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## VERSIONS OF EDEN: THE AUTOMOBILE AND THE AMERICAN NOVEL

In Edith Nesbit's *The Magic City*, it is a law of life that if one wishes for anything one can have it. But with that law goes another about machines. If one wishes for a piece of machinery, one is compelled to keep it and to go on using it for the rest of one's life. Machines are held to be a special case, their employment subject to conditions that run the life of the contract, so to speak, and disclose themselves only in the course of time. In Nesbit's fictional world, escape from the strange fatality that haunts machines is possible only for those who resist altogether their lure and fascination. When her leading character has the choice of wishing for a horse or a bicycle, he wisely chooses the horse and thereby wins exemption. Characters in recent American fiction are not so fortunate. An infatuation with machines is with them from the start, a condition of their existence. Machines promise power, mobility, freedom, even a "poetic" space that beckons from beyond the too familiar course of things, from beyond the rush of time and time's sad waste. But in the web of circumstance in which these characters come to be entangled something like the special rule about machines begins to take effect. We sense its operation in the eventual discovery of unforeseen liabilities and losses. This essay is an account of those somber reckonings. The machine in question is the automobile and my concern is with its passage through recent American fiction, with the hopes and dreams it carries, the casualties and losses to which it is linked.

Modern American fiction reflects a society enormously dependent upon the automobile both as a means of transportation and as a source of economic activity. It acknowledges practical advantages such as speed, comfort, and convenience, which cars are bound to embody in an environment fashioned for them and in which their employment has become all but indispensable. Yet it is by means of analyzing and evaluating the various impulses and aspirations in the grip of which Americans have bought, driven, and cherished