

The SMART SET

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REPÉTITION GÉNÉRALE

Distinction as a Crime.—The American hostility to salient, assertive and original men—the depressing end-result of the operation of a hundred million inferiority complexes—is not only ridding the national politics of genuine leaders; it is also ridding the whole of the national culture of genuine leaders. I know many men of ideas, and some of them are men whose ideas seem to me to be novel and profound. I don't know one among them who is not toying more or less openly with a notion of escaping from the United States.

It was Prohibition, of course, that probably put it into their heads: not Prohibition as a thing in itself—for surely no civilized man goes dry because of it—but Prohibition as a symbol of all the countless snoutings and repressions that now characterize life in the Republic. One simply cannot live under so intolerable a tyranny of the stupid without losing one's self-respect. Above all, one cannot live under it and carry on the enterprises of a free spirit. Some of these men propose to get out and stay out as soon as Europe settles down; the exile they contemplate is the forthright and irrevocable exile of a Whistler, a Turgenev, a Joseph Conrad or a Henry James. Others merely look forward to spending more and more time abroad hereafter, coming home now and then to look at the ruins. Is it imaginable that there will be any compensatory immigration in the other direction? Surely no sane man looks for it. No Agassiz will come, or Schurz, or Hamilton, or Gallatin, or Theodore Thomas, or Stephen Girard. Every ship will be full of the botched from the remote frontiers of civilization, but there will be no more Loeb and no more Carrel. Burlesons, yes, but not Oslers.

I doubt that they will be missed—that is, by the new guardians of the national virtue, the new paladins of malignant stupidity, the new race of undifferentiated right-thinkers. For what the right-thinker distrusts and dislikes most implacably is precisely what the rest of the human race regards as the superior man. Waste no tears upon the hog in his wallow: he is happy and his heart is pure. If you fancy that the sin-free Only True Christians of, say, Mississippi or Kansas lament the fact that no genuinely distinguished man lives among them, that their ears are not assaulted by Beethovens and their eyes and morals by Cézannes, then you are far beyond the margin of permissible error. They actually delight in it.

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