

Ambivalent Victorian: H. L. Mencken

During the 1920s, H. L. Mencken was the voice of the educated and sophisticated throughout America. His criticism of Presidents Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover, his characterization of Main Street Americans as the "booboisie" and of Puritans as people haunted by the "fear that someone, somewhere may be happy"—all this made Mencken a hero to a generation that included Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Walter Lippmann. But during the 1930s, when he directed his anti-establishment ferocity at Franklin D. Roosevelt, social welfare, and the New Deal ("a milk cow with 25 million teats"), Mencken found himself rejected as a literary anachronism. Yet a half-century later a "Mencken revival" indicates that many Americans, starting early in the Reagan years, have found a new sympathy with the man. Here, T. J. Jackson Lears explores the contradictions that made Mencken (1880–1956) first the most influential, then, for a time, the most forgotten critic in America.

by T. J. Jackson Lears

One gray autumn day in the early 1950s, James T. Farrell stopped off in Baltimore, took a cab to H. L. Mencken's house on Hollins Street, and spent a depressing afternoon with the critic who had befriended him years before. Though Mencken seemed physically healthy, he had suffered a cerebral hemorrhage in 1948, and its effects were painfully apparent. His talk wandered; he could neither read nor write. While Mencken maintained a wry good humor, Farrell recalled a persistent refrain in their conversation. "I'm finished," Mencken repeatedly told the novelist. "I'm out of it." Mencken's predicament was a poignant coda to a vigorous career. The impresario of words, for whom language had been life, was sur-

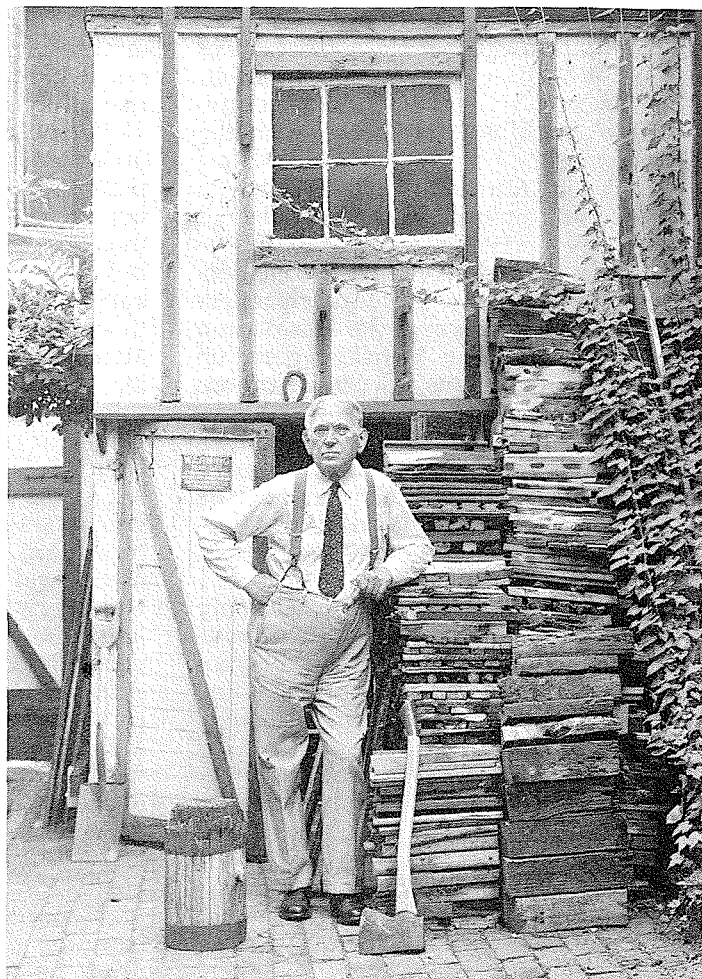
rounded by letters he could not read and books he could not understand.

There was a sense, though, in which Mencken had been "out of it" for many years before his stroke. During the earnestly nationalistic 1930s and 1940s, Mencken's levity seemed an echo of the frivolous Jazz Age. Even during the years of his greatest influence, the 1920s, his ideas betrayed a curiously anachronistic quality. Mencken assaulted Prohibitionists, Rotarians, and genteel custodians of culture, but the attack was launched with the well-worn weapons of positivist science and classical liberalism. He clung to the same late Victorian brand of iconoclasm for fifty years, while American culture passed him by.

To understand what Mencken meant to people when he stood at the height of his power, let us follow a black teenager as he made his way to the public library in Memphis in 1926. As a black, Richard Wright was not allowed to check out books, but he was determined somehow to smuggle out one by Mencken, for Mencken was the only white man more vilified in Southern newspaper editorials than any black ever was, and Wright wanted to find out why.

The book that Wright finally secured was full of the discoveries Mencken was then championing—T. S. Eliot, Dostoyevsky, Gide—names which Wright had never heard of. Yet Mencken's book itself was the most liberating book Wright said he ever read. It filled him with a sense that there was another, a better world elsewhere.

Mencken intoxicated many others. His critique of middle-American smugness stirred writers as diverse as Ernest Hemingway and Walter Lippmann. In 1926, Lippmann called him "the most powerful influence on this whole generation of educated people." Sinclair Lewis said Mencken should be made "Pope of America" for spreading the gospel of sophistication. In *The Sun Also Rises*, Hemingway noted that "so many young men got their likes and dislikes from Mencken." To the young talents of this new generation, for whom American culture with its Prohibition and Babbitt-like boosterism was stiflingly provincial, Mencken's gibes at American complacency went down like invigorating tonic. They delighted in piss-and-vinegar attacks like this one: "The normal American of the 'pure-blooded' majority goes to rest every night with the uneasy feeling



H. L. Mencken in the backyard of his house on Hollins Street (1947). Mencken criticized American culture as provincial, but spent his entire life in Baltimore, addicted to the comforts of home.

that there is a burglar under the bed, and he gets up every morning with a sickening fear that his underwear has been stolen."

Especially appealing was the way Mencken could offend both sides—say, Communists and 100% Americans—simultaneously. He argued that the Reds should be allowed to "spew out their garbage" on every street corner, because it wouldn't do any good: The American mind didn't work that way, Mencken said; it would choose a Ford over the Constitution every time.

The great irony of Mencken's career, however, is that although he attacked

American complacency with an unprecedented fierceness, in many ways he was himself complacently at home in it. Mencken, in short, was a bundle of contradictions, an ambivalent Victorian in the modern world.

Mencken admitted he was born "a larva of the comfortable and complacent bourgeoisie" in Baltimore in 1880. His father, August Mencken, was a second-generation German who owned a cigar factory and a part interest in the Washington baseball club. Young Mencken grew up amid the amusements of the Baltimore Germans—a beery atmosphere, heavy with cigar smoke and Biedermeier sentimentality. Not a bad atmosphere to grow up in, Mencken thought, as years later he recalled being "encapsulated in affection, and kept fat, saucy, and contented."

In Mencken's recollection, the Baltimore of the Eighties was a city of tidy row-house neighborhoods, pestilential plagues of mosquitoes, vile sewer stench—and gastronomic delights, given its proximity to the truck-garden of Anne Arundel County and "the immense protein factory of the Chesapeake Bay." After enormous mid-day meals, the male population transacted the rest of the day's business in bars, where no-account Virginia "colonels," down on their luck after "The War," hoisted bumpers of rye with the local business community; and August Mencken, with young Henry beside him, checked the blackboard for the ball scores. Out in the streets, black or Italian hucksters (always called Ay-rabs by the Baltimoreans) clattered carts along the cobblestones, hawking strawberries or oysters "with loud, raucous unintelligible cries, much worn down by phonetic decay." The city mixed Northern and Southern, provincial and cosmopolitan styles, and the mix marked Mencken's own cast of mind throughout his life.

After emerging from "the caves of learning" at Knapp's Institute and the Bal-

timore Polytechnic, young Mencken reluctantly entered the family business. His miserable career as a cigar salesman was cut mercifully short by his father's death in 1899. The day after the funeral, Mencken presented himself at the offices of the Baltimore *Herald*, a paper with less prestige but more dash than the rival *Sun* (even then a bastion of maiden-aunt respectability). Night after night, he kept coming back, until finally the editor sent him out to cover the theft of a horse and buggy. Mencken broke into print the next morning, and so began a decade's apprenticeship as a reporter.

The experience reinforced his preference for "life itself" over things academic. "At a time when the respectable bourgeois youngsters of my generation were college freshmen, oppressed by simian sophomores and affronted by balderdash daily and hourly by chalky pedagogues, I was at large in a wicked seaport of half a million people, with a front seat at every public show, as free of the night as of the day, and getting eyefuls and earfuls of instruction in a hundred giddy arcana, none of them taught in schools." Small wonder that Mencken, like so many other writers of his generation, disdained the anemic idealism of polite literature in the name of "real life."

Mencken rose rapidly. After six years of haunting police stations and waterfront dives, he was made managing editor—a reward for his hard work and talent. Mencken's lifelong belief in the mythology of self-made manhood was a projection of his own experience as a newsman in an individualistic era—a proud and manly age, he believed, when newsmen would no more think of calling themselves "wage slaves" and joining a union than they would imagine tying up a studhorse's mane in pink bowknots. Yet for Mencken there was a value in the newspaper experience that went beyond masculine posturing. On the docks and in the back streets, he had abundant opportunity to acquire a

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taste for "raw reality"—but he never followed Frank Norris and Theodore Dreiser into a self-parodic *nostalgie de la boue*. He developed a fascination with vernacular language: the pungent Baltimorese of the local whites, the patois of the Afro-Americans, the Polish or Yiddish or Italian variations of the more recent immigrants. The many voices of the city inspired the research that led to his monumental *The American Language*; they also enriched his own prose style.

In 1906 the Baltimore *Herald* collapsed, but Mencken stayed in Baltimore, as he would throughout his career. He joined the staff of the *Sun*—first as editor of the Sunday edition, later as editor of the *Evening Sun*, and in 1911 as author of a daily, signed editorial column he called the "Free Lance." The column gave Mencken a chance to air his idiosyncratic political views: a compound of ambivalent enthusiasm for the "progressive" civic reforms then raging through the city, tempered by a Nietzschean faith in the need for an iconoclastic elite. His contempt for Anti-Saloon Leaguers and other militant moralists provoked a vitriolic response from his readers, whose letters he printed alongside his columns. The role of pamphleteer/*provocateur* was one Mencken would relish all his life.

But it was in the realm of arts and letters that Mencken first began to acquire a national reputation during these years. In 1908, he began writing book reviews for the New York-based magazine *The Smart Set*; in 1914 he took over the editorship with George Jean Nathan. Like Van Wyck Brooks, Mencken assaulted "Puritanism as a Literary Force" and busily set about toppling such icons of gentility as William Allen White (*A Certain Rich Man*) and Marjorie Benton Cooke (*Bambi*). Thus began the epochal struggle, now enshrined in all literary histories: the Rebellion of the Angry Young Men Against the Genteel Tradition. According to conventional wisdom, World War I broke the back of Old Gentility, after the Young Men had pummeled it into stupefaction. In actuality, the psychic foundations of respectable bourgeois culture had been crumbling for decades, as WASP elites succumbed to a sense of "over-

civilized" languor towards the end of the nineteenth century. The harshest critics of the Genteel Tradition spoke from within that tradition, ranging in subtlety from Theodore Roosevelt to Henry Adams. The war merely made the weakness of the old ideals more obvious, less avoidable.

Nevertheless, there is no question that the ethnic tensions aroused by the war intensified the cultural conflicts. Mencken, Brooks, Randolph Bourne and other dissenters mounted a major attack on the Genteel Tradition in the name of cosmopolitan ideals *versus* 100% Americanism. For Mencken the issue was more personal. He had never been a professional German in his youth. His father and grandfather were detached from their homeland and annoyed by self-conscious ethnic posturing. There was little or no German spoken in August Mencken's household. But as a young man Mencken found himself inexorably drawn to German culture. He cut his intellectual teeth on Nietzsche, and when he visited Germany in 1913, he found, he believed, a land of beauty, tradition, and order—a sharp contrast to the "muddled mass of individuals" on this side of the Atlantic. The outbreak of hostilities in 1914 confirmed Mencken's Germanophilia. He felt surrounded by Anglophile cant and paranoid suspicion of things German—as indeed he was, especially after 1917 when the United States entered the conflict. In Mencken's mind, the war merged the cause of civil liberties with the rights of the German-American minority. It intensified his sense of isolation, and his embittered rage at Anglo-Saxon hegemony in letters as in politics.

After the war, there were growing divisions in the tattered army of Angry Young Men. Bourne was dead; Brooks was shuffling from one sanatorium to another; Mencken was alive and kicking, but increasingly impatient with the aestheticism of the *Smart Set*. He wanted to shift his gaze from literature to society, and in 1924 he founded *The American Mercury* in order to set up shop as a social critic. For several years he won a national following by aiming accurate barbs at the pretensions and pomposities of a business civilization. But after 1927 circulation began

to slip, and the Depression accelerated the decline, as Mencken remained stuck in his rigid iconoclast's pose. In 1933 he resigned from the *Mercury*, returned to the *Sun*, *The American Language*, and comparative obscurity. He had married Sara Haardt of Alabama in 1930, but she died five years later, leaving him utterly bereft. In 1939 he began to write his memoirs—it was as if he sensed he would be forever associated in the popular mind with a historical moment that had passed. Perhaps his obsolescence stemmed from his inability to adapt, chameleon-like, to changing cultural fashion. (One thinks of Van Wyck Brooks's reincarnation, in the 1930s, as a celebrant of mainstream American culture.) Throughout his career, Mencken's ideas remained remarkably consistent. In some ways that consistency was a weakness; in others it was his greatest strength.

From his freethinking father and grandfather, Mencken inherited the mental furniture of the "enlightened" 19th century bourgeoisie. A positivist belief in progress through empirical science; a literalist disdain for fantasy, myth, and metaphysics; a fear of anarchists, socialists, and labor unions—August Mencken's prejudices shaped his son's outlook from an early age. As his biographer, Charles Fecher, has observed, even as a child Mencken was "repelled by the improbable fantasy" of Grimm's fairy tales. His discovery of Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer, and Thomas Henry Huxley reinforced his distaste for religion and his reverence for "fact."

By the late 19th century, such attitudes were anything but rebellious. During Mencken's boyhood, Calvinism was dead, except in rural backwaters. The official creed was not "puritanism" but a liberalized, nondenominational Christianity which was hardly at odds with Mencken's own positivism. But there were fissures in the liberal-positivist consensus. The 1890s were hardly an era of complacent mediocrity, as Mencken's memoirs suggest; they were marked by social, intellectual, and moral ferment. Nationwide labor unrest threatened the bourgeois social order. A rediscovery of the nonlogical and unreasonable elements in the psyche undercut

the intellectual order. From Nietzsche to Henri Bergson, from William James to Freud, serious thinkers showed an unprecedented fascination with primal irrationality. And lesser men popularized that fascination on both sides of the Atlantic.

Despite his engagement with broad cultural issues, Mencken remained immune to much of the intellectual ferment surrounding him. He clung to the ponderous schemes of evolutionary progress mapped out by Huxley and Spencer. He dismissed James and Bergson, railed against "the Freudian rumble-bumble," and transformed Nietzsche from a Dionysian mystic into a Spencerian progressive in his youthful treatise *The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche* (1908). Mencken and Nietzsche shared a common contempt for "the masses," but there was a profound philosophical gulf between the two men. Mencken's *Treatise on the Gods* (1930) was a restatement of 19th century notions that religion was an immature stage in human development, gradually being outgrown as "the race" progressed; Nietzsche's life work was an effort to discredit positivism and restore an ecstatic dimension to religious life.

Mencken's literary tastes also revealed his inflexible literalism. Impatient with psychological subtleties, he dismissed "the flabby, kittenish realism of Howells," and declared Henry James to be "of less interest than Richard Harding Davis." He had a tin ear for poetry, which seemed to him "very deficient as an agent of progress." He admired Dreiser as "a really implacable reporter of facts"; he also praised Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis, and Joseph Conrad—novelists he could fit within his naturalistic frame of reference. But he rejected many 20th-century writers in baffled irritation. He admitted that "the Thomas Mann stuff simply eludes me"; he believed that Hemingway wrote novels simply to prove he was a "naughty fellow" and that there was no more sense in Faulkner than in "the wop boob, Dante." During the 1920s, Mencken's *Smart Set* was the magazine where most major new talents (Fitzgerald, Edmund Wilson) first broke into print. But as he aged, the prophet of modernity, who had once championed Ezra Pound, became anesthetized to much

of serious modern literature.

Mencken's political thinking remained less philistine. His classical liberalism never wavered; he remained devoted to free speech during periods when more "pragmatic" liberals abandoned it. He defended novelists against censors, publishers against smuthounds, socialists and anarchists (whose views he abhorred) against superpatriots. In 1925, Mencken focused attention on Carlo Tresca, the proprietor of a small, radical anti-Fascist paper in New York, whose views offended Mussolini's ambassador to the United States. Under pressure from the ambassador, the United States government shut down the paper and offered Tresca the non-choice of being deported to Italy or going to jail. Tresca shrewdly chose the latter option. In the *Sun*, Mencken fumed: "What becomes of the old idea that the United States is a free country, that it is a refuge for the oppressed of other lands? . . ."

In the *Mercury*, he published articles by Emma Goldman, an anarchist writer who had been deported during the Red Scare of 1919; he urged the Justice Department to return the papers it had seized from her office and the Bureau of Immigration to allow her to return to America to visit her relatives. While his own thinking was shaped by German ethnocentrism, he nevertheless rose above the racial mythologies of his time. He publicly denounced lynching in a town where race-baiting was a way of life, and the last thing he ever wrote was a stinging assault in the *Sun* on segregation in Baltimore parks. His libertarian principles led him to perceive national prohibition as an emblem of the moral hysteria pervading small town America in the 1920s. One can only imagine how he would skewer the "Just Say No" panicmongers of the 1980s.

It is tempting to see Mencken as the last liberal, the last genuine devotee of individual freedom who refused to make that "pragmatic" genuflection to bureaucratic authority—who refused to elevate technique over ultimate principle. He never twisted his libertarianism to sanction corporate or military power, as today's pseudo-libertarians have so often done. And, though his critiques of the New

Deal became formulaic, Mencken had spotted weaknesses in pragmatic liberal thought long before the accession of Roosevelt. Mencken remained committed to a classical republican vision of politics—the 18th-century vision of Jefferson, Madison, and Adams.

To be sure, Mencken does not always deserve to be grouped in such august company. Though he trained a sharp eye on the meanspirited moralism of prohibitionists and 100% Americans, Mencken displayed a meanspiritedness of his own. His was the narrow smugness of the urban bourgeois, addicted to his creature comforts and convinced that he has earned them through his superior ability. With the significant exception of his concern for civil liberties, Mencken's "Jeffersonianism" could be heard in any barber shop full of Right-Thinking Citizens. His father had divided all mankind into "those who paid their bills and those who didn't," and Mencken shared the old man's tightfisted morality. The New Deal, Mencken charged, was a "political racket" based on the proposition that "Whatever A earns really belongs to B. A is any honest or industrious man or woman; B is any drone or jackass." Mencken's obsession with the tyranny of the "inferior man" blinded him to mass suffering. "Even in a great depression few if any starve," he wrote. He was as much a defender of Victorian complacency as a rebel against it.

Despite his concern for culture, Mencken never considered its relationship to social and economic circumstances. True to the classical republican tradition, he tended to trace the shortcomings of American political life to the ignorance or venality of individual politicians. He seemed unable to conceive of power relations in systemic or structural terms, and so he missed the significance of the organizational revolution that was insulating the political process from popular control during the early 20th century. He all but ignored the steady concentration of power in bureaucratic and economic elites, and attributed the vapidness of American culture to an (undemonstrated) excess of democracy. An even more serious problem was the tendency of Mencken's cul-

tural criticism to slip into self-indulgence and superficiality: He often remained preoccupied with surfaces. He arraigned fundamentalists because they were ridiculous and businessmen because they were boring. In one sense his legitimate heir is that contemporary merchant of *chic*, Tom Wolfe.

But there was more than Wolfe's snobbery in H. L. Mencken. His talents were various; in many ways they resembled Mark Twain's. Both men were artists of language rather than ideas; both reached wide middle class audiences through outrageous humor and vigorous colloquial style. (Mencken said that Warren Harding's prose reminded him "of stale, bean soup, of college yells, of dogs barking idiotically through endless nights." It was a characteristic simile.) Without that style, neither man's reputation would have survived a generation. Both men sustained ambivalent relationships with majority culture: they mocked it, exploited it, made literary capital out of it, but they never dismissed it. To do so would have been to reject their own birthright as American provincials. Restive and rebellious as they were, they nonetheless remained committed to most values of the respectable bourgeoisie (including its sentimental ideal of domestic life).

Yet Mencken sought to be more than a National Funny Man. He used humor for serious purposes. Mencken's writing at its best was like that of Alexis de Tocqueville and other critics of American society: He lamented the homogenizing effects of democratic culture on public discourse, and he sought to promote a genuine "battle of ideas" for its own sake. He kept alive a tradition of personal journalism during decades when newspapers and magazines were passing increasingly under corporate control. His voice rose above the rumble of "responsible opinion," and for a time his disdain for official pieties leav-

ened the intellectual life of the nation.

Unlike many of us, Mencken was ultimately forced to test the courage of his intellectual convictions. As he grew older, more concerned about his health and prone to thoughts of death, Mencken increasingly followed his materialist premises to their logical conclusion.

For him, as for his late Victorian predecessors, the only alternative to religious or secular humanism was a mechanistic materialism that was nearly as arrogant in its human-centeredness, in its assumption that human science had already cracked the code of the cosmos. He was willing, Mencken said, "to stand up single-handed against the eternal and intolerable mysteries." The assertion sounds sophomorically Faustian, until one recalls the pain of his later life. When he married Sara Haardt, he knew she was dying of tuberculosis; when her death finally came it was still hard to accept. "What a cruel and idiotic world we live in!" he cried in a letter to *Atlantic* editor Ellery Sedgwick.

Mencken's own stroke was the final demonstration of that cruelty and idiocy. It was one of the "harsh and meaningless fits of destiny" he found in Conrad's stories, a destiny undreamt of in positivist optimism. Mencken the maestro of language was destined to end his days groping for words and forgetting the names of his closest friends. ("How are my friends?" was one of his refrains to Farrell.) He was sad, his voice was thick, sometimes the right word would not come; yet he still could sometimes summon his playful old persona. "When I see God," he would tell visitors, "I'm going to speak sharply to him." Nothing in his life became him like the close of it. We may permit ourselves to imagine that the old man on Hollins Street was not merely an anachronism, that he was "out of it" in a more honorable sense as well, providing a kind of stoical witness against the self-congratulatory certainties of America's national creed.

