

The SMART SET

Americanese

H.L. Mencken

GILBERT M. TUCKER'S "American English" (Knopf) is largely devoted to demonstrating that most of the discussion of the national vulgate in the past has been pedantic and absurd. My own work, "The American Language" (the revision of which now undermines my health), is not spared, though in justice to it I must note that Mr. Tucker does not accuse it of pedantry. What he is chiefly against is the doctrine that the only correct standards of English are those prevailing in southern England, and that every time American practise diverges from these standards the Americano is a barbarian. The fact is, of course, that American English is noticeably superior to British English in several important respects, and that not the least of these superiorities lies in the learned department of spelling. Here even the more intelligent Englishmen are against their own rules and in favor of the American rules, and every year one notices a greater tendency among them to spell *wagon* with one *g* instead of two, and to leave the supernumerary *e* off such words as *ax* and *asphalt*, and to spell *cider* and *tire* with an *i* instead of a *y*. The English *-our* ending, the main hallmark of English spelling, dies harder. George Bernard Shaw abandoned it years ago, and recently the *London Nation*, a journal of the very highest consideration, followed suit, but the great majority of English still regard the American *-or* ending as almost obscene. The argument commonly made for the *-our* ending by British pedagogues is that it serves to distinguish words brought in from the French—that it has an etymological purpose. Why any sane man should waste his time and thought upon an etymological purpose is not stated, but even so the argument is nonsensical, for the *u* is omitted by the English from

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many words that are indubitably French, *e.g.*, *exterior* and *progenitor*, and inserted in many words that are not French at all, *e.g.*, *arbour*, *honour* and *tumour*.

Here Mr. Tucker achieves some very shrewd and convincing criticism. He is less persuasive when he comes to determine the meaning of the term Americanism. His tendency now is to follow Lounsbury and Richard Grant Wright in barring out hundreds of terms that are as thoroughly American as chewing-gum. Certainly it is absurd to exclude such words as *moccasin* on the ground that the English have borrowed them and have no synonyms of their own. In truth, Mr. Tucker quickly finds his own rule too narrow, for after rejecting *moccasin* he puts down *buffalo*. Again, he is against admitting "perfectly regular and explanatory compounds," such as *office-holder* and *fly-time*, and yet he is presently listing *air-line*, *come-down* and *high-toned*. Yet again, he excludes *drawing-room car* (evidently he means *parlor-car*) on the ground that "inventors have the right to name their products, and if the English choose to call them something else, that change cannot make any sort of ism of the original appellation," and yet he lists *buckskin*, *butterine* and *cat-boat*. I find a few errors in his lists. He says that a *floater* is a person who "may vote either way"; the word actually designates a man brought in to vote in a district or districts in which he doesn't actually live. He calls *mucker* an Americanism; it is really quite as British as *bloody*. He speaks of *patent-outsides*; the country printers all know them as *patent-insides*. He says that *P.D.Q.* means "pretty deuced quick"—!!! . . . But he has made an interesting and very valuable book. It represents the labor of forty years. It was worth doing.

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