

SOME REASONS WHY AMERICANS VALUE THE BRITISH

[Excerpts from Aristides, “Life and Letters: Anglophilia, American Style,”
The American Scholar : 327–34.]

“In America our conceptions of honor, courage, romance, and decency were all imported from England” (328).

“As nineteenth-century Englishmen and Europeans studied the Greeks in search of an older and deeper culture, so it was to England that twentieth-century Americans, in search of the same treasure, hopefully turned. And, by and large, they were not disappointed. In England they discovered a country that would not brook tyranny, that never for long departed common sense, that rang with laughter, that made life’s possibilities seem both finer and grander” (334).

The “stolid English” won WWII, because, in Primo Levi’s words, they “had not noticed that they had lost the game” (327).

“The difference [between English and American literature] lies in the way the two literatures regard society and the ordinary life of daily routine. British literature is defined by its tendency to take society for granted and then to go on to demonstrate its burdensome but interesting and valuable complexity. And American literature, in comparison with British, is defined by its tendency to transcend or circumvent the social fact and to concentrate upon the individual in relation to himself, to God, or to the cosmos. [E]ven when the individual stands in an inescapable relation to the social fact, [American literature tends] to represent society and the ordinary life of daily routine not as things assumed and taken for granted but as problems posed, as alien and hostile to the true spiritual and moral life” (329).

W. H. Auden puts the matter much more starkly: “American literature is one extraordinary literature of lonely people” (329).

“The American weeklies seemed half the time to be preaching, the other half to be teaching—not at all my notion of a journalistic good time. The English weeklies, on the other hand, were written for equals: it was assumed that the readers were quite as sophisticated, intelligent, and cultivated as the editors” (331).

“English cool has always seemed impressive to Americans, certainly to the Anglophiles among us. It is represented by Evelyn Waugh, stepping out of a bunker during a Nazi bombing raid in Yugoslavia, looking up at a sky raining down bombs and announcing, ‘Like all things German, this is vastly overdone’” (331).

“This willingness to delimit oneself to the ground of fact, to the palpable and the knowable, is at the heart of English common sense, which is another English quality greatly attractive to Anglophiles. Owing to this strong strain of common sense, English culture was never permeated—as American culture still is—by fashionable ‘isms’” (331).

“When asked if he still read novels, Gilbert Ryle is supposed to have replied, ‘Yes, all six of them—every year,’ referring of course to Jane Austen’s works, but also speaking to the confident self-sufficiency of English culture” (332).

“I understand that Americans believe that it is self-evident that all men are created equal. It had better be self-evident. After all, you realize, there is no other evidence for it” (332).

Comment about a “model” Briton: “He knew about the traps everywhere, yet refused to fight below the level of intellectual argument and high principle. He was defeated, as good sense so often is in the world, but he departed with his integrity entirely intact” (331).

George Santayana, “The Decline of Great Powers,” *Dominations and Powers*, arguing that England’s demise as a great world power was in part a function of an odd sort of integrity, of perhaps too little cynicism:

“England . . . in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, acted the great power with conviction; she was independent, mistress of the sea, and sure of her right to dominion. Difficulties and even defeats, such as the loss of the American Colonies, did not in the least daunt her; her vitality at home and her liberty abroad remained untouched. But gradually, though she suffered no final military defeat, the heart seemed to fail her for so vast an enterprise. It was not the colonies she had lost that maimed her, but those she had retained or annexed. Ireland, South America, and India became thorns in her side. The bloated industries which helped her to dominate the world made her incapable of feeding herself; they committed her to forced expansion, in order to secure markets and to secure supplies. But she could no longer be war-like with a good conscience; the virtuous thing was to bow one’s way out and say: My mistake. Her kings were half-ashamed to be kings, her liberals were half ashamed to govern, her Church was half ashamed to be Protestant. All became a medley of sweet reasonableness, stupidity, and confusion. Being a great power was now a great burden” (333).