



PROJECT MUSE®

---

*American Snobs: Transatlantic Novelists, Liberal Culture,  
and the Genteel Tradition* by Emily Coit (review)

Ágnes Zsófia Kovács

The Henry James Review, Volume 45, Number 3, Fall 2024, pp.  
E-37-E-41 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/hjr.2024.a941327>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/941327>

Emily Coit. *American Snobs: Transatlantic Novelists, Liberal Culture, and the Genteel Tradition*. Edinburgh UP, 2021. 328 pp., \$120 (eBook).

By Ágnes Zsófia Kovács, *University of Szeged, Hungary*

---

Emily Coit's book traces the genealogy of various narratives of the "genteel tradition" in U.S. intellectual history and examines how John Adams, Henry James, and Edith Wharton are related to its development. The book reads various "recitations of the narrative about the genteel" (7) as part of a transatlantic liberal discourse in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It unravels how Adams, James, and Wharton contributed to the development of a conservative realist critique of genteel U.S. liberalism and also how their conservative critical positions have been variously taken up and used by generations of critics with diverging political orientations.

Coit defines the genteel tradition as an ongoing institutional practice. The starting point of this practice was connected to Boston, Harvard University, and publications like the *Atlantic Monthly* and the *Nation* decades before Santayana's essay defining "The Genteel Tradition," and Coit claims that it exerts its influence even in the 2000s. In this broad sense, the genteel tradition can be usefully described as a kind of liberal tradition: as a Bostonian liberalism that takes its cue from British Victorian thinkers on politics and culture, especially John Stuart Mill and Matthew Arnold. Coit contends that the political and cultural ideals of Bostonian liberalism should be considered together. On the one hand, politically, this liberalism embraces democracy, a move that sounds ambiguous today. In an optimistic moment after the Civil War, it "saw no contradiction in emphasizing private rights and public duties" (Butler 6) and elevated culture and broad representation together. On the other hand, culturally, it emphasized a vision of a cultivated democratic people and an even more cultivated leadership (7). Coit dissolves basic assumptions about this historical form of democratic thinking: this Boston-based democratic ideal is not emancipatory about sexuality and gender, nor is it antiracist. She states that elitism and racism form part of the genteel liberalism that venerates democracy (8).

Education emerges as a key discussion point at the intersection of political and cultural theories. The question is whether education should be seen as the means by which cultivation can be democratically distributed or as a useless attempt to elevate the masses who are neither able nor willing to be elevated. Diverse opinions on the extent, method, and usefulness of education help locate positions within the varied strands of the genteel tradition. Looking at the genteel tradition as a specific form of liberalism opens up new ways of understanding how Adams, James, and Wharton take part in the political conversations of their time through their reflections on the issue of education. Coit examines the development of the narrative of the genteel tradition in which Charles Eliot Norton became the representative of a politically conservative, openly not political, Puritanical, passive and feminine (as Coit likes to call it: schoolmarmish) genteel tradition. She proposes a counternarrative: that Nor-

ton and his friends venerated a democratic ideal while Adam, James, and Wharton had doubts and questions about democracy. Coit traces these broad questions of intellectual history to show how writings by John Adams, Henry James, and Edith Wharton relate to the problem of education. In criticism, James and Wharton are often read as “anachronistic progressives” ahead of their time (8). This idea can be argued against through their fictional and nonfictional representations of education as a useless, disciplining feminine effort to impress the uninterested; a feature that aligns them with the nonprogressive and anti-Semitic Adams.

The book is divided into two parts. The first analyzes early fiction by Adams, James, and Wharton on education while the second addresses their relevant late nonfiction. The six chapters unravel an intricate and interactive discursive network that spans from the 1870s till the 2000s.

Chapter 1 discusses how John Adams’s *Democracy* (1880) and *Esther* (1884) take issue with rational white male Boston liberalism by idealizing its opposite. Adams’s criticism targets John Stuart Mill’s *The Subjection of Women* (1869) about marriage, sex, equality, and learning. In his treatise, Mill makes a plea for elevating women from their socially constructed subjugated position in institutions of social life, primarily in marriage and education. It questions the idea of women’s innate inferiority, accepts the perfectibility of humans, and sees progress as possible, even if it accepts racial limitations to progress. In contrast, Adams develops a fascination for the intellectually void, savage, nonwhite, female, and animalistic—aspects that will eventually culminate in his idea of the bland Virgin. Adams relies on the marriage plot of realist novels to show stories of failed courtships and the prospective brides’ subsequent metaphorical suicides. Coit claims that the female characters of Adams’s early novels fail “because they cannot embody at once that primitive vitality and the cultivated liberal subjectivity that is its opposite” (24). Adams’s stories of failed courtship suggest that sex and learning are sites of competition not cooperation. His allusions to the Darwinian continuity between humans and animals show the limits of human perfectability, and he offers a vision of decline rather than progress. Adams finds citizenship and liberal subjectivity empty and boring, instead focusing on femininity and blackness in *Democracy*. In *Esther*, he expands upon the animalistic quality of humans, while culture and education are shown as sites of domination.

Chapter 2 surveys how Henry James’s *The Bostonians* (1886) and *The Princess Casamassima* (1886) interrogate basic liberal ideas of education. Coit contends that, in these novels, James directly addresses the question of whether working-class men, freedmen, women, and colonial subjects have the intellectual capacity to develop into citizens, a basic question in the aftermath of Reconstruction, a larger context in which both texts should be read. In many of his novels of the 1880s, James represents wealthy women dedicated to the emancipatory cause; in these novels, women undergo a revolutionary education. Coit argues that for James, democracy in these novels equals revolution and revolution equals “the destruction of all sensory and aesthetic glories civilization nourishes” (50) and celebrates instead: “aristocracy, the past, hierarchy, preservation” (50). *The Bostonians* represents a liberal education first corrupted by a demagogue and then crushed by a tyrant (54), and the racially different Verena’s capacity for education remains unproven in response to Olive’s stifling and joyless treatment. In terms of political and cultural ideals, the book represents the stupidity of “the people” in Carlyle’s sense as opposed to Mill’s egalitarian ideas about them.

In the face of Charles Eliot Norton's emphasis on culture and civilization, it relies on Walter Pater's vocabulary of pleasure. Similarly, *The Princess Casamassima* plays on the liberal premise that the poor can be educated only to show how educating the poor leads to anarchy and the destruction of culture: here democracy is a threat to culture. The young learner, Hyacinth Robinson, realizes this and commits suicide to prevent that threat. In both novels, the young learner is obliterated as James makes a Paterian embrace of pleasure the criterion of a successful liberal education instead of the joyless Ruskinian aestheticism propagated by Norton.

Chapter 3 looks into how Edith Wharton's *The Valley of Decision* (1902) stages a conservative rebellion against Charles Eliot Norton's democratic ideas of education. In Wharton's historical novel, Fulvia Vivaldi embodies the ideas of liberal tradition: she is an uptight, educated, democratically thinking woman, who insists on the education of the people. Fulvia's social ideas fail, since those people whom she tried to elevate democratically eventually assassinate her. Wharton's realist critique of Norton's idealism is undemocratic: the people should not be given rights they cannot use, as her male protagonist, Odo Valsecca, learns. Coit names Wharton's reaction to Norton a realist criticism of Norton's idealism that would be called the genteel tradition. Coit points out how later criticisms of the genteel tradition will take up Wharton's realist criticism of Norton's idealism and even her gendered representation of male realism pitted against female idealism. However, while Wharton's male realist hero becomes an undemocratic tyrant, later criticisms of the genteel tradition contrast the sterile female genteel tradition to male, realist, and democratic ways of thinking (81). Wharton further elaborates her anti-democratic views of education and reading in her stories "The Vice of Reading" (1903) and "The Descent of Man" (1904), which are against systematic education that would result in vulgarization and insubordination. Coit claims that Wharton's realist critique of Norton's idealism that began as anti-Victorianism developed into her characteristic antimodernism within decades (110).

The second part of the volume surveys late nonfiction texts by James, Adams, and Wharton. Chapter 4 discusses James's *The American Scene* (1907), "The Question of Our Speech" (1905), and his 1909 essay on Norton. James's relation to the genteel tradition is analyzed through the novelist's critique of educational institutions, universities, and colleges that serve as bulwarks against ignorance and materialism. Coit contends that while James indeed criticizes passive Boston intellectuals who sit in their encircled bastions of knowledge, his imaginative engagement does not reach as far as Ross Posnock's *The Trial of Curiosity* (1991) argues it does. Posnock exposed James's open engagement with democratic modernity through his interest in experience and his curiosity Coit argues (115), a vision of James that pushed back against earlier critical accounts that identified him with the passive and unpolitical genteel tradition. Yet, according to Coit's rendering, James in *The American Scene* reads less as a cosmopolitan modernist if one does not try to place him according to the reductive dualism of earlier criticism: passive feminine genteel vs. active male realist. He should rather be placed within the context of long vast conversations about the political duties and powers of cultivated intellectuals, "the remnant," in response to thinkers like Arnold, Mill, Godkin, and Norton (121). For instance, Charles Eliot Norton's essays and letters emphasize Arnoldian criticism and action while James's works communicate a preference for enjoyment—also in response, for instance, to William James's "The Social Value of the College-Bred" (1907). Henry James's "the

remnant” seeks pleasure, not duty. However, this does not make his idea of the remnant democratically or racially inclusive: the pleasure-seeking remnant is elevated, white, and male. As in *The Bostonians*, James resists a service and duty-oriented Ruskinian morally driven aesthetics in favor of a Paterian enjoyment-oriented one. Accordingly, where Norton sees universities as a force for combatting materialism, James sees them as a refuge from it, serving the pleasure of the restless analyst (142–43). James’s architectural metaphors of the absence of forms and secluded spaces in the U.S., his dislike of the absent functional divisions of inside and outside, are not only aesthetic distinctions, Coit argues. James’s cries for form and discrimination are also social and political statements. When he prefers spatial differentiation, James prefers European social and political hierarchies to the egalitarian ideals of Boston liberalism, which, according to him, can only create crude, uniform, and homogenous spaces and audiences. In 1909, James’s commemorative essay about Norton subtly plays out this difference of opinions between Norton and him. For Coit, the hero of this chapter is not James but Norton: the thinker whose life in culture has deliberate political functions and “who understands reading, writing and teaching as crucial forms of political agency” (161).

Chapter 5 analyzes Adams’s battle against liberal education in his *The Education of Henry Adams* (1907). The chapter discusses Adams’s idea of “the remnant,” college intellectuals, the most famous example of which is W. E. B. Du Bois’s essay on “The Talented Tenth.” Du Bois was also a Harvard man, a student of Santayana and William James, and his ideas form part of that Harvard-related discussion and can be compared to Adams’s. For Adams “the remnant” is basically impotent, while for Du Bois it is able to perform the vital task of social representation for a different race or a subordinate class, but he excludes women from it, much like Harvard president Charles William Eliot or his cousin, Charles Eliot Norton. In contrast, Adams suggests that what we think normally of as action is passive, and passivity is the real form of action: “individual, disruptive moves that depend on irony, detachment, complexity, uncertainty and indirection” (176), which is an Emersonian commitment to individualism. In that sense, Adams’s *Education* is part of the Boston talk, but it attacks President Eliot’s idea and practice of community-oriented liberal education—a fact President Eliot was quick to note and dislike. For Adams, real education is private and individual, not public; public education is both boring and useless. Van Wyck Brooks draws on Adams’s account of “the remnant” to develop the narrative about the genteel, which fashions the image of genteel passivity for the new century.

Chapter 6 reads Wharton’s *French Ways and Their Meaning* (1919) and her *A Backward Glance* (1934) within the larger Harvard discourse on the liberal “remnant.” In particular, Wharton’s texts are read against the backdrop of the dispute between her friend, Harvard Professor of English Barrett Wendell and Harvard President Charles William Eliot, a Boston conservative and a Boston liberal respectively. She takes many of her ideas from Wendell’s book *France of Today* (1907), which he produced as part of his output as the inaugural Hyde professor at the Sorbonne (1904–05). President Eliot has faith the differences can also change over time, while Wendell and Wharton have no such confidence; they are afraid of degeneration and are attentive to the past (200). Eliot sees humanity as perfectible, while Wharton and Wendell share the conviction that the more cultivated a person is, the more human he becomes. Wharton’s oft-quoted celebration of French cultural continuity in *French*

*Ways* is linked to Wendell's elitist idea of cultivation. The French are linked to the Romans culturally, while the Anglo-Saxon races are more savage, less historied and cultivated. For her, then, the newly rich in the U.S. cannot take a shortcut to a proper education; it takes time and effort. President Eliot's *Harvard Classics* (1919) project of fifteen minutes of reading every day as a way to cultivation is futile. As opposed to this, in France Wharton finds "real" civilization, culture, and education—real education that is wider than useless formal education.

Wharton even draws on a key term of discontent between Eliot and Wendell: Puritanism. Puritanism for Eliot stands for liberty and democracy and is tied in with education and idealism and this will be part of the narrative on the genteel, while for Wendell Puritan hierarchies are preordained and unchangeable, and democracy is unfeasible. Wharton distances herself from Puritans explicitly when she highlights her Dutch leisure-loving bourgeois ancestry in her autobiography. Last but not least, Wharton's narratives are connected to several early twentieth-century texts that draw on her idea of Puritans and democracy, like Santayana, Brooks, and Parrington. Eventually, a covert seventh chapter, the conclusion, traces the genealogy of the genteel tradition in the disciplinary history of American Studies till the 2000s. This section highlights recitations of the narrative about the genteel and how these recitations powerfully influenced twentieth-century American Studies scholarship.

The book not only develops an elaborate interdisciplinary framework but also applies it to make sobering critical statements about its authors' politics. The argument pushes back against the current tendency to read Henry James and Edith Wharton as prescient liberal thinkers ahead of their time—and instead relates them to the openly conservative and anti-Semitic Adams to show their idiosyncratic elitisms and racisms within the tightly knit institutional community of a turn of the century wealthy white U.S. cultural elite. Simultaneously, the book highlights the role Adams, James, and Wharton play in the formulation of twentieth-century realist critiques of the genteel tradition. In doing so, it surveys how generations of scholars rebuild each other's arguments. The silent hero of the book is Charles Eliot Norton, whom Coit's reiteration of the genteel narrative saves from the historically accumulated muck of reductive critical narratives.

Coit's book traces stories, collapses oppositions, catalogs shifting meanings of words, differentiates, contrasts, disambiguates. It thrives on conversation about broad theoretical questions, it dives into archival work through which it uncovers natural connections that have gone largely unnoticed. At the same time, its argumentation remains remarkably linear and articulate, even when most elaborate. In other words, it presents an academic practice that is not only theoretically sophisticated, widely read and informed, but also clearly articulated. The methodological vocabulary of the book contains terms such as: disciplinary history, genealogy, recitations of a narrative, the aesthetics and politics of (the same phenomenon), hegemony, etc. This terminology and the meaningful way it is put to use identify the book as a New Americanist enterprise at its best.

#### WORK CITED

Butler, Leslie. *Critical Americans: Victorian Intellectuals and Transatlantic Liberal Reform*. U of North Carolina P, 2007.