

## Business and the Literati

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*Algis Valiunas*

FOR AS LONG AS THE CULTURE OF BUSINESS has been an integral part of American life, it has also been frowned upon by important sectors of our society. Among our intellectuals especially, the business world has been the subject of many brutal caricatures, portraying corporations large and small, and the people who run them, as heartless, soulless agents of greed. These caricatures have shaped our implicit understanding of the nature of the business world, so much that they have come to pass for conventional wisdom.

In recent years, one of the clearest expressions of the reigning caricature was that offered by the commencement speaker who addressed the graduating class of Arizona State University in May 2009. Warning the students away from what he described as the familiar American formula for success, the speaker put forward what he took to be the ethic of the business world:

You're taught to chase after all the usual brass rings; you try to be on this "who's who" list or that top 100 list; you chase after the big money and you figure out how big your corner office is; you worry about whether you have a fancy enough title or a fancy enough car. That's the message that's sent each and every day, or has been in our culture for far too long—that through material possessions, through a ruthless competition pursued only on your own behalf—that's how you will measure success. Now, you can take that road—and it may work for some. But at this critical juncture in our nation's history, at this difficult time, let me suggest that such an approach won't get you where you want to go; it displays a poverty of ambition.

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As it happens, those words were spoken by the president of the United States, Barack Obama. But they could easily have been uttered by almost anyone with his education and intellectual pedigree. Those words convey an image that the architects of our elite culture's self-understanding—especially America's foremost authors and playwrights, who do a great deal to shape the way that other intellectuals, and Americans in general, think about our country—have long labored to construct.

The business of America may be business, but the business of American literature in the past century has been largely to insist that the nation is, in pursuing business, wasting itself on unworthy objects. In the eyes of most novelists and playwrights who deal with the subject, business is not an honorable vocation, but rather an obsessive scramble for lucre and status. Tycoons are plunderers. Salesmen are poor slobs truckling to their bosses, though most of them aspire to be cormorants and highwaymen, too. The mass desire to strike it rich has launched a forced march to nowhere. In short, American literature hates American business for what it has done to the souls of the rich, the poor, and the middling alike.

Right-thinking people now take it for granted that, in criticizing business, American literature has saved (or at least elevated) the nation's soul. But after a century of slander, that assumption needs revisiting. In so doing, it is worth examining the process through which our literati have framed the way we think about capitalism, and especially those who practice it. How did our culture come to hold the image of the businessman that it now does? Which literary works and authors have had done the most to shape that (mostly negative) image? And in this casting of the entrepreneur as villain in America's morality tale, which culture has been exposed as more corrupt—that of American business, or American letters?

#### RAKING THE MUCK

*Boodle, graft, scam, gyp, hustle, hoodwink, chisel, flim-flam, chicanery, rake-off, skullduggery, swindle:* Our language has a rich and evocative technical vocabulary for snake-bellied business dealing and the government malfeasance that is its indispensable servant. And beside the distinguished native tradition of underhandedness runs a counter-tradition of moral outrage and attempted reform, which emerged with force just as the culture of business was peaking at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In *The Shame of the Cities* (1904), Lincoln Steffens—dean of the muckrakers, the vanguard of investigative journalists who early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century drew the public’s attention to the filthier aspects of our national life—pronounced all Americans complicit in sin: “We break our own laws and rob our own government, the lady at the custom-house, the lyncher with his rope, and the captain of industry with his bribe and his rebate. The spirit of graft and of lawlessness is the American spirit.”

Soon after, Upton Sinclair’s novel *The Jungle* (1906) became the most celebrated muckraking work of its time; a century later, it is the only one still widely read. The story relates the brutal suffering of a Lithuanian immigrant meat-packer in Chicago, and sickened the country with indignation at the execrable manner in which food was processed. Nauseating the readership had practical benefits: President Theodore Roosevelt’s admiration for the novel—qualified by his distaste for Sinclair’s socialism—issued in the passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act and the Meat Inspection Amendment the same year as *The Jungle*’s release.

Sinclair’s socialist loathing for the capitalist oppressors thunders through the novel. Here a speaker who will inspire the downtrodden hero to join the Socialist Party roars at the prevailing injustice:

There are a thousand [in Chicago]—ten thousand, maybe—who are the masters of these slaves, who own their toil. They do nothing to earn what they receive, they do not even have to ask for it—it comes to them of itself, their only care is to dispose of it. They live in palaces, they riot in luxury and extravagance—such as no words can describe, as makes the imagination reel and stagger, makes the soul grow sick and faint. They spend hundreds of dollars for a pair of shoes, a handkerchief, a garter; they spend millions for horses and automobiles and yachts, for palaces and banquets, for little shiny stones with which to deck their bodies. Their life is a contest among themselves in ostentation and recklessness . . . .

Thorstein Veblen, whose *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) provided the muckrakers with an abstract sociological foundation, lamented with a characteristically dry eye that vice does a man more good than virtue if he wants to get on in the world: “Freedom from scruple, from sympathy, honesty, and regard for life, may, within fairly wide limits, be said

to further the success of the individual in the pecuniary culture.” From Veblen, whom he read with “a continuous ebullition of glee,” Sinclair learned the shame of conspicuous consumption: Lives wasted in profligate expenditure never appear more repulsive than through Sinclair’s eyes. His novel *The Metropolis* (1908) is a 200-page catalogue of exorbitant self-indulgence by the wealthiest people in New York. Preposterous extravagance and pretensions to gentility constitute the obverse of tearing wolfishness; persons of savage appetite bare their teeth when denied their rightful pleasures. In *The Moneychangers* (1908), a priapic 80-year-old banker—the most powerful man on Wall Street—destroys his sexual rival and the young woman he wants, and brings on a nationwide depression in the process, just to teach the rabble to fear their masters. Sinclair’s villains are peerless in their malignancy.

In some of the muckrakers’ critiques, however, there was a sense that the reckless excess of capitalism was a distortion of a proper business culture—and therefore that there could be such a thing as a proper business culture. If Sinclair was the most famous of the muckrakers, Ida Tarbell was the most judicious. In *The History of the Standard Oil Company* (1904), Tarbell takes pains to distinguish the bestial ruthlessness of the great oil monopolist John D. Rockefeller from the robust laissez-faire energy of the smaller oil men, who represent the best in American business: “They believed in independent effort—every man for himself and fair play for all. They wanted competition, loved open fight.” Tarbell’s aim in exposing Rockefeller’s nefariousness was to revive the flagging decency of American commerce, which the magnate’s enormous power had undermined. Tarbell was scrupulous about just whom to indict for corruption, and she believed in the fundamental virtue of free enterprise honestly pursued.

Muckraking was thus not simply agitprop—though it could be that when a Sinclair or a Steffens got carried away. At their best, the muckrakers addressed real ills and re-directed the nation toward probity, or the hope of probity, in business and politics. Their successors may have taken up only the dark side of capitalism exposed in their works, but the muckrakers themselves often understood the good that was being perverted by industrialism’s excesses. Unlike their successors, the muckrakers grasped the complex mix of greatness and shallowness evident even in the worst perverters.

One of those successors was Theodore Dreiser, whose *Trilogy of Desire*—comprising *The Financier* (1912), *The Titan* (1914), and *The*

*Stoic* (1947)—relates the monumental business achievement and hectic erotic career of Frank Algernon Cowperwood. (Though fictional, Cowperwood was modeled not all that loosely on Charles T. Yerkes, the sultan of urban street railways who helped modernize Philadelphia and Chicago and made one of the great American fortunes.) A 20-year-old junior stock broker as the first book opens, Cowperwood looks to the day when he will rise above the common run and be a commanding force. His ambition is to be one of “the men who schemed and built the railroads, opened the mines, organized trading enterprises, and built up immense manufactories.” Bravado, decisiveness, and ruthlessness get him what he wants in business and love—though what he wants most in love is an orgy that never quits.

His motto is “I satisfy myself.” Many lesser men and women have adopted it as their credo; in living it, however, few have been so pitiless and so superb. The conventional morality that brings down weaker men does not trammel Cowperwood: “He had no consciousness of what is currently known as sin. There were just two faces to the shield of life from the point of view of his peculiar mind—strength and weakness. Right and wrong? He did not know about those.”

The respectable and conventionally dishonest world does not appreciate “the Machiavellian, corrupting brain of Cowperwood,” which is not always sufficiently Machiavellian to assume the cover of virtue. When the failure of a Cowperwood business scheme threatens the thoroughly grimy Philadelphia political machine—and when Cowperwood’s adulterous affair with the daughter of an ethically flyblown but stoutly Catholic pol infuriates decent fathers and husbands—he goes to prison for a stretch. But doing time only makes him shrewder. The failure of the Northern Pacific Railroad in 1873 precipitates a panic that will ruin multitudes and bring on a ferocious depression. This national disaster affords Cowperwood his chance, and several days of cunning and frantic trading make him a millionaire once more. To turn fortune, whatever it might be, to one’s advantage is the hallmark of the Machiavellian prince.

Cowperwood is a visionary of practical affairs, with the brass and brainpower to make his visions real. In *The Titan* he quits Philadelphia for Chicago, a city in the ascendant, and sees its inevitable sprawling growth as the opportunity to build a street-railway system of imperial dimensions. He outmaneuvers all manner of sharpers with consummate

skill. The man who sees what the city can become bests those who fail to see beyond their immediate interests. In the end, however, Cowperwood fails to accomplish his plan for ultimate control. Not even his adroit bribery and political strong-arming can overcome the outrage of the masses, which is exploited by his financial rivals. “A giant monopoly is really reaching out to enfold [Chicago] with an octopus-like grip. And Cowperwood is its eyes, its tentacles, its force!” Editorial writers flay him with the most damning truth one can utter about a man in democratic America: “Frank Algernon Cowperwood does not believe in the people.” Dreiser’s irony cuts both ways: Democracy in action is the meeting of the bought-off pol with the violent mob. The author does not seem glad to see this dubious virtue triumph.

In *The Stoic*—written three decades after the first two books, and with a spirit that evinces the evolution of the literary culture’s view of business toward a more crude cartoon—the 60-year-old Cowperwood, a pariah in Chicago, takes his act to London, where he hopes to expand the underground train system throughout the city. His death intervenes. The woman he loved most of all—the 20-year-old Berenice Fleming, daughter of a Louisville madam who has gone legit, incredibly beautiful and incredibly intelligent and incredibly sensitive (only superlatives on a Trumpian scale will do)—uses her share of his estate to seek wisdom in India. The wisdom she finds of course annihilates the very purpose of Cowperwood’s existence—“the natural and ordinary desire to acquire” that Machiavelli extols, the endless longing to heap up wealth, power, renown, pleasure, beautiful objects and surroundings.

On the final page of the manuscript Dreiser left unfinished at his death, Berenice vows to establish a hospital for the poor of Manhattan’s Lower East Side, as Cowperwood wanted. Someone has to atone for the tycoon’s voraciousness. Nearing the end himself, Dreiser made the obligatory genuflection in the direction of conventional virtue.

In betraying his artistry this way, Dreiser perhaps saved his own soul—but one rather wishes he had not. Dreiser’s final move made Cowperwood less an admirable villain than a caricature—and so pointed toward the anti-business caricaturists who had risen by then. This new crop of writers crudely simplified the muckrakers’ critique of the businessman, thereby losing sight of the potential of commerce, properly understood, to be edifying and not just corrupting.

## A STALE OLIGARCHY

When Sinclair Lewis became in 1930 the first American awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, he said Dreiser was more deserving. He was right, as far as that goes, but he might have gone further: Almost anyone would have been more deserving.

Lewis made his reputation as the sardonic observer of American middle-class mores, most notably in *Main Street* (1920) and *Babbitt* (1922). *Main Street* is the story of Carol Milford Kennicott, a young college-educated woman with vague yearnings for high culture and romance who marries a small-town doctor. The novel traces her efforts to accommodate herself to the folkways of Gopher Prairie, Minnesota; her revulsion from the meanness of life there; her flight to the big city; and her return to her loving and patient husband. Gopher Prairie is the American commercial republic in miniature, seen through Lewis's magnifying glass, which he focuses as a burning lens to annihilate the nasty bugs scurrying there. There are kind and gentle people in town, but it is ruled by the miserable — “small busy men crushingly powerful in their common purpose, viewing themselves as men of the world but keeping themselves men of the cash-register and the comic film, who make the town a sterile oligarchy.”

The commercial instinct infects every thought and propels every activity in Gopher Prairie. Almost nobody seeks elegance or grandeur, but everyone grasps at his petty material desires with fierce claws. “[The town’s] conception of a community ideal is not the grand manner, the noble aspiration, the fine aristocratic pride, but cheap labor for the kitchen and rapid increase in the price of land.” Even Dr. Kennicott, who practices a noble profession nobly, grabs the chance to turn a not-entirely-honorable buck in property investment when farmers are compelled to sell their land at a terrible loss. Few people have anything like a calling, but everyone is open for business. The owner of a planing mill livens up a party with his rodomontade on the patriotic obligations of the business owner:

All this profit-sharing and welfare work and insurance and old-age pension is simply poppycock. Enfeebles a workman’s independence — and wastes a lot of honest profit. The half-baked thinker that isn’t dry behind the ears yet, and these suffragettes and God knows what all buttinskis there are that are trying to tell

a business man how to run his business, and some of these college professors are just about as bad, the whole kit and bilin' of 'em are nothing in God's world but socialism in disguise! And it's my bounden duty as a producer to resist every attack on the integrity of American industry to the last ditch. Yes — SIR!

Selfishness, boorishness, viciousness — such are the real heartland values as Lewis sees them.

Lewis's most famous creation is of course George F. Babbitt, whose name has become a byword for the businessman's avarice, triviality, and conformity. "He was forty-six years old now, in April, 1920, and he made nothing in particular, neither butter nor shoes nor poetry, but he was nimble in the calling of selling houses for more than people could afford to pay." Babbitt is a zealous booster of his native metropolis, Zenith, a city of 362,000 somewhere in the Midwest. When he gazes upon the limestone skyscraper of the Second National Tower, one sees the desolation of his spiritual life. "He beheld the tower as a temple-spire of the religion of business, a faith passionate, exalted, surpassing common men; and as he clumped down to breakfast he whistled the ballad 'Oh, by gee, by gosh, by jingo' as though it were a hymn melancholy and noble."

The businessman in Lewis's eyes possesses a standard-issue, manufactured self, and he would be nothing if he didn't have public opinion to stamp his persona. He believes what the Chamber of Commerce and the Presbyterian Church and the Republican Party tell him to believe, and he buys what advertisers convince him he must have. "These standard advertised wares — toothpastes, socks, tires, cameras, instantaneous hot-water heaters — were his symbols and proofs of excellence; at first the signs, then the substitutes, for joy and passion and wisdom." Babbitt is his toothpaste — and he wants always to afford the very best toothpaste. Lewis tells us: "He serenely believed that the one purpose of the real-estate business was to make money for George F. Babbitt." The public virtue he ardently professes is just a cover for the one thing that matters. Who could possibly be more crass than Babbitt?

Sinclair Lewis could be. His novel is smothered in adolescent irony and cheap contempt. If anyone is more insufferably smug than the business type at his worst, it is the literary type who despises him. Although Lewis allows Babbitt redemption of a sort at the end, when the businessman exhorts his son not to live an unreal life, the novel is

overwhelmingly full of loathing. It draws a hateful cartoon that has remained fixed in the public mind, and its effect has been thoroughly baneful. Anyone hoping to be taken for an intellectual knows that businessmen are empty suits, and that the preponderant American activity is a shameful waste from which no good can come.

While the successors to the muckrakers contorted the critique they inherited, the heirs to Lewis were all too eager to reinforce his cartoonish view. Arthur Miller, for instance, is still widely regarded as the foremost American playwright, and he owes his rank chiefly to his skill at manipulating the principal stereotypes of the businessman: the hard-faced boss and the broken underling. He milks contempt for the former and compassion for the latter to make the audience's knees jerk, fists clench, and eyes brim on command.

In *All My Sons* (1947), Joe Keller — a 60-year-old “man among men” who started out as a factory hand and wound up a manufacturing kingpin — has successfully denied any responsibility for the deaths of 21 American aviators, caused by cracked cylinder heads he sold to the Army Air Force during the war. It transpires that he set up a poor schmo to take the fall and go to prison, but even when Keller's guilt becomes clear to his beloved son Chris (who survived military service while his brother Larry did not), the father swears he could not have done otherwise: “You're a boy, what could I do! I'm in business, a man is in business; a hundred and twenty cracked, you're out of business; you got a process, the process don't work you're out of business . . .”

In the end Keller must face the truth. Chris's fiancée, Ann — who had been Larry's fiancée, and whose father was the fall guy for the corrupt and lethal oversight — produces a letter Larry wrote the day he flew his last mission. The letter reveals that Larry had read about his father and hers in the newspaper, and had been overcome by disgust. “Every day three or four men never come back and he sits back there doing business,” Larry had mused, before disclosing that he had deliberately flown to his death. His father goes into the house and shoots himself.

The businessman's suicide was a favorite ending for Miller. The most famous suicide in American theater is that of Willy Loman, in *Death of a Salesman* (1949). Exhausted by years on the road, his mind going, Willy is suitably beaten down by heartless business forces, so that his killing himself is at once supremely pitiable and supremely noble: He fakes a car accident so his widow and sons can collect the \$20,000 insurance

payout. Willy's wife admonishes her sons, who despise their father's doddering and weakness and failure, "But he's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid."

Miller's attention is fixed on larger concerns than the fate of one man. For him, the universal tragedy of American life is the fundamental capitalist insistence that business is business. That's exactly what Willy's boss says as he's firing him; Willy agrees reflexively, but then goes on to qualify and plead. The truth is incontestable nevertheless: If you can't make a killing you get murdered.

Of course, like so many writers before and after, Miller made a career, and a killing, out of contesting this supposedly incontestable truth. Miller's golden status will last as long as business remains the tragic influence in the fashionable interpretation of American woes. And that looks to be a very long time indeed.

David Mamet inherited Miller's moral authority and popular success. His plays, especially *American Buffalo* (1975) and *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1983), feature four-, seven-, ten-, and twelve-letter words flying through the air like knives at a family reunion of psychopaths. Obscenity is the mother tongue of his real-estate hustlers and junk dealers who dabble in housebreaking, because business in America is inherently obscene. In *American Buffalo*, two petty crooks planning a burglary discuss the philosophical underpinnings of their trade.

TEACH: You know what is free enterprise?

DON: No. What?

TEACH: The freedom . . .

DON: . . . yeah?

TEACH: Of the *Individual* . . .

DON: . . . yeah?

TEACH: To Embark on Any F---ing Course that he sees fit.

DON: Uh-huh . . .

TEACH: In order to secure his honest chance to make a profit.

Am I so out of line on this?

DON: No.

TEACH: Does this make me a Commie?

DON: No.

TEACH: The country's *founded* on this, Don. You know this.

This is the capitalist ethos as it has worked its way down to second-story men. The authorial voice sings in the cracked, parched, and uproarious tones of Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill's Marx-influenced musical satire, *The Threepenny Opera*.

In *Glengarry Glen Ross*, when the manager of a real-estate office unwittingly fouls up an improvised song and dance by a couple of salesmen trying to close a deal, the ace salesman Roma looses a foul-mouthed tirade at the fool who has just cost him \$6,000 and a Cadillac. The caper: "Whoever told you you could work with *men*?" To be a man is to be hard, a cutthroat competitor, a bandit, a beast of prey. Fear, hatred, and rage define the salesman's world; rampaging needs are what he has in place of a moral compass. The sales palaver never stops, and necessity is the mother of lie after lie. These hell-bent desperados, most of them barely holding on to a place in the middle class, sweat misery in buckets. Mamet creates an atmosphere of savage pathos so potent it almost makes one overlook the cultural clichés at the root of the drama. The prevailing caricature doesn't get any better handling than this, but it remains a caricature, and, by this time, an unhappily overworked one.

In more recent years, Mamet is said to have undergone something of a political conversion. He now considers himself not an angry liberal but an angry conservative. Yet one wonders if his treatment of business in his earlier plays is so far off from that which some conservatives might offer — and, indeed, what some conservatives have offered. Our few right-leaning novelists have tended to be cultural conservatives (who, while not yearning for socialism, are generally disapproving of the cultural face of capitalism) or strident libertarians (who view any but the purest and mightiest tycoons as pitiful).

#### FREEDOM UNBOUNDED

Indeed, the principal political conservatives among our leading novelists do little to speak up for business. Saul Bellow's greatest novel, *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), abounds with vivid schemers out to make a quick buck. Business types in Bellow's novels tend to be foils for eggheads who get their brains beaten in by tough reality. The Chicago-born Augie, wised up yet pretty decent, makes a go of a European business career involving black-market dealings, but he also composes a novel in the most original first-person voice since Huckleberry Finn's. One might say that Augie March's life is a triumph *despite* his business

success; if he had not written the story of his adventures, he stood to become another Bellow hustler.

Tom Wolfe similarly employs his pen to puncture the self image of the men of business. The *Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987) shreds the moral and intellectual pretensions of the Reagan-era yuppie investment bankers who style themselves Masters of the Universe. Here, Wolfe represents the characteristic position of the cultural conservative: disdain for the so-called country-club conservative, the advocate of freewheeling enterprise who believes that the greatest thing about America is everyone's supposed chance to make his fortune and that the greatest Americans are the richest. *Bonfire's* Sherman McCoy — delighted to be a WASP, a Yalie, and a hotshot young financier — has made his fortune and couldn't love himself more. His 14-room, \$3 million Park Avenue co-op is "the sort of apartment the mere thought of which ignites flames of greed and covetousness under people all over New York and, for that matter, all over the world." His clothes show the world what a formidable man it is dealing with, or so he believes. "He wore a blue-gray nailhead worsted suit, custom-tailored in England for \$1,800, two-button, single-breasted, with ordinary notched lapels. On Wall Street double-breasted suits and peaked lapels were considered a bit sharp, a bit too Garment District."

But when Sherman and his mistress, lost and terrified in the Bronx, kill a young black man with his car and flee the scene, the perquisites of wealth cannot save him from descent into the hell of criminal law and race politics. He takes it all like a coward and poltroon; losing everything, he plainly gets what Wolfe thinks he has deserved all his life. Wolfe's resentment may not be driven by liberal sensibilities, but is no less potent for it.

And what of Ayn Rand? Surely she seeks to be a cheerleader for the virtues of capitalism. She is certainly singular in the vehemence with which she champions the American tycoon. But she despises the typical businessman as an incompetent who makes his corrupt bargain with dirty politicians, nonsensical intellectuals, and assorted "looting lice." Rand sings the hero of titanic force bent on reclaiming the American founders' intention of a land perfected in liberty, with its capitalist engine running unimpeded by any government. In her view, the smallest grain of state regulation in the mechanism wrecks the entire system. Economic liberty must be utterly uncompromising in order to work at all.

Rand certainly has a following: Polls suggest that her 1,100-page novel *Atlas Shrugged* (1957) is the most influential book in America after the

Bible. But intellectually honest people who take one of those books seriously cannot in good faith admire the other. For Rand considers the economic and political catastrophes of modernity to derive from Biblical wisdom: The meek don't deserve to inherit the earth, and the opportunists who administer power in their name and call the sad result democracy are the bane of the few good men left.

Against the unfortunate teachings of Jesus Christ, Rand pits the life-giving exhortations of John Galt. Galt is the most heroic businessman: an engineering swami who designs a motor that converts static electricity from the air into kinetic energy, a philosopher who proclaims a political-economic order of unexampled freedom that is flawless not only in theory but also in practice. At least, it *should be* flawless in practice, for Rand presents Galt as the smartest and most sensible man in the world. When the company Galt has been working for is taken over by fools and plunderers, he gathers men of genius and talent indispensable to the world's work in a Rocky Mountain hideaway that his technical mastery renders invisible to the common sight. Galt commandeers the airwaves to deliver a 30,000-word disquisition outlining his philosophy and announcing his revolution. The invaluable brainworkers go on strike at Galt's order, and the world plunges into violent chaos. With multitudes dead and civilization ground to a halt, Galt returns to sow prosperity in the place of devastation.

Rand clearly enjoys the devastation at least as much as the prosperity. Ideological hatred is the hallmark of American literature's treatment of business, and Rand's hatred for the haters of unadulterated capitalism — she assails conventional conservatives as well as liberals — is of a piece with her veneration of genius tycoons and industrial innovators. She utterly detests those who ruin her theoretical purity with their miscreant compassion. Compassion, one of her imperious heroines says, is what you feel at the sight of a caterpillar being squashed. To feel it for a person desecrates human dignity. John Galt loathes compassion as love for the unworthy; better the beaten should crawl off and die where the best men and women won't be revolted by the sight and smell of their suffering. The best men and women in Rand's world have quite enough to do in the pursuit of their own happiness, in self-fulfillment unencumbered by the pain of the weak.

Compassion combines with envy and arrogance to corrode business integrity, honest self-regard, and political soundness. This analysis of

Rand's is not without truth: It describes accurately enough the origins and malign consequences not only of full-blown socialism but also of "pharaonic liberalism," to use the late Michael Kelly's phrase for government so large and interventionist that the label "nanny state" is "far too kind a term." And Rand, a refugee from Bolshevik Russia, comprehended the monstrosity of this collectivist impulse run amok. In her revulsion, however, she imagined that the only antidote to collectivist dystopia was laissez-faire utopia. This utopia, no less radical, is mankind's sole chance at salvation. Moderation, temporizing, half-measures—the fundamentals of American political economy—spell doom. Nothing less than economic perfection suited Rand, for anything less than the rational ideal would result in abomination.

Thus John Galt, the consummate philosopher-businessman, must bring on the collapse of the decadent old order—which resembles the New Deal more than it does Stalinism—and must call into being a breed of strong, self-sufficient, entirely rational men and women deserving the name of humanity. The Judeo-Christian ethic, the most pernicious lie human beings ever told themselves, will give way to the everlasting truth of dignified atheism and virtuous selfishness. In the final sentence of *Atlas Shrugged*, Galt supplants the sign of the cross with the benediction that heralds the new dispensation: "He raised his hand and over the desolate earth he traced in space the sign of the dollar."

What does Rand's teaching amount to? Mamet nailed it: the freedom of the *Individual* to Embark on any F---ing Course that he sees fit in order to secure his honest chance to make a profit. One should take Rand no more seriously than that.

#### VIRTUOUS CAPITALISM

Does anyone, then, deserve to be taken seriously? Has any American writer of note offered a depiction of business that captures the good as well as the bad about the place of commerce in our commercial republic?

The most outstanding example of such a deeper depiction is likely an unexpected one: James M. Cain, in his 1941 novel *Mildred Pierce*. Cain is commonly looked down upon as a purveyor of *noir* semi-trash to the unwashed, but he in fact offers a far more nuanced, sympathetic, and generally intelligent treatment of the American businessman—businesswoman in this case—than any of the more celebrated works discussed above.

Mildred Pierce finds herself in hard straits in 1931. Her husband, Bert, had inherited a ranch outside Los Angeles, but his efforts at fruit-growing were a bust. The real-estate boom of the 1920s, however, made the land he was sitting on extraordinarily valuable, and “he became a subdivider, a community builder, a man of vision, a big shot.” Investing in AT&T stock made him seriously rich, until Black Thursday in 1929 made him seriously poor. His success had intoxicated him, so that he couldn’t admit his high flying was strictly a matter of luck. To look for a job was beneath him. Mildred starts baking cakes and pies for sale to bring in a little money, and comes to despise her husband for his fecklessness, and especially for his affair with a slatternly widow.

When Mildred kicks Bert out of the house, she has to scrape by on her own, with two daughters to support, and times are bleak. Job-hunting delivers one hard knock after another. Her pride complicates the picture: Mildred looks upon her supposed degradation through the eyes of her clever and snobbish 13-year-old daughter, Veda, and what she sees will not allow her to accept work as a waitress or housekeeper.

Then one day she happens to be sitting at a lunch counter when a waitress is fired, and she jumps at the chance to fill the opening. Cloddish at first, she works hard to become adept, and brings in extra money by selling her exceptional pies to the restaurant, enlisting the other waitresses’ help to win over the reluctant owner in a campaign worthy, in its own small way, of a masterly general or wheeler-dealer. The aristocratic Veda is scalded, though, when she discovers the shameful way her mother is supporting them; to appease her, Mildred blurts out that waiting tables and baking pies are just the means to her acquiring a restaurant of her own one day. Restaurant owners can get rich, and for Veda getting rich almost makes life worth living.

Mildred learns the high price of aspiration: To advance from employee to owner takes a lot of money and a lot of worrying about where the money will come from. On the eve of the restaurant’s opening, Mildred’s younger daughter Moire is hospitalized, and Mildred faces the hard choice between tending to her new business and being with her sick child. She takes care of business *and* stands vigil at the hospital. But when Moire dies, altogether unexpectedly, business is forgotten. “The restaurant seemed remote, unreal, part of a world that no longer concerned her.”

The day after the funeral, however, Mildred opens the restaurant, and her pride and pleasure in her accomplishment are patent. “There [the

neon sign] was, as beautiful as ever, casting a bluish light over the trees. She drew a deep breath and came inside. At last she was open, at last she had her own business.” It’s not exactly the stuff of high romance, but one breathes with moral exhilaration here; the beauty of commercial neon may not be apparent to everyone who passes, but Mildred knows, and the reader knows, what enterprise and hardihood it signifies. The delight in being her own boss is richer than the austere satisfactions of Max Weber’s famed virtuous capitalism. Mildred even relishes the sensuous thrill of handling the money she has made. “[T]here had been a mob, and she found she had taken in \$46, or \$10 more than her wildest hopes. She folded all the bills together, so she could feel their fat thickness.”

Energy, will, and courage power Mildred to success, just as slackness, arrogance, and demoralization sink Bert in defeat. Mildred represents the best in can-do individualism; she is a born entrepreneur, though it takes some unusual turns in fortune to make her realize her capacities. Not even maternal heartache can wreck her indomitable drive to make it. She will open three more restaurants, and will make it quite handsomely.

But her triumph is unmade by the two most passionate human connections in her life—her affair with Monty Beragon, a rakish polo ace and heir to a fruit-exporting concern, and her overwhelming love for her daughter Veda, who grows into an ambitious classical musician and ravishing beauty. Beragon epitomizes unearned luxury without ambition; he dazzles Mildred at first, but looks down on her for cooking food and selling it, and she comes to look down on him for despising work. Veda glows with longing for fame and luxury; she idolizes Beragon’s open-handed elegance and can’t endure her mother’s scrimping chintziness. Beragon and Veda are soul mates in corruption. When Beragon’s family business goes belly-up, he effectively becomes Mildred’s gigolo, until she dumps him in contempt. When Veda scores big with a sexual blackmail scheme against the son of a prominent family, Mildred throws her out, and Veda is only too glad to leave.

But Mildred loves Veda beyond all reason, and Veda’s ascent to stardom as a coloratura soprano inflames Mildred’s desire to have her return. To win Veda back, Mildred marries the now-penniless Beragon, though they sleep separately, and she buys his dilapidated and unsalable Pasadena castle; these are at last a home and family Veda considers worthy of her remarkable self, and she returns. The idyll is blighted, however: Restoring and maintaining the house drains Mildred’s

finances; she takes to borrowing, or pilfering, from her own restaurants, and creditors threaten to take the business unless she can make good on her debts. Veda, now 21 and wealthy, is her only hope, and in the night Mildred goes to her for help.

She finds her daughter in Beragon's bed. Mildred strangles Veda and nearly kills her. Mildred loses the business and divorces Beragon, who flies off with Veda to New York. Mildred is back baking pies for the restaurant in which she once worked as a waitress, and she is back with Bert. The novel's final line sums up the desolation: "Yes — let's get stinko."

Work, self-reliance, and the pride of ownership were the purest things Mildred had. She possessed the solid strengths of the middle class, and if she could have remained content with these her life might have been a small-scale triumph. But the hankering for lots of the best of everything that obsessed Beragon and Veda afflicted Mildred. With a sharp sense of moral complication, Cain shows that the affliction even contributed to Mildred's success: Her ambition for her daughter's sake helped carry Mildred beyond her original limitations. Still, Mildred's success never raised her from the ranks of the ordinary; that was what Veda, who was born to shine, could not stand about her mother. Veda gets what she is after, but forfeits her soul, if she ever had one, and Mildred ends up a loser in every respect. Thus the great American peril, Cain instructs, lies not in wanting but in wanting too much — or, more precisely, in wanting it the wrong way.

#### THE ETHIC OF AMBITION

*Mildred Pierce* depicts more movingly than perhaps any other American novel the satisfactions to be had in the life of commercial diligence and routine and regularity, and the killing dissatisfactions of people who must have more and more. Where some of the most distinguished writers of fiction and drama resort to dim-witted lampooning, savage jeering, and gross sentimentality in their works about business, the novelist known as the pulp master creates as his heroine a vital and inspiring businesswoman, quite superb for all her commonness, worthy of respect and even of tragedy.

Cain speaks for the decency of moderate ambition and temperate desire. And he understands the overpowering American need to rise higher than one's oxygen supply can sustain normal brain function. Mildred did not seek the stratospheric heights for herself, but she

needed them nevertheless. Her fate illustrates a great cautionary tale, in which the supreme virtues of the commercial republic are destroyed by the vices of Heliogabalus.

But Cain's book is not a cautionary tale about the perils of the business ethic. It is instead a cautionary tale about the perils of the larger American ethic, the ethic of boundless desire. That desire can be elevated to preposterous heights by capitalism, but it is not a function of capitalism. Indeed, it is at times helpfully restrained by the pressures of running a business and competing in the marketplace.

This is what so many of our writers miss about the business world, and what is ignored by the grossly oversimplified caricature of that world that dominates the imagination of our cultural elites. To be a businessman is not to lose one's soul. Rather, to be an American — whether one sells insurance, runs a company, or writes novels or plays for a living — is to aim high, but to thereby run the risk of letting ambition get the better of sense. Often, it seems that America's leading writers have fared worse in managing that risk than many men of business.