

THE EXQUISITE AMERICAN

BY THEODORE MAYNARD

EVERY now and then somebody makes me feel very embarrassed by taking it for granted that I, as an Englishman, must have a much better command of the language than Americans. This is not primarily because I happen to be a professor of English literature. Most people have already dimly discovered that professors rarely have a real understanding of literature, and a few people even guess the cause: that the dreary researches necessary for obtaining a Ph.D. degree generally destroy any love that the candidate may have had for the beauty of words. At the end of the process he emerges with a dissertation—and a ruined sense of style.

I get of course, as does every professor of English, a letter from time to time that solemnly seeks the authority of my decision on some grammatical point. For instance, not very long ago I was consulted by one of the heads of a Western railway who wanted to know whether a locomotive could be spoken of as he or (on the analogy of a ship) as she. My reply suggesting a careful examination of the engine's bearings before deciding so delicate a matter, was, I fear, regarded as being in bad taste.

But I am not referring to consultations of this sort. In a much larger sense I find it assumed that an Englishman writes and speaks his language much better than an American.

I can readily comprehend how Frenchmen, or Italians, or Spaniards living here

can entertain this idea. They have in many cases learned the rudiments of our tongue in their own country; which means that they have endured a severe drilling in grammar. Moreover, the precision of their Latin minds makes them notice every lapse from correctness. All round them they hear Americans using constructions and terms that they cannot find in their dictionaries, so they naturally rate English English higher than American English.

Why Americans should do the same thing puzzles me a good deal. Lest I should be thought to be exaggerating I hasten to add that this notion prevails only among the better educated among them. The others, if they think about the matter at all, have no doubt that, just as Americans do everything else better than Englishmen, so they speak English better. People who listened in to the King speaking over the radio wondered if they had got the right wave-length. For His Majesty, strange to say, never dropped any h's, and actually spoke the King's English.

Any thoroughly literate person who has read up to this point will hardly need my disclaimer against being a master of prose style. While I have my little bag of parlor tricks and am able, on the proper occasion, to indulge myself in a few airs and graces, I am aware that my manner of writing is, even at its best, far from being a model, and that often, owing to the hasty way I am obliged to write, it is on a deplorably low level. That, however, is not just now

the question. I am still wondering why so many Americans should so exalt educated Englishmen, and to their own disadvantage. For as I grow increasingly impressed with the literary power visible in America, I am less and less inclined to accord the writers of my own country a position higher than American writers have won, or are winning.

II

The United States has not yet of course produced a man in the same class with Shakespeare, or Milton, or Dickens. Nor has it produced more than a few writers of unquestionable greatness. Even during the last hundred years the American literary output has been decidedly inferior, both in quantity and quality, to the English. Only now is America catching up. But that it is doing so is the important point.

I do not intend, however, to make any effort to compare the respective merits of contemporary writers on the two sides of the Atlantic. It is enough for my present purpose that I have indicated my own opinion. I have other fish to fry at this moment, and I am going to try to find out what are the distinguishing characteristics of American writers, what is the nature of the American creative genius.

First let me say that I believe the current literary fever, the *cacoethes scribendi* that has seized so many people in America, is symptomatic of something else beside an obvious incidental futility. This perfectly appalling torrent of writing can, I know, be partly accounted for on several grounds that have no connection with that creative energy which I surmise. Far more people go to college in America than in any other country in the world; there is therefore a very wide dissemination of culture. Being

myself a professor, I am painfully aware how superficial this culture of most college graduates is; and that, as Mr. Taft once said, in every class five per cent pass *cum laude*, and fifty per cent *mirabile dictu*. But still a vast number of people are exposed to culture; and it is too often the mark of the half-baked man that he wants to write.

Many of these are under the illusion that they will be able to make money with their pens; and they do learn a formula in their courses in the short-story that enables them to sell a few stories before growing too sterile even for the popular magazines. But others, suffering from the unfortunate effects of a badly assimilated education working upon their vanity, struggle for the fame which they imagine awaits them.

A good many of these subside into the literary circles of women's clubs, or into the little theatre movement, or even into the poetry magazines, where they are able to exercise what talents they have without doing the world any special harm, even if they do it no special benefit.

These ineffectual souls have their own sort of vision; some spark of divine fire has touched their brains to keep them going at all. Yet apart from the tens of thousands of such hangers-on of literature, America manages to support thousands of men and women who can consider themselves professional writers. It is true that most of them have some additional means of livelihood; otherwise they would speedily starve. But they find writing to be a not unremunerative side-line, and in some instances they produce work of real literary merit.

The magazines are their chief means of support; and there are so many magazines in America. The charge that they set a premium upon uninspired competence is to a great extent true; but compared with

the magazines Europe perpetrates (if we make a dozen or so exceptions) their contributions are positively distinguished.

America does at least demand a decent level of efficiency. In no department of activity would she tolerate the kind of hopeless duffer whom you will often find in high places in my own country. Lord Randolph Churchill was no duffer; neither is Mr. Lloyd George: on the contrary, the one man was a brilliant amateur, and the other is a brilliant humbug. But they will serve to illustrate my point. Churchill, when Chancellor of the Exchequer, upon being questioned in the House of Commons about some figures in his budget, breezily confessed concerning decimals that he did not know what the "damned dots" meant. And Lloyd George, in the days during which, having tripped poor Asquith up, he went out to save the country, when tackled over some statement of his about "forty per cent", broke down in his explanation, and let everybody see that he was not quite clear as to the import of the phrase. That sort of thing could never happen in America. The most hill-billy Congressman would be better informed.

And so, in every department of what is sometimes called the writing game (with the exception of journalism) the American is never allowed to do his job so badly as many an Englishman does his. No American publisher would look at the rubbishy books which appear in cartloads every year in England, and therefore (one must suppose) find a market. Even if the American higher literary levels are not so high as the English (which I question) there can be no ground for argument that the English low levels are yards below the worst that the United States can be accused of.

I am not attempting, however, to rest any case on this. I mention it merely in

passing, so as to clear the ground, as I have also mentioned that large class who never do more than achieve a dull average. My point is that the enormous literary output of America, though mechanically stimulated by a widespread education and easy opportunities for publication, is ultimately to be traced to a very genuine hunger for literary expression. Bewildered, side-tracked or prostituted as it may be, it stands for something creative. Toward what goal the artistic soul of the nation is making is now the question to which I must address myself.

III

My firm belief is that the natural bent of Americans is toward fastidious delicacy rather than toward that elemental forcefulness upon which Americans often like to plume themselves. Since the days of Jefferson Brick, and no doubt before those days, there have always been people who liked to shout that the libation of Freedom must sometimes be quaffed in blood. Americans are forever characterizing themselves as a people of phenomenal virility—masterful, untamed he-men. This, I take it, is due to the national memory of the days when the wilderness had to be subdued by bold, rough-handed men among whom the gentler graces of life could have very little sway.

What is overlooked is that such men never thought of themselves as red-blooded, two-fisted he-men. The only men they met were men like themselves, brawny and brave; and they supposed that only such men existed. Directly a man becomes conscious of his virility you may know that he is deficient in that quality.

The vast majority of Americans think of Europeans as effete. Europeans do not think of Americans as effete, though they

might with some justice do so did they understand to what extent the older stocks of the country need the replenishing vigor of those immigrants who now do most of the obscure hard work of the nation. Europeans do, however, regard—and with a good deal of surprise—such Americans as they encounter at close quarters as being somewhat lacking in energy. They see that Americans are immensely vivacious; but also observe that they put far more of themselves into their play than into their work.

Life in truth has dealt altogether too easily with Americans. Their prosperity was not won without effort, and prodigious effort; but to retain it no great effort has been needed. They live more softly than Europeans, and show it.

What I am trying to say is that America is living upon the great legend of Daniel Boone and the Leather-Stocking Tales, while giving most of its thought to the refinements of civilization. Americans in a happy dream walk about as though they still had powder-horns at their belts, while busily surrounding themselves with porcelain bathtubs, radios, electric iceboxes and motor-cars. I am far from denying that these are good things in their way (though there are some things still better); but I do say that this heaping up of comforts is sybaritic. Indeed, I am sure that Americans themselves realize this, however dimly. How else are we to account for the enthusiasm with which millions of them deliberately rough it every Summer in camp or log-cabin?

But we may notice how every year the shacks become more luxurious. The porcelain tubs and the radios and the frigidaire are imported to the wilds of Maine or Wisconsin. Soon the only thing rough about the decidedly commodious log-cabins will be their unfinished exteriors. The uneasy

he-men will have to keep alive their virility by wearing lumber-jackets, swearing with increased emphasis and ingenuity, and chewing tobacco. How else are they going to retain faith in their abundant virility?

It must not be supposed that I am objecting to the cult of the camp. I far prefer that sort of thing to the luxurious dismal hotels of Atlantic City. But I do believe that the conscious seeking of it is ominous. I am afraid that it will end by the pretense breaking down, and Atlantic City spreading itself along the entire length of the Atlantic seaboard.

I should be afraid of this, did I not cherish, for reasons of my own, a hope for other things to happen. America would eventually come to find herself lapped in slumber among the débris of her comforts were there not in her a spiritual stirring which I, with some confidence, expect to see fulfilled.

In other words, and more explicitly, I am looking for the American genius to be devoted less to practical and more to speculative matters. The two-fisted he-men who are now so thoroughly cowed at home by their women folk, and who can call their souls their own only in their offices, will pass, along with all the symbols of Babbitry; and in science and art America will make her great contribution to the world. That, at any rate, is my dream.

Accordingly I note in her literature the two tendencies—the one, which I believe to be false, toward a rowdy celebration of democracy and sweat; the other, which I believe to be true, toward an exquisite sensitiveness. Anybody who likes to do so may take Whitman as a representative of the first tendency, and Henry James of the second.

I have deep respect for Whitman's gargantuan powers of expression, but since I

was eighteen I have not been able to read him without a feeling of unutterable boredom. This is because I believe what he is saying is very largely nonsense. He reduces himself to absurdity in a hundred different places.

To cotton-field drudge or cleaner of
privies I lean,
On his right cheek I put the family kiss.

I believe in the liberty, equality and fraternity of democracy; but really, if I am to be asked to embrace Whitman's cleaner of privies, I must be excused from being so democratic as all that. And I cannot feel convinced that Whitman is so democratic as all that either. What he is really doing is to put his mythical Americano upon a mystical pedestal, so that effete Europe may be dumbfounded with wonder. I am no more persuaded by this kind of thing than by that teetotal novel which in his youth he wrote upon the stimulation of gin. He remained, in fact, throughout his life, all ginned up, though, being at bottom an extremely shrewd fellow, he soon saw how vapid were his early sentimental lyrics (the feeblest poems ever written by a great poet) and decided to make a legend of America and himself. "Bearded, sun-burnt, gray-necked, forbidding, I have arrived"—the perfect he-man. He will therefore tell you that to him the scent of his arm-pits is an aroma finer than prayer, and sound his barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.

But his real gift is expressed,—though even there somewhat too wordily, in my opinion—in such splendid poems as "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking", and "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed". Here we have the roll of those waves to which he listened on the shores of Long Island, and that almost tremulous tenderness which was far more genuine

than all his deliberately assumed violence. He was very fond of throwing out hints about the many children which he, red-blooded fellow that he was, had begotten; but nobody, so far as I know, actually saw these children. My private guess is that they were mythical, that Whitman was probably incompetent, and that his pose of virility was assumed in order to conceal his deficiency.

I am always suspicious of professions, of whatever sort, that are too loud. It is monstrous good fun to wait until one can catch a writer of the hard-boiled school off his guard, and discover that, when encountered at the right moment, he is rather more sentimental than most people. In the same way, after Carl Sandburg has finished bellowing in most strident tones a poem about "Chicago, hog-butcher of the world!" he will creep away by himself and note with a delicately observant eye the fog coming over the city on soft cat-like feet. Out of the blaring rag-time of "The Congo", Vachel Lindsay manages to alchemize a thing made of gossamer spangled with dew:

And they pranced with their butterfly partners there,
Coal-black maidens with pearls in their hair,
Knee-skirts trimmed with the jessamine sweet,
And bells on their ankles and little black feet.

It must be understood that the last thing in my mind is a wish to make any complaint about this: on the contrary, I applaud. But without a particle of malice I feel somewhat amused. For after the American's conception of himself as a great big strong fellow with hair on his chest, who eats beefsteak for breakfast, and can lick any wop in the world with one hand tied behind his back, it is distinctly

pleasant to find that his special aptitude is for finesse.

About the writers of the great New England school I shall have a word to say later. But those closer to ourselves, Henry James, Edith Wharton, Cabell, Hergesheimer, Elinor Wylie, Robinson, and Willa Cather are all characterized by extreme delicacy of expression, sometimes of an exceedingly fine-drawn order. Even the bucolic Frost, for all his easy conversational tone, must be included here; for he will be seen, upon close examination, to be exact, and exactitude is the most delicate of all things. His passion for precision is not less than Henry James's, if his style is much less tortuous. Even Sherwood Anderson, fumbling and stumbling to say what he has in his mind, possesses the same temper. There are many wonderful passages on the craft of letters in "A Story Teller's Story" which show an artistic sensitiveness as acute as that of Flaubert. Here is one of them:

There is no reason at all why I should not have been able, by the instrumentality of these little words, why I should not have been able to give you the very smell of the little street wherein I just walked, made you feel just the way the evening light fell over the faces of the houses and the people—the half moon through the branches of that old cherry tree that was all but dead but that had the one branch alive, the branch that touched the window where the boy stood with his foot up, lacing his shoe. And there was the dog sleeping in the dust of the road and making a little whining sound out of his dreams and the girl on a nearby street who was learning to ride a bicycle.

These the materials of the story-writer's craft, these and the little words that must be made to run into sentences and paragraphs; now slow and haltingly, now quickly, swiftly, now singing like a woman's voice in a dark house in a dark street at midnight, now viciously, threateningly, like wolves running in a Winter forest of the North.

Now and then there is a certain awkwardness, but the feeling for delicacy is unmistakable. Poor Dreiser has it too, though upon the whole I should describe him as being, rather than an American tragedy, a Teutonic muddle.

I do not find in the English writers, to the same extent, this agonized hunger for delicate exactness. It is true that nobody ever wrote English prose more perfectly than Max Beerbohm, or English verse more perfectly than A. E. Housman; but, apart from these and other notable exceptions, the tradition of English men of letters is that of a good deal of indulgence toward untidiness. From Chaucer down they nearly all show a decided tendency to sprawl and let those who do not like it go to the devil. But as contrasted with American writers they possess a portentous fecundity. They are coarse and reeking in their robustious energy. We may take as their symbol the hand of Scott that from the opposite window was watched moving over the paper from morning to night without pause. It was this titanic strength that produced "Woodstock" in three weeks; and it does not stand alone. We see it in Dumas sitting all day in a shop window in Paris smoking cigar after cigar and writing page after page; and, but little diminished, we find it again in Wells beginning a novel on the same day that he finished one, or in the prolific Chesterton dictating an article over the telephone.

Where shall we match that in America, unless it be in the astonishing fertility of Eugene O'Neill? And, after all, playwrighting calls (I imagine) for less physical effort than any other form of writing. "Give me a condor's quill! Give me Vesuvius' crater for an inkstand!" shouted Melville; but his energy was insane and destroyed him. Most American writers are much more modest in their demands.

IV

At its commencement American literature was frost-bitten with Calvinism and paralyzed with a sense of its inferiority to the literature of England. The superb commonsense of Franklin, and the fact that he made no pretension to being a man of letters, saved him; but for a long time American writers cultivated an artificial elegance. Even Cooper's first novel was written in imitation of the insipid English romances that were his wife's favorite reading. Trying to be well-bred, it succeeded merely in being negative.

This could hardly have been otherwise. For the circumstances of the man of letters were dreadfully arid, as Freneau and later Bryant complained. The macaberesque genius of Poe battled bravely but in vain; for America had hardly yet grasped the idea that literature might possibly be an American thing.

Even the later writers had a sense of spiritual isolation, which resulted in a good deal of mild eccentricity. Thoreau went off to his woods, and Emerson hitched his wagon to a star. Hence there was that curious hodge-podge of marble fauns, Spanish romance, English squires, and Oversouls that constituted the American literature of the early Nineteenth Century.

Yet precisely because it did not deal as a rule with the alien facts of American life, American literature was accepted on nearly equal terms by England. Lowell and Holmes and Hawthorne and Longfellow were read as largely abroad as at home.

Even at that time, however, the English were always hoping that American authors should be as wild and woolly as their nationality demanded. Sometimes they got what they were hoping for, and then they took Artemus Ward to their bosoms. But their suspicions were never fully justified

until Whitman started bellowing about his *Americanos* and *camarados*. This made them blessed beyond their fondest dreams. Here was the perfect American author—or one perfect except for his missing lariat and revolver.

The thing still goes on. Englishmen are always secretly disappointed when they find Americans to be (whether in life or literature) highly polished, as they nearly always are. They have to extract a half-hearted consolation in catching these unaccountably fastidious people in solecisms of diction and grammar, which they then scornfully label *Americanisms*. And the best of them, it must be confessed, yield matter on this score, either ignoring the proper use of the subjunctive or (more gorgeous still) flourishing it while obviously incapacitated for understanding that English mystery. And—heavens above!—what do not the Americans perpetrate in the way of adverbs! A few cultivated ones, echoing the English sniggers, gave President Harding's *illy*, like his *normalcy*, a derisive intonation. But Harding was not the only one to use *illy*. Melville has it; and Cabell (that beautiful stylist, despite Mrs. Gerould and Mrs. Grundy) actually writes, though I doubt whether he says, *kindlily*!

The search for the American savage is, after all, poor sport; but it continues. Vachel Lindsay once spoke bitterly to me of the way his English publishers, without consulting him, brought out his volume "The Golden Whales of California" under the title of "The Daniel Jazz."

Yet, apart from these strictures, England has usually treated American authors pretty well. It is true that now and then she neglects an important writer (but she does that with her own); and Mr. Robinson, though he is lectured upon at the Sorbonne and treated with immense respect in the

French high-brow reviews, is hardly known among my own people. On the other hand Frost arrived in England an unknown man, and returned to the United States a couple of years later famous because garlanded with English praise. He had busily written in the lovely English countryside poems that reflected only the loveliness, and the tartness, of his stony New England hills.

The English are almost wholly innocent, whatever exasperated Americans may think, of any anti-American feeling in literary affairs. Melville was discovered by Masefield and Barrie. And I heard on two separate occasions Mrs. Meynell—the most exacting of critics—speak of the superiority of American women novelists to their English sisters and—this seems a little too much!—admire a copy of Mr. Braithwaite's anthology of magazine verse. "We couldn't produce", she said, "a book of the sort nearly so good here."

V

Americans have been periodically exercised about the production of an authentic literature since Emerson wrote his famous essay on the American scholar. It deals with the question only in very general terms, and the acute critical intelligence of Van Wyck Brooks was needed for the analysis of the conditions under, and against, which the American writer must work. All the same Emerson had a number of sensible things to say.

He stood in a middle position between Longfellow and Whitman, both of whom discussed the same problem. Longfellow in his dialogue on an American literature, also showed himself full of Yankee shrewdness, and his argument that American literature is not an imitation but a continuation of English literature would be unan-

swerable except for one fundamental misapprehension. He held that Americans "are, in fact, English under a different sky." But he could not foresee how radically the racial stock in the United States would be affected by immigration, and he did not allow sufficiently, I think, for the influence that a different sky (and a different landscape) were destined to have.

Whitman, standing at the other extreme, divined the truth that America was something in many respects fundamentally different from Europe. But he proposed to make a clean sweep of everything European, which was *his* mistake. Yet his genius, despite all its aberrations and limitations, came nearer the mark than the rich culture of Longfellow. "The Americans", he writes, in his preface to "Leaves of Grass", "of all nations at any time upon the earth, have probably the fullest poetical nature. The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem." But in "Democratic Vistas" he does worse than indulge in harmless hyperbole: he gets on the wrong track:

America demands a poetry that is bold, modern, and all-surrounding and kosmical, as she is herself. . . . It must bend its vision towards the future, more than the past. Like America, it must extricate itself from even the greatest models of the past, and, while courteous to them, must have entire faith in itself, and the products of its own democratic spirit only. Like her, it must place in the van, and hold up at all hazards, the banner of the divine pride of man in himself.

And to return to his preface again, he makes the largeness of the country, "its mighty amplitude", an index of the largeness of the spirit of its art.

Here, I think, he is talking nonsense. What has the mere size of America got to do with the kind of literature she is to produce? Canada and Siberia are even

larger; but I have yet to hear of any overwhelming artistic feats performed in those countries. China and India, on the other hand, have contributed much to the various departments of art—and have specialized in intricacy rather than in majesty of design; while Athens and Palestine achieved their greatest triumphs in effects of unsurpassed grandeur. In the city state of Florence burned the majestic imagination of Dante. In the little island of England arose the geniuses that could produce “King Lear” and “Paradise Lost.”

America has never produced a work of titanic vigor. Carving colossal figures on a mountain-side does not necessarily mean that imaginative splendor is released. And, in literature, America’s two works on the grand scale, “Leaves of Grass” and “Moby Dick,” show signs of excessive strain, and in each case exhausted the theme and the author.

If I write as a prophet I write also as a diagnostician. In our literature England will continue to give the gusto—more than ever if she loses her empire and concentrates her creative powers at home; while America will contribute the grace, the

subtlety, the exquisiteness, the delicacy, the dainty sophistication. Though I have never thought it wise for so many American artists to live abroad—since they depart with the evident idea that art is an exotic thing—I believe that they are guided wisely to this extent: they almost always choose to live in France instead of England. For they dimly recognize that the genius of their country is Gallic rather than (to use a familiar but exceedingly silly word for the sake of clearness) Anglo-Saxon.

America might well produce a Jane Austen; she will never produce a Dickens. She has produced (with every right to glory in the fact) a Poe and a Robinson; she will never produce a Byron or a Browning. And lest anybody should imagine that I purpose disparagement, I add that I read Poe and Robinson with quite as much pleasure as I read Byron and Browning, and Jane Austen with quite as much admiration (and nearly as much pleasure) as I read Dickens. But the large, expansive, and (to quote Whitman) “kosmical” style in literature is English; where the fine, delicate, subtle style is American.

RIO GRANDE

BY HARVEY FERGUSON

IV. *The Rise and Fall of the Mountain Men*¹

WHEN civilization penetrates a new country mountains are always the last barriers to be surmounted and the last areas to be settled and tamed. In fact, mountains are never wholly subdued as valleys and prairies are. Even when cities sit at their feet they still keep in their hearts some unconquerable wilderness where roads cannot go and the earth will yield nothing to human labor.

Few mountain ranges have more of this resistant quality than the Rockies. Only a tiny fraction of their surface is arable and all of their upper levels are buried under deep snow more than half the time. In the North their Summer is only a few weeks of feverish warmth and color and then they are ravished by torrents and by slides of earth and snow, like a world in the travail of creation. The Arctic Zone of their summits reaches south as far as Santa Fé and recurs again on the giant peaks that stand over Mexico.

It was at the mountain barriers that the Spanish pioneering in the Old Southwest stopped. The wave of civilizing energy that surged northward from Mexico City just sufficed to reach and settle the Rio Grande valley and conquer the valley tribes before it spent itself. For two centuries after the conquest the moun-

tains remained unmapped and seldom crossed, and the Indians who lived in them and beyond them were a scourge that descended from the heights and went back to their impenetrable security.

Both the Spanish and the Mexican governments were evidently aware that their pioneering had failed in this respect. The Spanish government had various plans for crossing the mountains and exploring the prairies to the east and north, and a few attempts were made. One of these was the expedition of 1806, led by Facundo Melgares, who found and arrested Lieutenant Z. M. Pike, the advance agent of the American invasion and conquest. But there was no sustained effort to explore the mountains, or to map them. No settlements were established in or beyond them. None of the mountain tribes was ever subdued. When the Spanish empire collapsed the Rockies still belonged to Indians and wild animals.

When Mexico became a republic, the Mexican government made grants of land in the mountains and east of them to members of the aristocracy. These *ricos* were supposed to settle the wild lands, building a line of communities and great *haciendas* between the valley and its foes to the east. They were to stop both the prairie Indians and the greedy infidels from beyond the Missouri. But these grants of land, some of them as large as

¹ This is the fourth of a series of six independent articles. The fifth will be printed next month.