

## IN MEMORIAM: HLM

by Daniel Raeburn

HENRY LOUIS MENCKEN was the greatest American journalist of the last century and possibly the best writer of American English ever. He was also an asshole, and it is for the latter quality that we are doomed to remember him, if we remember him at all. Ask an educated layperson about Mencken and she will perhaps recall one of the dead libertarian's pungent aphorisms, if she has the stomach. ("Misogynist," for starters: "A man who hates women as much as women hate one another.") Ask any collegiate aspirant who HLM was and s/he will know only what s/he is required to know: basically, that Mencken was a racist, sexist, anti-Semitic old homophobe—which, in fact, he was. Unfortunately, a minority of writers persist in reading the SOB anyway. Worse, some of these writers are of the leftist persuasion.

Take me, for example, and take this magazine. The pendulous B of the *Baffler* logo is bogarted from the double-S logo of the *Smart Set*, the raffish magazine through which Mencken enlightened the hip literati of the nineteen-teens. The typographic grid of this page is swiped from *The American Mercury*, the august magazine Mencken co-founded and through which he defined the next decade and, by extension, all American literature and criticism since. I cop to this because I am the typographer who did the pilfering, down to the last fancypants ligature. Those baffled by our admiration for a conservative should recall how Walter Lippmann described Mencken's power: "He calls you a swine, and an imbecile, and he increases your will to live." We take HLM as our strongest, most bitter tonic.

A swig of his venom was good for what ailed America in the Twenties, when Mencken single-

handedly mounted, waged, and won a war against the goody-two-shoes then lording over the national literature. With the force of his ridicule Mencken gave the heave-ho to the bluenoses and replaced them with an earthier bunch that included Theodore Dreiser, Willa Cather, and Sinclair Lewis. In doing so Mencken blazed a trail that has been followed by every American naturalist and realist since. Along the way he also helped to mock Prohibition out of existence, winning for himself the huzzahs of booze-hounds worldwide. His mission accomplished, Mencken then turned his guns on politics, where he saw a different kind of patrician threat to our national character.

Mencken began his war on Franklin D. Roosevelt using essentially the same battle plan as before. He argued that in economics, as in books, any attempt to better the masses was quackery. For Mencken, the New Deal was like a book full of too much Uplift: condescending, oppressive, unrealistic and unnatural. Better to let sleeping dogs lie and let unemployment lines be, as well as his tax bill. Of course, Mencken put none of this meekly or dryly. He dressed up his callousness as common sense and boomed it from the rooftops. However, this time HLM's troops did not line up behind him, mainly because they were in the soup line. Mencken's war on liberalism proved to be his Waterloo. His popularity shrank to the point where wags referred to him as "the late H. L. Mencken." His actual death and the subsequent publication of his dyspeptic diary have not revived his standing. For the most part, today's university-based arbiters of cultural memory want nothing to do with the man. After a decade or two on the ropes, Mencken's

rep as an iconoclast is on the canvas and the count is at eight, now nine. But before we count out the late HLM, we should let at least one scene from his life flash before us.

In 1927 a Memphis newspaper ran an editorial denouncing Mencken. This in itself was scarcely unusual: Editorial assaults on HLM were so common in those days that in 1928 the *Palm Beach News* proclaimed him “the most universally hated man in the United States.” Much of this hatred emanated from the South, thanks in large part to “The Sahara of the Bozart,” Mencken’s famous 1920 assessment of the cultural attainments of their beloved Dixie:

Down there a poet is now almost as rare as an oboe-player, a dry-point etcher or a metaphysician. It is, indeed, amazing to contemplate so vast a vacuity. One thinks of the interstellar spaces, of the colossal reaches of the now mythical ether. Nearly the whole of Europe could be lost in that stupendous region of worn-out farms, shoddy cities and paralyzed cerebrums: one could throw in France, Germany, and Italy, and still have room for the British Isles. And yet, for all its size and all its wealth and all the “progress” it babbles of, it is almost as sterile, artistically, intellectually, culturally, as the Sahara Desert.

The only reason we remember the Memphis newspaper’s outraged defense of the Southland is because a poor teenager named Richard Wright just happened to see it. Wright had never heard of Mencken before, but he figured that if crackers hated the man that much, he could not be all bad. Wright was not allowed to use the Memphis library, but he finagled a valid card and forged the following note, which he quietly passed over the counter to a suspicious librarian: “Dear Madam: Will you please let this nigger boy have some books by H.L. Mencken?”

To the great benefit of American letters, the bookmarm consented and loaned Wright *A Book of Prefaces*—a word Wright did not yet know how to pronounce—as well as a volume of Mencken’s *Prejudices*. (Years later, Wright deadpanned, “I knew what that word meant.”) When Wright returned to his rented room he opened *Prejudices*. “I was jarred and shocked by the style, the clear, clean, sweeping sentences,” he recounted. “Why did he write like that? And how did one write like that? I pic-

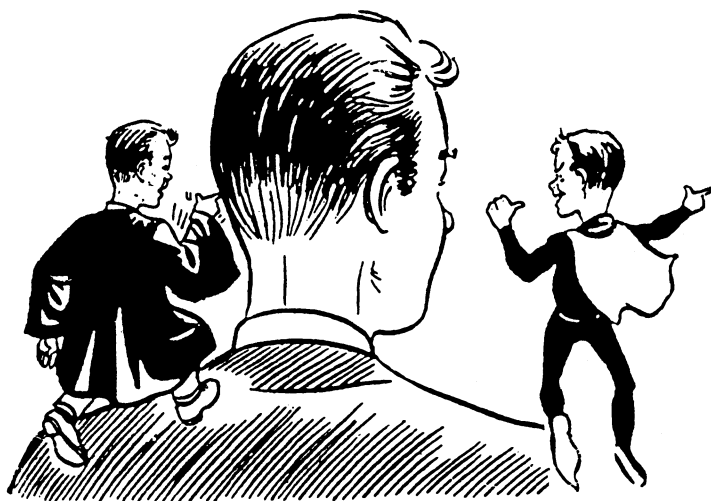
tured the man as a raging demon, slashing with his pen... denouncing everything American... laughing... mocking God, authority... This man was fighting, fighting with words. He was using words as a weapon, using them as one would use a club.... I read on and what amazed me was not what he said, but how on earth anybody had the courage to say it.” At that moment, said Wright, he as a writer was born.

Thirteen years later, when Wright published *Native Son*, librarians across the South banned it. When Wright published his autobiography, *Black Boy*, the U.S. Senate passed a resolution declaring it obscene. Today, if you visit the Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore and turn Mencken’s copy of *Black Boy* to page 217, you will see the quotations above marked in Mencken’s distinctive hand.

Contempt for censors and Ku Kluxers was perhaps the only opinion the black socialist had in common with the white conservative. Mencken always maintained that he was a German, not an American, and he facetiously rued that he was born in this alien land. His most famous railings were directed against the One Hundred Per Cent American, and I need not replay any of his greatest hits against the booboisie. But I can’t resist. Here is an opening salvo from the third series of Mencken’s *Prejudices*:

Here I stand, unshaken and undespairing, a loyal and devoted Americano, even a chauvinist, paying taxes without complaint, obeying all laws that are physiologically obeyable... [and] avoiding all commerce with men sworn to overthrow the government... Here am I, contentedly and even smugly basking beneath the Stars and Stripes, a better citizen, I daresay, and certainly a less murmurous and exigent one, than thousands who put the Hon. Warren Gamaliel Harding beside Friedrich Barbarossa and Charlemagne, and hold the Supreme Court to be directly inspired by the Holy Spirit, and belong ardently to every Rotary Club, Ku Klux Klan, and Anti-Saloon league, and choke with emotion when the band plays “The Star-Spangled Banner,” and believe with the faith of little children that one of Our Boys, taken at random, could dispose in a fair fight of ten Englishmen, twenty Germans, thirty Frogs, forty Wops, fifty Japs, or a hundred Bolsheviks.

Excuse me while I shake off the irony. Today the author of a taunt this fearless would be



anything *but* a conservative. What distinguishes Mencken's treason, aside from its humor, is that he was not only un-American, he was *anti*-American, and that, at the risk of being too pat, is what made him all-American. Mencken never intended to define dissent. He never intended to be a hero to the left or to the right. He set the tone for ferocious literary irony because his neighbors and his government left him no choice: He wrote the words above, from "On Being An American," following World War I, when we treated German-Americans like him as shamelessly as we are now treating Arab-Americans.

The blast above is the one that inspired Fred Hobson, on the last page of his 650-page anvil, *Mencken: A Life* (Random House, 1994), to sum up Mencken as "our nay-saying Whitman." Hobson's unorthodox conclusion rings true, in a foxy way. The amped-up style of Mencken's youth clearly owes its galloping rhythm to Whitman, although Mencken salted his prose heavily with Ring Lardner and made no bones about sounding like his idol, Mark Twain. What makes Hobson's comparison crafty is the way it acknowledges HLM's least-aided prejudice—namely, homophobia—at the same time as it recognizes Mencken's admiration for old Walt. Mencken did declare Whitman to be "the greatest poet that America has ever produced," but he is doubtless scratching frantically at his casket after being equated

with the hairy sensualist.

Alas, the reader finds herself wishing that Hobson took more digs like this at his subject. Fair is fair, and Hobson has every right to jab at Mencken, because Mencken made his living tarring and feathering guys like Hobson: "In my case [Hobson writes] a southerner, a professor of literature, a political liberal, and an admirer of Franklin D. Roosevelt." Only if Hobson were a follower of Mary Baker Eddy or Carry Nation could he merit more of the late HLM's scorn. That scorn is the thistle that Hobson seeks to grasp. "It is not principally with [Mencken's] thought... that I am concerned in this biography," he writes. "Rather, it is with... what Mencken himself called his 'prejudices' and with the role they played in his life." Hence the 650 pages, which, when treating the corpus of HLM's prejudices, is an admirable feat of compression.

Mencken did not believe in equality between anyone and he did not believe in democracy at all. In 1920 he defined democracy as "the theory that the common people know what they want, and deserve to get it good and hard." Thirty-six years later, at the end of his career, he described it as a game in which "one party always devotes its chief energies to trying to prove that the other party is unfit to rule—and both commonly succeed, and are right." Now that our politics are a tweedledee two-party system, our free market

is an oligopoly, and the loser of our election is judged President, Mencken's cynicism is right-on, and right at home.

In place of democracy Mencken proposed a sort of Nietzschean aristocracy—rule by the clearly superior—while also pledging allegiance to Liberty and Freedom. If this mixture of undemocratic, anti-egalitarian “freedom” sounds familiar, well, it should. Fire up your internet browser. Pick up your “local” newspaper. Listen to our Chief Executive. Today we are surrounded by this kind of “freedom.” Our economy and our lives are ruled by it.

Now that *laissez faire* days are here again, behold as one of today's triumphant conservatives approaches to sing a hymn to HLM. Enter Terry Teachout, the editor of *The Second Mencken Chrestomathy* and a frequent contributor to *National Review* and *Commentary*. In the preface of his relatively slim bio, *The Skeptic* (HarperCollins, 2002), Teachout writes, “Times have indeed changed: Mencken's social and political views, long thought irreversibly outdated, have become a resurgent strain in American thought. Like it or not, the Mencken *Weltanschauung* is once again a force to be reckoned with, and written about.”

But any rebel conservative or embattled day trader who daydreams of old HLM returning to help him unmask the labor unions and expose the Protocols of the Elders of Veblen would do well to put down his little dream pipe and suck instead a deep, harsh hit from the reality bong. As Gore Vidal once said, “So clear and hard a writer would not be allowed in the mainstream press of today, and those who think that they would like him back would be the first to censor and censure him.” Were Mencken loosed on today's scene, the first heads he would demand would be those of the voodoo economists and celebrity stockbrokers and value-adding energy potentates currently bankrupting our treasury, aborting our civil liberties, and generally swinging us by our short curlies. Along with everybody else with one working quarter of a cortex, Mencken saw that capitalism and democracy are always at loggerheads. Of course, Mencken advocated

throwing out the democracy, but that does not mean that he championed the free-marketeers. No, sir:

The typical American of today... is led by cheer leaders, press agents, word-mongers, uplifters... He permitted the late war to be sold to him by the methods of the grind-shop auctioneer... He is a pliant slave of capitalism, and ever ready to help it put down fellow-slaves who venture to revolt. But this very weakness, this very credulity and poverty of spirit, on some easily conceivable tomorrow, may convert him into a rebel of a particularly insane kind, and so beset the Republic from within with difficulties quite as formidable as those which threaten to afflict it from without... [He] is still content to work for capitalism, and capitalism knows how to reward him to his taste. He is the eloquent statesman, the patriotic editor, the fount of inspiration, the prancing milch-cow of optimism. He becomes public leader, Governor, Senator, President.



I should say that neither of these biographies is equal to the man. Although Hobson's book is the one I would take to a desert island, a desert island is probably the only place I would re-read it. It is rich and even deep in insight, but written in the prose of a journeyman. Teachout's book is the one I would loan to a newbie. It is professional, and it suffers from a professional's slickness, a tendency to glide on the surface of words and events, avoiding knotty speculation and the thorniest question of all, namely, Why was Mencken a racist, sexist, anti-Semitic old homophobe?

To be fair, Mencken puts any writer in a pickle, including me. First there are his salty, unimpeachable sentences, which make the prose of his quoter taste insipid by comparison. But the big problem is Mencken himself. “Among the most intriguing aspects of Mencken is the number of paradoxes in the man,” Hobson ponders, early in his lucubration. Teachout spryly announces, “His certainty was a theatrical illusion produced by the panache of his prose.... The tug and tang of ambiguity are part of what makes him so compelling.” Paradoxes, yes. Ambiguity, no.

Mencken was a professional contrarian, perverse to the point of hypocrisy. The giddy pes-

simist loathed democracy but covered it with gusto for more than forty years. ("It provides the only really amusing form of government ever endured by mankind," he shrugged.) The self-styled libertine guffawed loudest at the booboisie, perhaps because he lived a Victorian life and died in the same middle-class house he was born in—"a mama's boy," hoots Teachout. Mencken snorted at all humanitarians and members of The Uplift because he believed that science and medicine, not justice and equality, would elevate mankind—and he clung to this naive belief through two world wars and into the atomic age.



Even Mencken's prejudices were ass backwards. A common axiom is that a bad man is a better person when he is writing, i.e., being an artist, than when he is being all too human. Not Mencken. On paper he was more often than not an ogre, albeit a most eloquent ogre. But in life Henry Mencken showed a humanity and a liberality incongruent with his HLM persona. As he dashed off hundreds of blatant and eugenic statements about the people whom he referred to, in his lighter moods, as Afamericans, he was also publishing more black writers than any white editor of his time. In fact, during Mencken's last six years at *The American Mercury*, he published the black journalist George Schuyler more than any other writer, white or black. While he was earning his reputation as our most unrepentant bachelor and

misogynist he was also fighting against Emma Goldman's deportation and paying her hospital bills. Then there is his anti-Semitism. Boy, is there anti-Semitism. And yet some of his best friends. . . .

At the core of all these paradoxes is class, that most denied of all American bugbears and the prejudice that made HLM write like a racist, sexist anti-Semite even as he lambasted the bigots of his day. It is Hobson who corrals this biggest bull, and for that, he gets the blue ribbon. Not that it takes a genius to spot social class as Mencken's *numero uno* obsession. "The capital defect in the culture of These States," he wrote in "The National Letters,"

is the lack of a civilized aristocracy, secure in its position, animated by an intelligent curiosity, skeptical of all facile generalizations, superior to the sentimentality of the mob, and delighting in the battle of ideas for its own sake. The word I use, despite the qualifying adjective, has got itself meanings, of course, that I by no means intend to convey. Any mention of an aristocracy, to a public fed upon democratic fustian, is bound to bring up images of stockbrokers' wives lolling obscenely in opera boxes, or of haughty Englishmen slaughtering whole generations of grouse in an inordinate and incomprehensible manner, or of bogus counts coming over to work their magic upon the daughters of breakfast-food and bathtub kings. This misconception belongs to the general American tradition. Its depth and extent are constantly revealed by the naive assumption that the so-called fashionable folk of the large cities—chiefly wealthy industrials in the interior-decorator and country-club stage of culture—constitute an aristocracy.

Reading this, and knowing that Teachout read it and scores of other passages just as bald (and true), one has to wonder how class managed to escape Teachout's athletic tally of HLM's other failings. Perhaps Teachout was simply too busy lashing Mencken for the rest of his insensitivities to notice the snobbery under his nose. Or perhaps Teachout tactfully underplayed Mencken's hauteur, which contradicts the right's fiction that it is the party of the true *volk*. Either way, Teachout blew his chance to resolve all those tangy ambiguities.

Class, understood according to Mencken's maverick notion of intellectual aristocracy, explains his apparent contradictions. Class was the reason he willingly drew the ire of his

loutish neighbors by dining with educated black writers in his home; class was also the reason he referred to the poor people who lived in the alleys behind his house as “black-amooors,” “coons,” and “darkies.” He found them all inferior, albeit for different reasons. Class was the reason that Mencken wrote an editorial in 1938 calling for unrestricted immigration of cultured German Jews—“an undoubtedly superior group”—while sneering that the lumpen Jews of Poland and Romania should be sent to Russia. Class was the reason Mencken lampooned Midwesterners (“Scandinavians run to all bone and no brain”), Southerners (“oakies, lintheads, hill-billies and other anthropoids”), Yankees (“old maids, male and female”), and, of course, the scrabbling Babbitry. Class was also at the heart of Mencken’s hatred of Franklin D. Roosevelt. Mencken voted for the aristocratic Dem in 1932—FDR was a “gentleman,” he wrote—but he denounced him ferociously once he displayed a different kind of *noblesse* and initiated the New Deal.

Class was also at the core of HLM’s beef with democracy. Mencken believed that democracy was based on envy, on the poor man’s urge to get his hand in the wallet of the hard-working burgher. This absurdity needs no rebuttal. But Mencken’s analysis of exactly how democracy fails itself merits a hearty “Hear, hear”:

Democracy, in fact, is always inventing class distinctions, despite its theoretical abhorrence of them.... There is a form of human striving that is understood by democratic man... and that is the striving for money. Thus the plutocracy, in a democratic state, tends inevitably, despite its theoretical infamy, to take the place of the missing aristocracy, and even to be mistaken for it. It is, of course, something quite different. It stands under no bond of obligation to the state; it has no public duty; it is transient.

Take the word “plutocracy” and substitute “corporation,” and you can hear the tonic chord within Mencken’s orchestrated BS. Put simply, democracy fails when it elevates business over brains.

Unfortunately, this warning will float over the bloated head of today’s conservative, who is high on the delusion that a liberal wizardry is masterminding our schools, our newsrooms, and our culture. But conservatives need to know that Mencken hated the business class—*hated* them—even more than he hated his notorious foes. Leave it to Mencken to pull off that paradox. Of the businessmen of the Twenties, Mencken roared, “Such swine were and are my enemies even more plainly than the Communists, not only because they devoted themselves to robbing me, but also and more importantly because their intolerable hoggishness raised the boobery in revolt, and the ensuing revolt threatened to ruin me even more certainly.”

Teachout acknowledges HLM’s apostasy, but then adds weakly, “Yet he preferred [businessmen] to politicians.” Given Mencken’s feelings about both groups, this is a bit like saying that, were Mencken given a choice between the noose and the electric chair, Mencken preferred the noose. Teachout’s distinction is moot, anyway, now that our executive branch is just that—executives—our politicians are businessmen and our businessmen are politicians. And whom do we have to thank for this boondoggle? Libertarians: the same people who claim to carry on HLM’s tradition.

We need not speculate what HLM would say about the state of our democracy under the current Chief Executive. He already said it three quarters of a century ago, and his bad medicine is still cathartic:

One cannot observe [democracy] objectively without being impressed by its curious distrust of itself—its apparently ineradicable tendency to abandon its whole philosophy at the first sign of strain. I need not point to what happens invariably in democratic states when the national safety is menaced. All the great tribunes of democracy, on such occasions, convert themselves, by a process as simple as taking a deep breath, into despots of an almost fabulous ferocity. Nor is this process confined to times of alarm and terror: it is going on day in and day out. Democracy always seems bent upon killing the thing it theoretically loves. ■