

VOLUME XI, NUMBER 3, SUMMER 2011

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Book Review by Algis Valiunas

## AT THE ZOO

*Prejudices: First, Second, and Third Series*, by H.L. Mencken.  
Library of America, 610 pages, \$35

*Prejudices: Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Series*, by H.L. Mencken.  
Library of America, 612 pages, \$35



HENRY LOUIS MENCKEN (1880–1956), the Sage of Baltimore (a town not notably long on sages), was the most vivid literary journalist of the 20th century, and perhaps the most enduring, in part because such writing generally lasts about as long as a hatch of mayflies. Mencken's style, it's commonly said, has prolonged his posthumous life—boisterous, bludgeoning, bloody-minded, his prose whaled the tar out of every native piety he found insufferable, which pretty well covered them all. Although he called himself pre-eminently a “critic of ideas,” his ideas reportedly withered and died decades ago. No decent person, according to the consensus of decent persons, could possibly read his undemocratic animadversions, not to say plug-ugly screeds, without revulsion. Mencken made no bones about his hatred for democracy and scorn for religion, particularly for the brand of Christianity practiced in the Bible Belt, a term he coined, interchangeable with the Hookworm and Pellagra Belt, another lip-smacking Menckenism. But then he was the most melodious of haters, and at the time anyway found a readership willing to dance to his tune.

The Library of America has recently lent its authority, which has not yet been forfeited altogether, to help restore some of Mencken's old luster and perhaps gain him some new readers. An attractively boxed two-volume set of his *Prejudices*, choice magazine and newspaper essays that were originally gathered in six series from 1919 to 1927, is a fine gesture in that direction. Still, the volumes are numbers 206 and 207 in the Library of America's collection, which has granted precedence over the years to such luminaries as Sarah Orne Jewett, Charles Brockden Brown, George M. Kaufman, Lafcadio Hearn, and Philip K. Dick (whose science-fiction novels get a three-volume spread). So Mencken's place in the pantheon is rather a dim and distant corner. Will anyone come to pay tribute? Is tribute deserved?

Mencken's reputation, especially among people who have not read much of him, pegs him as a regular guy, a tough-talking wisecracking journalist out of a Ben Hecht screenplay, clattering away at his typewriter while tossing down shots from a bottomless bottle of Scotch he keeps in his desk drawer. His own reminiscences, in *Newspaper Days 1899–1906*,

the second volume of his autobiography, contribute to this image of stubble-jawed whisky-breath glamour, as he recalls the glory days of the *Baltimore Herald*, where he got his first job at 18 and ascended through the ranks at rocket speed—and where every reporter had his own brass cuspidor and copy boys conducted cockroach races down the center of the newsroom. He takes pains to point out, however, that never in his career did he drink while working; and he was almost always working.

Aristocratic fastidiousness was in fact more his way than promiscuous bonhomie. This son of a prosperous cigar manufacturer knew he was cut out for higher things. What most people considered the high life had no appeal to him, though he did enjoy a romance with a movie starlet in his mid-40s. Rather, he was passionate about Joseph Conrad and Theodore Dreiser, whom he thought the greatest writers among his contemporaries; and attended hundreds of concerts, never getting enough of Bach and Beethoven and Brahms; played the piano at the weekly gathering of a fine amateur music society, whose members adjourned afterward to a handsome tavern (handsome taverns being to his mind the



modern exemplars of architectural and decorative elegance), so that his sort of aristocracy did not exclude all common pursuits.

Still, no one was more brutal toward the popular taste when he was riled, and the popular taste kept him in a perpetual lather. A brief piece, "The Butte Bashkirtseff," on one Mary MacLane, a Vassar graduate who in a pair of risqué memoirs flashed a glimpse of thigh then shamefacedly withdrew the offer, damns the native puritanism that fears the world's loveliness is the devil's snare:

A mongrel and inferior people, incapable of any spiritual aspiration above that of second-rate English colonials, we seek refuge inevitably in the one sort of superiority that the lower castes of men can authentically boast, to wit, superi-

ority in docility, in credulity, in resignation, in morals. We are the most moral race in the world; there is not another that we do not look down upon in that department; our confessed aim and destiny as a nation is to inoculate them all with our incomparable rectitude.... The impulse to cavort and kick up one's legs, so healthy, so universal, is hedged in by incomprehensible taboos; it becomes stealthy, dirty, degrading. The desire to create and linger over beauty, the sign and touchstone of man's rise above the brute, is held down by doubts and hesitations; when it breaks through it must do so by orgy and explosion, half ludicrous and half pathetic. Our function, we choose to believe, is to teach and inspire the world. We are wrong.

Our function is to amuse the world. We are the [William Jennings] Bryan, the Henry Ford, the Billy Sunday among the nations.

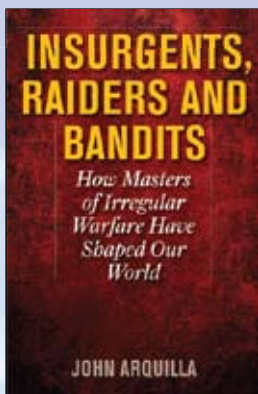
Americans, in short, don't have a clue how to live. And though Mencken devotes the largest part of his critical energies to assailing the prevalent stupidity, he doesn't expect to make the slightest dent in it. Stupid people are too stupid to be helped. Intellectual and moral solicitude is not his line. If his chucklehead countrymen's function is to amuse the world, his own function is to amuse himself, and the happy few who find his antic mordancy to their taste.

SERIOUS CRITICS OF IDEAS HAD GENERALLY gone at things very differently. Samuel Johnson did not write like this: his solemn earnestness in the name of common sense was the antidote to David Hume's godless effrontery, which threatened to turn solid rock to airy nothing. Thomas Carlyle, Matthew Arnold, and John Ruskin all submitted the customary virtues of the Christian tradition to trial, but in the end upheld, even rarefied, them. Mencken, by contrast, was an imp, and one who supposed himself among the finest minds of his time: comic dynamite, an American Nietzsche who could leave them rolling in the aisles. Along with Nietzsche (about whom he wrote his first book, which was the first book on Nietzsche in English), Mark Twain was his acknowledged master—not the country charmer but the desolated universal ironist. Like Twain, Mencken wanted his savagery to amuse but also to be taken seriously; Mencken took himself seriously, after all, working like a demon, though he knew nothing he had done would matter to him in the least the second he was dead.

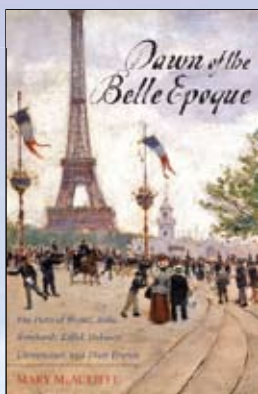
So although the comedy rarely pauses for breath, Mencken regards himself as the serious representative of a cultivated American manhood willing to stand up against the thuggish and villainous, who invariably come cloaked in probity and sometimes in bed-sheets, and to speak for the high refinement that the majority finds unendurable. In "The American Tradition," Texan virility comes off as goonish and just plain dumb:

There are no soothing elms on the campus at Austin; instead there is only the cindered *plaza de toros* of the Ku Klux Klan. Patriotism, down there, runs wilder than elsewhere. Men have large

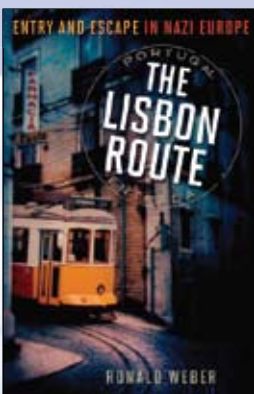
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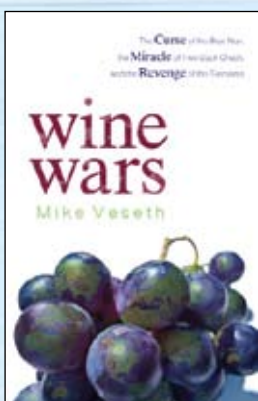
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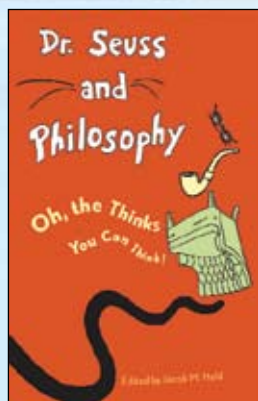
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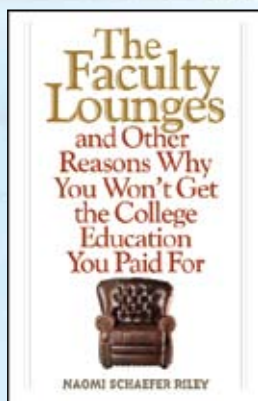
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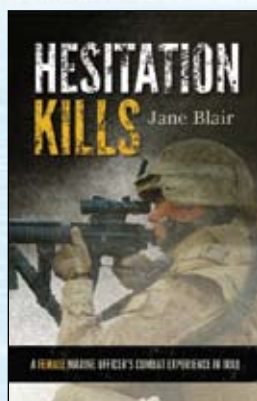
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hands and loud voices. The sight of the flag makes their blood leap and boil; when it is affronted they cannot control themselves.

The inescapable shadow of the loud-voiced men stunts the growth of those with any intellectual aspirations: the thinness of what passes for heartland culture is

the product of men who, drilled beyond their capacity for taking in ideas and harrowed from infancy by harsh and unyielding concepts of duty, have borrowed the patriotic philosophy of suburban pastors and country schoolmarms, and now seek to apply it to the consideration of phenomena that are essentially beyond their comprehension, as honor is beyond the comprehension of a politician.

Against the pervasive miasma is the ideal of life as it ought to be lived, with grace and verve and fearlessness. Once upon a time it could be found in a part of the country now parched and moribund, as he writes in "The Sahara of the Bozart":

But in the south there were men of delicate fancy, urbane instinct and aristocratic manner—in brief, superior men—in brief, gentry. To politics, their chief diversion, they brought active and original minds. It was there that nearly all the political theories we still cherish and suffer under came to birth. It was there that the crude dogmatism of New England was refined and humanized. It

was there, above all, that some attention was given to the art of living—that life got beyond and above the state of a mere infliction and became an exhilarating experience.

Mencken is willing to forgive the founders from the South their role in afflicting mankind with democracy because after all they did not behave like democrats themselves. Back then sweetness was there to be savored. Perhaps it still is, if one knows how to search it out.

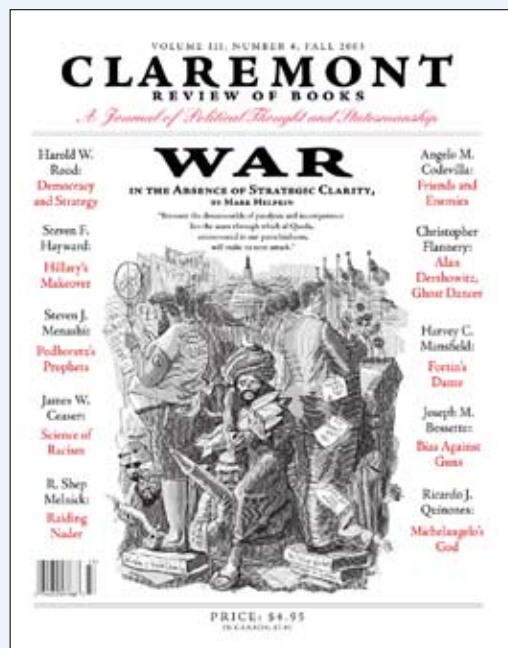
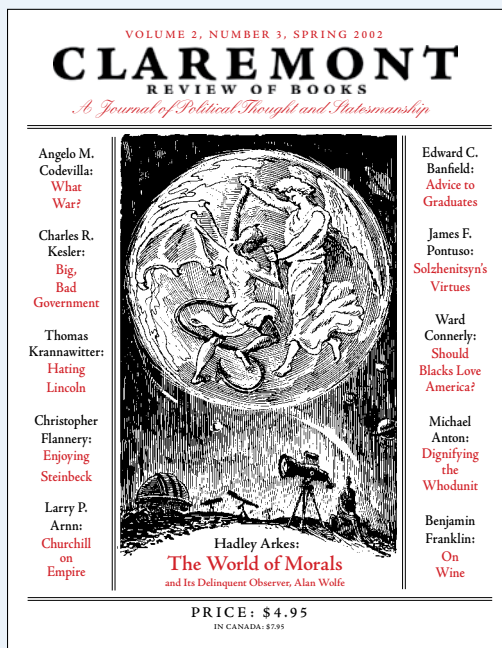
Such sweetness as Mencken finds in his America comes mostly of indulging his profound distaste. A wild glee colors his vituperations; he has a high old time flaying the malefactors. In the lavish possibilities for the verbal abuse of the people he despises, delight glows brightly: yokels can be called numbskulls or poltroons or morons or rabble or hinds or swineherds or witch-burners or the human kohlrabi or the anthropoid host. His "Catechism" consists of a single question and answer: "Q. If you find so much that is unworthy of reverence in the United States, then why do you live here? A. Why do men go to zoos?" The animals put on a good show, once you get past the smell.

**M**ENCKEN TOO PUTS ON A GOOD SHOW, once you get past the smell. Mencken's *Diary*, which was not published until 1989, for sanitary reasons, is especially notorious for its racist pungency. Although his reputation now suffers principally for his disparagement of blacks and Jews, there his particular loathing, as in *Heathen Days 1890–1936*, is reserved for Arabs, "the dirtiest, orneriest, and most shiftless people who

regularly make the first pages of the world's press," and for "the half-simian hill-billies of the Appalachian chain" whose migration to Baltimore has fouled his beloved Union Square neighborhood. Such hatefulness is a lot to overcome in a more sensitive age than his. Has he really got what it takes to do so?

The style does still possess a curmudgeonly charm, but the fundamental ideas are few and he beats them to death: democracy is bunk, religion is swill, the world needs more democracy-hating atheists like Mencken. That is not entirely to deny that he is right about the spineless opportunism of politicians or the vacuity of intellectuals or the credulity of fundamentalist true believers. And one would welcome a critic of his tearing bite to take on the recent dismal spectacle: the celebrated moral heroism of Teddy Kennedy; the Clintonian daisy chain of lust for power, lust for glory, lust for self, and simple lust; the rise and rise of Sarah Palin; priests who rape children; the fabulous self-delusion of the lumpen professoriate; 50 million abortions since *Roe v. Wade*; the proclamation of the Peaceable Kingdom by our nominal commander-in-chief while Iran prepares for nuclear war. Perhaps there are worse things, which Mencken did not foresee, than his hobbyhorses of puritan mores, preachy novels, and Harvard-educated bond traders. Mencken will never again be what he was. We have his number; we know what to make of him. And yet he retains a certain allure all the same—enough that one would love to know: what would H.L. Mencken have made of *us*?

*Algis Valiunas is a fellow of the Ethics and Public Policy Center.*



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