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HENRY JAMES'S BUSINESSMEN

By BLAIR G. KENNEY

THE BUSINESSMAN was a favorite whipping boy of the nineteenth century novel. Horrified by the results of mechanization, the literary world vented its disgust upon the product and producer of that industrialism. English writers consistently denigrated the businessman. Dickens had the icy Dombey, Trollope his brutal Melmotte, even gentle George Eliot showed a melodramatic Bulstrode-Raffles-Rigg trio of evil dabblers in commerce. American writers, too, derided the species. Hawthorne's Peter Goldthwaite who stores up colonial currency in hope of a rise is both avaricious and silly, the epitome of the "speculator." Howells' Dryfoos is most convincing when most sinister. It is surprising that only the most aesthetic, sensitive, perhaps effete of nineteenth-century novelists, Henry James, is able to see beyond the stereotype, and to portray for us that virile figure in all his variety, in nobility as well as squalor. Only James sees the businessman as a figure of hope rather than doom.

It is important to note that James sees the businessman as the most characteristic of *American* types, in fact as typical of America in general. He says in *The American Scene*:

No impression so promptly assaults the arriving visitor as that of the overwhelming preponderance, wherever he turns and twists, of the unmitigated 'business man' face, ranging through its various possibilities, its extraordinary actualities, of intensity. And I speak here of facial cast and expression alone, leaving out of account the questions of voice, tone, utterance and attitude, the chorus of which would vastly swell the testimony and in which I seem to discern, for these remarks at large, a treasure of illustration to come.¹

The "treasure of illustration" was to come, and had come, in James's fiction, and we can discern in his novels the same wealth of invention and differentiation within the type which he shows in this long essay. In *The American Scene* he speaks of New York, the capital of the world's business, in terms which we could apply to the reading of his novels:

The immense liberality of the Bay, the noble amplitude of the boat, . . . the gaiety of the light, the gladness of the air, and, above all (for it

1 Citations to this work refer to the 1946 Scribner edition. Here p. 64.

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most came back to that), the unconscious affluence, the variety in identity, of the young men of business: these things somehow left speculation, left curiosity exciting, yet kept it beguilingly safe (p. 6).

Unlike most of his literary contemporaries, James was pleasantly intrigued by the world of business.

His variety of businessmen ranges from Abel Gaw in *The Ivory Tower*, whose lust for money and power is so strong that the recovery of the man he has bilked causes his death, to Christopher Newman, the idealistic and attractive thwarted lover of *The American*. For convenience we will assume the existence of three main types of businessmen in James's work, even though to do so is to slight unfairly James's ability to portray individuals. First we have the man who is literally identified with his money to the point that he exists only in relation to it. Abel Gaw is one of these. "He's just dying of twenty millions," says Rosanna of Gaw.² His emotions are too bound up with dollars to admit the presence of people. So, to a lesser extent, is it with Mr. Ruck of "The Pension Beaurepas," and with Jim Pocock of *The Ambassadors*. They are shown as negative quantities in the stories except for the money which they provide. One cannot miss the symbolic point of Mr. Ruck's illness, which is intimately connected with the financial ailment which has attacked American lumber, and the picture James draws of him, with his back to the Alps, reading an American journal (XIV, 438), is equally pointed. He *is* American lumber, and his insensitivity to all else is almost Dickensian. European culture and beauty do not exist for Mr. Ruck, or for Jim Pocock, to whom Strether's Paris means simply a chance for a few spicy adventures.

Related to these, but much more interesting, are the Grand Old Men of business, the ironic and complex figures like Adam Verver and Daniel Touchett. This second group includes those men who have made their money and now wish to atone for the making. Their enormous and ruthless effort seems to have drained them of life, so that although, unlike the first group, they show a generalized kindness, they are also ineffectual in human relationships. Verver and Touchett are both strangers in foreign lands, and both have a vague and shadowy quality.

² All citations to James's novels and short stories refer to volumes in the New York Edition (New York, 1936). Here XXV, 140.

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The third type is that in which the force and shrewdness which have enabled them to make their way in business is not exhausted, but so vital that when it carries over to human relationships it defeats their desire for life, since human beings are not run like stock markets, and unleashed force must be tempered by forms and softer virtues in the business of society. Christopher Newman and Caspar Goodwood are both of this type. Both seek love, and attempt to take their women by storm, only to find that honest vitality and power is likely to be defeated by the more subtle means of human communication. Isabel rejects Caspar's violence as she does his argument, darting from his arms at the end of *The Portrait of a Lady* (IV, 436), and Newman is defeated by the Bellegardes at the moment when he shows his power over them. When he tells them of his discovery they realize he will never use his knowledge.

There are common elements in all these figures which make up the type of American businessman of whom James speaks in *The American Scene*. If those of the last two groups are most attractive, yet even Mr. Ruck has a certain pathetic amiability with his perfect willingness to be ignored and exploited by his wife and daughter, and his perpetual "That's the principal interest for ladies" (XIV, 14), with which he gently excuses their foibles. Even the comic ghastliness of the picture of Abel Gaw is mitigated by his mild and sad love of his daughter, the one living thing in his world. These businessmen express for James the spirit of America, and it is in his eyes a fruitful spirit.

There is one constant feature of James's businessmen, in contrast to his Europeans and indeed to most of his other American characters. They are never all of a piece. They are usually mixtures of contradictory and anomalous traits. We can begin to see this in a simple description of Daniel Touchett's face in *The Portrait of a Lady*:

It was evidently a face in which the range of representation was not large, so that the air of contented shrewdness was all the more of a merit. It seemed to tell that he had been successful in life, yet it seemed to tell also that his success had not been exclusive and invidious, but had had much of the inoffensiveness of failure. He had certainly had a great experience of men, but there was an almost rustic simplicity in the faint smile that played upon his lean, spacious cheek and lighted up his humorous eye as he at last slowly and carefully deposited his big tea-cup

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upon the table. He was neatly dressed, in well-brushed black; but a shawl was folded upon his knees, and his feet were encased in thick, embroidered slippers (III, 4-5).

In the old man, the anomalies are shown only in terms of qualifying statements, but in the picture of young Christopher Newman the sense of dislocation and contradiction is stronger:

The gentleman on the divan was the superlative American; . . . It was the eye in this case that chiefly told the story; an eye in which the unacquainted and the expert were singularly blended. It was full of contradictory suggestions, and though it was by no means the glowing orb of a hero of romance, you could find in it almost anything you looked for. Frigid and yet friendly, frank yet cautious, shrewd yet credulous, positive yet skeptical, confident yet shy, extremely intelligent and extremely good-humored, there was something vaguely defiant in its concessions, and something profoundly reassuring in its reserve (II, 2-4).

The most distinctive feature of all these characters is their mixture of shrewdness and naivete. The tycoons are as innocent as children when they enter the social world. Mrs. Tristram says to Newman, "You have been odiously successful," and Newman replies happily, "Successful in copper, . . . but very mixed in other mining ventures. And I've had to take quite a back seat on oil" (II, 44). His grasp of the business situation is excellent, but as small talk for a party this is decidedly lacking in European finesse, and his grasp of art, dancing and social regulations is also that of a child. The social innocence of the other businessmen is equally apparent. Caspar is impatient of all forms. Pocock and Mr. Ruck view them with awe and confusion. Adam Verver and Daniel Touchett are aware of the existence of such, but can do no more than see the bare outlines. They hold aloof from them by ignorance and by choice. The Prince concludes that Verver "has his own [form]" (XXIII, 7). He is a "patient punctilious host" (XXIII, 130), but "inscrutably monotonous behind an iridescent cloud" (XXIII, 128). His gentleness and detachment seem to remove him from social intercourse altogether. Though the book is full of encounters and festivities, we only see Adam talk alone with Maggie and once or twice with Charlotte. He never speaks in company.

As well as social innocence, these men possess moral innocence. Evil is something very clear-cut to them, which they do

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not feel really acquainted with, but if they did they would, with the preacher, be against it. Complexity of motive and the interdependence of good and evil are foreign to their simplicity. Thus Jim Pocock seems Mme. Vionnet as "A regular bad one—though of course of a tremendously superior kind" (XXII, 118). They see evil in the simplest and most extreme terms, as when Goodwood calls Gilbert Osmond "the deadliest of fiends" (IV, 432). They cling to the simplest truths in the face of the most baffling and subtle motives, as when Newman bursts out to the Bellegardes, "Why should you object to me so—what's the matter with me? I can't hurt you, and I wouldn't if I could. I'm the most unobjectionable fellow in the world" (II, 374). Even kind Mr. Touchett, when Ralph confronts him with a grand scheme to help Isabel, reverts to a kind of instinctive and naive sense of morality, saying "Well, I don't know that it's right to make everything so easy for a person" (III, 264).

The most direct logic, and often a kind of natural instinct for justice, determines the ethics of these men, and frequently this stands in shining contrast to the murky motives of the European characters. Jim Pocock may have a negative moral value, but Newman is the moral hero of his book through his ability to cut through the cant, hypocrisy, and actual criminality which rule the Bellegardes' "nobility." Goodwood is not far from the truth in calling Osmond a fiend. Mr. Touchett's fears about Isabel's legacy are to be realized in full. Though these characters are never aware of the whole truth, the truths they act upon are the right ones. James's picture of Newman sums up this moral straightness: "He had been blessed from the first with a natural impulse to disfigure with a direct unreasoning blow the painted face of temptation" (II, 102).

With the exception of Abel Gaw (and even he is "mild"), all these men possess in common a great fund of what James calls "good faith," or good nature, that is part of their innocence. Adam Verver is constantly spoken of as a child, and he is of course Adam before the fall, as Newman also in his very name shows his unfledged state. A very important problem in James's work arises from his concept of the American innocence. Innocence can cut through corruption and decadence. But its power depends entirely on what the Adams and Newmans do with the

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great possibilities which they possess because of their freedom from forms and binding traditions. James usually offers such characters an education. It seems that to James "good nature" is a gift granted by the gods to innocence, but evil and unpleasantness must be learned, as Newman, when the Bellegardes snatch his bride from him, tries to learn how to be vengeful. In the cultural sense evil seems to be a product of history, as in the case of the Bellegardes where the antiquity of the family is almost synonymous with its corruption. An American has chances for good or evil, of course. But the characteristic problem of America is not that of evil, but that of unawareness. The Americans must decide whether to attain maturity or to remain forever children.

Some do remain children. Gaw, Pocock, and Ruck have never developed senses of themselves outside of their business capacities, and thus their moral judgments come from the random candor of childish minds. Daniel Touchett and Caspar Goodwood remain ineffectual in their worlds because they never attain a full grasp of the complexities. The nearest successes are gained by Newman and Adam Verver, both of whom are forced into contact with evil and do deal with it. Newman fails to attain his happiness against odds which are too great, but he comes to a certain understanding of the world of the Bellegardes as we see when he revisits the Duchess and becomes aware of her amorality. More important, he comes to terms with himself. He realizes that his old "commercial person" role no longer fits him when he also realizes that the impulse to make the Bellegardes "pay" is dead in him. He is now enough of a man to forgive his enemies. As James says, "the bottom had fallen out of his revenge. Whether it was Christian charity or unregenerate good nature . . . I don't pretend to say" (II, 534). He has come to grips with evil, yet retained the virtue of his innocence.

The moral possibilities of such men are not always defined in James's works. Newman will of course remain to some extent a child. He will never comprehend fully the mixed world of the Bellegardes or the niceties of Renaissance painting. With Adam Verver, however, it is difficult to tell how much of an education has gone on. By the end of *The Golden Bowl* Adam is still, as

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he always was, inscrutable, but he is also “splendid” (XXIV, 333). In the interview he has with Maggie in which she says she must “sacrifice” him we see that he has understood the situation and is offering himself as a sacrifice. To do this, surely he must have had to grasp the complexities and subtleties of the situation, and yet he remains the same image of beneficent innocence he has always been. Adam Verver is apparently the fullest expression of the success of a moral education of this type of American, yet Adam is a shadowy person in his dubious “perfection” which we see only through Maggie’s eyes.

James intentionally does not answer the question about individual Americans and about American culture as a whole which he raises in these novels. In *The American Scene* he puts the problem bluntly as he speaks of the houses of New York:

The huge new houses, up and down, looked over their smart, short lawns as with a certain familiar prominence in their profiles, which was borne out by the accent, loud, assertive, yet benevolent withal, with which they confessed to their extreme expensiveness. ‘Oh, yes; we were awfully dear, for what we are and for what we do’ — it was proud, but it was rather rueful, with the odd appearance everywhere as of florid creations waiting, a little bewilderingly, for their justification, waiting for the next clause in the sequence, waiting in short for life, for time, for interest, for character, for identity itself to come to them . . . (p. 8).

The problem is the same one for their businessmen owners; how to build a character when there are no existing forms by which its building can be guided. It is a problem of the whole culture, the problem of wealth without history.

James goes on to question whether what he calls a “short cut” is possible (p. 8), whether with the power which comes from American money America can buy more than mere power. This is the other side of the American businessman. Innocent though he seems before evil, we never forget that all these men have been engaged in a struggle which has its ugly and grasping side. The hero of “The Jolly Corner” suggests all the nameless evils of business. He leaves a possible commercial career in America to live as a gentleman in Europe, and returns to New York to find the ghost of what he might have been, a spectral figure of power and yet incompleteness, with “splendid covering hands, strong and completely spread,” yet “one of these hands

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had lost two fingers, which were reduced to strips" (XVII, 476). The same hint of hidden evil can be seen in the aspects of our more familiar heroes. Even in his last illness Daniel Touchett maintains his air of "veiled acuteness" when money is mentioned (III, 260). Caspar has a "bold though brooding ambition" (III, 164), which Isabel connects with forces of darkness. These men have all been shrewd and ruthless in their businesses. Newman's trip to Europe was the result of his disgust as a shady transaction probably no different from many transactions he had previously carried out with no qualms. Adam Verver has wrought through "years of darkness" (XXIII, 144), as the author tells us. In all these cases there is a discrepancy between the kindly and generous people they are, and the ruthless things they have done.

But what these men have done is not the main issue for James. What is central is that they are men of power. They have led lives of effort rather than ease. They have immense practicality and a gift for concrete action. What is important to James are the possibilities open to them. Gaw and Pocock are mediocre in business as well as life, and they allow their energies to be channeled into one narrow stream. But Goodwood and Newman are vital figures in all their dealings. The connection between acquisitiveness and sex is easy to make, for these two men are the most ardent of James's lovers. Mr. Touchett, also, though he is apparently frail and sickly, was capable of producing Ralph, and of marrying a woman who as a girl resembled the vivid Isabel Archer. Adam Verver is apparently the least forceful, but in one sense he is the most successful, because his forcefulness is not a personal one, but a vision of the future. The first description of him gives the keynote to his success. His features resemble a "small decent room," but this lack of scope is contradicted by "a pair of ample and uncurtained windows." James goes on to say, "There was something in Adam Verver's eyes that both admitted the morning and the evening in unusual quantities and gave the modest area the outward extension of a view that was 'big' even when restricted to the stars" (XXIII, 170).

Adam is the only one who has a real vision, however. In *The American Scene* James finds a superiority of imagination and

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a “finer texture” in American women, noting “a queer deep split or chasm between the two stages of personal polish, the two levels of the conversible state, at which the sexes have arrived” (p. 65). In another sense this is not only a gap between the American men and women, but between the American spirit which these businessmen typify, and the more cultured and effete European spirit, toward which the women lean. Isabel rejects the unimaginative Goodwood for Gilbert Osmond’s subtlety, Maggie Verver loves her faithless Italian Prince. James always sees the European spirit as essential, for only in Europe can America find the tradition, the forms, and above all the moral knowledge to fulfill itself. Thus all our businessmen, with the perennial exception of Abel Gaw, go to Europe to look for these values, and their perpetual failure is pictured always as an unfortunate loss. Throughout James’s novels the noble struggle of the businessman is to buy culture with power.

What James looks to is a marriage of American power with European tradition. In abstract terms, he seeks the tempering of the energy of life by the forms and knowledge which allow the only channels in which it can fulfill itself. America cannot surrender its energy to forms, it must not assume, with the Bellegardes and Osmonds, that forms are all of life, but it must come to terms with them. Thus James sees America as a businessman, buying life. The fictional example of his ideal is Adam Verver, who uses his millions to purchase a cultured young wife, and to endow “American City” with objets d’art. A direct statement of this ideal can be found in *The American Scene*, where he looks again at New York:

It was exactly because I seemed, with the ear of the spirit, to hear the whole quarter bid, as with one penetrating voice, for the boon of the future, for some guarantee, or even mere hinted promise, of history and opportunity, that the attitude affected me as the last revelation of modernity. What made the revelation was the collective sharpness, so to speak, of this vocal note, offering any price, offering everything, wanting only to outbid and prevail, at the great auction of life. ‘See how ready we are’—one caught the tone: ‘Ready to buy, to pay, to promise; ready to place, to honour, our purchase. We have everything, don’t you see? every capacity and appetite, every advantage of education and every susceptibility of sense; no ‘tip’ in the world, none that our time is capable of giving, has been lost on us: so that all we now desire is what you, Mr. Auctioneer, have to dispose of, the great ‘going’ chance of a time to come’ (p. 183).

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The failures of the Newmans and Goodwoods become insignificant before this idea. Even the Pockocks and Gaws have done their part in providing capital.

In this sense the true success is portrayed as that of Adam Verver. Impotent though he may be personally, the sacrifice he makes in leaving his daughter, in chaining Charlotte to the New World, is fruitful not only for the marriage of Europe and America we see in one instance of the second generation in Maggie and the Prince, but in the vision he has of the museum for "American City." Heartless and dry though his collection of art objects may seem to us, to James it has a deeper significance. James says of Adam, "What was at all events not permanently hidden from him was a truth much less invidious about his years of darkness. It was the strange scheme of things again: The years of darkness had been needed to render possible the years of light" (XXIII, 144). The ruthless seeking of power is necessary, for then that power can be used to acquire the arts of life. In the widest sense Adam Verver is giving his life to acquire a sense of values for America. All James examples of the American businessmen have failed to some degree in the search for personal fulfillment, Adam and Ruck and Goodwood alike, but they all succeed in forming the basis through which America can acquire the arts of life, through which its honesty and its power can become part of a more complex and *interesting* existence. James makes this perfectly explicit in a passage in *The American Scene* describing the Metropolitan Museum, if we remember that the museum is not merely a collection of art, but a symbol of the education of the child which is America through the arts, the distillation of human experience which he can acquire only laboriously and with sacrifice, not by rejecting, but by understanding the parent Europe:

There was money in the air, ever so much money — that was, grossly expressed, the sense of the whole intimation. And the money was to be all for the most exquisite things — for *all* the most exquisite except creation, which was to be off the scene altogether; for art, selection, criticism, for knowledge, piety, taste. The intimation — which was somehow, after all, so pointed — would have been detestable if interests other, and smaller, than these had been in question. The Education, however, was to be exclusively that of the sense of beauty; this defined, romantically, for my evoked drama, the central situation. What left me wondering a little, all the same, was the contradiction involved in one's

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not thinking of some of its prospective passages as harsh. Here it is, no doubt, that one catches the charm of rigours that take place all in the aesthetic and the critical world. They would be invidious, would be cruel, if applied to personal interests, but they take on a high benignity as soon as the values concerned become values mainly for the mind. (if they happen to have also a trade-value this is pure superfluity and excess.) The thought of the acres of canvas and the tons of marble to be turned out into the cold world as the penalty of old error and the warrant for a clean slate ought to have drawn tears from the eyes. But these impending incidents affected me, in fact, on the spot, as quite radiant demonstrations. The Museum, in short, was going to be great, and in the geniality of the life to come such sacrifices, though resembling those of the funeral-pile of Sardanapalus, dwindled to nothing (p. 192).

Here James takes the view of the true artist, that if the end is beauty, all means are justified. There is a ruthlessness about his judgment, and a single-mindedness, which may show us why James was one of the few nineteenth-century novelists to appreciate that ruthless and single-minded type character, the American businessman.



HENRY JAMES JUVENILIA: A POEM AND A LETTER

By RICHARD CARY

I. *The Poem*

THE EXCRUCIATING interlude of Henry James's public agony and failure as a dramatist (1890-1895) has been extensively chronicled by his critics and biographers. No such absorption has marked another, much earlier literary misfire — his private failure as a poet. The cause of this neglect lies in (a) James's disinclination to show his callow compositions to family or friends, and (b) his quick and silent abandonment of the medium.

It comes as a surprise to most — even to seasoned James scholars — that the incipient prose-master ever tried his hand at meter. Looking backward, at age 70, he in fact took particular pains to deny it. "The muse was of course the muse of prose fiction — never for the briefest hour in my case the presumable, not to say the presuming, the much-taking-for-granted