

Is the Atlantic Narrowing?

A certain kind of question is asked very earnestly in our time. Because of a certain logical quality in it, connected with premises and data, it is very difficult to answer. Thus people will ask what is the hidden weakness in the Celtic race that makes them everywhere fail or fade away; or how the Germans contrived to bring all their organisation into a state of such perfect efficiency; and what was the significance of the recent victory of Prussia. Or they will ask by what stages the modern world has abandoned all belief in miracles; and the modern newspapers ceased to print any news of murders. They will ask why English politics are free from corruption; or by what mental and moral training certain millionaires were enabled to succeed by sheer force of character; in short, they will ask why plutocrats govern well and how it is that pigs fly, spreading their pink pinions to the breeze or delighting us as they twitter and flutter from tree to tree. The logical difficulty of answering these questions is connected with an old story about Charles the Second and a bowl of goldfish, and with another anecdote about a gentleman who was asked, 'When did you leave off beating your wife?' But there is something analogous to it in the present discussions about the forces drawing England and America together. It seems as if the reasoners hardly went far enough back in their argument, or took trouble enough to disentangle their assumptions. They are still moving with the momentum of the peculiar nineteenth-century notion of progress; of certain very simple tendencies perpetually increasing and needing no special analysis. It is so with the international rapprochement I have to consider here.

In other places I have ventured to express a doubt about whether nations can be drawn together by an ancient rumour about races; by a sort of prehistoric chit-chat or the gossip of the Stone Age. I have ventured farther; and even expressed a doubt about whether they ought to be drawn together, or rather dragged together, by the brute violence of the engines of science and speed. But there is yet another horrible doubt haunting my morbid mind, which it will be better for my constitution to confess frankly. And that is the doubt about whether they are being drawn together at all.

It has long been a conversational commonplace among the enlightened that all countries are coming closer and closer to each other. It was a conversational commonplace among the enlightened, somewhere about the year 1913, that all wars were receding farther and farther into a barbaric past. There is something about these sayings that seems simple and familiar and entirely satisfactory when we say them; they are of that consoling sort which we can say without any of the mental pain of thinking what we are saying. But if we turn our attention

from the phrases we use to the facts that we talk about, we shall realise at least that there are a good many facts on the other side and examples pointing the other way. For instance, it does happen occasionally, from time to time, that people talk about Ireland. He would be a very hilarious humanitarian who should maintain that Ireland and England have been more and more assimilated during the last hundred years. The very name of Sinn Fein is an answer to it, and the very language in which that phrase is spoken. Curran and Sheil would no more have dreamed of uttering the watchword of 'Repeal' in Gaelic than of uttering it in Zulu. Grattan could hardly have brought himself to believe that the real repeal of the Union would actually be signed in London in the strange script as remote as the snaky ornament of the Celtic crosses. It would have seemed like Washington signing the Declaration of Independence in the picture-writing of the Red Indians. Ireland has clearly grown away from England; and her language, literature, and type of patriotism are far less English than they were. On the other hand, no one will pretend that the mass of modern Englishmen are much nearer to talking Gaelic or decorating Celtic crosses. A hundred years ago it was perfectly natural that Byron and Moore should walk down the street arm in arm. Even the sight of Mr. Rudyard Kipling and Mr. W. B. Yeats walking down the street arm in arm would now arouse some remark.

I could give any number of other examples of the same new estrangement of nations. I could cite the obvious facts that Norway and Sweden parted company not very long ago, that Austria and Hungary have again become separate states. I could point to the mob of new nations that have started up after the war; to the fact that the great empires are now nearly all broken up; that the Russian Empire no longer directs Poland, that the Austrian Empire no longer directs Bohemia, that the Turkish Empire no longer directs Palestine. Sinn Fein is the separatism of the Irish. Zionism is the separatism of the Jews. But there is one simple and sufficing example, which is here more to my purpose, and is at least equally sufficient for it. And that is the deepening national difference between the Americans and the English.

Let me test it first by my individual experience in the matter of literature. When I was a boy I read a book like *The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table* exactly as I read another book like *The Book of Snobs*. I did not think of it as an American book, but simply as a book. Its wit and idiom were like those of the English literary tradition; and its few touches of local colour seemed merely accidental, like those of an Englishman who happened to be living in Switzerland or Sweden. My father and my father's friends were rightly enthusiastic for the book; so that it seemed to come to me by inheritance like *Gulliver's Travels* or *Tristram Shandy*. Its language was as English as Ruskin, and a great deal more English than Carlyle. Well, I have seen in later years an almost equally wide and well-merited popularity of the stories of O. Henry. But never for one moment could I or any one

else reading them forget that they were stories by an American about America. The very first fact about them is that they are told with an American accent, that is, in the unmistakable tones of a brilliant and fascinating foreigner. And the same is true of every other recent work of which the fame has managed to cross the Atlantic. We did not say that *The Spoon River Anthology* was a new book, but that it was a new book from America. It was exactly as if a remarkable realistic novel was reported from Russia or Italy. We were in no danger of confusing it with the 'Elegy in a Country Churchyard.' People in England who heard of *Main Street* were not likely to identify it with a High Street; with the principal thoroughfare in any little town in Berkshire or Buckinghamshire. But when I was a boy I practically identified the boarding-house of the Autocrat with any boarding-house I happened to know in Brompton or Brighton. No doubt there were differences; but the point is that the differences did not pierce the consciousness or prick the illusion. I said to myself, 'People are like this in boarding-houses,' not 'People are like this in Boston.'

This can be seen even in the simple matter of language, especially in the sense of slang. Take, for instance, the delightful sketch in the causerie of Oliver Wendell Holmes; the character of the young man called John. He is the very modern type in every modern country who does specialise in slang. He is the young fellow who is something in the City; the everyday young man of the Gilbertian song, with a stick and a pipe and a half-bred black-and-tan. In every country he is at once witty and commonplace. In every country, therefore, he tends both to the vivacity and the vulgarity of slang. But when he appeared in Holmes's book, his language was not very different from what it would have been in a Brighton instead of a Boston boarding-house; or, in short, if the young man called John had more commonly been called 'Arry. If he had appeared in a modern American book, his language would have been almost literally unintelligible. At the least an Englishman would have had to read some of the best sentences twice, as he sometimes has to read the dizzy and involved metaphors of O. Henry. Nor is it an answer that this depended on the personalities of the particular writers. A comparison between the real journalism of the time of Holmes and the real journalism of the time of Henry reveals the same thing. It is the expansion of a slight difference of style into a luxuriant difference of idiom; and the process continued indefinitely would certainly produce a totally different language. After a few centuries the signatures of American ambassadors would look as fantastic as Gaelic, and the very name of the Republic be as strange as Sinn Fein.

It is true that there has been on the surface a certain amount of give and take; or at least, as far as the English are concerned, of take rather than give. But it is true that it was once all the other way; and indeed the one thing is something like a just nemesis of the other. Indeed, the story of the reversal is somewhat singular, when we come to think of it. It began in a certain atmosphere and spirit

of certain well-meaning people who talked about the English-speaking race; and were apparently indifferent to how the English was spoken, whether in the accent of a Jamaican negro or a convict from Botany Bay. It was their logical tendency to say that Dante was a Dago. It was their logical punishment to say that Disraeli was an Englishman. Now there may have been a period when this Anglo-American amalgamation included more or less equal elements from England and America. It never included the larger elements, or the more valuable elements of either. But, on the whole, I think it true to say that it was not an allotment but an interchange of parts; and that things first went all one way and then all the other. People began by telling the Americans that they owed all their past triumphs to England; which was false. They ended up by telling the English that they would owe all their future triumphs to America; which is if possible still more false. Because we chose to forget that New York had been New Amsterdam, we are now in danger of forgetting that London is not New York. Because we insisted that Chicago was only a pious imitation of Chiswick, we may yet see Chiswick an inferior imitation of Chicago. Our Anglo-Saxon historians attempted that conquest in which Howe and Burgoyne had failed, and with infinitely less justification on their side. They attempted the great crime of the Anglicisation of America. They have called down the punishment of the Americanisation of England. We must not murmur; but it is a heavy punishment.

It may lift a little of its load, however, if we look at it more closely; we shall then find that though it is very much on top of us, it is only on top. In that sense such Americanisation as there is is very superficial. For instance, there is a certain amount of American slang picked up at random; it appears in certain pushing types of journalism and drama. But we may easily dwell too much on this tragedy; of people who have never spoken English beginning to speak American. I am far from suggesting that American, like any other foreign language, may not frequently contribute to the common culture of the world phrases for which there is no substitute; there are French phrases so used in England and English phrases in France. The word 'high-brow,' for instance, is a real discovery and revelation, a new and necessary name for something that walked nameless but enormous in the modern world, a shaft of light and a stroke of lightning. That comes from America and belongs to the world, as much as 'The Raven' or The Scarlet Letter or the novels of Henry James belong to the world. In fact, I can imagine Henry James originating it in the throes of self-expression, and bringing out a word like 'high-browed,' with a sort of gentle jerk, at the end of searching sentences which groped sensitively until they found the phrase. But most of the American slang that is borrowed seems to be borrowed for no particular reason. It either has no point or the point is lost by translation into another context and culture. It is either something which does not need any grotesque and exaggerative description, or of which there already exists a grotesque and exaggerative description more native to our tongue and soil. For instance, I

cannot see that the strong and simple expression 'Now it is for you to pull the police magistrate's nose' is in any way strengthened by saying, 'Now it is up to you to pull the police magistrate's nose.' When Tennyson says of the men of the Light Brigade 'Theirs but to do and die,' the expression seems to me perfectly lucid. 'Up to them to do and die' would alter the metre without especially clarifying the meaning. This is an example of ordinary language being quite adequate; but there is a further difficulty that even wild slang comes to sound like ordinary language. Very often the English have already as humorous and fanciful idiom of their own, only that through habit it has lost its humour. When Keats wrote the line, 'What pipes and timbrels, what wild ecstasy!' I am willing to believe that the American humorist would have expressed the same sentiment by beginning the sentence with 'Some pipe!' When that was first said, somewhere in the wilds of Colorado, it was really funny; involving a powerful understatement and the suggestion of a mere sample. If a spinster has informed us that she keeps a bird, and we find it is an ostrich, there will be considerable point in the Colorado satirist saying inquiringly, 'Some bird?' as if he were offering us a small slice of a small plover. But if we go back to this root and rationale of a joke, the English language already contains quite as good a joke. It is not necessary to say, 'Some bird'; there is a far finer irony in the old expression, 'Something like a bird.' It suggests that the speaker sees something faintly and strangely birdlike about a bird; that it remotely and almost irrationally reminds him of a bird; and that there is about ostrich plumes a yard long something like the faint and delicate traces of a feather. It has every quality of imaginative irony, except that nobody even imagines it to be ironical. All that happens is that people get tired of that turn of phrase, take up a foreign phrase and get tired of that, without realising the point of either. All that happens is that a number of weary people who used to say, 'Something like a bird,' now say, 'Some bird,' with undiminished weariness. But they might just as well use dull and decent English; for in both cases they are only using jocular language without seeing the joke.

There is indeed a considerable trade in the transplantation of these American jokes to England just now. They generally pine and die in our climate, or they are dead before their arrival; but we cannot be certain that they were never alive. There is a sort of unending frieze or scroll of decorative designs unrolled ceaselessly before the British public, about a hen-pecked husband, which is indistinguishable to the eye from an actual self-repeating pattern like that of the Greek Key, but which is imported as if it were as precious and irreplaceable as the Elgin Marbles. Advertisement and syndication make mountains out of the most funny little mole-hills; but no doubt the mole-hills are picturesque enough in their own landscape. In any case there is nothing so national as humour; and many things, like many people, can be humorous enough when they are at home. But these American jokes are boomed as solemnly as American religions; and their supporters gravely testify that they are funny, without seeing the fun of it

for a moment. This is partly perhaps the spirit of spontaneous institutionalism in American democracy, breaking out in the wrong place. They make humour an institution; and a man will be set to tell an anecdote as if to play the violin. But when the story is told in America it really is amusing; and when these jokes are reprinted in England they are often not even intelligible. With all the stupidity of the millionaire and the monopolist, the enterprising proprietor prints jokes in England which are necessarily unintelligible to nearly every English person; jokes referring to domestic and local conditions quite peculiar to America. I saw one of these narrative caricatures the other day in which the whole of the joke (what there was of it) turned on the astonishment of a housewife at the absurd notion of not having an ice-box. It is perfectly true that nearly every ordinary American housewife possesses an ice-box. An ordinary English housewife would no more expect to possess an ice-box than to possess an iceberg. And it would be about as sensible to tow an iceberg to an English port all the way from the North Pole, as to trail that one pale and frigid joke to Fleet Street all the way from the New York papers. It is the same with a hundred other advertisements and adaptations. I have already confessed that I took a considerable delight in the dancing illuminations of Broadway--in Broadway. Everything there is suitable to them, the vast interminable thoroughfare, the toppling houses, the dizzy and restless spirit of the whole city. It is a city of dissolving views, and one may almost say a city in everlasting dissolution. But I do not especially admire a burning fragment of Broadway stuck up opposite the old Georgian curve of Regent Street. I would as soon express sympathy with the Republic of Switzerland by erecting a small Alp, with imitation snow, in the middle of St. James's Park.

But all this commercial copying is very superficial; and above all, it never copies anything that is really worth copying. Nations never learn anything from each other in this way. We have many things to learn from America; but we only listen to those Americans who have still to learn them. Thus, for instance, we do not import the small farm but only the big shop. In other words, we hear nothing of the democracy of the Middle West, but everything of the plutocracy of the middleman, who is probably as unpopular in the Middle West as the miller in the Middle Ages. If Mr. Elihu K. Pike could be transplanted bodily from the neighbourhood of his home town of Marathon, Neb., with his farm and his frame-house and all its fittings, and they could be set down exactly in the spot now occupied by Selfridge's (which could be easily cleared away for the purpose), I think we could really get a great deal of good by watching him, even if the watching were inevitably a little too like watching a wild beast in a cage or an insect under a glass case. Urban crowds could collect every day behind a barrier or railing, and gaze at Mr. Pike pottering about all day in his ancient and autochthonous occupations. We could see him growing Indian corn with all the gravity of an Indian; though it is impossible to imagine Mrs. Pike blessing the cornfield in the manner of Minnehaha. As I have said, there is a certain lack of

humane myth and mysticism about this Puritan peasantry. But we could see him transforming the maize into pop-corn, which is a very pleasant domestic ritual and pastime, and is the American equivalent of the glory of roasting chestnuts. Above all, many of us would learn for the first time that a man can really live and walk about upon something more productive than a pavement; and that when he does so he can really be a free man, and have no lord but the law. Instead of that, America can give nothing to London but those multiple modern shops, of which it has too many already. I know that many people entertain the innocent illusion that big shops are more efficient than small ones; but that is only because the big combinations have the monopoly of advertisement as well as trade. The big shop is not in the least remarkable for efficiency; it is only too big to be blamed for its inefficiency. It is secure in its reputation for always sacking the wrong man. A big shop, considered as a place to shop in, is simply a village of small shops roofed in to keep out the light and air; and one in which none of the shopkeepers is really responsible for his shop. If any one has any doubts on this matter, since I have mentioned it, let him consider this fact: that in practice we never do apply this method of commercial combination to anything that matters very much. We do not go to the surgical department of the Stores to have a portion of our brain removed by a delicate operation; and then pass on to the advocacy department to employ one or any of its barristers, when we are in temporary danger of being hanged. We go to men who own their own tools and are responsible for the use of their own talents. And the same truth applies to that other modern method of advertisement, which has also so largely fallen across us like the gigantic shadow of America. Nations do not arm themselves for a mortal struggle by remembering which sort of submarine they have seen most often on the hoardings. They can do it about something like soap, precisely because a nation will not perish by having a second-rate sort of soap, as it might by having a second-rate sort of submarine. A nation may indeed perish slowly by having a second-rate sort of food or drink or medicine; but that is another and much longer story, and the story is not ended yet. But nobody wins a great battle at a great crisis because somebody has told him that Cadgerboy's Cavalry Is the Best. It may be that commercial enterprise will eventually cover these fields also, and advertisement-agents will provide the instruments of the surgeon and the weapons of the soldier. When that happens, the armies will be defeated and the patients will die. But though we modern people are indeed patients, in the sense of being merely receptive and accepting things with astonishing patience, we are not dead yet; and we have lingering gleams of sanity.

For the best things do not travel. As I appear here as a traveller, I may say with all modesty that the best people do not travel either. Both in England and America the normal people are the national people; and I repeat that I think they are growing more and more national. I do not think the abyss is being bridged by cosmopolitan theories; and I am sure I do not want it bridged by all this slang

journalism and blatant advertisement. I have called all that commercial publicity the gigantic shadow of America. It may be the shadow of America, but it is not the light of America. The light lies far beyond, a level light upon the lands of sunset, where it shines upon wide places full of a very simple and a very happy people; and those who would see it must seek for it.