

The American MERCURY

October 1925

SELF-CONSCIOUS AMERICA

BY SINCLAIR LEWIS

THÉOPHILE GAUTIER in his red waistcoat, parading proudly as the child who waves a wooden sword and without mercy for grown-ups pipes "Notice me—notice me!" François Villon and D'Annunzio and, to descend many leagues, Frank Harris, each shouting that he is so very ba-a-ad, the baddest boy in the whole neighborhood. Lord Byron, weary with the self-imposed duties of making love and of liberating those Greeks whose suavity as waiters and integrity as fruit-vendors we all admire. Victor Hugo and Lord Tennyson, presiding without one hidden grin over courts of soapy admirers.

Always, everywhere, writers and painters and their kindred have been self-conscious—and by self-conscious I wish to denote an undue perception of one's own importance and interest. That self-consciousness is displayed in England today by the renowned dramatist who on all occasions gives final opinions, particularly on the purposes and customs of America and Soviet Russia, two countries which he has not troubled to visit; it is displayed by the corpulent and agreeable essayist who has just paintingly discovered Roman Catholicism and the Jews. In the patience with which French men of letters acquire a name for peculiarity by making themselves enjoy the horrors of impressionism, tolerating the most distressing paintings on their walls, in the

wistful courage with which certain German authors work away at trying to become perverted, in the earnestness with which authors of all lands, from China to Peru, maintain their superiority to ordinary idiots and thus bar themselves out from the delights of inconspicuousness and vulgarity—in all these phases of megalomania is betrayed a self-consciousness universal and dreary. But nowhere save in America would it occur to the most pompous author or painter or musician that he must be self-conscious as a civic duty.

With us, any proper artist knows that he must yield to the criticisms of all fish mongers and blotter-salesmen and wives of non-conformist pastors as though he were a public official. He begs them to vote upon what literary themes, whiskers, income, and golf-trousers they may desire him to adopt. In Europe, save perhaps in Moscow, the most childish literary exhibitionist performs his little self-conscious tricks entirely to amuse himself and to irritate his wife. It does not enter his mind that the local Purity League or his unknown correspondents in the backwoods must be consulted as to which eccentricities he may choose, and what is more important, not the boldest Purity Leaguer nor the most itchingly epistolary customer in those cynical countries would assume that any artist is waiting to hear their demands.

In America alone does the fiction-writer or the sculptor or any one else have a duty—a Duty—of being naughty or austere, documentary or frivolous. One may not decently be a Prohibitionist or a booze-h'ister or both, a tennis fanatic or a loafer, a prosy fellow writing free verse or a frenzied poet writing radio advertisements because one happens to like it, but only because one is thus Doing Something Worth While. No conscientious American trolls out bawdy ditties because he relishes them, but always he does so for the purpose of cheering the bed-ridden victims of paresis in his neighborhood. He may not write a flippant chronicle of a village, a church, or the diabetic institution of matrimony because it interests him to write thus, but only because he is Revealing Conditions and Making People Stop and Think. He must never, if he be a composer, emit a blast of jazz for any less pious reason than the Creation of Native American Art. Whatever he does, he must be original, forceful, and defiant of criticism, and with these bold virtues he must combine a willingness to heed every warning from each of the 110,000,000 persons who by their residence in the United States are automatically constituted the equals not only of kings but of William Lyon Phelps.

(I had a letter once from a Chicago lawyer whom I have never met. Addressing me by my first name, he admonished, 'I've considered your stuff pretty average rotten till now, and thought of taking the time off and telling you to quit till you learn to write, but this last story of yours is fairly good. Go ahead. Drop in and see me here at my office and we'll talk your junk over.'")

But the amateur critic who spends Sunday afternoon in coaching his favorite writers has caused less lamentation and salt weeping among judicious persons than certain of the highbrows guaranteed by the *Dial*, the late *Freeman*, the *Little Review*, and the more esoteric pages of *Vanity Fair*. Out of 1,857 critics holding the Authors' League of America diploma certifying that

they really like Picasso, that they have read most of Proust, and that they can tell Mouton Rothschild from Nuits St. George, there are not more than sixteen who consider a writer as a person doing something because he enjoys it or because he has been lured into it by the fashion, and doing it well or badly. The others dolorously analyze him as an employé of the Federal Department of Uplift, and consider whether he has Advanced American Culture, Been True to His Higher Vision or—most dread and lofty Duty of them all—Shown Himself Aware of the New Tendencies in French Literature.

II

Nowhere in America itself is this duty-ridden earnestness of the artist and his disciples so well shown as at that Brevoort and cathedral of American sophistication, the Café Dôme in Paris.

Among the other advantages of the Dôme, it is on a corner charmingly resembling Sixth avenue at Eighth street, and all the waiters understand Americanese, so that it is possible for the patrons to be highly expatriate without benefit of Berlitz. It is, in fact, the perfectly standardized place to which standardized rebels flee from the crushing standardization of America.

On view at the Dôme is the great though surprisingly young author who, by his description of vomiting and the progress of cancer, in a volume of sixty-seven pages issued in a limited edition of three hundred copies, has entirely transformed American fiction. There is the lady who has demolished Thomas Hardy, Arnold Bennett, and Goethe. And king of kings, Osimandias of Osimandias, supremest of Yankee critics, *ex cathedra* authority on literature, painting, music, economics, and living without laboring, very father and seer of the Dôme, is that Young Intellectual who, if he ever finishes the assassnatory book of which we have heard these last three years, will tear the world up by the roots. He is going to deliver unto scorn all the false idols of the intelligensia, particularly such false

idols as have become tired of lending him—as the phrase is—money.

These geniuses are never offensive—well, not too offensive—that is, no worse than an American banker holding forth in Luigi's bar about the gas-mileage of his Packard, a German *Schieber* at San Remo with binoculars on his manly breast, or the small neat Frenchman with gray silk gloves who in every railway compartment demands that you close the window. The geniuses do stride to their appointed tables with the quiet and amused modesty of the *maestro*, so like the forgiving smirk of a Christian Science lady, and for persons who have never heard of them and of their talented friends, they are icily sorry, yet something must be said for them. Almost all the authors have written two or three devastating stories for the magazines which are printed on lovely, thick, creamy paper and which last, often, for five months, and one of them once bought a drink for a woman from his home town, and paid for it.

No, it is not the geniuses who invite homicide but their disciples, and for every genius at the Dôme there are seventeen disciples, mostly female. They are the amateur press-agents of the amateur arts. They are the military police of radicalism, the Summers of obscenity, and the house-to-house canvassers of culture.

There is the widow of the Milwaukee coal magnate. When a simple layman—a stock-broker or doctor or writer for the magazines—is delivered into her voice, she attacks without a declaration of war. Really? He hasn't read Thaddeus Boniface's volume of symmetric verse, "Pi R Square"? He hasn't subscribed to *Complex: A Magazine of Sublimation*? He hasn't seen Savinien Skjalgsson dance? He hasn't even heard of Bill Benner's new school of Intimate Painting, with Bill's portrait of Advanced Cirrhosis as the Sistine Madonna of the movement? Then the man's a fool, and the coal magnate's relict feels a divine compulsion to tell him so.

There is the bobbed-haired Jewish girl who announces nightly that she is proud

to be the lady-love of Stephen Kriechfisch, the symbolistic novelist, and that any one who has ever written an intelligible sentence is a worm. There is the young old man who wears a thumb ring and whose subtle pleasure it is to trap sightseers from Minneapolis into a confession that they rather like Minneapolis, golf, and Dickens. "Really, my dear, they were too pricelessly precious!" There is the skinny lady who has gone out for vice with the same relentless grimness with which her sister back home exploits virtue. She smokes cigarettes till her head aches, she has devoted seven laborious years to getting herself seduced, she hates brandy and becomes frigidly drunk on it nightly, and to any layman so bourgeois as to go home before two A. M. she remarks, "Yes, that's the sort of thing you would do."

I listened to this Salvation Army of compulsory sin. I first learned from them that it was imperative to adore—though not necessarily to read—Mr. James Joyce's "Ulysses." Then the guiding geniuses and their disciples had a change of heart, whether because they tardily perceived that by printing all six of the unprintable Anglo-Saxon monosyllables Mr. Joyce had ruined their own chances to be shocking, or for the less metaphysical reason that the fellow had come to a measure of popularity and sales. Today, Joyce is more *passé* than James Russell Lowell. The disciples snap that here in the Dôme at this moment are at least seven fictionists who can excrete prose more turgid, more illegible, and generally more distinguished than his. To admire him is to be a provincial and even—most withering of condemnations at the Dôme—to be a person who does not live on the Left Bank but in the philistine sunshine and air of the Champs-Élysées.

From the disciples I had a bacchic glint of the new beauty which was to be bootlegged into America and save it from radios and the *Saturday Evening Post*. As an Iowa newspaperman I had learned that a "penman"—so we yearningly called them there, in a literary society unibulbous but other-

wise astoundingly like the Dôme—a penman must be patriotic, pure, and reverent toward the Hebrew God but nasty toward the Hebrews. Now, at the Dôme, I acquired a whole new code of Duties:

(1): Literature must be absolutely untrammelled, uncensored, and unimitative.

(2): All literature must be imitative of (a) Joyce; (b) Gertrude Stein; (c) Ezra Pound; (d) André Gide; (e) Jean Cocteau; (f) Sherwood Anderson; (g) Waldo Frank; (h) Marcel Proust. You are permitted, by the ruling of the International Convention of 1925, to choose any one of these models or to mix all of them, but any writing which does not obviously proceed from these Eternal Prototypes is to be censored.

(3): is the same as 2, except that the eight Prototypes are sharply condemned as old-fashioned, and their names are replaced by those of any eight acquaintances of the person intoning the code.

(4): You must write about a thing called "The American Scene."

(5): You must never, since all Americans are dubs, write about the American Scene, but only about the Left Bank of the Seine.

(6): You must not write about any scene whatever, since that is Merely Pictorial. Your characters must wriggle through a void, to the sound of Wagnerian overtures played on tin whistles and Jews'-harps.

(7): The judges in this match shall be Ernest Boyd, Gilbert Seldes, Ezra Pound, Albert Nock, Paul Rosenberg, Cuthbert Wright, Harold Stearns, and Djuna Barnes. No person shall be considered a competent writer unless this committee agree upon him, unanimously, and as that has never happened and by no miracle could happen, a great deal of liveliness is added to the sport of literary competition.

III

I had listened—I had learned—I had striven to keep myself from writing with cheerfulness; but came a night, as Mr. Wells is fond of saying, when a native cussedness stirred in me. I fell from grace, I left the Dôme,

and as I wandered in such unsanctioned portions of Paris as the Rue Royale and the Grand Boulevards, I was sore-laden with a notion that the patronizing observations about other writers made by the geniuses at the Dôme weren't papal bulls but merely damned impertinence on the part of young literary bounders. At that moment I craved the company of the most lowbrow magazine star who booms that he is a "real he-guy and not one of these knitting champions," who volunteers that he merely scribbles enough to make a living, in between his real duties as a man and a citizen—fishing, poker, addressing hardboiled press clubs, teaching his seven sons to play golf, and mixing cocktails on the Italian terrace of his new \$200,000 country residence—all the domestic delights whereby he proves that a Stout Fellow who has been properly trained in "the newspaper game" can produce literature and yet remain as sane and strong and pure as a Y.M.C.A. secretary or a prize-fighter.

I contemplated the valiance of these Stout Fellows as I sat melancholy and alone before a lemon soda at the Café Napolitain. I remembered one of them who used to warn me against reading the contemporary English writers because they were, by "taking all these dirty cracks at decency," contaminating an erstwhile innocent world; and who revealed to me that it was all bunk to say that this guy Conrad was a high-grade author, because he knew absolutely that Mary Roberts Rinehart and Irv Cobb and Pete Kyne got more per story than this Conrad bird ever heard of. Himself, he had a pretty foresight for market values, and while his rivals were blindly sticking to the Prizefight Story (how the Yale Junior defeats the world's champion, but only in the sixteenth round) he would perceive a public tend toward inner nobility, and switch overnight to the Domestic Story (how grandmother saves the flapper from gin).

I recalled a dinner of the more opulent literary gentlemen, ample and pleasant gentlemen whose names are forever on the

magazine covers, and not one of whom, save myself, weighed less than two hundred and ten pounds or had a literary distinction of less than fifteen hundred dollars a story. I remembered their easy talk—free from all the precosities of the Dôme—about their motors, their investments, and their annual pilgrimages to Europe, consisting of a week of seeing the smuttier Parisian reviews and helping their daughters buy frocks, a motor trip along the Riviera, and a fortnight in such Italian hotels as were guaranteed free of all wops, frogs, hunks, hunkies, and yids. I remembered how their large blandness of world-survey, unprejudiced as the politics of a banker, untrammelled as the biology of a Baptist, gracious as a motorcycle cop, flowed over me and engulfed me and left me desirous of becoming a chiropractor and having done with it.

The diners referred with nausea to the "little literary lice," whereby they indicated the very cross-word-puzzle geniuses of the Dôme who that night seemed too much with me, late and soon. But meditating thus over my root beer at the Napolitain, I perceived that these Stout Fellows, the major generals and heavyweights of story-manufacturing, best-sellers and saviors of morality and lovers of the perilous sport of watching baseball, were not less but considerably more self-conscious and egocentric than the children at the Dôme.

Certainly men and women who have done fine and distinguished things do appear at the Dôme and its allied colleges, on the Left Bank, in Chelsea, in Greenwich Village. All the chattering lads in those retreats, however competently they may lie to themselves about the actual amount of work they do, however superciliously they look down on Thackeray and Hawthorne, are yet authentically alive to a revolt against the Mark Twain-O. Henry-*Saturday Evening Post*-Hearst-Munsey tradition that, to avoid pedantry and effeminacy, a writer must have the oral vocabulary of a truck-driver and the inescapable joviality of a pool-room; and that however

he may hate sitting in puddles, he must go fishing.

Even the scorn for all places outside the grubbier alleys of the Latin Quarter (or Greenwich Village) which one finds so irritating in these new self-conscious Bohemians is generally to be explained by a proud recent arrival from the silo belt, or by poverty. The lads who cannot afford sunshine and privacy make up for them on the principle of the fox who very properly jeered at the grapes he could not reach.

But of such self-defensive sneering one becomes as weary as one does of that incessant excuse for people with atrocious manners, that whelp of psycho-analysis, which the friends of bad-tempered geniuses produce daily: "You mustn't mind his rudeness—he's really awfully shy." Neither shyness nor poverty nor the ravages of disease need be paraded outside the home. Poverty is no more than riches an excuse for superciliousness. And to have to choose between literary baseball fans and the Boy Scouts of Dadaism is a hell of a choice . . . and one that is necessary only among that zealous and proselytizing folk, the Americans.

IV

In casting a leering eye upon the American theory that it is a Duty to be deliberately high or low brow, that it is a Duty to be or do anything in the matter of literature, the question is, naturally, not so simple as the elementary inquiry: "Is it permissible for an author to mix propaganda with fiction or poetry?" This controversy, like most critical discussions, is very ancient, always appearing as new and important to some delighted commentator, and in all ages equally meaningless. Is it permissible for a narrative to express its author's theories about the structure of the state or the criminality of Sunday theaters? Certainly. Is it permissible for an author to avoid, so far as he can, all propaganda? Certainly. Despite the existence of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, Mr. E. J. O'Brien, and the O. Henry Prize Com-

mittee, there is as yet no authority other than the author's own desires which shall decide what he may or may not write. Even economic duress does not dictate, for a brisk fellow can make his honest fifty thousand a year equally by doing naughty stories or by upholding virginity, so gratifyingly broad is the present scope of our more vacuous magazines.

As a matter of fact, Mr. Upton Sinclair in "Mammonart" has come near to proving that no one can write without propaganda, will it or no. He shows how ardently Conrad, usually instanced as the pure artist free of all controversy, does press-agentry against the vile walking delegates who would annoy ship-owners in their right to overload steamers and send unsafe hulks out into storms. He might have shown that Hergesheimer and Cabell are propagandists in their hatred of propaganda.

Mr. Sinclair himself is one of the worst of the evangelists; he insists that social justice is the one fit topic for any writer. He is unable to find anything save viciousness in the French minor poets, futility in much of Swinburne, and patent medicine in Coleridge; and with the zeal of a William Jennings Bryan he would lure away from them all the rare and solitary youngsters who in them have discovered a solace and exaltation incomprehensible to crusaders. He praises "The Psalm of Life" as excellent poetry because it is "an incitement toward diligence and sobriety," though for reasons unknown he fails to recommend the Methodist hymnal on the same grounds. He does worship Shelley, but chiefly as a rebel, and "magic" in poetry he ridicules. A debate with such a man regarding poetry would be as sensible as an argument between a Paulist Father and a Christian Science healer.

Yet Mr. Sinclair is high-spirited, suggestive, original. He is wholesomely unafraid to tear down the taboos about even Shakespeare; he is unabashed in the senile presence of the high priests. And as a psychological study the book is valuable in its

indication of how twisted an intelligent person may be when he insists that people write (or swim or vote or make love or do anything else) in any one particular way.

Throughout, Mr. Sinclair assumes that if Shakespeare, Goethe and the other Tories had seen the cause of the people, it would have made a difference in erecting a reasonable world. I wish he would ask the author of "The Jungle" whether that vivid book has made any lasting difference in hygiene or labor conditions in the Chicago stock yards; and ask the author of "Main Street" whether that diagnosis of village dullness has rendered conversation at the afternoon bridge-parties on Willow avenue much more amusing. I suspect that the authors of both these books wrote them—whatever reasons they may have given to their earnest surface selves—essentially because it tickled their sense of mischief to write thus, and that later, when they found their fulminations perfectly ineffective, they have gone on to other manners and themes with no vast grieving. I suspect that though they are probably both of them good enough Socialists, as is Bernard Shaw, to look with relish upon the immediate hanging of all insurance-hunting ship-owners, all sellers of bad meat, and all persons who make Main Street life a horror by droning "Hot 'nough for you t'day?" yet secretly they see that in the long run it is not the machinations of these tyrants but the mass of smug human stupidity which keeps the world uncivilized.

Despite the protestations of Mr. Sinclair that one must write tracts, despite the sniffs of critics to the effect that Mr. Sinclair has no license to write tracts, is there any sort of high literature or of low scribbling which it is really despicable to produce? May one exude the cryptic, elliptic, symbolistic-impressionistic-esoteric sort of fiction in which every word means something besides the one thing it can mean, in which by the omission of verbs and transitions it is guaranteed that no lowbrow trespasser will get beyond the first paragraph, and in which the brightest mo-

ments of the indistinguishable characters are concerned with neo-Freudianism or neo-salvarsan? Certainly. Why not—if the author enjoys it? There are enough handy men producing obvious Wild West stories, Riviera decamers, and exposés of college presidents. But contrariwise, may one write pink romances? Certainly. Why not? What critic yet born has enough divinity in him to dictate to melancholy married spinsters on side streets that they must, in decency, be bored by Dorothy Richardson instead of enjoying Berta Ruck?

Write shameless adventure—the roll of the sea, the shine of the jungle, and all the rest of that puerile stuff of escape, which neither corrects prison conditions nor illuminates the Oedipus complex? Write adventure? Why not? Homer and Cervantes, Vergil and Dean Swift and Mark Twain, Melville and Kipling and Stevenson wrote as gleefully and coarsely of blood-and-thunder as any Harlem hack; and whenever he will permit himself, Hardy slips from gloom into a melodrama as adventurous as the print-paper magazines. Hergesheimer's "Wild Oranges" is hectic adventure, and it is in no way inferior to the most spacious of his later novels. Nothing in Frank Norris is better than the latter, *i.e.*, the gallopingly adventurous portion, of "McTeague"; nothing better in Wells, not even the soul of Mr. Polly, than "The Island of Dr. Moreau," and the swash-buckling quest for quap in "Tono-Bungay"; and so far as Jack London lives it is for his sheer adventure and not for his sociology. Out of adventure and melodrama, Joseph Conrad makes a new world of unassailable beauty. Yet now and then arises some lady sage who protests that vulgar adventure, or any other definite form of doing, is necessarily inferior art, and that the ticking of little gray souls in little gray rooms is the only noble matter of the novel.

May one write laborious accounts of provincial customs? Why not? The pained æsthete who would abolish them, who would license only the delicate quiver of obvious beauty-hunting, have also to abol-

ish Balzac, Zola, Fielding, Bennett, Wells. On the other hand, may one descend so muddily as to turn out detective stories? Why not? It is unproven that the dialectic of this metaphysical art of plot-guessing is inferior to laboratory research, or the picking out of themes in music, and certainly it has satisfied many curious persons who otherwise might have sickened themselves with theology. It is doubtful whether any character in the last hundred years of fiction, even Pickwick or Mulvaney or Anna Karenina, is more living than Sherlock Holmes.

Solemnly to counsel authors that they may write as they wish seems as puerile and platitudinous and absurd as to quote "Honesty is the best policy." Anywhere in Europe, it *would* be absurd. But in a country where every one from the newest reporter on the Kalamazoo newspapers to the most venerable professors at Harvard, from the Oklahoma clergy to the more scholarly movie actors, is replete with holy alarms for all contemporary authors, there is no gospel more novel—or more repulsive to Americans, the most self-conscious and exaggerated people in the world.

V

The general opinion here is that Jews, Italians and Frenchmen are neurotic, full of hysterical excesses, becoming either Bolsheviks or flinty aristocrats, degenerates or ape-like peasants; while Americans, Englishmen, and most Germans and Scotsmen are by general judicious and unprejudiced, flushed with common sense, and despising the manners of dancing-masters. The opposite is the case. Americans are the most self-conscious, the most neurotic, the most æsthetic, the most stubbornly unæsthetic, and incomparably the most interesting tribe living, and next to them come the Britishers and Germans.

Our self-consciousness proceeds from the most important of all American traits: the tendency to exaggeration in every department of thought and conduct, which in

turn comes partly from our hot-house growth, our lack of slowly matured traditions, partly from our hybrid and contradictory stocks, and partly from the sentimentality which afflicts all Northern peoples as weather drives them from the reality of out-doors to the brooding unrealities of the hearth and candlelight.

This Winter-bound sentimentality governs the English, the Scotch, the Germans, the Scandinavians, the Russians, nor are any of them so aged and traditional as they first seem to a tourist American who has never beheld a building erected before 1820. The Englishman considers himself instructed by immemorial tradition, but Rome was hoary and the Riviera had been the battleground of articulate clans for forty thousand years when London was still a litter of reed huts, and Oxfordshire a wolf-haunted wild. No, it is a newish race, the British, and hectic by comparison with the cynical French, the mature and compromising Italians.

The difference is seen in a comparison of French and English poetry. The theory of Cook trippers and of English pro-consuls is that the French are hysterical little people, clever but unsound, given to gesticulations, silly food, and the practice of weeping on all occasions, whereas Englishmen are hard, practical, beefy fellows who would rather die than be caught expressing emotion. But French poetry and fiction, the real expressions of the national soul, are, except for Victor Hugo and a few females and one or two novelists popular among the wives of respectable tradesmen, as heartless and practical and deft as a diamond glass-cutter, while English literature, especially the greatest, is dripping with sobs and Utopianism.

The British are just as likely to produce a Shelley, a Keats, a Byron, a Coleridge, an Aubrey Beardsley, an Ernest Dowson, a Dickens, a Wyndham Lewis (the *Blast* man), a right believer in the angels of Mons, a Jack Jones shrieking in the House of Commons, an exhorter praying by the hour in a mouldy chapel of the Peculiar

People, a Kipling bawling that all Hindu Nationalists are fiends, a suffragist burning mail with acid, a Lord Banbury justifying them by his sneers at suffrage, or any other passionate and slightly hysterical type, as to produce the stolid red-faced squire of their ideal. If once in Mrs. Humphry Ward they admired the mirroring of their own honest whiskers and square-toed boots and square-headed statesmanship, today the young generation flocks to Margaret Kennedy, Rebecca West, May Sinclair, and E. M. Forster, four authentically brilliant novelists who, writing with the gay delicacy which is so British and is supposed to be so French, stuff all the squires and Anglo-Indian colonels and solid bishops into the wastebasket, and reveal a world of young Britishers as eager and unstable as the dancers of Henri Murger.

Exaggerative, these British, yet withal it is in but a few realms—their belief in the sanctity of games for their own sake, the universal opinion that all persons save stay-at-home Britishers are colonials, and their reverence for the most distant sprig of the royal family. In politics the British are exaggerative enough. The county family piously believes that all labor-union officials are in the pay of Red Russia and should be hanged at once. The Clyde-side Socialist believes that the country can be preserved only by shooting the aristocracy, most of the Oxford professors, and all the journalists. But this exaggeration is not significant, because politics is paranoiac universally. The debates in the *Chambre des Députés* are of the madhouse; Bolsheviki and Mensheviki murder one another and join to murder the anarchists; Fascisti and Communisti express with machine guns and castor oil a certain lack of political blandness; and on election day in Berlin, 1925, the Hindenburgites and Marxites voted with clubs. Indeed Britain is more decorous and balanced than other lands. Ramsay MacDonald, as labor prime minister, was able to spend a week-end with the King, to go to the garden-parties of

dukes, without much anguish on the part of either the Conservatives or the Socialists. I have seen that most oligarchic peer, the late Marquess of Curzon, applaud the Labor air-minister, Lord Thomson, for the gallantry of his attack on Curzon's ally, the Duke of Sutherland.

In America, a Ramsay MacDonald would have been kicked out by the butler and assassinated by his own followers, had he appeared at a smart garden-party; and in any case he would never have secured office, but would have been ousted as illegally as was Victor Berger from the House of Representatives and the Socialist assemblymen from the pious legislature at Albany.

However dismaying their exaggerations about Americans, Hindus, and the importance of dressing for dinner, the British are painfully well-balanced compared with us—all of us. There is nothing we do not overdo. To Europe we are still the dollar-chasers, and it is true that when a Yank finds it interesting to amass wealth he pursues the dollar with all horns tooting, taking six-barred fences and water gates and tearing off his scarlet coat in the amorous fury of the hunt, while the French peasant merely pinches every centime and the English merchant regards every shilling in the till as his by sacred right. But if the American exaggerate in money-chasing, he flings the same money away with a passionate glee unknown elsewhere in history. He hurls ten millions at universities he has never seen; he wants to buy all the Rembrandts in Europe, and to feed the Letts, the Syrians, and all the secretaries of all the reform leagues in Washington, D. C.

The only human being more exaggerative than the American Prohibitionist, with his unshaken belief that hardy pots can be made to like strawberry ice-cream soda, was the old-time American drinking-man. He never was content with *Bierhallen* or placid sidewalk cafés. He had to stand up at the bar, shoot his whiskies straight, go home drunk and penniless, and justify the insanities of Prohibition. And thus when

an American is lowbrow (and he may be a lumberjack or a chemist, an insurance clerk or a newspaper editor), he is monstrously lowbrow. He views any male person who plays the piano, reads Sir Thomas Browne, or speaks in an agreeable voice as a sheer degenerate. The American highbrow regards any person who has a liking for chewing tobacco, fire engines, or the long, delicious, drawling anecdotes of backwoods general-stores as a blatant moron. And this highbrow, this precious laddie speaking an English more Oxonian than Oxford, is not the product of a slow autumnal coloring by rot, but springs in one generation from the hardest roughneck. The son of the morose bacon-chewing Indian fighter is heard whinnying that he simply cannot endure these terrible Americans one encounters in Paris: only in Capri, in the more select villas, does he find delicate companionship and a serenity in which to contemplate the art he is too feeble to pursue.

The American Tory is so complete and humorless that merely to speak of the I. W. W. or of Debs is to become suspect by him and his satinwood-paneled wife. Side by side with his intransigence is American democracy, that faith whereby any waiter, elevator runner, trolley conductor, clothing salesman, or taxi chauffeur who likes his job or who enjoys being courteous to his patrons is suspect as a coward, a weakling, and a traitor to that free-born-American independence which is particularly to be noted in recently arrived Greeks, Sicilians, and Finns. These innocent and unprejudiced arrivals see with a glad new light that independence is not, as they had thought, self-respect, but rudeness, and the lesson in Americanization they learn with alacrity.

Exaggerative American youth—it feels itself persecuted if the family fail to have a radio, a closed car, and the movies four times a week. The American motorist—if his car has a potential speed of less than seventy miles an hour, he is ashamed and miserable, though in no state of liquor

would he dare to drive more than fifty. The American poker-fanatic—to him a game which ends before five in the morning, before the players are sick with nicotine and alcohol and the boredom of shuffling and dealing, is a pastime fit only for missionary societies.

And American philosophy—not since the orgies of Savonarola have the gods witnessed so obscene a spectacle as a country seriously accepting and discussing Frank Crane, the Fundamentalists, John Roach Straton, Dr. Albert Abrams, osteopathy, Bernarr MacFadden, "Abie's Irish Rose," Shriners' conventions, Mayor Hylan, and the advertisements in the *World Almanac* of mail-order home-training courses whereby, without deserting the soda-fountain, young men may become finger-print experts, dancers, mail-carriers, orators, railway-station superintendents, violinists, evangelists, authors, aviators, and managers of tea-rooms.

VI

One of the most instructive examples of the American ethic is the solemnity with which the populace consider whether or no their loyal countrymen, especially writers and painters, may stay abroad.

Recently the Paris editions of both the New York *Herald* and the Chicago *Tribune* have maintained earnest symposia on the reasons why so many American writers live in France for considerable periods. In Paris or at the dock in New York the first question of the reporters, unless they are wise ship-news men who have learned that liners are not ships but ferries, is "Should writers go abroad? Do you feel that you understand America better that way?"

I had supposed that any one—even a writer, with his burden of moral duties toward his congregation—went to Paris because he liked to; because the wine is cheap, the girls pretty, the crêpe Suzette exalted, the Place de la Concorde beautiful, and the theater so bad that one can, without the inconvenience of remaining in New

York, still acquire vanity in being a New Yorker. But such reasons are frivolous. One goes to Paris, one has a Duty in going to Paris, because there one receives inspiration and stimulation at the tomb of Voltaire, before the Monna Lisa, amid the collections of lace, and in the high-soaring conversations at studios belonging to music students from Nashville. One acquires Culture and a Broad View through meeting the French poets and historians whom one never meets. One adds piquancy to one's literary manner by learning the names of seven French wines, the appellation Boul' Mich', and such jaunty phrases as "nom d'une pipe," a phrase used as frequently in Paris as is "begorra" in Dublin. Whatever spiritual replenishment one gains, one unquestionably Gets a Better Perspective on America, and year by year in damp corners of cafés one sits talking of that Better Perspective which one acquired while forgetting what America is like. I know an American novelist who has been Getting that Better Perspective for sixteen years, and who has so much Perspective now that the American characters in his book are as accurate and well-rounded and bucolic and nasal and generally profound as the American characters of *Punch* or Mr. Michael Arlen.

The opposing school holds as firmly that the American writer has a Duty *not* to remain in Paris. They permit the refreshment of six weeks in Europe every two years, providing that the only purpose of such a sojourn shall be a perception of how much better and sweeter and less expensive America is than these dying and neurotic countries. This grim school, no more than the Perspectivers, allows the belief that any decent Yankee may visit Europe merely to save money, get a drink, and admire Gothic doorways, and it insists that after the six weeks the literary explorer, laden with Dunhill pipes and little leather boxes from Florence and Tauchnitz editions of the more antiquated American novels, shall return to the Greenwich Village flat from which he or she so intensively studies

Alaskan folklore and the agrarian movement in Montana. Not only do our writers themselves thus moralize about being abroad, but any clubwoman from Fort Worth, any professor in a one-building university, has a right—indeed a Duty—to instruct them; and the daring leaders of thought listen reverently.

No part of the Continent and Britain is free from smugness about itself. Oslo and the Oslonians believe as prayerfully as Chicago that any reason for staying in, or staying away from, Oslo is somehow a compliment to Oslo; and Tokio and Antofagasta and Wiggan as well as Los Angeles esteem themselves each the center of the universe and the wellspring of all the arts. The Englishman believes that his street of damp brick villas is the flowering of civilization; and to all right-thinking persons, India is not a land which has more or less to do with the Hindus but chiefly an interesting background against which Englishmen may display anew the changeless virtues of Tootlebury.

Yet always, since the days when scholars went inevitably to study at Padua or Pisa, the British writer has gone abroad without thinking it necessary to excuse himself. Browning, Shelley, Borrow, or, today, Bennett, Maugham, Walpole—such men have always wandered; and for any pressman to demand their reasons would have been considered by everybody, including the uncomfortable pressman, as impertinence. It is nearly inconceivable, even with

the present rapid Americanization of the British press, that a London daily should hold a debate on "Is it wholesome for British writers to live in Italy?" It is impossible that the standard sister of the standard Dorset vicar should on the high moment of meeting her favorite author, say Hichens or Locke or Oppenheim, inform him that his Duty toward her was to spend less time in Cannes.

Such magnificence of self-consciousness and duty-mongering and hysterical bounding to extremes may in all its richness be found only in our sturdy land. To the question beloved of all Sunday newspapers and teachers' associations, "What is the matter with America and how shall we do something about it?" there is one final answer: There are too many people who ask "What is the matter with America?" and then dash out and try to do something about it.

And there are idiots who will consider this philosophical inquiry an attack on our fair land! Actually, to say that we are the most neurotic, most self-conscious folk in the world is to say that our provincial days of sockless statesmen, merchant princes pompous in broadcloth, and oratorical second-rate lawyers are over; that we are feverish with the pursuit of every wisdom and every agreeable silliness; and that overnight, without even ourselves perceiving it, we are changing from the world's dusty wheatfield to the world's hectic but incomparably fascinating capital.

BALLAD OF THE SWABS

BY GEORGE STERLING

The tale is of my grandsire
And his good whaling-ship,
Back to Sag Harbor faring
From his eleventh trip.—

A true man, a taut man,
With sea-blue eyes and bright,
Three foot across the shoulders
And five foot five in height.

The stout ship *Thomas Dickinson*
Up from Rio rolled,
Eighteen hundred casks of oil
Braced tight in her hold.

Two years out each man Jack was
And ninety days to spare,
Wives and sweethearts waiting
Starved love to share.

Block Island lay to starboard,
Montauk lay to port.
“Damme! my bullies!
Land’s the place for sport.

“Rum’s a mocker when ’tis served
Only once a day,
With the brown Marquesan girls
Half a world away.

“Now swab the deck, my hearties!
Two hours will see us home
From toil and fluke and tempest
And the night-reef’s foam.”

Out spake Billy Palmer,
An Amagansett boy:
“Flense my butt if I crook arm
At any such employ!

“To hell with oil and whalebone
And all sea-faring men,