

THE NOVELIST AND THE BUSINESSMAN: HENRY JAMES, EDITH WHARTON, FRANK NORRIS

1. In the opening pages of Henry James's novel *The American* (1877) Christopher Newman is discovered sitting in the Louvre:

An observer with anything of an eye for local types would have had no difficulty in referring this candid connoisseur to the scene of his origin, and indeed such an observer might have made an ironic point of the almost ideal completeness with which he filled out the mould of race. The gentleman on the divan was the superlative American...

James's hero, the 'superlative American', is a businessman and a millionaire: the appropriateness of casting a businessman in the role of *the American* was in 1877 already apparent. Somewhat later in the century Mr. Bullion, the outspoken banker in William Dean Howells' Utopian novel *A Traveller from Altruria* (1894), discourses upon the American 'ideal of greatness' in the following terms:

I should say that within a generation our ideal had changed twice. Before the war, and during all the time from the revolution onward, it was undoubtedly the great politician, the publicist, the statesman. As we grew older and began to have an intellectual life of our own, I think the literary fellows had a pretty good share of the honors that were going; that is, such a man as Longfellow was popularly considered a type of greatness. When the war came, it brought the soldier to the front, and there was a period of ten or fifteen years when he dominated the national imagination. That period passed, and the great era of material prosperity set in. The great fortunes began to tower up, and heroes of another sort began to appeal to our admiration. I don't think there is any doubt but the millionaire is now the American ideal.

This analysis modern historians have largely confirmed. The great moment of division is the Civil War, with its impetus to social change and rapid industrialization and the accompanying defeat, actual and symbolic, of the agrarian economy and culture of the

South. Before the Civil War America is still predominantly rural. After the Civil War America becomes rapidly urban and industrial. Business, in all its forms, comes to be regarded as the essential American occupation, the businessman as the pre-eminent American type. From now on the business of the United States is business.

The importance of business in American life and the peculiar appropriateness of the businessman as a subject for the American novelist is nowhere better expressed than in this remarkable passage by Henry James, part of an essay contributed to the English magazine *Literature* in 1898:

I cannot but think that the American novel has in a special, far-reaching direction to sail much closer to the wind. « Business » plays a part in the United States that other interests dispute much less showily than they sometimes dispute it in the life of European countries; in consequence of which the typical American figure is above all that « business man » whom the novelist and the dramatist have scarce yet seriously touched, whose song has still to be sung and his picture still to be painted. He is often an obscure, but not less often an epic, hero, seamed all over with the wounds of the market and the dangers of the field, launched into action and passion by the immensity and complexity of the general struggle, a boundless ferocity of battle — driven above all by the extraordinary, the unique relation in which he for the most part stands to the life of his layful, his immitigable woman-kind, the wives and daughters who float, who splash on the surface and ride the waves, his terrific link with civilization, his social substitutes and representatives, while, like a diver for shipwrecked treasure, he gasps in the depths and breathes through an air-tube.

This relation, even taken alone, contains elements that strike me as only yearning for their interpreter — elements, moreover, that would present the further merit of melting into the huge neighboring province of the special situation of women in an order of things where to be a woman at all — certainly to be a young one — constitutes in itself a social position. The difficulty, doubtless, is that the world of affairs, as affairs are understood in the panting cities, though around us all the while, before us, behind us, beside us, and under our feet, is as special and occult a one to the outsider as the world, say, of Arctic exploration — as impenetrable save as a result of special training. Those who know it are not the men to paint it; those who might attempt it are not the men who know it. The most energetic attempt at portrayal that

we have anywhere had — *L'Argent*, of Émile Zola — is precisely a warning of the difference between false and true initiation. The subject there, though so richly imagined, is all too mechanically, if prodigiously, «got up». Meanwhile, accordingly, the American «business man» remains, thanks to the length and strength of the wires that move him, *the magnificent theme en disponibilité*. The romance of fact, indeed, has touched him in a way that quite puts to shame the romance of fiction. It gives his measure for purposes of art that it was he, essentially, who embarked in the great war of 1861-4, and who, carrying it on in the North to a triumphant conclusion, went back, since business was his standpoint, to his very «own» with an undimmed capacity to mind it. When, in imagination, you give the type, as it exists today, the benefit of its great double luster — that of these recorded antecedents and that of its preoccupied, systematic, and magnanimous abasement before the other sex — you will easily feel your sense of what may be done with its overflow.

The first point James makes, that the American novelist should 'sail closer to the wind', be more adventurous, take more risks, must be taken in the context of the essay as a whole. His title is «The Question of the Opportunities», and he has been discussing the implications for the American writer of the huge new reading public he saw coming into being:

they hang before us a wide picture of opportunities — opportunities that would be opportunities still even if, reduced to the *minimum*, they should be only those offered by the vastness of the implied history. It is impossible not to entertain with patience and curiosity the presumption that life so colossal must break into expression at points of proportionate frequency. These places, these moments will be the chances.

It is the world of business that James sees as the heart of this 'colossal' life and as offering, therefore, the most out-standing 'opportunity' for the novelist: the business man, as he says later, is '*the magnificent theme en disponibilité*'. In going on to draw attention to the common acceptance of the businessman as the 'typical American figure' he is simply returning to the point he had made twenty-one years before in casting Christopher Newman as the hero of *The American*.

When James turns to the problems of writing on a business theme, he suggests first of all that the violent quality of business

life actively invites fictional treatment. The business man may be an 'obscure' hero, but he is as frequently an epic one, and James like almost all American novelists before Sinclair Lewis, seems to think of him principally in an epic role. It is also clear that James thought of 'business' as concerned primarily with financial manipulation rather than with the production or distribution of goods; and that in speaking of «the immensity and complexity of the general struggle, a boundless ferocity of battle» he must have had in mind the great contemporary contests for business power: the captain of industry or of finance — a Gould, a Rockefeller, a Morgan — was the figure of the age. The images of battle no doubt came naturally at such a period; they nevertheless carry with them strong suggestions of mediaeval romance. The great captain of finance was, if sometimes an evil figure, undeniably a romantic one — «The romance of fact, indeed,» writes James, «has touched [the businessman] in a way that quite puts to shame the romance of fiction» — and it would seem that James himself saw the businessman as essentially a romantic hero, the business novel, by implication, as a form of romance.

In his remarks upon the relationship of the businessman to his «immitigable womankind» James touched, most perceptively, on a problem the novelist of business has almost inevitably to grapple with in some form or another. How far is the business life compatible with the cultivation of personal relationships, or of the arts? Can the relationship between the businessman and his wife be more than that of two yoked lonelines? Can the businessman, by the very nature of his occupation, ever hope to be anything but a cultural barbarian? Nor can the business novelist avoid the even more fundamental question which James raises in his second paragraph. Having suggested what the ideal business novel should do and what it should be about, he goes on to show the very good reason why it was unlikely ever to be written: the world of business, he says, is «impenetrable save as a result of special training. Those who know it are not the men to paint it; those who might attempt it are not the men who know it». James is obviously right, yet he does not modify his view that the business world offers a great opportu-

nity for the right kind of novelist. His own practice as a novelist shows plainly that he did not think of himself as falling within that category, but his remarks, extraordinarily interesting in themselves, are also extremely useful as aids to understanding the problems of the business novel and as touchstones in assessing the work of other novelists.

2. What is immediately striking about the passage is the sense of excitement that sweeps through it. There are all the marks of a « shock of recognition », of the enthusiasm of a prospector come suddenly upon a vein rich beyond expectation. This, on the face of it, is surprising. The idea of the businessman as hero was not new to James, nor were most of the other ideas in the essay. In the *Notebooks*, for example, under the date November 26th, 1892, we find a reference to:

the whole subject, or question, about which Godkin, as I remember, one day last summer talked to me very emphatically and interestingly — the growing divorce between the American woman (with her comparative leisure, culture, grace, social instincts, artistic ambitions) and the male American immersed in the ferocity of business, with no time for any but the most sordid interests, purely commercial, democratic and political. This divorce is rapidly becoming a gulf — an abyss of inequality, the like of which has never before been seen under the sun.

The passage appears between a discussion of the international marriage (November 24th) and an outline of the situation which was later to evolve into *The Golden Bowl* (November 28th): *The Golden Bowl* (1904) portrays two international marriages and is centrally concerned with the relationships between a businessman, Adam Verver, and his daughter and his wife, but it does not touch upon the kind of problem which James discusses in the *Notebooks* and in « The Question of the Opportunities ». His treatment of Verver is reminiscent in this respect of the presentation of Mr. Dosson in *The Reverberator* (1888), which James discusses in the later 'Preface' to that tale:

before the American business-man, as I have been prompt to declare, I was absolutely and irredeemably helpless, with no fibre of my intelligence responding to his mystery. No approach I could make to him on his «business side» really got near it. That is where I was fatally incompetent, and this in turn — the case goes into a nutshell — is so obviously why, for any decent documentation, I was simply shut up to what was left me. It takes but a glance to see how the matter was in such a fashion simplified.

James, that is to say, recognises in himself that insuperable ignorance of business he mentions in the 1898 essay and achieves a solution, or at least a simplification, by ignoring altogether the 'business' side of the businessman. The businessman of the early tales — Mr. Dosson, Mr. Westgate in «An International Episode» (1879), Mr. Ruck in «The Pension Beaurcpas» (1881) — are not seen in action, apart from the charming moment when Mr. Westgate takes as a great joke the idea of two aristocratic Englishmen coming to America to do business: «'Leave that to the natives', said Mr. Westgate». But if they are not seen in action they are frequently seen in relation to their 'immitigable' womankind, and the peculiar aptness of that surprising adjective is nowhere better demonstrated than in the portrayal of the Ruck family in «The Pension Beaurcpas». The American narrator is here explaining their situation for the benefit of a fellow-expatriate:

'Mr. Ruck's a broken-down man of business. He's broken-down in health and I think he must be broken-down in fortune. He has spent his whole life in buying and selling and watching prices, so that he knows how to do nothing else. His wife and daughter have spent their lives, not in selling, but in buying — with a considerable indifference to prices — and they on their side know how to do nothing else. To get something in a 'store' that they can put on their backs — that's their one idea; they haven't another in their heads. Of course they spend no end of money, and they do it with an implacable persistence, with a mixture of audacity and of cunning. They do it in his teeth and they do it behind his back; the mother protects the daughter, while the daughter eggs on the mother. Between them they're bleeding him to death'.

.....

'But haven't they common sense? Don't they know they're marching to ruin?'

'They don't believe it. The duty of an American husband and father is to keep them going. If he asks them how, that's his own affair. So by way of not being mean, of being a good American husband and father, poor Ruck stands staring at bankruptcy'.

It is obvious that long before his discussion with Godkin James's own observations had led him to the notion of some kind of a 'divorce' between the businessman and his womankind, although he may not have formulated the idea in any precise terms. Although in *The American* Christopher Newman does not finally marry Madame de Cintré it is clear that he is only too ready to take her as his 'link with civilization'. In his specification of the ideal wife he had said: «She may be cleverer and wiser than I can understand, and I shall only be the better pleased». Adam Verver spends money lavishly on his first wife and on his daughter, and when he marries Charlotte Stant his ostensible reasons are largely social: it is the constant use he does in fact make of her as his 'social representative' that permits Charlotte and the Prince so large a measure of intimacy.

Christopher Newman and Adam Verver are, of course, the most important of James's business characters. Newman is a very early creation, Verver appears in James's last completed novel, but superficially, at least, the two have a good deal in common. They are both still young — Newman is forty-two, Verver forty-seven — but they have already made great fortunes from small beginnings. Newman is certainly a self-made man, Verver apparently so. Both have made their money in the western United States, and both finally return there. In both novels the action arises from the visit of the business man to Europe on an acquisitive expedition and his subsequent involvement with members of the European aristocracy. Newman comes to Europe frankly in search of a wife: «I want, in a word, the best article in the market'». Verver comes to Europe primarily to purchase rare *objets d'art*. He also purchases, however, an Italian prince as husband for his daughter: Prince Amerigo is «'a part of his collection'», as Maggie tells her husband, «'You're

a rarity, an object of beauty, an object of price' ». If this kind of acquisitiveness seems less attractive in Verver than it does in Newman that is largely because in Newman it springs from warmth, eagerness and naive aspiration, while in Verver it is part of a deliberate, cultivated connoisseurship. When Newman speaks of wanting « the best article in the market » he does so jocularly: it is part of his appealing straightforwardness that he should use such down-to-earth and, to him, customary imagery. There is little conscious humour, however, in Verver's habitual « application of the same measure of value to such different pieces of property as old Persian carpets, say, and new human acquisitions » — acquisitions, that is, such as Prince Amerigo and Charlotte Stant.

Both Newman and Verver experience some revulsion from their financial success, but again their reactions are different in kind and in quality. Early in *The American* Newman describes to Tristram how on the point of concluding a spectacular business transaction he had suddenly experienced « the most extraordinary change of heart — a mortal disgust for the whole proposition ». Much later, thinking over the opposition of the Bellegarde family to his 'commercial' background, he is clear that he would have given up his business for the sake of Madame de Cintré and that, indeed, little of his former appetite for business remains: « If, however, his financial imagination was dead, he felt no contempt for the surviving actualities begotten by it. He was glad he had been prosperous and had been a great operator rather than a small; he was extremely glad he was rich. He felt no impulse to sell all he had and give to the poor, or to retire into meditative economy and asceticism ». Verver, on the other hand, looks back over the whole of his business career as « the years of darkness [which] had been needed to render possible the years of light ». These latter years he is devoting, with a sense of self-justification if not actually of guilt, to building and furnishing a magnificent museum, « a palace of art... a receptacle of treasures sifted to positive sanctity », which he will present to « the people of his adoptive city and native State, the urgency of whose release from the bondage of ugliness he was in a position to measure », as a « house from whose open doors and windows, open

to grateful, to thirsty millions, the higher, the highest knowledge would shine out to bless the land ».

The irony here is light, but sufficient both to define James's attitude towards Verver and to mark the contrast with the presentation of Newman. The 'innocence' of both Newman and Verver has often been commented upon and has usually been regarded as practically identical: they are in fact innocent in quite different ways. Newman's innocence is naivety, a genuine ignorance of all affairs which are not business affairs. Verver's innocence seems wilful by comparison: he has cut himself off from 'life' in his devotion to 'the aesthetic principle', in his enslavement to 'the exemplary passion, the passion for perfection at any price'. Where Newman, though undoubtedly the cruder, the more brash of the two, remains conspicuously uncorrupted to the end, it would seem to be James's intention to present Verver as having been in some measure corrupted by his success and his consequent power over things and over human beings. We can perhaps detect here the first hints of the overt moral criticism of *The Ivory Tower*.

In neither book, of course, does James come near to fulfilling his own prescription for the business novel. Neither Newman nor Verver is seen in action as a business man. No clue is given to the sources of Verver's fortune, though he has obviously augmented it on the stock market, and we learn little of Newman's career except that he has «'been in everything'», including railways, wash-tubs, leather, oil, copper and «'other mining ventures'». The whole question is, in *The American*, rather lightly dismissed: Newman's account of his career to Tristram «was, with intensity, a tale of the Western world... It dealt with elements, incidents, enterprises, which it will be needless to introduce to the reader in detail; the deeps and shallows, the ebb and the flow, of great financial tides». This is as near as James ever comes, in his own novels, to «the boundless ferocity of battle», to what is referred to in *The American* as «transcendent operations in ferocious markets» and in *The Golden Bowl* as «transcendent calculation and imaginative gambling». The recurrent reliance on 'transcendent', with its suggestion of going beyond and out of reach, conveys clearly James's sense that

it was not for him to attempt the portrayal of the business world as such.

Even in *The Ivory Tower* (1917) the two rival businessmen, Abel Gaw («incapable of thought save in sublimities of arithmetic») and Frank Betterman, are seen only when retired from business and at the point of death. There is a clear moralising intention in this book, stronger perhaps than anywhere else in James, but as always the emphasis is on the results of business enterprise — in this case on the moral issues arising from the inheritance of wealth commercially acquired — not on the enterprise itself. In the notes appended to the unfinished book James comments:

Enormous difficulty of pretending to show various things here as with a business vision, in my total absence of business initiation; so that of course my idea has been from the first *not* to show them with a business vision, but in some other way altogether; this will take much threshing out, but it is the very basis of the matter, the core of the subject, and I shall worry it through with patience.

The worrying through may have proved more difficult than he had bargained for and it seems a little doubtful whether, even if the War had not intervened, he could have successfully performed the necessary sleight of hand. It is clear that as a result of his 1903-4 visit to America James suffered a powerful moral and aesthetic revulsion from «the dreadful American money-world». For the first time he had looked with clear eyes at the financial basis of that leisured, cultured society he had so long admired and so often celebrated. But although he may have seen more clearly than before, he was no nearer than he had ever been to a real understanding of the essential economics of the situation.

Some of the comments on the business section of New York in *The American Scene* (1907), the direct product of the 1903-4 visit, indicate that James had come to think of the American world of affairs as too vast and complex for any fictional treatment. He recalls:

how from the first, on all such ground, my thought went straight to poor great wonder-working Émile Zola and *his* love of the human ag-

gregation, the artificial microcosm, which had to spend itself on great shops, great businesses, great « apartment-houses », of inferior, of mere Parisian scale. His image, it seemed to me, really asked for compassion — in the presence of this material that his energy of evocation, his alone, would have been of a stature to meddle with. What if *Le Ventre de Paris*, what if *Au Bonheur des Dames*, what if *Pot-Bouille* and *L'Argent*, could but have come into being under the New York inspiration?

The answer to that, however, for the hour, was that, in all probability, New York was not going (as it turns such remarks) to produce both the maximum of « business » spectacle and the maximum of ironic reflection of it. Zola's huge reflector got itself formed, after all, in a far other air; it had hung there, in essence, awaiting the scene that was to play over it, long before the scene really approached it in scale. The reflecting surfaces, of the ironic, of the epic order, suspended in the New York atmosphere, have yet to show symptoms of shining out, and the monstrous phenomena themselves, meanwhile, strike me as having, with their immense momentum, got the start, got ahead of, in proper parlance, any possibility of poetic, of dramatic capture.

It is hardly surprising that James should shrink from a task that, he seems to suggest, might have defeated even Zola. His solution in *The Ivory Tower*, as in *The Reverberator* and *The American*, is not to treat the 'business' side of the businessman at all. So that, in *The Ivory Tower*, the Bunyanesque naming of Frank Betterman testifies to the moral concern, but, as in Bunyan's own *Mr. Badman*, the moral fervour receives inadequate economic 'weighting'. Although *The Ivory Tower* marks a new development in James's work and attitudes at a late moment in his life, nothing in the book makes it necessary to qualify Edith Wharton's remark, in *A Backward Glance* (1934), about James's:

total inability to use the « material », financial and industrial, of modern American life. Wall Street, and everything connected with the big business world, remained an impenetrable mystery to him, and knowing this he felt he could never have dealt fully in fiction with the « American scene », and always frankly acknowledged it. The attempt to portray the retired financier in Mr. Verver, and to relate either him or his native « American City » to any sort of concrete reality, is perhaps proof enough of the difficulties James would have found in trying to depict the American money-maker in action.

3. If Edith Wharton allowed a faint note of conscious superiority to creep into this paragraph she was not entirely without justification. We might consider, for example, what it is that gives such weight to a book like *The House of Mirth* (1905). This is only her second novel, and the first to deal with a 'modern' subject, but it is an extremely sophisticated work in which can be detected many of the themes that were to be developed in such later novels as *The Custom of the Country* (1913) and *The Age of Innocence* (1920). Among the most important of these themes are that of the lovely girl who is «the victim of the civilization which produced her» and that of the intimacy of the relation between business success and social recognition. The embodiment of the first theme in *The House of Mirth* is Lily Bart, the «rare flower grown for exhibition» and for nothing else, of the latter Mr. Rosedale, the Jewish financier, who gains the acceptance, however grudging, of society in time with the accretion of his millions. Lily Bart finds herself through force of circumstances brought to reconsider her earlier rejection of Rosedale:

Much as she disliked Rosedale, she no longer absolutely despised him. For he was gradually attaining his object in life, and that, to Lily, was always less despicable than to miss it. With the slow unalterable persistency which she had always felt in him, he was making his way through the dense mass of social antagonisms. Already his wealth, and the masterly use he had made of it, were giving him an enviable prominence in the world of affairs, and placing Wall Street under obligations which only Fifth Avenue could repay.. and now all he needed was a wife whose affiliations would shorten the last tedious steps of his ascent.

That linkage of Wall Street and Fifth Avenue goes to the heart of the matter: the one phrase is sufficient to suggest that Edith Wharton already recognises more plainly than Henry James seems ever to have done the economic basis of the society she portrays. The novel as a whole makes it clear that she not only recognises the existence of a class-system, she knows exactly how it is constructed, what sanctions maintain it, and what forces can transcend its barriers. As if to underline her economic awareness she wrote, shortly after *The House of Mirth*, a novel dealing with the specifically economic

subject of the ownership and management of a textile mill. *The Fruit of the Tree* (1907) is not a good novel, and seen in the perspective of her whole production it seems something of a sport, though less so than the extraordinary *Ethan Frome* (1911). Her reasons for writing it are not wholly clear, but she was, while entirely capable of feeling strongly about the subjects she chose, undoubtedly susceptible to the trends of literary fashion: hence, for example, *A Son at the Front* (1923).

The action of *The Fruit of the Tree* revolves about the character of Amherst, the manager of the Westmore mills, and about the conflicting demands made upon him by, on the one hand, his job and, on the other, his relations with the two women he marries. His first wife, Bessy Westmore, is the owner of the mills, and he hopes by marrying her to put into practice his paternalistic schemes for the improvement of working and living conditions. Bessy, however, thinks that business is « vague and tiresome » and that she should not be troubled with it: « it was part of the modern code of chivalry that lovely women should not be bothered about ways and means ». When Amherst persuades her on one point he is made to suffer for it at home: « his victory at Westmore had been a defeat at Lynbrook ». Amherst's second wife sets herself deliberately to share in his business life as a preliminary to « evoking the secret unsuspected Amherst out of the preoccupied businessman chained to his task ». At first she seems to succeed, but Amherst's work remains to the end more important than his life at home: « it was there, at the mills, that his real life was led... ». The responsibility for the failure of his first marriage, that is to say, was not entirely Bessy's.

Amherst is himself one of the earliest idealistic businessmen in American fiction, but he meets little but opposition from fellow businessmen: they remain unconscious of « a moral claim superior to the obligation of making one's business 'pay'... Business was one thing, philanthropy another ». Although the latter part of the book is largely taken up with the relations between Amherst and his second wife, much as Frank Norris's *The Pit* tends to become more Laura's story than Jadwin's, the history of the mills remains the

central thread. At the end this is made explicit: « However achieved, at whatever cost of personal misery and error, the work of awakening and freeing Westmore was done, and that work had justified itself ». *The Fruit of the Tree*, then, is a committed novel. What it advocates may be only a mild paternalism, but the criticism of contemporary business ethics and the contemporary social structure is firmly made. We think of the description of Bessy Westmore as the finished product of industrialism:

Her dress could not have hung in such subtle folds, her white chin have nestled in such rich depths of fur, the pearls in her ears have given back the light from such pure curves, if thin shoulders in shapeless gingham had not bent, day in, day out, above the bobbins and carders, and weary ears throbbed even at night with the tumult of the looms.

It is this attitude and knowledge which underlies the satirical superstructure of *The Custom of the Country*. If the socio-economic criticism is here made by implication rather than by overt statement it is no less fundamental. The 'custom' of the book's title is the American dichotomy, mentioned by James, between the businessman at work and the businessman at home. Charles Bowen remarks on the paradox that American men « who make, materially, the biggest sacrifices for their women, should do least for them ideally and romantically ». Because « the average American looks down on his wife » he doesn't « let her share in the real business of life »:

« Why does the European woman interest herself so much more in what the men are doing? Because she's so important to them that they make it worth her while! She's not a parenthesis, as she is here — she's in the very middle of the picture... Where does the real life of most American men lie? In some woman's drawing-room or in their offices? The answer's obvious, isn't it? The emotional centre of gravity's not the same in the two hemispheres. In the effete societies it's love, in our new one it's business. In America the real *crime passionnel* is a 'big steal' — there's more excitement in wrecking railways than homes ».

Undine Spragg's subsequent experiences rather contradict this impression of European manners, but the point about American so-

ciety is, in the context of the novel, well taken. The businessman's relations with his 'womankind' have been a frequent theme of social comedy in James and Howells: the Spragg family bears an unmistakable resemblance to the Ruck family, while in the early scenes of the book one is often reminded of the social aspiration of the Laphams in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), and the Dryfooses, in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890). But in *Through the Eye of the Needle* (1907) Howells makes social comment of this kind the starting-point of a Utopian sermon preaching the total abolition of business, and Edith Wharton herself has already taken the subject extremely seriously in *The Fruit of the Tree*. In *The Custom of the Country*, too, much more is involved than a superficial comedy of manners. The mutual incomprehension of the businessman and his wife is here the cause of dishonesty, infidelity and divorce, of desperate unhappiness and even of suicide. Business corrupts, and the average business life is a « persistent mortification of spirit and flesh ». Society itself is progressively corrupted, for its values are essentially based on the possession of wealth and hence on success in business. Ever Mr. Spragg, a man of 'rigid' domestic morality, has 'elastic' business principles, and Ralph Marvell's final disaster springs largely from the seduction of the large, quick profits that reward fortunate speculation.

At the same time one of the more sympathetic characters in the novel, and certainly one of the most arresting, is Elmer Moffatt, the self-made railroad king from the West who is Undine's first and fourth husband. As in her presentation of Rosedale in *The House of Mirth* Edith Wharton seems to show a greater respect for those who themselves amass money than for those who merely inherit it. We are reminded of the contrast between Samuel Griffiths and his son in *An American Tragedy* (1925): Edith Wharton was as well aware as Dreiser of the tendency of money-power to degenerate into exclusive élites in the second and successive generations. The presentation of Moffatt is nevertheless ambiguous. He offends our sensibilities as he offended Undine's but, like Undine, we sense his power: « he gave her, more than any one she had ever known, the sense of being detached from his life, in control of it, and able,

without weakness or uncertainty, to choose which of its calls he should obey ». It is not so much that he is a businessman as that business is what he happens to be doing: he could do any number of other things equally well. Towards the end of the book there is a revealing interchange between Moffatt and Undine which seems worth quoting at some length. Meeting Undine unexpectedly after a long separation Moffatt recounts the various stages of his rise to affluence and power:

Absorbed in his theme, and forgetting her inability to follow him, Moffatt launched out on a recital of plot and counterplot, and she hung, a new Desdemona, on his conflict with the new anthropophagi. It was of no consequence that the details and the technicalities escaped her: she knew their meaningless syllables stood for success, and what that meant was as clear as day to her. Every Wall Street term had its equivalent in the language of Fifth Avenue, and while he talked of building up railways she was building up palaces, and picturing all the multiple lives he would lead in them. To have things had always seemed to her the first essential of existence, and as she listened to him the vision of the things he could have unrolled itself before her like the long triumph of an Asiatic conqueror.

« And what are you going to do next? » she asked, almost breathlessly, when he had ended.

« Oh, there's always a lot to do next. Business never goes to sleep ».

« Yes; but I mean besides business ».

« Why — everything I can, I guess ». He leaned back in his chair with an air of placid power, as if he were so sure of getting what he wanted that there was no longer any use in hurrying there, huge as his vistas had become.

She continued to question him, and he began to talk of his growing passion for pictures and furniture, and of his desire to form a collection which should be a great representative assemblage of unmatched specimens. As he spoke she saw his expression change, and his eyes grow younger, almost boyish, with a concentrated look in them that reminded her of long-forgotten things.

« I mean to have the best, you know; not just to get ahead of the other fellows, but because I know it when I see it. I guess that's the only good reason », he concluded; and he added, looking at her with a smile: « It was what you were always after, wasn't it? ».

This is a style which never quite frees itself from the threat of the cliché ('almost breathlessly', 'reminded her of long-forgotten things'), but the passage as a whole seems entirely successful and rich in implications. We note, for example, the sexual overtones of 'things he could have' and 'the long triumph of an Asiatic conqueror': Undine is already thinking of what a remarriage to Moffatt would be like. All the terms of the *Othello* metaphor, too, are exactly right — Moffatt has been earlier presented as a 'braver of the Olympians' with 'something epic' about him — although there is an eloquent irony in Undine's being precisely without Desdemona's innocence. In that last sentence there is, of course, irony for Moffatt himself as well as for the reader: Undine's conception of 'the best', limited as it is to notions of material acquisition and social prestige, is at once less adventurous and less admirable than Moffatt's own conception. Although so reminiscent of Christopher Newman in his 'air of placid power', his western origins, his ownership of railways, his personal magnanimity, Moffatt is nevertheless closer to Adam Verver in his connoisseurship. This connoisseurship is, in both Moffatt and Verver, of an almost predatory nature, but where James leaves us in doubt as to the quality of Verver's taste, failing to specify any of his purchases, Edith Wharton typically takes more risks and, without entering into great detail, persuades us that Moffatt is genuinely sensitive and that his taste is good: his room contains « a lapis bowl in a Renaissance mounting of enamel and a vase of Phoenician glass that was like a bit of rainbow caught in cobwebs. On a table against the window a little Greek marble lifted its pure lines... ».

But Moffatt is not the book's hero. He appears in a better light than most of those who affect to despise him, but his values, no less than theirs, are ultimately money values, and in human relationships he is often insensitive and clumsy: when Undine's son is weeping his heart out for loneliness and lovelessness Moffatt's idea of comforting him is to hold out the hope of his one day becoming « the richest boy in America ». It is perhaps a weakness in the novel that none of the major characters is sufficiently likeable for our sympathies to be fully engaged: Ralph, though badly used, is ineffective; the Spraggs are too pathetic, the Dagonets and the de Chelles are

too proud; Undine, in her unqualified materialism, assumes the proportions of a predatory monster. But if *The Custom of the Country*, though certainly humane and often humorous, is finally a cold book, that is because the materialism and cynicism at the heart of its society (« Every Wall Street term had its equivalent in the language of Fifth Avenue ») are too clearly seen for it to be otherwise. Even Moffatt, though he looks forward to Jay Gatsby, does not have Gatsby's romantic justifications; for the rest, the world of *The Custom of the Country* is overwhelmingly a world of Tom and Daisy Buchanans.

Fitzgerald's name is invoked here mainly to suggest the special position which *The Custom of the Country* occupies in American literary history. It is not only Edith Wharton's finest novel, it is one of the great novels of this century. Certainly it is the finest American novel to have appeared between *The Golden Bowl* and *The Great Gatsby*, and in some respects it is a *bigger* novel than either of these. It did more, of course, than merely appear between *The Golden Bowl* and *The Great Gatsby*: it stands between them in a very particular way. It might be argued that *The Great Gatsby* could hardly have been written without *The Custom of the Country*; it is beyond argument that *The Custom of the Country* itself could not have been written without *The Golden Bowl*, or, rather, without the whole body of James's achievement.

In *A Backward Glance* Edith Wharton recalls Henry James's response to *The Custom of the Country* when it first appeared:

after prolonged and really generous praise of my book, he suddenly and irrepressibly burst forth: 'But of course you know — as how should you, with your infernal keenness of perception, *not* know? — that in doing your tale you had under your hand a magnificent subject, which ought to have been your main theme, and that you used it as a mere incident and then passed it by?'

He meant by this that for him the chief interest of the book, and its most original theme, was that of a crude young woman such as Undine Spragg entering, all unprepared and unperceiving, into the mysterious labyrinth of family life in the old French aristocracy.

The presentation of Undine Spragg at Saint Désert (how excellent, in both instances, the choice of names!) is undoubtedly one of the finest things in the novel, and it is the point at which the balance of our sympathies is most delicately maintained, but James's remark is both a commentary on his own limitations and a tribute to the richness of *The Custom of the Country*. It is the very generosity of Edith Wharton's talent in this book, the fact that she could pick up and develop such a theme only to drop it again almost in passing, that makes it the major work it is. Almost alone among American writers of this century Edith Wharton here achieves the combination of picaresque amplitude with a controlling artistic intelligence of the Jamesian kind. And she achieves it in this novel alone: *The Custom of the Country* stands in much the same relation to her other books as *A Hazard of New Fortunes* stands to the rest of Howells' production. But if the intelligence at work in the novel is of the Jamesian kind it is not of the Jamesian quality: nothing in Edith Wharton approaches the power or the sensitiveness of James at his best. But James, for his part, could never have committed himself to so extensive an undertaking as *The Custom of the Country*: the social and moral areas involved would have been too great for him to have grasped artistically. At least, he would have felt that they were too great. We sometimes sense in James a kind of temerity, a limiting over-scrupulosity, which prevents him from ever working on the very largest scale, and the admiration wrung from him by 'the coarse, comprehensive, prodigious Zola' suggests that it was a limitation of which he was himself intermittently aware.

Edith Wharton is no Zola, but in *The Custom of the Country* she is, if not exactly more prodigious, at least more comprehensive and certainly coarser than James itself. The coarseness is the price paid for the comprehensiveness, but, after the agonizing subtleties of *The Golden Bowl*, for all its grace, and the refined obscurities of *The Ivory Tower*, for all its moral intensity, it is possible to feel that the price may be worth the paying. Part of the coarseness consists in the unhesitating rapacity of Edith Wharton's indebtedness to Howells and, above all, to James himself. It would be possible to go through *The Custom of the Country* and refer character after cha-

racter, situation after situation, back to a possible original in the novels of Howells or James. At the same time James and Howells, singly or together, do not *contain* Edith Wharton. She is not only more comprehensive than either of them; in a quite down-to-earth way she knows more. She is more at home than ever they were in greater and wider worlds. She sees, worldly-wise, how things are done. Her Americans are never as innocent as James's; unlike Howells she does not write novels of Utopian propaganda. Hence the immense assurance of her best work. If Edith Wharton does not begin to have James's completeness or sensitivity as an artist, she does have an excellent ear for the cadences of the spoken word, for actual speech rhythms, and an omnivorous eye for the furniture of life, the décor of social intercourse. These are qualities Howells possesses supremely: it is the essence of his talent. They appear also in the early James; in his later work they seem progressively to disappear or, at least, to become submerged. The houses in *The Golden Bowl* have an inferential rather than an objective existence: they are little more than names. The characters themselves, though intensely alive, are as if spirited from house to house, placed in new juxtapositions, by a controlling hand: all that matters is the exact quality of the actual situation, the poised moment. The life of *The Custom of the Country* is certainly not more intense than that of *The Golden Bowl*, but it is more broadly based, more inclusive; coarser, perhaps, but more 'life-like'. And if Edith Wharton presents more of the data of life that is perhaps because she has a wider range of them at her fingertips.

Edith Wharton's knowledge is her own, but her equipment remains fundamentally Jamesian. It is to the early rather than the late James that she is mainly indebted; and as a minor nation buying up the discarded weapons of a great power finds itself well-armed but already a little outdated, so Edith Wharton appeared something of an anachronistic survival in the age of Dreiser and Sinclair Lewis. Her style seemed *démodé*; her social criticism, because conservative rather than radical-progressive in temper, was taken no more seriously than aesthetic revulsion; and younger novelists, apart from Scott Fitzgerald, seem to have found nothing in her that they could

'use'. Yet she represents accurately and powerfully, and Rosedale and Moffatt, for example, succeed as characters at precisely the point where Frank Cowperwood fails. Dreiser knew much better than Edith Wharton how such men made their money, although she understood these matters much better than James had done, but he had little idea of what they did with their money when they had it or of how they actually behaved in the presence of their social 'betters'. This is where Edith Wharton is absolutely at home, and not snobbishly so: her treatment of Rosedale and Moffatt is not unsympathetic and she shows herself rather better at imagining the, to her, unknown depths than is Dreiser at imagining the, to him, unknown heights. Whereas *The Stoic*, for example, is a dismal failure, the scenes in *The House of Mirth* of Lily Bart's 'degradation' (her fall in prosperity is, like Silas Lapham's, a rise in integrity) are convincing and only slightly sentimentalised.

4. *The Custom of the Country* itself, however, though far more impressive in knowledge and in scope than any of Henry James's novels about businessmen, yet falls a long way short of his vision, in « The Question of the Opportunities », of what the business novel might be. Elmer Moffatt, Mr. Spragg and even Ralph Marvell show more signs than do Christopher Newman and Adam Verver of being 'seamed all over with the wounds of the market', but Edith Wharton still does not depict either here or in *The Fruit of the Tree* 'the immensity and complexity of the general struggle, a boundless ferocity of battle'. To find a novel of this period which meets the Jamesian specifications — and meets them with peculiar exactness — we must go to a novelist of an entirely different kind, Frank Norris, and to an underestimated novel, *The Pit* (1903). Ever since the Civil War there had been in America a great outpouring of 'business' and 'economic' novels. Apart from those of Howells few such novels have other than sociological or historical interest today, and *The Pit* is perhaps the first American novel of literary importance to derive its central interest from detailed descriptions of business activities:

its hero, Curtis Jadwin, is certainly the first large-scale presentation of an American captain of finance.

The story is that of Jadwin's attempt to corner the world wheat market through speculation on the Chicago wheat exchange, the 'Pit' of the title, and of how these business activities affect his relationship with Laura, his 'artistic' wife. It is a carefully, even self-consciously, structured novel: the whispers about the wheat that spoil Laura's evening at the Opera foreshadow the intrusion of the wheat into her own life, and reflect the indifference of the world of business to what Chicago took to be the world of art and gracious living; the subject of those whispered discussions, the failure of an attempt to corner the market, looks forward to Jadwin's own failure later in the book; the scene of the brokers' offices working overtime is repeated, in almost the same words, at the very end of the novel when Jadwin has failed and is leaving with Laura to start a new life in the West. But the structuring only intensifies the sense of artificiality, of contrivance, that the novel inevitably gives. It becomes only too clear only too soon what the end will be: it is simply a matter of time and of Norris's ability to squeeze excitement from the sheer audacity of Jadwin's attempt and from the details of business operations in the 'Pit' itself.

Nevertheless, *The Pit* remains both readable and historically important. There is a great sense of the excitement of business, with descriptions of the changing mood of the 'Pit' at critical moments and an insistence on the all-absorbing nature of the speculative fever. The choice of the Chicago Wheat Exchange as a subject had one very great advantage: speculation in wheat is sufficiently straightforward for the ordinary reader to understand the essentials without having to be bombarded with detailed explanations, as tends to happen in Dreiser's business novels. This makes for a nice management of that problem of comprehension mentioned by James. Moreover, Norris concentrates on the operations, visible and audible, of the 'Pit' itself, tending to ignore or minimise the importance of political and other pressures. Unlike Dreiser, he doesn't feel impelled to give the whole picture, present all the ascertainable facts. This makes for narrative strength: the story line is kept clear. But it is

possible to ask if Norris wasn't, in fact, less interested in making things clearer for his readers than in making things easier for himself. Although Norris undoubtedly knew a good deal about the Chicago Wheat Exchange, it seems likely that it didn't so much thrust itself upon him as a subject demanding treatment as suggest itself to him as a possible setting for an American novel on the lines of Zola's *L'Argent* (1891).

Certainly there is a remarkably close relationship between *L'Argent* and *The Pit**. *L'Argent* deals with speculation on the Paris Bourse and in particular with the history of one company, the Universal Bank, whose shares, under advertising pressure, rise to fantastic values before being overtaken by inevitable collapse and general ruin. M. Saccard, the promoter, is perhaps more like Dreiser's Frank Cowperwood than like Curtis Jadwin: he is intensely self-centred, unscrupulous, with a fierce appetite for women. Yet Saccard and Jadwin have much in common. Both engage in speculation for the love of battle rather than for the hope of gain. Both are known, more or less justly, for their kindness to the unfortunate. Both are frequently described as 'Napoleonic'. Both commit themselves unreservedly to the enterprises in which they are engaged, Jadwin expending his personal fortune to support the price of wheat, Saccard using his to sustain the price of the Bank's shares. When defeat comes each loses more heavily than his associates. Both are driven on beyond what is wise and prudent by an ambition to achieve an unreasonable goal: Jadwin wants to corner the world's wheat; Saccard wants first to drive the price of shares beyond three thousand francs and, that achieved, to buy all the shares in the market. Saccard is driven on by a desire to revenge himself upon the Jewish bankers; Jadwin does not have quite this revenge motive but he does desire to crush one particular speculator (Scannell) as punishment for his dishonest treatment of his former partner (Hargus). Both are loved by good women much gentler and more civilised than themselves, and loved

* Some of the resemblances mentioned here have previously been noted in LARS AHNEBRINK, *The Beginnings of Naturalism in American Fiction*. Upsala and Cambridge, Mass. 1950, pp. 301-4.

above all because they are men of courage and great activity, who seem intensely alive.

There are other resemblances. Saccard's first coup, based on advance knowledge of a forthcoming peace settlement, is rather similar to Jadwin's first success, which is the result of advance knowledge of the introduction of a tariff bill in the French Chamber of Deputies. In both cases this first success leads them on to further and more disastrous adventures. The changes in the tone of the 'Pit' are a good deal like those of the Bourse, and early in each book we hear of a false rumour that almost panics the market: in *L'Argent* the rumour is of an English ultimatum to France to stop work at Suez; in *The Pit* it is of an English ultimatum to Turkey. In *L'Argent* the office-boys, in *The Pit* the dealers themselves are given to horse-paly in idle moments. In both books the most honourable and admirable of the male characters (Cressles, Mazaud) is ruined as a result of the speculations of the hero, who is his friend, and commits suicide by shooting himself in the head; in each case the heroine (Laura, Madame Caroline) discovers the body.

It seems fairly clear that *The Pit* is, to a large extent, Norris's attempt to 'do' *L'Argent* into American. *The Pit* is a much smaller book than *L'Argent*, and a lesser one. Norris has left out the scenes of the sordid lower depths of the financial world and of the suffering caused by unscrupulous manipulators. He has, as it were, creamed off the top of finance, emphasising the excitement and romance, omitting the dirt and crime. This is in line with the conception of business as romance expressed in *The Pit* itself: as Laura sits in the opera she hears in the occasional silences fragments of the whispered conversation about the failure of the wheat 'corner':

And abruptly, midway between two phases of that music-drama, of passion and romance, there came to Laura the swift and vivid impression of that other drama that simultaneously — even at that very moment — was working itself out close at hand, equally picturesque, equally romantic, equally passionate; but more than that, real, actual, modern, a thing in the very heart of the very life in which she moved.

A little later in the book Laura, though drawn to the artist Corthell,

suddenly realises that her feeling for Jadwin, the man of business, is far more powerful:

Then suddenly Laura surprised herself. After all, she was a daughter of the frontier, and the blood of those who had wrestled with a new world flowed in her body. Yes, Cortwell's was a beautiful life;... But the men to whom the woman in her turned were not those of the studio. Terrible as the Battle of the Street was, it was yet battle. Only the strong and the brave might dare it, and the figure that held her imagination and her sympathy was not the artist... but the fighter, unknown and unknowable to women as he was; hard, rigorous, panoplied in the harness of the warrior, who strove among the trumpets, and who, in the brunt of conflict, conspicuous, formidable, set the battle in a rage about him, and exulted like a champion in the shoutings of the captains.

Norris's adaptation of Biblical imagery is not particularly successful, but it does reflect the earnestness of his attempt to invest business with an aura of antique splendour and romance. This romantic element is to be found in Zola, whom indeed Norris claims as 'the very head of the Romanticists', but in Norris it becomes dominant. His ideas on the subject are most fully expressed in an enthusiastic passage in *The Responsibilities of the Novelist* (1903):

The desire for conquest — say what you will — was as big in the breast of the most fervid of the Crusaders as it is this very day in the most peacefully disposed of American manufacturers. Had the Lion-Hearted Richard lived to-day he would have become a «leading representative of the Amalgamated Steel Companies», and doubt not for a moment that he would have underbid his Manchester rivals in the matter of bridge girders. Had Mr. Andrew Carnegie been alive at the time of the preachings of Peter the Hermit he would have raised a company of *gens d'armes* sooner than all of his brothers-in-arms, would have equipped his men better and more effectively, would have been first on the ground before Jerusalem, would have built the most ingenious siege-engine and have hurled the first cask of Greek-fire over the walls.

Competition and conquest are words easily interchangeable, and the whole spirit of our present commercial crusade to the Eastward betrays itself in the fact that we cannot speak of it but in terms borrowed from the glossary of the warrior. It is a commercial «invasion», a trade «war», a «threatened attack» on the part of America, business is «captured», opportunities are «seized», certain industries are «killed», certain former monopolies are «wrested away». Seven hundred years ago a certain Count Baldwin, a great leader in the attack of the Anglo-

Saxon Crusades upon the Old World, built himself a siege-engine which would help him enter the beleaguered city of Jerusalem. Jerusalem is beleaguered again to-day, and the hosts of the Anglo-Saxon commercial crusaders are knocking at the gates. And now a company named for another Baldwin — and, for all we know, a descendant of the Count — leaders of the invaders of the Old World, advance upon the city, and, to help in the assault, build an engine — only now the engine is no longer called a *mangonel* but a locomotive.

The difference is hardly of kind and scarcely of degree. It is a mere matter of names, and the ghost of Saladin watching the present engagement might easily fancy the old days back again.

The point about military imagery is well taken. In *The Pit* as in *L'Argent*, images of battle are used again and again in descriptions of commercial operations. Business as battle, and both as romance: this was part of James's vision. Elsewhere in *The Responsibilities of the Novelist* Norris writes: « Romance does very well in the castles of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance chateaux... but, if you choose to look for her, you will find her equally at home in the brown-stone house on the corner and in the office-building downtown ». Laura's recognition that she was 'a daughter of the Frontier' spurred her admiration for Jadwin, the 'warrior' of business. Now Norris suggests that commerce is perhaps only the latest form to be taken by that great, uniquely American romance of the frontier which had seemed on the point of extinction: « we must look for the lost battle-line not toward the sunset, but toward the East ».

It is one thing to see the romance of business, as Zola does, quite another to see business entirely in terms of romance. *L'Argent* has an epic scope which *includes* romance, and transcends it. In *The Pit* Norris lets romance take charge. He also allows in the disproportionate space given to Laura and her problems, too great an intrusion of the conventionally 'romantic'. At the same time the relationship of the businessman to his wife is, as James saw, something the business novelist can scarcely ignore, and Norris presents effectively, if too melodramatically, the picture of a woman who sees not another woman but her husband's business as her deadly rival: « It's wheat—wheat—wheat, wheat—wheat—wheat, all the time. Oh, if only you knew how I hated and feared it! »

The idea of opposing Corthell, the artist, to Jadwin, the practical man of affairs, is in itself good. Unfortunately Corthell is wholly unconvincing: in dealing with the 'artistic' Norris is hardly more at ease than Dreiser. Indeed, the characterisation in this novel is poor compared to what Norris had shown himself capable of in *McTeague* and in characters like Annixter and Magnus Derrick in *The Octopus*. Laura remains a misty, somewhat Pre-Raphaelite figure. Jadwin convinces intermittently, as in his moments of more relaxed speech, and something of the 'Napoleonic' quality that Norris saw in him does come across. But the character doesn't hang together. Kind and even lovable at home, unscrupulous and even brutal in the 'Pit', Jadwin is too much of a Jekyll-and-Hyde to seem human. Norris is at great pains to emphasise the gulf between Jadwin's sentimentality on the one hand and his ruthlessness on the other, but fails to suggest what it is that can unite them in a single personality.

5. The novel, then, is not entirely successful, and even when due allowance is made for its having been left unrevised at Norris's death there is no doubt that it appears crude and limited, a distinctly minor work, by comparison with a James or a good Edith Wharton novel. It can scarcely be necessary to point out, however, how nearly *The Pit* fulfils James's conception of what the American business novel might be. The epic heroism, the 'wounds of the market', the 'ferocity of battle', the imagery of war and the aura of romance, the central importance of the relationship between the businessman and his 'immitigable womankind' — these things on which James lays such strong theoretical stress are given fictional substance by Norris. But they are also precisely those elements in *The Pit* which Norris seems to have taken from *L'Argent*. It is at this point that one recalls the reference which James himself makes to *L'Argent* in «The Question of the Opportunities»: «The most energetic attempt at portrayal [of 'the world of affairs'] that we have anywhere had — *L'Argent*, of Émile Zola — is precisely a warning of the difference between false and true initiation. The subject there,

though so richly imagined, is all too mechanically, if prodigiously, got up». The reference, it is true, is primarily critical, yet James does acknowledge the energy and the 'richly imagined' quality of the book. Though there is no evidence of James having in fact read *The Pit*, we may imagine him judging it in similar terms, if with greater reservations.

Looking back at «The Question of the Opportunities» with both *L'Argent* and *The Pit* in mind it is hard to resist the conclusion that, far more than he may have realised, James's reading of *L'Argent* had profoundly influenced his sense of the possibilities of the American business novel. It is perhaps worth noting that after the 1903-4 visit to America, when he became aware for the first time of the full extent of contemporary American business activity, James seems to have grown even more appreciative of Zola's gifts than he had been previously: in the passage already quoted from *The American Scene*, for example, he speaks of Zola, with almost envious admiration, as the only writer who might have measured up to the New York business spectacle.

It is not, of course, suggested that Norris, for his part, was influenced by James's essay, though the possibility cannot be entirely ruled out. The point is rather that James, though quite as aware as younger writers of the new 'opportunities' offered by an expanding society, was less able to turn such opportunities to the uses of his art; and this not so much because of genuine incapacity as of long-standing personal inhibitions and an excessive sense of his own limitations. Did James perhaps exaggerate, in «The Question of the Opportunities» and throughout his life, the difficulties of understanding the business man and his world? We can understand his aversion from the methods employed by Zola in 'getting up' a new subject, but there is little evidence that he made any effort whatsoever to overcome his ignorance of 'affairs'. It is perhaps a fundamental weakness in James, not simply that he failed to deal with business and businessmen, for that is scarcely a universal criterion, but that the social and human area in which he worked, instead of expanding in response to a widening experience, became progressively narrower: so that his last completed novel, *The Golden Bowl*, is the one in

which the characters seem most completely divorced from anything recognisable as 'real life'. The great interest of Edith Wharton's work, on the other hand, is that, unrestricted by the Jamesian inhibitions, she is able to bring to bear the Jamesian techniques upon important socio-economic questions that James himself regards either not at all or from a great distance. At the same time she does not have the devouring energy which Norris displays in *The Octopus* and those sections of *The Pit* which deal with the business side of Jadwin's life. *The Custom of the Country* can be seen, in fact, as standing midway between the crude force of Norris and the sensitive artistic intelligence of James.

James's ignorance of economic issues, with the limitations this imposed upon him as a novelist of American manners, has been frequently commented upon, never more frankly than by James himself. It has seemed necessary to touch upon the question again here, both for reasons of completeness and as a means of demonstrating the still insufficiently recognised achievement of Edith Wharton, but that is not the note on which to conclude. What emerges so impressively, indeed, is not the narrowness of James's art but the catholicity, the comprehensiveness of his sympathies and insights. Without knowing of the essay in *Notes on Novelists* (1914) we would scarcely have looked to James for one of the most perceptive and appreciative of all English discussions of Zola. Without having juxtaposed « The Question of the Opportunities » with *The Pit* we would scarcely have thought of James as a possible theoretician for such a practitioner as Frank Norris. We may sometimes forget for a moment the marvellous achievement of the novels and tales and wish that James had devoted more of his attention to the writing of literary criticism. No one was more generous to his inferiors than James; no one better demonstrated the appreciative function of criticism; and, as « The Question of the Opportunities » so eloquently shows, no one responded more eagerly to the appearance of new novelistic material, however far it might seem to lie outside the conceivable boundaries of his own interests as a creative artist.

MICHAEL MILLGATE