilt manifests itself in the extreme forms of “hopelessness,” “self-loathing,” and even “bottomless self-disgust” that Rorty invokes, how could anything be as simple as his voluntarist language of “choices” would suggest? As George Shulman aptly observes, “for Rorty, people simply get over the past, or willfully ‘choose’ not to repeat it.” But one cannot simply make the “choice” to “deny” theoretically informed recognitions of one’s own guilty implication in oppressive structures, and thereby, à la Walt Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and John Dewey (as Rorty reads them), “make room for pure joyous hope.”

Both Rorty’s diagnosis of left-liberal self-loathing among academics and his prescription that those laboring under it should simply decide to “deny” the “knowledge” that can lead to feelings of guilty implication are simplistic. They are simplistic because liberal guilt is structural guilt: that
is, recognition of one’s connection to immoral or unjust structures outside of one’s direct control, structures so pervasive and complex that one cannot simply wake up one day and decide to dissociate from them, to leave them behind in the dust. Even worse, many left-liberal academics, certainly including myself, are not unambiguously certain that we would want to give up all of the advantages that these guilt-inducing structures provide to us and many of those closest to us, even if we could.

Edith Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence,* a historical novel about elite society in “Old New York,” may seem oblique to the questions about liberal guilt and its potentially immobilizing effects that are raised by Berlant and Rorty, as well as, implicitly, by earlier chapters of this book. In the self-consciously “presentist” reading that follows, however, I seek to refract these simultaneously psychological and political questions through Wharton’s rich literary text. Wharton’s novel cannot point us toward an “answer” to the “problems” posed by liberal guilt and leftist melancholia. Taken as a prism, however, *The Age of Innocence* can help both to defamiliarize these all too familiar phenomena and to offer fresh figurations of their dynamics. I will suggest that Wharton’s novel may thus help us at least begin to imagine new approaches to this troubled terrain.

**Theorizing Innocence**

Although it would not quite be accurate to claim that Newland Archer, *The Age of Innocence*’s protagonist, is consumed by guilt over his own material and social privileges, Archer’s ambivalent sense of self is expressed through his “complicated awareness” of interlocking systems that produce benefit for some and suffering for others; just this awareness, Ellison argues, is a defining element of liberal guilt. Through most of Wharton’s novel, Archer both recognizes old New York’s social structures as arbitrary, unfair, and often cruel, and also lives in such a way as to identify himself and his interests with those structures. Exclaiming over after-dinner cigars that “women ought to be as free as we are,” he privately recognizes that “such verbal generosities were in fact only a humbugging disguise of the inexorable conventions that tied things together and bound people down to the old pattern” (89). Archer is often painfully aware of the clash between his trenchantly critical social views and his own rather conventional life choices: “Archer tried to console himself with the thought that he was not such an ass as Larry Lefferts . . . but the difference was after all one of intelligence and not of standards” (90). The result of this awareness is that he often feels his own “real life” is elsewhere, deferred, waiting for him to live it.
As for innocence, Archer initially defines his own identity against it. He aligns “innocence” with his fiancée, and then wife, May Welland. The novel’s first pages introduce May to us at the opera, a performance of Faust, where we see her filtered through Newland’s gaze as “a young girl in white with eyes ecstatically fixed on the stage-lovers.” She carries a bouquet of white lilies, which she softly touches with “white-gloved finger tips.” “The darling!” thinks Newland, “She doesn’t even guess what it is all about” (59). By “it” he means Faust’s attempts to seduce Marguerite. Newland takes for granted that May is innocent not only of sexual experience but also of any knowledge or representations related to sex. Looking forward to their honeymoon, Newland envisions himself exercising his “manly privilege” to initiate May not only into sexuality but, simultaneously, into the pleasures of grown-up literary classics such as Faust. Newland sets his fantasy of manly initiation abroad, outside New York society “in some scene of old European witchery” (60–61).

Newland Archer is himself the character most frequently aligned with knowledge and theory in Wharton’s narrative. Describing May’s absolute “purity,” he situates himself outside innocence, looking in. He feels himself in several senses more experienced and sophisticated even than the other “white-waistcoated” gentlemen around him at the opera: “He had probably read more, thought more, and even seen a good deal more of the world, than any other man of the number” (61). Indeed, as critics have recognized, Newland explicitly uses theories and tools of ethnographic analysis to aid in his understanding of his own social group, which he thinks of as akin to a “primitive” “tribe.”24 Wharton herself read widely in anthropology (Bronislaw Malinowski was a personal friend), and she implies that Archer has assimilated at least what would have been available by the 1870s, including Edward B. Tylor’s Primitive Man (1865).

Newland’s analytic sophistication reveals itself a few chapters later, for instance, as, alone in his study, he reaches an anthropologically informed deconstructive understanding of May’s “innocence”:

[All this frankness and innocence were only an artificial product. Untrained human nature was not frank and innocent; it was full of the twists and defenses of an instinctive guile. And he felt himself oppressed by this creation of factitious purity, so cunningly manufactured by a conspiracy of mothers and aunts and grandmothers and long-dead ancestresses, because it was supposed to be what he wanted, what he had a right to, in order that he might exercise his lordly pleasure in smashing it like an image made of snow. (91)

Newland’s analysis effectively turns inside out Western culture’s most
influential narrative of innocence and its loss, the *Genesis* account of Eden and the Fall. Newland displaces innocence from its primal position as humankind’s original state, subsequently corrupted by the serpent who introduces guile and deception into Eden, and therefore into human experience. Instead of innocence, Newland asserts, guile and its twists are themselves primary. “Innocence” is a species of guile, secondary and derivative. Innocence is an “artificial product,” “cunningly manufactured” for the marriage market via conscious and unconscious training.²⁵

Still inverting *Genesis*, where the joint human fall from innocence renders humankind forever postlapsarian, Newland soon begins to theorize that what might really be in some deep sense irreversible is the transformation that occurs, among women of his own upper class, from humanity’s original guile into feminine “innocence” as a historically specific form of artifice. May’s mother, who insists on never being told anything “unpleasant,” is for Newland an image of “the innocence that seals the mind against imagination and the heart against experience” (271, 171). Mrs. Welland’s cunningly manufactured, “artificial” innocence has become impenetrable, a fixed identity. Although after their marriage May ceases physically to be a virgin, Newland continues to marvel “at the way in which experience drop[s] away from her” (221). May’s own artificially constructed feminine “innocence,” he fears, may soon constitute an obliterating “negation” that yields only blankness, and that can never be reversed (224).

Drawing on “some of the new ideas in his scientific books,” in particular “the much-cited instance of the Kentucky cave fish, which had ceased to develop eyes because they had no use for them, Newland wonders what if, when he had bidden May Welland to open hers, they could only look out blankly at blankness?” (121). Newland’s “scientific” theory that May’s innocence may be an irreversible modification, analogous to the blindness of the Kentucky cave fish, is at the heart of why, as he sits in his study, “he felt himself oppressed” (91). He foresees that May’s “invincible innocence,” the “indestructible youthfulness” that keeps her forever “pure,” will constrain his own freedom and individuality (171, 207). “He perceived with a flash of chilling insight that in future many problems would be thus negatively solved for him... The worst of it was that May’s pressure was already bearing on the very angles whose sharpness he most wanted to keep” (218).

Throughout, Newland’s moments of “scientific” theorization about the people and social structures around him coincide with those moments in which he feels most trapped, most disabled. The best example occurs near the end of the book, at Ellen Olenska’s farewell dinner. Archer analyzes the dinner party ethnographically as “the tribal rally around a kinswoman about to be eliminated from the tribe” (319). Although to a naïve witness
the party would appear entirely “harmless-looking,” Archer interprets it as a ritualistic expulsion or sacrifice, “the old New York way of taking life ‘without the effusion of blood’” (319). Because the scene’s social violence is never explicit, Archer must read and theorize aggressively. He construes even the faintest of implications, of unspoken analogical meanings, of pauses in conversation, as elements in the culmination of a vast “conspiracy” (Archer’s word), patiently prepared for over months, to eliminate Ellen from the social group. I do not mean to suggest that Archer’s analysis of the dinner party’s meaning is paranoid or wrong (although it is worth noting that Wharton does not provide outside confirmation of his analysis). What I wish to point out is that the more completely Archer reads and theorizes the social technology involved in this sacrificial moment, in which he himself has a part to play, the more his emotional affect becomes one of numb paralysis: “[A] deathly sense of the superiority of implication and analogy over direct action, and of silence over rash words, closed in on him like the doors of the family vault” (320). The more he cathexes onto the totalizing social power at work, the more robbed of agency he feels: “As these thoughts succeeded each other in his mind Archer felt like a prisoner in the centre of an armed camp” (319).

Newland Archer’s understanding of Old New York’s structures and modalities of power is comparable to the sorts of knowledge and theory that Richard Rorty finds so disabling for progressive political action, especially insofar as Newland takes the social power he analyzes to be both ubiquitous (employing “countless silently observing eyes and patiently listening ears”) and inexorable in its workings (319). It is as if Newland has proleptically developed the perspective not merely of an ethnographer but of a Foucauldian cultural critic. For Rorty, however, this would mean that Newland has become a “rationalizer of hopelessness.” “Foucauldian theoretical sophistication,” Rorty insists, “is even more useless to leftist politics than was Engels’ dialectical materialism.”26 Newland’s sense of his own complicity in the “sacrifice” of Ellen—the sacrificial dinner is held in his own house, after all—adds, moreover, to his habitual sensation of weightlessness: Newland seems to himself “to be assisting at the scene in a state of odd imponderability, as if he floated somewhere between chandelier and ceiling, wonder[ing] at nothing so much as his own share in the proceedings” (319).

Yet although Newland Archer himself and, at least in part, Wharton identify him with theory, knowledge, and indirect guilt, I want to suggest several interrelated levels on which Newland, rather than May, simultaneously functions as the primary referent for the title’s “innocence.” I ultimately argue that Wharton’s intertwining of guilt and innocence around the figure of Newland Archer offers a lens through which we might begin
to envision how the theory-structured, potentially paralyzing, “knowledge” of the guilty liberal might potentially coexist with (rather than be replaced by, as Rorty would have it) a more open-ended orientation toward “the possibilities and politics of futurity itself.”

Innocence and the American Man

To begin with, Newland is wrong about May. She is not innocent, at least not quite in the way that he thinks she is. He has his first surprise when May indicates to him, just before their marriage, that she has known for two years about an affair he once had with a married woman (“poor silly Mrs. Thorley Rushworth”): “You mustn’t think that a girl knows as little as her parents imagine. One hears and one notices—” (131, 174). If May recognizes one of the realities supposedly kept from young women, that many men in Old New York have premarital and extramarital affairs, then Newland’s vision of her as she watched the Faust seduction scene—“She doesn’t even guess what it’s all about”—was incorrect, indeed itself overly innocent. Newland is again shocked, near the end of the book, to realize that for quite some time May has believed that he and Ellen are lovers, which is never technically the case. Still more unsettling, she conveys to him that she actively manipulated Ellen into leaving the country, playing on the latter’s conscience by telling her at a strategic moment that she, May, was pregnant, although at the time she herself did not know whether it was true or not. Newland is astonished one last time in the book’s final chapter, after May’s death, when he learns that the wife whom he still thinks of as embodying “blindness” about both the real world and his own interiority in fact knew all about his struggle to break out of the marriage and then his decision to remain within it.

Newland’s serial rediscoveries that May always knew more, saw more, and even acted more than he imagined suggest that it is his own belief in her feminine innocence that is invincible, rather than any actual quality of “invincible innocence” (171) that she possesses. From the beginning, Newland’s sense of his own sophistication has relied on his gendered perception of May as utterly innocent: “[P]ride in his own masculine initiation was mingled with a tender reverence for her abysmal purity” (60). “Masculine initiation” derives its status by juxtaposing itself with the unfathomable naïveté of the young American girl. But if Newland seems recurrently unable to hold on to his repeated discoveries of May’s lack of innocence, one might say equally of him what he says of May: certain experiences drop away or slide off of him, leaving no apparent trace. Further, almost as much as he insists on his own “masculine initiation”
relative to May, Newland himself emphasizes his inexperience, even ignorance, by comparison with the Countess Olenska. Ellen Olenska is an American who has spent much of her childhood and all of her adult life in Europe, the latter while married to the wealthy and decadent Polish Count Olenski. Her sexual experience seems as unfathomable to Newland as May’s “abysmal purity” does. The countess, he is certain, has “tasted mysterious joys” and had “exquisite pleasures” that he cannot imagine, let alone name. In speaking with her about her past life, he feels “as awkward and embarrassed as a boy” (136, 248, 142).

The countess’s supposed sexual initiation is just one charged example of her “depths of experience beyond his reach”: “It frightened him to think what must have gone into the making of her eyes” (283, 104). If, in Newland Archer’s scientific analogy, May Welland’s enforced (and self-enforcing) innocence has meant the loss of her ability to see at all, so that even if he forced her eyes open, they would be able only to “look blankly out at blankness,” then by contrast Ellen Olenska has “had to look at the Gorgon” (283). Rather than blinding her, the Gorgon has dried up her tears, leaving no mediating screen between her and “the powers of evil” with which she has lived for so long and so familiarly (117). More generally, whenever Newland’s frame of reference shifts to the register of national identity, he unquestioningly aligns America and Americans with innocence and purity. Discussing the Olenski household with M. Rivière, Newland’s gaze wanders to a wall calendar with the U.S. president’s picture on it: “That such a conversation should be going on anywhere within the millions of square miles subject to his rule seemed as strange as anything that the imagination could invent” (257).28

**Fantasies of Innocence**

In short, Newland has an almost lifelong investment in the category of “innocence,” whether he aligns it with May as the virginal embodiment of Old New York; with himself as an American boy-man confronted by a European woman; or with the territory and identity of the United States itself. We turn now to the scene in which the most overbearing version of Newland’s investment in “innocence” emerges. During a carriage ride he and Ellen share from the New Jersey ferry terminal to Fifth Avenue, he articulates a “vision” for achieving absolute New World innocence, for returning to a prelapsarian state in a world apart. He willfully chooses to regard his “vision” as realizable. As Rorty might put it, Newland opts to replace “shared knowledge of what’s real with hope for what might become real.”29 Because he refuses to accept this fantasy’s status as fantasy, his
dream of escaping into a world outside of guilt will leave Newland feeling more entrapped, more implicated, in social realities than ever before. As we will see, his subsequently tortured relation to the fantasy of an escape from social implication—he will move from a desperate belief in the fantasy to a never quite successful determination to jettison it from his psyche—will constrain his sense of agency for nearly three decades.

Newland has been sent by May and May’s mother to drive Ellen to her ill grandmother’s house. He and Ellen have admitted their love to each other but have not sexually consummated their relationship. In the carriage, he insists to her that he does not want “an ordinary hole-and-corner love-affair,” in which they would enjoy “stolen” moments of intimacy (281–82). Stealing intimate moments in hidden corners would make them criminals, albeit of the most ordinary kind, guilty of the same hypocrisy as those society men Newland knows who prate about morality and propriety while carrying on secret affairs with women of lower social classes. Newland desires an intimate relationship with Ellen, a woman not his wife, but a relation that would entirely avoid contradicting social law, no matter how frequently other men may bend or break that same law. He desires, that is, an “innocent” sexual relation. Ellen immediately points out the painful irony of their discussing such a vision in May’s own carriage: “You choose your place well to put it to me!” That they are having the discussion inside the brougham of Newland’s wife indicates the structuring realities of their situation. We must look, Ellen insists, “not at visions but at realities” (284). If they begin a sexual relationship, no matter where it happens, and no matter what Newland wants to call it, she will be his “mistress,” with all the connotations of betrayal and immorality that attach to the word. At bottom, they would remain “only Newland Archer, the husband of Ellen Olenska’s cousin, and Ellen Olenska, the cousin of Newland Archer’s wife, trying to be happy behind the backs of the people who trust them” (285).

In response, Newland extrapolates from his initial vision of an innocent sexual relation to an entire “world” of innocence, a “new-land” in which his actions would not impact or implicate others. He insists that they can get “away” from the social world that he has spent the novel theorizing and critiquing, exempt at last from its guilty hypocrisies. Newland’s notion for how he and Ellen can be together without guilt requires their escaping, somehow, from the “world” in which they live: “I want—I want somehow to get away with you into a world where words like that—categories like that—won’t exist. Where we shall be simply two human beings who love each other” (284). Newland’s vision here is that he and Ellen can relocate to what Richard Poirier has called “a world elsewhere.” This vision, so pervasive in the American literary tradition, is itself an extension of American
exceptionalism; it pictures a new world that is perpetually available as fresh, unmarked space, away from “old world” codes and constraints. Newland’s desire to leave society and its complications recalls, for example, Huck Finn’s impulse to “light out for the territory” so that he can escape the constraints of “civilization.”

Ellen’s response to Newland at first seems a jaded Europeanized deflation of his vision. There is no such place, she tells him: “Oh, my dear—where is that country? Have you ever been there? . . . I know so many who’ve tried to find it; and, believe me, they all got out by mistake at wayside stations: at places like Boulogne, or Pisa, or Monte Carlo—and it wasn’t at all different from the old world they’d left, but only rather smaller and dingier and more promiscuous” (285). Those who go searching for some “new-land” outside of the social order discover that it does not exist: they find only another corner of their own world. If Ellen deflates Newland’s vision of an innocent new world, however, she does so only to reinstate innocence, not as a place, but as a mode of behavior. If they cannot escape a social order that would render any sexual relationship between them as hurtful to others, then they must refrain from any relationship at all. That their love should cause no pain to others, and in this sense remain innocent, is, for Ellen, its most essential characteristic, even if that results in her rigidly paradoxical logic of renunciation: “We’re near each other only if we stay far from each other” (285).

For Ellen, the imperative to eschew guilty behavior is also the heart of what differentiates America from the Europe she has left: “That’s why I came home. I want to forget everything else, to become a complete American again, like the Mingotts and Wellands, and you and your delightful mother, and all the other good people here” (106). She loves Newland because it was he who first made her see that under America’s seeming “dullness there are things so fine and sensitive and delicate that even those I most cared for in my other life” (such as art, beauty, and other, unnamed “exquisite pleasures”) “look cheap in comparison” (247). For Ellen, “America” is a form of ethical behavior or it is nothing: “If it’s not worth while to have given up, to have missed things, so that others may be saved from disillusionment and misery,” then she might as well return to her decadent European husband (248). Her love for Newland will be dead. Hence, “I can’t love you unless I give you up” (192).

In addition to American exceptionalism, both Newland’s vision of exiting the social world, so that he can act beyond its hypocrisies, and Ellen’s tortured renunciation of any active relationship with Newland, are also versions of what Berlant calls “liberal fantasies.” Liberal fantasies might best be understood as illusory attempts to evade the infamous “dirty hands” problem. Following Sartre, American liberal theorists such as Michael
Walzer insist that the problem of “dirty hands” is endemic to political and social action. For Walzer, to act effectively and morally in the real world, especially if one seeks to produce significant change, often means that at the same time one will find oneself forced to help perpetuate something that is morally ambiguous or morally wrong (even if only through remaining silent when one should speak up). A given political action or campaign, Walzer insists, “may be exactly the right thing to do . . . and yet leave the man who does it guilty of a moral wrong. The innocent man is no longer innocent.” If this “man” insists on retaining his purity, however, he will tie his own hands and fail to do the right thing. The obvious and realistic response, Walzer contends, is that, to avoid impotence, we must recognize that sometimes our hands will get dirty.32

Literary realists, in their portrayal of a complex world where actions always have multiple ramifications and effects, are often read as advancing views analogous to those of political theorists such as Walzer. As Henry James himself says in his preface to *What Maisie Knew*, “no theme is so human as those that reflect . . . that bright hard medal, of so strange an alloy, one face of which is somebody’s right and ease and the other somebody’s pain and wrong.” Whether in a political or literary register, the “realist” position asserts that we have no choice but to “live with all intensity and perplexity and felicity in [our] terribly mixed little world,” where one person or group’s “right and ease” is always connected to “pain and wrong” for someone (or someplace) else.33

Yet many leftist intellectuals continue to find it difficult to accept or operate within this realist logic. If not struggling in the throes of liberal guilt or leftist melancholia, then they are “caught” in such liberal fantasies as, for example, the fantasy “that ethical feminist knowledge will be safe for, will not do harm to, anyone who encounters it.” Dreaming of modes of knowledge and praxis that exist beyond any possibility of causing harm leads some academic feminists, according to Berlant, to evade facing the “failure, loss, pain, and chagrin” that should be confronted alongside of any utopian imagining.34 A similar fantasy of innocence also lies behind what Rorty claims he finds in left-wing “movements” that limit their own effectiveness by refusing to compromise on their ideological purity.35 Ironically, these fantasies of political innocence constitute merely the obverse side of the same liberal guilt whose occasioning they are so determined to avoid. Like liberal guilt, they also end in immobility.

The sensible “realist” response to liberal guilt and fantasies of innocence alike is that one must learn to accept dirty hands, and just *let go* of the fantasy that one might do good—or do anything—without any possibility of causing harm. But it is a response that does not work for all, or not fully, including Newland Archer, protagonist of a realist novel. For Newland, the
determination to resign himself to reality, to let go of his fantasy of radical innocence, produces a dreary melancholia. By the time of the book’s last chapter, Newland has resigned himself to a life of limited aspiration: “His days were full, and they were filled decently. He supposed it was all a man ought to ask.” A member of Old New York’s wealthy elite, Newland has reached a stage in his life where he takes a role in all of the “new philanthropic, municipal, and artistic” movements responsible, in turn-of-the-century New York, for “starting the first school for crippled children, reorganising the Museum of Art . . . inaugurating the new Library,” and other good causes. He has been intermittently active in Theodore Roosevelt’s Progressive movement, although he was relieved to lose his seat in the state legislature after serving for just one year (327–28). Newland is heavily burdened by the knowledge that he failed in his primary attempt at utopian reimagining, in which he envisioned constructing with Ellen Olenska a whole new world without repressive social conventions or oppressive power structures. He now views such visions as “unattainable and improbable.” Even to “repine” the failure would be excessive, “like despairing because one had not drawn the first prize in a lottery” (329). Having locked his utopian fantasy away in a vault that even he can no longer open, Newland now feels himself to be “a mere grey speck of a man” (335).

Wharton’s much-discussed final chapter of _The Age of Innocence_, I suggest, begins to make visible another possibility beyond being “caught” either by the liberal dream of “clean hands” or by the liberal disillusionment and melancholia that only appear to be opposed to that dream. During the final chapter, Newland Archer suddenly comes to see his fantasy of establishing an innocent sexual/social relation with Ellen Olenska, a utopian relation that would do no harm to others, explicitly as a fantasy, but, paradoxically, a fantasy that it is crucial he should never fully relinquish. When read next to contemporary American writings on liberal guilt, Wharton’s conclusion evokes possibilities for renegotiating, or at least loosening the bonds of, our own paralyzing relationships with political guilt, fear, and melancholy—and renegotiating as well as our continuing (although often buried) investment in the vision of discovering an innocent space or praxis.

Traversing the Fantasy of Innocence

The novel’s last chapter jumps forward twenty-six years from the end of the previous chapter, into the early twentieth century. It ends with the now-widowed Newland Archer having just arisen from a Parisian street
bench, where he had sat looking up at the terrace of Ellen Olenska’s fifth-floor flat. He has not seen Ellen since the ritualistic dinner party that simultaneously banished her from Old New York’s social world and reaffirmed his own participating membership in it. With May dead, however, and his own son urging him to mount the stairs to Ellen’s apartment, Newland and Ellen’s coming together would no longer occur in the register of betrayal or guilt. It would not cause pain to others. Indeed, there no longer seems any social or institutional reason that they cannot finally enjoy a relationship that is simultaneously sexual and innocent. The central aspect of Newland’s earlier vision of a new world—that is, his vision, while in May’s carriage, of a nonguilty relationship with Ellen—now seems realistically within reach.

Nonetheless, Newland does not respond to his son Dallas’s prompting. After Dallas himself has gone upstairs, Newland continues to sit on the street bench. “‘It’s more real to me here than if I went up,’ he suddenly heard himself say.” Finally, in the book’s last line, “Newland Archer got up slowly and walked back alone to his hotel” (340–41). There is something inarguably perverse in Newland’s final action, something that runs counter to common sense. His refusal to see Ellen Olenska provokes an “incredible gesture” on the part of his son (340). As Renata Salecl emphasizes, “from a pragmatic point of view, this renunciation is stupid.”36 The ending bothers undergraduates, just as does Mrs. Lidcote’s decision in “Autre Temps . . .” to return to exile (see chapter 1). They view these decisions as representing pointless sacrifices.

Rather than the sacrifice of his chance finally to enjoy a “happy ending” with Ellen, however, we can read Newland’s arising from his seat in front of Ellen’s window as signifying something else. Finishing her book in 1920, at the start of cinema’s golden age, Wharton’s language in the book’s final few paragraphs evokes a man finally allowing a mesmerizing film to end, so that he can get up and leave. When Newland and his son Dallas first enter the Parisian square in which Ellen’s building is located, Newland is struck by the light that the dome of the Hôtel des Invalides casts over the square: “By some queer process of association, that golden light became for him the pervading illumination in which she lived” (338). Newland stands for a moment and then sits down on the bench in front of Ellen’s window, sending Dallas upstairs without him. As he sits, his mind’s eye becomes like a mobile camera, tracking Dallas’s ascent in the lift to the fifth floor, his ringing of the doorbell, his being “admitted to the hall, and then ushered into the drawing room.” Next, reversing his angle of vision to a spot already inside the drawing room, Newland “tried to see”
Ellen’s room from Dallas’s point of view, finally tracking in on “a dark lady, pale and dark, who would look up quickly, half rise, and hold out a long thin hand with three rings on it. . . . He thought she would be sitting in a sofa-corner near the fire, with azaleas banked behind her on a table” (340; ellipses in original).

Newland finally turns away when a “light shone through the windows” and a servant “came out on the balcony, drew up the awnings, and closed the shutters.” The lights have come up in the theater, as we might say, and the curtain has been drawn. “At that, as if it had been the signal he waited for, Newland Archer got up slowly and walked back alone to his hotel” (341). Newland finally grasps that to go upstairs would be to take his longstanding fantasy too literally, like a person trying to climb up and into a movie screen.

The book ends here. A blank space follows the final sentence. In sidestepping the conventional narrative closure that many readers expect, in which lovers finally join together—and which even Newland’s son Dallas seems to have envisioned in bringing his father to Paris and then to Ellen’s apartment—Wharton preserves an openness. Lacking the expected closure, the blank space at book’s end becomes available, I believe, for readers’ own projections. Certainly, one might find oneself disappointed by Newland’s decision not even to try to connect with Ellen. One could quite plausibly fill in the blank with a future for Newland that is defined by disengagement and withdrawal from life. Taking willful advantage of the blank space, however, I would like to project, to imagine, that despite the conclusion’s elegiac tone Newland’s response to the “waited for” signal, to the closing of the shutters—at which he rises from the bench and starts to walk—represents a possible advance.

In my projection, Newland comes away with an importantly altered relation to his fantasy of a free relationship with Ellen. For much of his adult life, Newland has been captivated, captured, by the vision of a life that he and Ellen could and would, in a simpler, cleaner world, have shared. When he chooses not to enter her building and instead allows the screen to go blank, Newland for the first time recognizes his fantasy as fantasy. Lacanian theory uses the phrase “traversing the fantasy” to describe a process that results in the realization that the “fantasies that have been directing one’s desire and contributing to one’s suffering are both relative and doomed to remain unfulfilled.”

Traversing a fantasy, however, is not the same thing as repudiating it. Traversing a fantasy does not mean that one must now simply abandon it in favor of, say, the social “realities” Ellen had mentioned to Newland during their carriage ride.

In his latter decades, Newland’s grimly realist attempts to force himself
to let go of his fantasy even as, at some deeper level, he continued to organize his being around it left him feeling hollow, a “mere gray speck of a man.” After years spent blindly pursuing/despairing of an impossible fantasy, like a moth banging up against a window, Newland Archer now chooses to walk away, this time holding on to the fantasy, rather than being held by it: “It’s more real to me . . . than if I went up.” In traversing his fantasy, Newland comes to realize that he can retain his thirty-year-old dream of connecting with Ellen in a world free of social complexity without also retaining the desperate belief that it will, that it *must*, come true. Fantasy, once recognized as such, just might come to play a productive role in his life. Archer can hold onto it as an emblem, even a metaphor, for other possibilities, just as a movie can energize and inspire us even when we recognize as fantasy the events that it depicts.

Paradoxically, it is only after Newland Archer recognizes and accepts his fantasy of achieving an innocent future with Ellen Olenska *as* fantasy that he has the opportunity to stop regarding his present moment as irredeemably diminished. It is only then that he has at least the chance to choose a new direction, even as he retains his fantasy as a signifier of utopian possibilities (“it’s more real to me . . .”). Admittedly, the new relation to his fantasy that I am projecting for Newland is not directly signaled by any of his conscious thoughts or intentions at the book’s end. Yet regardless of what he himself “actually” does after returning to his hotel, I would argue that the structure of the novel’s concluding paragraphs still makes available to us, as readers, an opportunity to traverse his fantasy of innocence. What, then, might a critically presentist reading that “traverses” Newland Archer’s fantasy of innocence illuminate regarding the question of liberal guilt?

The minor key tone of Wharton’s ending, in which Archer walks off quietly and alone, might indeed lead one to think of what Daniel Born describes as an all-too-frequent trajectory of liberal guilt, “from a desire for involvement and activism to a fastidious withdrawal, a disengagement.”

That trajectory repeats itself, spinning its wheels back and forth between the liberal dream of achieving a nonharmful, noncomplicit praxis, and leftist melancholia. A reading that “traverses” Newland’s fantasy, however, presents us with at least an allegorical possibility for retaining, albeit in a new and altered form, a sense of openness toward the image of an innocent social relation, a relation in which, contrary to the dictates of both political and literary realism, trying to live and do “right” does not always involve complicity in “pain and wrong” somewhere else.

Taken as uncritical truth, “American innocence” has had, and continues to have, deadly effects both on the North American continent and around the world. The hegemonic ideology that Patricia Nelson Limerick has called the “Empire of Innocence” not only energizes a national self-view of
the United States as a “good fellow wronged” by malevolent foreigners, as discussed in chapter 5. It also continues to underwrite popular myths about the “settling” of the American West, white resistance to affirmative action programs, and literary and cultural celebrations of the canonical figure that R. W. B. Lewis dubbed “the American Adam.” However often it is demystified by activists, scholars, and teachers, or even “lost” as a result of national traumas, the feeling of American innocence remains an irreducible constituent of at least white American identity. Wharton’s apposite phrase is “invincible innocence.” In fact, insofar as liberal guilt takes a posture of confession and contrition, such guilt might itself be read as a bid to regain at least some form of spiritual innocence.

The Age of Innocence hints at a possibility for leftist intellectuals to move beyond the back-and-forth game of puncturing fantasies of American innocence, only to see such fantasies reemerge further downstream as still central to Americans’ sense of their national identity. “American innocence,” taken explicitly as a fantasy, would no longer signify a lack of knowledge, responsibility, or guilt regarding either the past or the present. Recognized as fantasy, and retained as such, “American innocence” would be by definition unrealizable. “Traversed,” the fantasy of American innocence might yet remain “real” as a powerful tropological placeholder, a metaphor for leftists’ need to maintain an orientation, a desire, towards futurity that is not entirely bound either by the preexisting social system or by the guilty intellectual’s encompassing knowledge and sophisticated theory.

I conclude by arguing that, because of a crucial twist Wharton adds to her use of the genre of historical fiction, The Age of Innocence’s last chapter also foregrounds another form of “real” innocence. This latter is a built-in epistemological guilelessness regarding the future that we all share, including—or especially—the most sophisticated and knowing among us. The temporally based, structurally innocent dimensions of consciousness that Wharton’s concluding chapter stresses both complements and energizes the necessary ability—whether Newland Archer’s ability or the immobilized academic leftist’s ability—to continue being motivated and sustained by something like what Lauren Berlant calls “concrete utopian imagining.”

Temporal Innocence

Returning briefly to the earlier scene in May’s carriage, we see that in fact two seemingly unrelated sorts of fantasy or vision arise. There is what we have already discussed, Newland’s “vision” that he and Ellen could escape to a new “world,” outside the social, beyond categories of guilt and betray-
al—which, as I have argued, does not yet know itself as fantasy. (At this point, Newland is, he insists, “just trusting to it to come true” (284). In addition, however, there is “the brotherhood of visionaries” that Archer muses upon as he waits for Ellen’s train to arrive (280). “Their visions” dwell on the future and its possibilities, such as “a tunnel under the Hudson through which the trains of the Pennsylvania railway would run straight into New York,” or “the building of ships that would cross the Atlantic in five days, the invention of a flying machine, lighting by electricity, telephonic communication without wires, and other Arabian Nights marvels” (280). As his reference to the Arabian Nights suggests, Newland—knowingly, in this case—locates this set of futuristic visions within the category of fantasy.

At a similar moment earlier in the novel, Newland Archer, Ellen Olenska, and the banker Julius Beaufort discuss early rumors about Alexander Graham Bell’s invention:

the fantastic possibility that they might one day actually converse with each other from street to street, or even—incredible dream!—from one town to another. This struck from all three allusions to Edgar Poe and Jules Verne, and such platitudes as naturally rise to the lips of the most intelligent when they are talking against time, and dealing with a new invention in which it would seem ingenuous to believe too soon. (163–64)

In the face of such an “incredible dream” about the future, knowledge and sophistication strive to avoid ingenuousness. The reflexive task of “the most intelligent” individuals, “talking against time,” is carefully to evade naiveté. Their intelligent sophistication is pitted against any early belief in this “fantastic possibility” for future connection and communication.

Of course, the reader has the historical advantage of knowing that Archer, Olenska, and Beaufort’s intelligent skepticism will turn out to have been misplaced. By the novel’s end, “telephonic communication” has become quotidian reality, as Newland’s son Dallas calls him from Chicago to arrange a last-minute trip to Europe on one of the new five-day steamers, a call which Newland receives in a room lit by “pleasantly-shaded electric lamps” (329). Indeed, each “fantastic possibility” for the future mentioned in earlier chapters is vindicated in the coda-like concluding chapter. Even Larry Lefferts’s obscene and hyperbolic joke, uttered to Archer and the other men over cigars, that, one day, “we shall see our children . . . marrying Beaufort’s bastards” becomes reality (322). Newland’s “eldest son, the pride of his life,” becomes engaged to Beaufort’s illegitimate daughter Fanny, the wedding to occur in Grace Church, “and nobody wondered or reproved” (332).
In confirming the fulfillment of every “fantastic possibility” regarding both the technological and the social future, however “incredible” it originally seemed to the novel’s “most intelligent” characters, Wharton gives a particular twist to the sort of dramatic irony generally available to the historical novelist. In any historical novel, the author and her readers will necessarily know more about the social and technological future than do the book’s characters. At key moments in The Age of Innocence, however, Wharton escalates this irony by calling our attention to how the book’s most sophisticated characters—characters who think that their skepticism sets the example against any ingenuous, gullible, or naive relation to the future—are wrong.

Throughout, Wharton textures her novel so as to emphasize her readers’ superior perspective and knowledge specifically in relationship to what passes for knowingness or sophistication in 1870s New York. In the first chapter, free-indirect discourse focalized in Newland Archer explains why he has arrived late at the opera: “New York was a metropolis, and [he] was perfectly aware that in metropolises it was ‘not the thing’ to arrive early at the opera” (58). The upper-class spectators at the opera constitute “what the daily press had already learned to describe as ‘an exceptionally brilliant audience’” (57). Later in the same scene, the narrator refers to a character trying “to look as if he had meant to insinuate what knowing people called a double entendre” (68). In each of these examples, Wharton allows a whiff of quaintness to hover about the era’s “knowing people.” Imagine a time when double entendre was a daring new possibility, just beginning to circulate among the most advanced people. Think of the day when New Yorkers first began to conceive of their city as a “metropolis.” Look backward from today (the 1920s), when mass media is already awash in formulaic, voyeuristic slickness, to an earlier era (the 1870s) in which such slickness actually seemed new and noteworthy. In addition, Wharton also allows her 1920s readers to recognize the silly arbitrariness of naturalized conventions of the 1870s, such as the “unalterable and unquestioned law . . . [which] required that the German text of French operas sung by Swedish artists should be translated into Italian for the clearer understanding of English-speaking audiences.” This ludicrous “law” “seemed as natural to Newland Archer as all the other conventions on which his life was moulded” (58–59).

Alan Price’s recent book on Wharton’s activities during the First World War, which details her impressive, and personally very difficult, work on behalf of Belgian and French refugees, is titled The End of the Age of Innocence. A typical assumption about Wharton’s work on The Age of Innocence in 1919 and 1920 is that she could perceive a valuable “innocence” in the rigid, old-fashioned world she had often severely criticized
only after the “epoch” delimiting that world was irrefutably ended. This assumption takes its cue from sentences in Wharton’s autobiographical memoir, *A Backward Glance* (1933), in which she asserts, “The world I had grown up in and been formed by had been destroyed in 1914.” She describes her postwar writing of *The Age of Innocence* as an “escape” from the “grim” present, which allowed her imaginatively to return to her “childish memories of a long-vanished America.” Wharton’s use of the word “escape” suggests her awareness that any “innocence” supposed to characterize “Old New York” (“Old New York” was an early title for the novel) is fiction, existing in a space self-consciously recreated in the mode of nostalgia.

There is an important sense in which an “age of innocence” (whether construed as an individual’s childhood or a given historical epoch) can only ever be identified from a position after it or otherwise outside of it. For anyone who claims to speak from a position internal to the age of innocence—to speak “innocently,” that is, of innocence—innocence will necessarily vanish in the very moment of its naming, like the “modern” in Paul de Man’s well-known essay, “Literary History and Literary Modernity.” De Man writes, “The spontaneity of being modern conflicts with the claim to think and write about modernity.” So too, we might say that the spontaneity of being innocent conflicts with the claim to think and write about innocence. If one “knows” that one is innocent, then one also has knowledge of something with which to contrast that innocence. One already knows too much. Innocence necessarily excludes its enunciator.

Thus, *The Age of Innocence*, from its title onward, positions its readers as a site of historical knowledge and sophistication relative to the novel’s characters. But that reading position is only too familiar for the leftist academics whom we began this chapter by discussing, who feel blocked because they “know too much,” whose theoretical sophistication has constrained their sense of political hope. To the degree that Wharton’s text fixes innocence “back then,” it would seem to militate against a presentist interpretation of the book as at least gesturing toward the chance for such a reader to reclaim innocence as a productive fantasy, as the emblem of an open future. Rarely recognized but absolutely crucial about *The Age of Innocence*’s concluding chapter, however, is that it does not take the narrative up to Wharton’s actual time of writing: 1919–1920.

Living in the twentieth century’s first decade, Dallas Archer serves as the representative of a new age, who judges his father’s generation as “prehistoric” and notes how it “dates” him that he never left May for Ellen (336). Dallas takes utterly for granted those technological inventions and radical social changes (he is marrying “Beaufort’s bastard,” after all) that the most intelligent of Newland’s generation declined even to believe were possible.
Able to recognize precisely how the most knowing of Newland’s age were traduced by their temporal disadvantage, Dallas appears in the coda as something of a reader surrogate. Yet, although separated by less than twenty years from the moment of writing, the novel’s last chapter is just as much “historical fiction” as is the body of the novel set in the 1870s. Above all, Dallas has no inkling that what Wharton later called the “catastrophe of 1914” draws near. He is even more “innocent” in relation to the future than were his father, Ellen Olenska, and Julius Beaufort when they scoffed at the thought of “telephonic communication.”

Wharton’s working title for a projected sequel to *The Age of Innocence* was “The Age of Wisdom,” in which she intended to follow the fortunes of Dallas Archer, Fanny Beaufort, and others of their generation. She never wrote the sequel. But given the world war that impended upon its group of protagonists, as a title “the age of wisdom” can only be read as deep irony. An alternate title might be something like “Age of Innocence: The Next Generation” or “Innocence Reloaded” (to borrow from popular science fiction of our own day). Here another meaning of “the age of innocence” emerges. Innocence may seem to belong to the young or to the prior generation, but it is itself of hoary age, insofar as it is forever reconstituted in relation to the future. This recurrent pattern emphasizes a kind of structural innocence that we all share in relation to the future, even or maybe especially the knowing and sophisticated. Today’s sophistication may always be revealed as tomorrow’s ignorance; today’s knowingness may always turn out to be a form of ingenuousness. This temporally based epistemological innocence is one that in fact we can not escape, which means that despite all of our knowledge and theory, we do not know what is to come, or of what we can be sure.

From one point of view, Wharton’s novel shows innocence as a state that is impossible. The “innocence” of an unmarried woman such as May is no more than a cultural artifact, “cunningly manufactured” via a historically specific process, because it is what men are supposed to want. More broadly, it is only a fantasy to believe that we could become somehow “innocent” of our participation or implication in burdensome, objectionable realities. At the same time, Wharton’s novel also shows innocence to be always and unavoidably available. The point that I have been moving toward in this last section may seem to boil down to the truism that no one can really know what the future holds, no matter how knowing, sophisticated, or cynical he or she may be. Indeed, I do think leftist melancholia can lead us to forget the truth of this particular truism. Beyond the platitude, however, *The Age of Innocence*’s deployment of historical frames within frames serves to underline our real, structural “innocence” of determinate knowledge about the future. The openness of futurity is a tempo-
eral reality that even liberal guilt’s “complicated awareness” can never quite preclude. The novel’s emphasis on a temporally based epistemological innocence, combined with the possibility of interpreting Newland as choosing to retain innocence knowingly as a fantasy, can, in a refractive presentist reading, help orient our imaginations toward a renewed relationship with the category of American innocence.