

Review Essay: *The Representation of Business in English Literature**

Michael R. Stevens
Professor of English
Cornerstone University

An anthology is an odd species of learned text. It is neither the “flesh” of a unified argument produced by a single mind, nor the “fowl” (no pun intended!) of a wide-ranging, multifaceted journal, retooling each month or quarter. Instead, the scholarly anthology offers a set of scholarly essays, heavily footnoted, deep and narrow in focus, and often ambiguously linked. In the case of *The Representation of Business in English Literature* more than enough intellectual heft is offered, with contributors from some of the United Kingdom’s leading research institutions (Edinburgh, Hull, Leeds—though Oxford and Cambridge are noticeably missing). Notwithstanding, questions of consistency and breadth of focus linger over the volume from start to finish, and at times the evaluation of the literary mind seems to balance on purely mercantile terms, an unfortunate oversimplification that almost swamps the volume—almost. Nonetheless, the essays eventually rally and offer a measure of helpful insight into the world of social critique and exchange of ideas across sometimes-hostile boundaries.

This book was initially commissioned by the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA), and, as John Blundell describes in the foreword, the tap-root was F. A. Hayek’s bittersweet notions about intellectuals, among whom he counted in rather motley fashion “journalists, teachers, ministers, lecturers, publicists, radio commentators, writers of fiction, cartoonists, and artists—all of whom may be masters of the technique of conveying ideas but are usually amateurs so far as the substance of what they convey is concerned” (x). Although Hayek admitted the

*Edited by Arthur Pollard. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2009 (186 pages).

strength of this sweeping class of people in a comment to the IEA's founder Sir Antony Fisher in a 1945 meeting—"... [they] reach the intellectuals, the teachers and writers, with reasoned argument. It will be their influence on society which will prevail and the politicians will follow" (ix)—even here a sense of condescension and pragmatism prevails. Literary voices are seen as naïve, amateur, and merely idealistic but at the same time influential and if properly trained able to affect the really important people—the politicians. This is a dour portrait of serious literary minds. (I will not vouch for publicists and radio commentators, but does not Bill Watterson of *Calvin and Hobbes* fame deserve a better place than to be lumped in this thin category of cartoonists?) John Blundell finishes his foreword with a plan to reeducate writers and to redirect their vision of business through a mechanism of financial incentives because "fiction writers above all ... treat business as an honourable, creative, moral and personally satisfying way of life" (xvi). However, does this business plan to rectify fiction writing seem any more credible than a fiction writer's aspirations to chasten and thus transform the world of market capitalism? Is it possible that the contributors to this volume, and perhaps even their antecedent Hayek himself, might be guilty of an amateur understanding of the penetrating insights into human nature and society that are available through the aperture of imaginative prose? My reading of *The Representation of Business in English Literature*, in light of this thorny question, has revealed a mixed and intriguing set of observations.

Arthur Pollard's introduction begins with a sharp separation whereby "few writers have had first-hand experience of the world of commerce and industry. Their world is governed by the imaginative and the spiritual. It is no wonder therefore that they so often despise the other world that they see as materialistic, concerned with the despised but necessary activities of everyday existence, with matters of trade and work and wages and profits" (1). This bifurcation of the world into something akin to idealists versus realists dominates the tone of much of the volume (Pollard is, in fact, the editor), and the effect is unfortunate. This effect, furthered by such claims as, "perhaps not surprisingly, with their ready sympathy for those who are obviously suffering, creative writers can tend to be too simplistic" (5), is softened by his approval of Dickens and Shaw, among others, as fair-minded and helpful in showing business as a healthy mechanism in culture. Not quite satisfying, Pollard's faint smile does at least offer possibilities that some of the contributors find vital.

The chapter "Eighteenth-Century Attitudes Towards Business" by W. A. Speck sets up a fundamental enmity toward luxury that preoccupied Swift and Smollett. However, Daniel Defoe is a champion of industriousness: Robinson Crusoe practices vigorous commerce before, during, and after his stay on the island. Indeed,

literary attacks on the slave trade are lauded, though Speck points out that they “appealed more to the hearts than to the purses of readers” (34). The next essay, Geoffrey Carnall’s “Early Nineteenth Century: Birmingham—‘Something Direful in the Sound,’” continues in the tenor of Speck’s account. Carnall well notes the nostalgic longings for ruralism and agrarianism in authors who are dealing with a rapidly industrializing England. These authors include Walter Scott and the romantic poets Wordsworth, Crabbe, Keats, and Blake. Inasmuch as the whole essay is rather fragmentary, there is no extended engagement with the sharp critiques of Progress by this latter group of poets. The treatment of Blake is particularly disappointing because this poet’s prophetic laments are skipped over in favor of pointing out that Blake’s tone must be seen as equivocal in view of his being an engraver and tradesman himself. Carnall is even a bit acerbic in showing that Jane Austen’s defamations of trade come less from observation than from her rural gentry sensibilities. Yet, though I bristle to see favorite writers, so thoughtful in so many spheres, reproved for narrowness with regard to understanding the place and importance of trade, I nevertheless must concede Carnall’s broad point that business was often decried as a matter of course, not of investigation and intimate knowledge.

Carnall turns the tables by displaying a few literary figures of the era who gave a fuller portrayal of the tradesman, though here he seems to be pressing a bit to locate counterpoints. Both Charles Lamb’s and Walter Scott’s use of Quaker merchants reveals some of the tensions between strict moral codes and business interests. In Lamb’s archetypal tradesman, Juke Judkins, as well as Scott’s highland merchant, Bailie Nicol Jarvie, the possibilities for the thoughtful, community-engaged businessman are curbed a bit by certain crass traits either bred or invited by the hard edge of the marketplace. So it is that, for his most positive portrayal of business, Carnall turns to John Galt (the nineteenth-century Scottish novelist—not he of Ayn Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged*) and his character Mr. Cayenne, who captures that image of “a Captain of Industry, a resourceful benefactor of his local community” (64) without seeming to be too much of an idealization.

Other heroes and exemplars are available during the rest of the nineteenth century as Angus Easson points out in his entry, “The High Victorian Period (1850–1900): ‘The Worship of Mammon,’” a period where “authors show an awareness of the need to deal and to know how to deal in the market-place” (71). Easson cites Thomas Carlyle as realizing that “the Industrial Age was an achievement as great as a force of Nature and greater because it was man-made and man-controlled” (69). It is to their credit, he says, that “knowledge of business deals and operations never adversely affected the sense of Charles Dickens’s or George Eliot’s genius” (72). It seems a little quirky to emphasize

the shrewdness of these two writers in gaining and controlling rights to their publications and printing but not in delving deeply into the crushing analyses of industrialization and urbanization that Dickens offers up in *Oliver Twist* or *Bleak House*. Instead, Easson focuses on *Little Dorrit*, where the troubling merchant, Mr. Merdle, is exposed “as a kind of black hole which sucks money in, only for it to vanish like anti-matter” (67) but where lessons on debt and insolvency are also meant to instruct those wrestling in the world of commerce. The negative lesson is that not everyone trapped by the system is a bad businessman, and not everyone trapped by the system is destroyed. In a backward sort of way, good does triumph as Mr. Dorrit’s “affairs are entangled, he has no idea how, and he is clearly unfitted for business, yet he was not criminal in his financial dealings” (81). Hence, “in a business situation, known to Dickens and accurately represented by him, to be imprisoned and one’s assets thus secured proves an advantage” (82). Although Easson alludes to H. G. Wells and George Bernard Shaw, who are developed in the next essay (like many anthologies, this one suffers from some odd redundancies), the Dickens model, though tacit and a bit submerged, holds out the best example of thoughtful fiction writing about business in the rapidly industrializing England of the Victorian age.

What Easson had pointed toward at the end of his account is picked up in a brisk, well-wrought essay by Allan Simmons, “The Early Twentieth Century: Uniformity, Drudgery and Economics,” which was the highlight of the whole volume in its careful melding of literary with economic concerns in this most ideologically charged of periods. I will admit I am also partial because Simmons leads off with T. S. Eliot’s masterful reflections on urban-industrial decay from *The Waste Land*, and my own dissertation work centered on Eliot as socio-economic thinker through his journal *The Criterion*. For me, Simmons hits just the right note in suggesting that the literary figures known as modernists had every right to comment on the business sphere: “Modernism captures the vulnerabilities and skepticism associated with the abandonment of comforting certainties of the Victorian period in the wake of the combined impact of thinkers such as Freud, Marx, and Darwin. The challenges their theories posed for man’s settled sense of self, his place within a social order, and his place within a divinely arranged scheme, inform all the arts in this period” (101). Then, after such a set-up, Simmons leaves me perplexed by turning to five signature fiction writers, four of whom are not really of this modernist generation. Of H. G. Wells, George Bernard Shaw, Joseph Conrad, Thomas Hardy, and D. H. Lawrence, only the last can really be placed firmly with Eliot, Joyce, and Pound. Indeed, Wells and Shaw, as was mentioned above, had already played a role in Easson’s comments on the Victorian Age, and Conrad and Hardy were both dead within

a few years of the publication of *The Waste Land* and *Ulysses*. Thus, the times seem a tad “out of joint” in Simmons account. Although solid insights are gained on the failures of idealism and the possible goods of realism from Shaw’s *Major Barbara*, with its industrialist father and clueless Salvation Army daughter, and from Wells’ *Tono-Bungay*, with its critique of twentieth-century Britain where “this notion that business success depends upon advertising rather than upon the product advertised ... is damning” (112), the respective publication dates of 1905 and 1909 place both texts in an Edwardian world far removed from the England during and after the Great War so soon to follow.

Likewise, Simmons’ featuring of Hardy, especially his masterful *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, which helps reveal “the presence of unsettling, mainly economic, new forces at work in the countryside” (115), is belied by a publication date in the shadow of Victoria’s Jubilee—1892. Even the sharp observation, “Hardy’s representation of the business that constitutes the rural economy is anything but escapist,” in *Far from the Maddening Crowd*, cannot quite modernize this publication of 1874. The section on Conrad is fascinating but still feels like it hearkens to the time of English sea-supremacy and empire: a pre-World War I sense of things. Thus it is that D. H. Lawrence fills Simmons’ thesis and context best, and the account of *Women in Love* is a sharply drawn recognition that the novel, composed during the war and published in 1922, captures a synthesis of changing literary perceptions and changing socioeconomic factors—all centered in the coal-mining industry’s “dehumanising effect” (126) on both workers and owners. Simmons gives nice balance to his synopsis of Lawrence’s purposes: The crisis in this single (though crucial) industry points to a broader “crisis of values ‘from within’ the milieu of English society” (128). Writers who are able to see in the world of commerce the wider “spirits of the age” are able to serve all of society by reflecting on human concerns; such reflection is no mere imaginative exercise but a service to business itself.

By way of conclusion, and by way of hiding my own ignorance of contemporary British literature, I will comment on the final essay of the volume, John Morris’s “Mid-Late Twentieth Century: ‘An Unprecedented Moral Quagmire,’” only in passing on the way to final reflections. I am intrigued by Morris’s query as to why “creative writers of both Left and Right, divided on so much else, should have shared anti-business feelings, especially as Eliot became a director of Faber and Faber, Pound a propagandist for Mussolini, and Yeats an established figure close to the rich and privileged” (141). Yet, Morris goes back through Wells and Lawrence and Arnold Bennett (in another of the volume’s awkward repetitions between essays) and leaves us where Simmons had. Only when he leaps past World War II and into the age of technology and control, which our last few

generations have shaped but mostly been shaped by, do we see the reversal that Morris is after: “But it has to be said that the dystopian look at finance and business set an important literary and cultural trend to the effect that those who work within the system need to use it before it uses them” (160). Indeed, the writer and culture maker as exploiting the system of commerce, of using the market rather than being used by it, becomes a trope in Martin Amis, James Herbert, and Jeffrey Archer. Morris mentions them as being “writers who inevitably see themselves as much businessmen as authors, part of the process, producers of a potential package of book, film, video and even, perhaps, tee-shirt” (185). Although Morris hopes this sort of writing about writing marks an “apotheosis” and not an “apocalypse” (185), he does not seem so sure.

Neither am I, because it seems that the writers within Morris’s account have lost the wherewithal of commenting on meaningful human dilemmas, of standing outside the mass forces of the market so as to give some critique—even a misbegotten one. Ultimately, Morris’s chapter makes the other contributors seem shortsighted because fiction writers have in the past at least provided some conscience to keep business from degenerating into something all-consuming and monstrous. Indeed, Pollard’s final comment in the introduction to this conflicted but thought-provoking volume comes back in a haunting way, as the editor laments, “In earlier periods criticism had taken the form of protest, outraged by the failure of business to measure up to a set of basic human values. With these values gone, protest has now given way to cynicism and despair. Business, like all else, is now seen as operating in the post-modern spiritual vacuum. Literature has lost its bearings and defining moments are no more” (7). Let us hope Pollard is wrong and that his compiling this book helps to keep alive a very real prophetic and redemptive hope, to the end of the age.