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I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Roberta Teague Herrin entitled "H. L. Mencken as a Philologist." I have examined the final copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in English.

John H. Fisher, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

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H. L. MENCKEN AS A PHILOLOGIST

A Dissertation

Presented for the

Doctor of Philosophy

Degree

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Roberta Teague Herrin

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines H. L. Mencken's attitudes toward language and the forces that shaped those attitudes. This study also traces the development of The American Language, assesses the influence of this work on language studies in America, and examines Mencken's place in the field of linguistics.

Three types of material are surveyed in this study: the body of H. L. Mencken's writing that reflects his attitudes toward language; the definitive secondary material which focuses on Mencken's interest in American English; and the background material necessary to establish a social, historical, political, and linguistic context for Mencken's ideas.

This study concludes that H. L. Mencken's attitudes toward American English were shaped by a number of factors—his upbringing in the middle-class household of a German-American cigar maker, his experiences as a journalist, his early reading in Dialect Notes, his experience as a magazine editor and essayist. Though Mencken became adept enough in language study to produce The American Language, his chauvanistic treatment of American English and his methods of collecting information barred him from the ranks of the professional linguists. He was—and is—considered an amateur, a dilettante, a man unsophisticated in linguistics.

Mencken's lasting value is that he set before a growing community of linguists a work which inspired other philologists to

collect and analyze. The thesis of The American Language was but one of many catalysts for American linguistic study in the twenties and thirties. It is important because it came from a sophisticated man of letters who twitted the professionals into action.

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INTRODUCTION

Purpose

The purpose of this dissertation is to examine H. L. Mencken's attitudes toward language and the forces that shaped those attitudes. This study also traces the development of The American Language, assesses the influence of this work on language studies in America, and examines Mencken's place in the field of linguistics.

Scope

Three types of material are surveyed in this study: the body of H. L. Mencken's writing that reflects his attitude toward language; the definitive secondary material which focuses on Mencken's interest in American English; and the background material necessary to establish a social, historical, political, and linguistic context for Mencken's ideas. Where necessary, this paper utilizes Mencken's manuscripts, scrapbooks, and papers housed in the Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore, Maryland. The dissertation examines the content of The American Language only as it demonstrates Mencken's attitudes toward language or sheds light on the trends in linguistic study that are significant for Mencken's work.

Rationale

Since 1959, nineteen dissertations have been written on subjects such as H. L. Mencken's relationships with Dreiser and

Upton Sinclair, Mencken's philosophy, his literary criticism, his Mercury essays, his criticism of the New Deal, his commentary on the South, his politics, and his rhetoric. No monograph of Mencken's philological interests has appeared. In fact, history sometimes assigns Mencken's language study a back seat to his political, social, and literary commentary. Consequently, his reputation often rests on "A Bathtub Hoax," "The Sahara of the Bozart," the obituary of William Jennings Bryan, and his introduction to Dreiser's An American Tragedy.

Along with Mencken's journalism and literary criticism, however, his interest in language matured as he matured, and The American Language thus became a classic piece of American literature. In 1936 Edmund Wilson praised the fourth edition as "an authoritative work of the very first interest and importance." Wilson believed

> that the first edition of "The American Language" marked a stage in the development of our literature. It marked the moment when the living tide of American had mounted so high along the sands of "correct English" that it became necessary to make some formal recognition of it—the moment when American writers were finally to take flight from the old tree and to trust for the first time their own dialect. . . . Looking back, we must give Mencken credit for one of the really valuable services performed in our own day by American criticism for American writing. For the period of literary activity which reached its height just after the War, two critics of importance stand out: Mencken and Van Wyck Brooks. Brooks exposed the negative aspects of our literary tradition and urged us to get away from our governesses. Mencken showed the positive value of our vulgar heritage; and he did more than anyone else in his field to bring about that "coming of age" for which Brooks had sounded the hour. (299)

Wilson has identified the exact significance of The American Language: It marked the end of American literary colonialism. Its

further significance lies in Mencken himself: He was a sophisticated man of letters in the twenties and thirties whose opinions ran counter to what the public (and to what other gentlemen of the times) expected.

For example, Mencken's generalizations are sometimes baffling. On the one hand, he was a German-American elitist and idealist who flouted the values of the masses—the booboisie. On the other hand, he was a libertarian who praised the common Americans' use of the English language. He loved them for their linguistic flexibility, inventiveness, drama, clarity, and violation of convention. He loathed their opposites—the academics, the "schoolmarms"—who sacrificed flexibility and inventiveness to convention.

Out of these extremes and contradictions, Mencken developed a distinct prose style and an attitude toward language that have become his trademarks. He knew what good writing was, and he believed that schoolmarms thwarted good writing. One of their most abominable tactics, in Mencken's view, was to impose the standards of genteel British English on the American booboisie. Consequently, the thesis of the 1919 edition of The American Language was the wide divergence between American and British English. Mencken argued that the American variety was not only reputable but preferable.

From 1919 to 1948 Mencken continued to explore and modify his thesis, and though he worked on hundreds of other projects, he was always occupied with the collecting, writing, and rewriting of his American language material. It was frequently secondary to

The American Mercury or American politics, but it always resurfaced as an obsession. What had begun as "ostensibly harmless drudgery" in philology (McDavid, Abridgment vi-vii) came to possess him, making more and more demands of his time as each new edition entertained an old audience and captured a new one.

As The American Language grew through four editions and two supplements, it grew in respectability and influence. On the one hand, it was Mencken's personal statement—the culmination of his "obsessive" culling and cataloging. On the other hand, it was the first work of its kind. It transcended the traditional barriers between scholar and layman; gained popularity among the masses as well as among the professional linguists; and spurred dialect studies among the "boobs" as well as in American universities.

Mencken's correspondence during these years (1919-1948) reveals a man embarrassed to be working among the professional "gogues" but delighted that his work was affecting the study of American English. It shows a witty man, joking and sarcastic about the project but recognizing that it was his livelihood. The letters also show the tired Mencken, plowing through "gallons" of accumulated notes, letters, clippings toward yet another, then another, edition of the work, all the while complaining that someone more apt than he should be writing the book. And, finally, Mencken's correspondence shows that on the subject of American English he was communicating with some of the most important people in American studies—Joseph Hergesheimer, Louis Untermeyer, Ezra Pound, Theodore Dreiser, William Carlos Williams.

Though Mencken's linguistic sophistication and his methods of research are questioned by most professional philologists, and his ideas are considered passe by many critics and historians, he remains a major twentieth-century impetus for the growth of American linguistic studies and American literary independence. A careful study of the body of Mencken's own writing and the most definitive works about Mencken shows why The American Language is regarded today as his most important contribution to the twentieth-century intellectual milieu and why Joseph Wood Krutch could say in 1956 that Mencken's work, not just his ideas, would survive him as the best prose of the twentieth century.

CHAPTER I

MENCKEN'S LIFELONG INTEREST IN LANGUAGE

As a Child

Mencken's early interest in words—their sounds and their meanings—is perhaps best documented in Happy Days, his accounts of his childhood in Baltimore. Granted, the Happy Days essays are the reminiscences of an old man. They are peaceful, fluid, "fireside" narratives—the direct opposites to his caustic satires. They are perhaps colored by time, but the significance of their subject matter cannot be overlooked. What the old Mencken remembers best about the child Mencken are frequently tidbits of linguistic discovery. In an essay on "Baltimore of the Eighties," he describes the early appearance of "huge, fragrant strawberries of Anne Arundel county." His intent, however, is to give the reader not just the scene and the fragrance of the strawberries but the flavor of the language as well. He says that the name was "pronounced Ann'ran'l" and that

> All spring the streets swarmed with hucksters selling things: they called themselves, not hucksters, but Arabs (with the first a as in day), and announced their wares with loud, raucous, unintelligible cries, much worn down by phonetic decay. (57)

When he describes the winter street wares, it is, again, for the reader's linguistic—not his culinary—appreciation:

> In winter the principal howling was done by colored men selling shucked oysters out of huge cans. In the dark backward and abysm of time their cry must have been simply

> "Oysters!", but generations of Aframerican larynxes had debased to "Awneeeeeee!", with the final e's prolonged until the vendor got out of breath. (57)

In addition to what he heard in Baltimore as a child, Mencken recounts what he read, in particular "The Moose Hunters," the first story he ever remembered reading. Published in the 1887 Chatterbox, "The Moose Hunters" was, he says, "printed as a sort of sop or compliment" [sic] to the wide American circulation of this English annual (157). In his words,

> I was near the end of the story, with the Canucks all beaten off and two carcasses of gigantic meese hanging to trees, before the author made it clear to me that the word moose had no plural, but remained unchanged ad infinitum." (159)

Whether we can trust either his memory or his linguistic honesty is debatable; Mencken loved a joke. At any rate, this is the sort of linguistic joke that Mencken would like to remember about himself. It is but another indication of the glee with which he embraced the flouting of grammatical rules, particularly in the mind of a child as yet untainted by schoolmarms.

In yet another discussion of his reading, Mencken acknowledges his early love of Twain and the gusto with which he read all of Twain's work. A Tramp Abroad, however, gave him trouble, especially a woodcut whose legend contained the word generation which he confused with federation, a word often "in my father's speech in those days, for the American Federation of Labor had got under way only a few years before" (169). He did not consult the dictionary or his mother or even his father about the definition, but instead suffered his own ignorance. "At eight or nine," he says, "intelligence is no more

than a small spot of light on the floor of a large and murky room" (169). Age eight, in fact, seems to have been a time for Mencken when language awareness emerged; he began to "penetrate suddenly to the difference between to, two, and too, or to that between run in baseball and run in topographical science, or cats and Katz. the effect is massive and profound" (159).

This gradual dawning of a verbal consciousness might never have led him to his trade as a journalist had there not been a tangible link between this abstract enlightenment and the concrete interests of the child. The link came with the gift of "Dorman's Baltimore No. 10 Self-Inker Printing Press" (216), his most significant Christmas gift: "It was the printing press that left its marks, not only upon my hands, face, and clothing, but also upon my psyche. They are still there though more than fifty years have come and gone" (217). Granted, these may be the myths of childhood—not the realities—created by the mind of an old man; their significance is in their nature, not their accuracy, for they document the initial sparks of an interest in language that would later make him as consistent a cataloger of words as was the great lexicographer Johnson.

As a Journalist

The Happy Days volume of Mencken's autobiographical sketches covers the years from 1880 to 1892. In 1898, when he was eighteen, Mencken applied for his first newspaper job with the Baltimore Morning Herald and wrote his first two items on February 23, 1899

(Bode, Mencken 28). Mencken looks back at these days as the beginnings of his interest in American English: "I began to observe American speechways as a young reporter working in the police-courts of Baltimore at the turn of the century" (Supplement I ix-x). Though he wrote only straight news at first, he frequently reproduced the dialects he heard. In an 1899 news item about the death of a street preacher, he reproduces the language of both the preacher—"Buckle on your armor, brethren and sisters! Gird yourself with the armor of the Lord!"—and of a Black woman in the audience—"Dat's de Lawd's work, sho 'nuff, en you bettah let it alone" (Stenerson, Iconoclast 86-87).

When Mencken was given his own column, he was free to experiment with subjects as he liked. His first column appeared on October 28, 1900—"Rhyme and Reason." It was renamed "Knocks and Jollies" in November. At the same time, he began "Terse and Terrible Texts," and later came "Untold Tales" (Bode, Mencken 35). The titles alone reflect Mencken's humor and his love for the sound of words. In "Baltimore and the Rest of the World" Mencken began to develop a "personal and individual" style and began to air his linguistic interests. For example, one column reported, "The catsup vs. Ketchup controversy is raging in Rochester, N.Y., and all the massive intellects of the town are centered upon it" (Bode, Mencken 35). Bode considers "Baltimore" the most successful of the early columns and says that their "coltish" quality is the testing ground for later, more significant Free Lance essays (35).

In 1901 Mencken was made Sunday editor of the Herald; then city editor (36-37) and finally editor in chief. When the Herald closed on June 17, 1906 (41), Mencken had had more than six years of experience at all levels of journalism and had come in contact with all varieties of people, stories, styles, and jobs. During these years he made an additional important discovery:

> I was urged to a more systematic study of American English by a chance encounter with a file of Dialect Notes in the Enoch Pratt Free Library . . . probably about 1905. . . . I was a steady customer of Dialect Notes after my discovery of its riches. (Supplement I, ix-x)

Manchester says that Dialect Notes was a "small, erudite journal . . . describing the origin of words." He suggests that much of Mencken's vocabulary, the "spice" of his "reviews and columns," can be attributed to this journal. The word then became Mencken's "hobby"—one that he decided to unleash on the public (138-139).

After the demise of the Herald, Mencken had a short tenure with the Evening News but finally settled with the Sun as its Sunday editor. According to Carl Bode, "No part of Mencken's life as a newspaperman ever remained uneventful but the closest to it was his first four years on the Sun" (Mencken 41). These years may have been uneventful, but Edgar Kemler sees them as most significant to Mencken's developing linguistic interests. During this period Mencken "read the British press and wrote editorials on British politics." This is when he first observed "the wide divergence of English and American usage." Kemler says that Mencken's reading of the English newspapers

inspired his card file and initiated his attention to language as a subject for his columns (34-35).

In 1910, the Sun acquired a new owner and became the Baltimore Evening Sun (Bode, Mencken 42). Mencken was "set to doing a daily article for its editorial pages" (Supplement I ix-x). According to Manchester, Mencken was "stuck one afternoon for a column to plug the editorial page," and so he wrote "The Two Englishes" (139). Mencken himself says that at this time he

> began experimenting with an occasional discussion of the common speech of the country, and by October was engaged upon an effort to expound its grammar. These inquiries brought a pleasant response from the readers of the paper who took to sending me additional material, and I soon began that huge accumulation of notes and commentaries. (Supplement I ix-x).

"The Two Englishes" appeared on October 10, 1910, and was so popular that he followed it with "England's English" (October 14), "Spoken American" (October 19), "More American" (October 20), and "American Pronouns" (October 25).

On May 8, 1911—the following year—Mencken's popular Free Lance column was launched. In this column Mencken was free to include still more material on American English. From May to November of 1911, the American language figures in nineteen columns. Frequently Mencken fills out a column with a list. On June 29, for example, he lists the following synonyms for bald head: eggtop, flyslide, kiss-kopf, basinet, bitulithic, veneering, dumpling, kisje-kopje, asphalt, macadam. In July and August of 1911 he runs a series of synonyms for intoxicated, which includes such words as pifflicated

(July 15); derailed, fuselled (July 18); lubricated (July 20); beached, submerged (July 24); sloshed (August 1). He devotes a large part of some columns to American grammar. For example, the August 1, 1911, column contains a list of the "principal parts of irregular verbs in the American language." The fifty-five verbs include climb-clim-clum, know-knowed-knew, say-sez-said, snow-snowed-snew.

Mencken also fills out his columns with "Specimens of the American language as she is spoken" (June 24, 1911):

> The voice of people as overheard on crowded highways:
> "Baltimore hardly couldn't be no slower"
> "If dirty roads wasn't so dirty they'd be better than them cobblestones." (June 9, 1911)
>
> Specimens of the noble American language:
> "He shouldn't ought to have went."
> "Them what has, gits." (June 30, 1911)

He also addresses spelling (November 9), "Vaudeville American" (August 30), and pronunciation of foreign words and phrases adopted into American (June 3, 9). He devotes the entire column for July 18 to the teaching of English, arguing that "the aim of the public schools is to fit children for the actual business of life and not to convert them into prigs and upstarts." This aim applies to language because "the plain people, it is obvious, want their children to learn the language that they themselves employ for communication."

Much of the time, Mencken includes these items for fun. He frequently plays with language at the expense of his audience. For example, he runs a continuous attack against "boomers." To show that the English language is "elastic" and "shameless," he gives the

following definition: "boomer, n, a press-agent who believes himself" (May 25, 1911). The dictionary of "boomery" continues on May 29, 1911: "Boomian, n, a gentle and lady-like boomer." The May 31, 1911, column defines Boomiform Appendix as "a useless organ."

Unlike 1911, in 1912 and 1913 few of Mencken's columns touch on the subject of language. August 16, 1912, includes three short lists of synonyms—for clergyman, for physician, and for journalist. September 17, 1912, defends bozart as a spelling for beaux arts. But in 1914, Mencken frequently chooses language for his subject. In 1914 and 1915, as noted earlier, Mencken was caught up in the conflicting attitudes toward the war. Stenerson describes his pro-German Free Lance articles as "an enemy outpost" in the midst of articles supporting Wilson and the English (Iconoclast 175). Finding the subject of the war too controversial, he turned to language.

The 1914 columns have much the same flavor as those of 1911. He returns to his habit of listing examples of the vernacular: "The American language, so soft, so smooth: 'I like a belt that's loosern what this one is'" (July 10, 1914). On November 20, 1914, he announces the publication in the Sunday Sun of a series of articles on the American Language and asks "the help of all persons who happen to be interested in the subject." His November 24 article begins with a "list of common words that are pronounced alike but spelled differently in English and American," but following this list, he immediately jumps to the subject of the war and the Sun's anti-German stance.

The Free Lance column irregularly makes reference to the American language throughout the rest of 1914. On October 24 he lambasts teachers—especially English teachers. "I have yet to hear of a single grammar teacher, indeed, who knows anything more about grammar than is to be found in the grammar books—which is a good deal less than nothing." In subsequent columns he lists objects that have different American and English names (November 27, 1914); he again attacks English teachers (December 7, 1914); he lists irregular verbs (December 12); and he devotes the entire December 28 column to plural pronouns in American English.

The last Free Lance column appeared October 28, 1915. The 1915 essays are bitter and serious. When Mencken does discuss language, it is in connection with the war. His March 8 column begins with an attack on the German language, but shifts to an attack on the English who are "posturing as martyrs"; he wonders if they are "past all caring."

The Free Lance essays are the most characteristically Mencken in their tone, their format, their subjects. They tell us that along with politics, religion, and local Baltimore controversies, Mencken was listening to and reporting on the American vernacular. In William Manchester's view, Mencken's "enthusiasms" in these columns are seen later in "the scholarship of his most enduring work as a lexicographer" (85). Much of this material resurfaced again and again in future articles and finally in The American Language.

Concurrent with the Free Lance articles for the Baltimore Evening Sun Mencken wrote occasionally for the Baltimore Sun. Between October 18 and December 20 of 1914, he wrote five essays on American English:

"Do You Speak English or American?" (November 22)
"Where 'American' Differs from the Old English Language" (November 29)
"National Characteristics Are Shown in the Use of Words" (December 6)
"They Differ Widely in the Spelling of Words" (December 13)
"Schools Don't Attempt to Teach the Language Americans Speak" (December 20)

Only one additional essay on language appeared in the Baltimore Evening Sun in 1916—"Notes on the American Language" (September 7).

The importance of these years, 1899-1916, to Mencken's philological interests is inestimable. In addition to collecting and sorting his ideas about language, he accumulated a "public," in Manchester's view, much "as a shop keeper accumulates customers, during his first years in the business" (86). Mencken's public would continue to grow and would respond enthusiastically to his language interests.

In December of 1916, Mencken was sent to Germany as a war correspondent for the Baltimore Sun. The United States broke off relations with Germany in February of 1917, and Mencken returned home in March to find that the United States had entered the war. Consequently, it was impossible for him to write the sort of pro-German essays he would have preferred (Adler 52-54). In June of 1917, he made an arrangement with the New York Evening Mail to write two articles a week, avoiding any discussion of the war. But, by

Mencken's understated admission, "now and then a reference to it slipped in." The Mail was seized and suppressed by the government in 1918 (Adler 55), but before its closure Mencken had contributed to it ten essays. Two of these essays show that his experience as a war correspondent added another dimension to his philology.

"Nothing Dead about Language U.S. Boys Take to the Trenches" (September 28, 1917)
"How They Say it 'Over There'" (October 25, 1917)

If Mencken could not write directly about the war, he could do it indirectly by discussing the language. In 1917 and 1918 he also wrote four essays on swearing and continued to probe the nature of British and American English:

"Time Will Mold Our Speech" (October 15, 1917)
"The Critical Vocabulary" (January 31, 1918)
"The Curse of Spelling" (April 11, 1918)

Following the publication of The American Language in 1919, Mencken continued to write for the Baltimore Sunpapers, but from 1920 to 1940 only five journalistic essays are devoted to language. "Essay on American" appeared in the Baltimore Evening Sun on November 7, 1921. Subsequently printed in the 1921 edition of The American Language, this was a translation of the Declaration of Independence from English to American. In fact, much of Mencken's newspaper material at this time was related to The American Language. "On Grammarians" (Baltimore Evening Sun, February 6, 1922) was a rehashing of his attacks on schoolmarms, and "[Baltimore] Streets and their Names" (Baltimore Evening Sun, May 29, 1922) was related to Chapter VIII—"Proper Names in America." Even his two essays on

swearing ("On the Art of Cussing," Baltimore Evening Sun, February 21, 1921, and "The Art of Swearing," Baltimore Evening Sun, May 24, 1937) were part of the section on euphemisms in Chapter IV.

Between November 9 and January 29, 1928, the Chicago Sunday Tribune syndicated Mencken's revisions of many of the Evening Sun essays. Only two of these reflect his interest in language and are general restatements of his earlier linguistic essays:

"The American Language" (April 12, 1925)
"The Language We Speak" (September 4, 1927)

But in 1934, when Mencken was working on the fourth edition of The American Language, the New York American asked him to do a weekly article on American English. According to Mencken, these articles fitted naturally with his ongoing language project (Adler 114). Between July 9, 1934, and May 20, 1935, he wrote thirty essays related to language.

As a Magazine Editor and Essayist

In addition to Mencken's newspaper articles, his contributions to various magazines demonstrate his lifelong interest in the word—particularly his years with the Smart Set and The American Mercury. In mid-1914, Mencken agreed to co-edit the Smart Set with George Jean Nathan (Williams 320), but he had been contributing book reviews and columns to it since 1908. His most significant linguistic essay for the Smart Set was published in 1913 as part of a series on the American. In the first essay, "The American" (June 1913), he asked "What is he?" (91). He answered the question in five additional essays:

"The American: His Morals" (July 1913)
"The American: His Language" (August 1913)
"The American: His Ideas of Beauty" (September 1913)
"The American: His Freedom" (October 1913)
"The American: His New Puritanism" (February 1914)

These articles were originally intended as a book called The Americans. It was never published, but the chapter on "The American: His Language" was a composite of Mencken's ideas about American English—the details of which were scattered throughout his newspaper prose of the previous decade.

Mencken begins his essay with a typical tirade against Schoolmarms: "Schoolteachers, as a class, are the most hunkerous and unobservant folk in all the world." The "orthodox English" grammar that they teach has been replaced by American English grammar (89). He analyzes American pronouns and verbs, and he concludes that the American is bent on simplification. He argues that "American is much richer than English" and cites dozens of new words, borrowed words, compounded words, similes, and slang. He concludes with this observation:

> Such is American, a language preeminent among the tongues of the earth for its eager hospitality to new words, and no less for its compactness, its naked directness, and its disdain of all academic obfuscations and restraints. (95)

He believes that schoolteachers will eventually have to "make a frank compromise" between book English and the American language: "If such a compromise is ever reached, the result, in short order, will be an entirely new language . . . distinct from orthodox English" (96). These arguments in this eight-page article form the core of what became the 1919 edition of The American Language.

As an editor and reviewer for the Smart Set and The American Mercury, Mencken established the widest possible territory for his philological interests. For the Smart Set he reviewed such important books as Edward Sapir's Language and Otto Jesperson's Language, both in May of 1922. In 1924, Mencken and Nathan, with the aid of Alfred E. Knopf, founded The American Mercury, for which Mencken was a major editorial force until 1933. By 1924, Mencken's American Language was in its third edition, and he was well established as a spokesman for the development of American linguistic studies. Consequently, Mencken reviewed for the Mercury such works as Jesperson's An International Language (November 1928), volume III of Hans Kurath and George Curme's A Grammar of the English Language (August 1931), and The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary (June 1933). He also had an opportunity to solicit and publish other writers on language: "The American Language in Mexico" (H. C. McKinstry, March 1930), "The Russian Language in the United States" (J. B. Wells, April 1932), "Notes on American Yiddish" (George Wolfe, August 1933). Particularly important are the articles by noted linguists of the period: Sapir contributed "The Grammarian and His Language" (February 1924); Krapp wrote "The English of the Negro" (June 1924); and Louise Pound added "Notes on the Vernacular" (October 1924).

Though Mencken exercised greatest control, perhaps, in what he chose to review and what he chose to print, his interest in the word is best seen in his editorial comments to other writers for the Mercury. For example, when Dane Yorke submitted an article to the

Mercury entitled "Regusted Radio," Mencken suggested that not all readers would be familiar with the word regusted because it was a slang term from the "Amos and Andy" radio program (Bode, Mencken 254). Though regusted is just the sort of term Mencken would appreciate, if it did not reach his readers it was unsuitable. A similar suggestion was made to George S. Schuyler who submitted to the Mercury an article called "The Decline of the Negro Church." Mencken responded in a letter, January 26, 1932, that the title was "a bit cold and formal. Perhaps 'Black America Begins to Doubt' would be better," he said. This letter, says Carl Bode, demonstrates "Mencken's gift for the eye-catching phrase" (Letters 261).

In addition to the Smart Set and the Mercury, Mencken wrote articles on language for dozens of other magazines. To American Speech, which lists him as a co-founder, he contributed some thirteen essays on such topics as "Jitney" (January 1927), "'O.K.,' 1840" (April 1942), "War Words in England" (February 1944), and "Some Opprobrious Nicknames" (February 1949). His essays on linguistic topics were printed in erudite periodicals such as The Yale Review ("The American Language," March 1936) and The New Yorker for which he wrote a series of eight articles called "Postscripts to the American Language" (September 25, 1948-October 1, 1949). At the same time, he wrote for General Mills' house magazine Horizon—"The Language of the Flower Mill" (March 1948)—and was frequently "condensed" in Readers Digest (an ironic but appropriate outlet for his philological interests considering his hatred of the mob but his love for the mob's language).

As an Old Man

Even late in his career, when Mencken was not writing directly about language, his philological interests crept in. In 1943 he published Heathen Days—third in the series of reminiscences about his life. The style is as fluid and comfortable as the style of Happy Days (1940) or Newspaper Days (1941). In an essay set in 1913—"Court of Honor"—a fourth-rate actress explains how an unsuitable suitor nevertheless makes her feel wonderful after a bad stage performance: "I know that I have been lousy, but there he is waiting for me to tell me that I haven't" (126). Though Mencken is caught up in the spirit of this steamy story from his young manhood, he cannot resist the footnote for the word lousy: "This term was still a novelty in 1912, even on Broadway. It came in toward the end of 1911" (126). His comment sheds no light on his story, but he obviously thinks that the reader will appreciate this linguistic tidbit.

Such examples prove that Mencken's careful attention to language—begun before he was twelve years old—was sustained throughout his life and that in his reviews, in his role as an editor, in his correspondence, and in his reminiscences he was always a philologist.

In 1947, Mencken suffered his first stroke, which was followed by the massive stroke in 1948 that left him "an old, incapacitated man" (Bode, Mencken 370). The great irony is that at the end of his life, the word failed him. His interest in language might have

begun, as Manchester suggests, as a "hobby," but it grew to such professional and personal importance that it became the center of his life. The cruel effect of the 1948 stroke was that "he could no longer read or write. And he could no longer speak except haltingly. Once he realized all this he threatened to kill himself" (Bode, Mencken 370). A consultant, who was called in by Mencken's physician, reported that "Mencken not only could not read but could not comprehend much of what he heard. . . . The extent of incomprehension was concealed by the remnants of Mencken's remarkable facility with language" (Bode, Mencken 371).

The man who had noted in his youth that Arabs was pronounced in Baltimore's streets with "the first a as in day," who noted for his Sun readers the controversy between catsup and ketchup, was reduced in his old age to the indignity of saying "'scoot' when he meant 'coat'; 'ray' when he meant 'rain'; 'yarb' when he meant 'yard'" (Bode, Mencken 372).

CHAPTER II

MENCKEN'S ATTITUDES TOWARD THE LANGUAGE OF THE COMMON MAN[1]

Mencken's Incongruous Attitudes

In his essay "H. L. Mencken: A Postscript," Charles Angoff says that Mencken is "a philosophical anarchist, a literary stylist, a vaudevillian, a life-long irresponsible boy whose chief delight in life was . . . 'to stir up the animals'" (467). Admittedly, Mencken loves to "stir up the animals," and to any serious student this "stirring up" can sometimes be confusing. Mencken's intensity leads him to make sweeping generalizations—often for effect; these, in turn, lead to stereotypes which seem inconsistent and contradictory. Douglas Stenerson argues that these stereotypes are really just part of his style—"exaggeration," "invective and ridicule": "Although Mencken sometimes seemed to assume that his stereotypes summed up the whole truth, his quick response to anything vital and colorful in individuals saved him from consistently taking his own sweeping generalizations at their face value" ("The Forgotten Man" 690).

While Mencken may not have taken his stereotypes "at their face value," his reader often does, especially when the reader is himself an "animal" who is stirred to emotion rather than thought.

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[1]The generic he is used throughout this dissertation.

The result is that Mencken is charged with inconsistency, and his ideas are not taken seriously. Indeed, if one takes Mencken's work as lightly as does Angoff (who is notorious for his open dislike of Mencken) and considers him a mere entertainer—a "vaudevillian," a "life-long irresponsible boy"—then the consistency or inconsistency of his work is unimportant. But to one who takes Mencken seriously, the validity of his ideas is contingent on their consistency and logic.

One of Mencken's most incongruous, sweeping generalizations is his hatred of the common American masses. In the series of articles on the American which Mencken wrote for the Smart Set in 1913, he has characteristically "little good" to say about him. The first article—"The American" (June 1913)—describes him as a "sub-brachycephalous and sentimental fellow." Mencken identifies several dubious qualities:

> his sudden sobs and rages, his brummagem Puritanism, his childish braggadocio, his chronic waste of motion, his elemental humor, his great dislike of arts and artists, his fondness for the grotesque and melodramatic, his pious faith in quacks and panaceas, his curious ignorance of foreigners, his bad sportsmanship, his primitive feeding, his eternal self-medication, his weakness for tin pot display and strutting, his jealous distrust of all genuine distinction, his abounding optimism, his agile pursuit of the dollar. (89)

In this essay, Mencken depicts the American as a hybrid or mutant. The product of European cultures, he evolves on American soil as "a creature that had never been on land or sea." He is characterized by "gawkiness and gaucherie: he ceased to be a gentleman, or even the larva of a gentleman, by any European standard" (87).

In an essay called "The American Tradition," Mencken elaborates on this loss of gentility, calling "the Anglo-Saxon of the great herd"

> the least civilized of men and the least capable of true civilization. His political ideas are crude and shallow. He is almost wholly devoid of aesthetic feeling; he does not even make folk-lore or walk in the woods. The most elementary facts about the visible universe alarm him and incite him to put them down. Educate him, make a professor of him, teach him how to express his soul, and he still remains palpably third-rate. He fears ideas almost more cravenly than he fears men. (Prejudices IV 40)

Such an indictment of the common man—or as Mencken would come to label him, the "boob," "homoboobiens," who make up the "booboisie" (Kemler 159)—identifies Mencken as an elitist. It logically follows that he would extend this indictment of the "great herd" to all facets of their lives—even their language. A casual reader would expect Mencken to despise the language of the common man and praise the language of his elite superiors. But such is not the case.

The third of the Smart Set essays on the American—"The American: His Language"—praises the "spoken American of the common people" as "a language preeminent among the tongues of the earth" (93-95). Mencken praises its "vigor": "It is, indeed, an extraordinarily succinct, nervous and clangorous speech. None other of modern times is better adapted to the terse and dramatic conveyance of ideas" (93). He praises its "rich similes" (94), its "lush and vigorous slang" (94), its superiority over English:

> That American is much richer than English, even than the loosest spoken English, in its concise and picturesque words, precipitating ideas of considerable complexity into one or two sforzando syllables, must be evident to anyone who studies the vocabularies of the two languages. (93)

And he praises the American's desire "to make speech lucid, lively, dramatic, staccato, arresting, clear—and to that end he is willing to sacrifice every purely aesthetic consideration" (95).

Though he uses the term American, what he means by it is not immediately clear, and at this point one must be careful to avoid the snares of his sterotypes. Mencken's praise certainly does not extend to the language of a Harding, a Wilson, a Sherman, a Babbitt, a schoolmarm—all of whom represent to Mencken the worst possible types of Americans. Rather, he lauds a particular mold of individual American—the plain man who is uncorrupted by aristocratic ideals and to whom formal English is almost a foreign tongue.

Mencken's conflicting attitudes toward the common man and his language are addressed by Douglas Stenerson in his book H. L. Mencken: Iconoclast From Baltimore.

> Throughout his career, his attitudes toward the American public showed a divided allegiance. On one hand, as a member of the enlightened minority, he ridiculed the shortcomings and follies of the majority. He reveled in its language, its humor, its occasional refusals to conform to what was expected of it. (79)

William Allan Williams attributes this "divided allegiance" to Mencken's divided critical perspectives: "Mencken was criticizing from conservative and radical premises simultaneously" (295-296). To understand how Mencken could be such a mixture of the conservative and the liberal, one must look at several factors: his German ancestry, his eighteenth-century elitism, his rejection of democracy, his belief in a genuine aristocracy and its forgotten man, his

conflicts during WWI and his place in the twenties—the decade that saw three editions of The American Language.

Mencken's German-American Heritage

H. L. Mencken's grandfather—Burkhardt Ludwig Mencken—emigrated from Saxony in 1848. According to Stenerson, some immigrants between 1830 and 1900 became Americanized, but most became "German-Americans." That is, in response to American life, they developed a "complex of moral and social attitudes and a way of life" that was peculiar to the mixture of the two cultures (Iconoclast 48-49). Stenerson estimates that in Mencken's youth, one-fourth of Baltimore's 425,000 residents belonged to this German-American community. Mencken, being the oldest son of the oldest son, was "potentially the next head of all the American branches of his family and therefore highly attuned to the German-American tradition" (Iconoclast 39). Furthermore, he inherited from his grandfather Burkhardt "consciousness of a proud family heritage," which distinguished him from the majority of German-Americans (Iconoclast 44).

In spite of his strong German heritage, however, Mencken himself admitted that what first sparked his interest in Germany was not his family heritage but—ironically—Mark Twain's A Tramp Abroad. Stenerson asks, "Why did he gag at Grimm's Fairy Tales but eagerly swallow Huckleberry Finn" (Iconoclast 58)? His question is answered in part by William Allan Williams who believes that "from the beginning Mencken was not so much attracted by a flesh and blood Germany, a

militaristic state or the Vaterland, as he was by a cultural ideal" (325).

That ideal held that the German-American tradition was superior to the Anglo-Saxon tradition: "He was convinced early in life that Bourgeois German-Americans, with few exceptions, were more competent, industrious, and honest, and therefore usually more prosperous, than Anglo-Saxons." Mencken says that he "inherited . . . a bias against the rabble." It was his father's view that

> most of the dead-beats and the Schnorrer were pure Anglo-Saxons from the South or from the Southern counties of Maryland. . . . My father viewed them with great contempt, as incompetent and often dishonest. . . . To say that anything was American, in my family circle, was to hint that it was cheap and trashy. (qtd. in Iconoclast 52)

Given this background, it is not surprising that Mencken is aware of his place near the top of the hierarchy of social classes and that he assumes certain prerogatives of his class. This attitude—in combination with the anti-puritan, free-thinking attitudes that he inherited from his grandfather and his father—produced an elitist (Iconoclast 48-50).

Eighteenth-Century Idealism and Rejection of Democracy

Mencken stereotypes the common American as "rabble" and as "mob man," yet—as Stenerson points out—he is quick to respond to the "vital and colorful in individuals." This appreciation for individuality is a characteristic that Mencken shares with eighteenth-century elitists such as Washington, Adams, and Jefferson. In fact,

those who knew Mencken best identify him as an Augustan, an eighteenth-century idealist, a libertarian. Carl Bode, in the essay "Mencken in His Letters," says that Mencken was an Aristotelian, bound to the material, scientific world, a man of the Age of Reason (itself an Aristotelian age), as were his closest friends—doctors, businessmen, scientists, etc. (246-247). According to Bode, the man who knew Mencken "better than anyone else" was his brother August; he believed that Henry was "fitted for the eighteenth rather than the twentieth century":

> He saw him as skeptical, far beyond the average of his day in many matters; and ready to speak his mind even at a cost, like Voltaire. . . . He saw him as someone who prized clarity in thinking and writing; who made it a habit to define his ideas and then express them so that their shape was unmistakable. (246-247)

Mencken was an eighteenth-century man not only in his idealism but also in his personal life. According to August, "he was an old-style gentleman," a man who loved good fellowship, but "beneath his bourgeois good fellowship lay an elitist who all his life distrusted the democratic horde" (qtd. in Bode, "Mencken in His Letters" 246-247).

It is upon this very "horde" that Mencken often turns his eighteenth-century wit. But here August makes a distinction between Mencken and the eighteenth-century wits: "With rate exceptions," Mencken's wit "avoided the waspishness of Alexander Pope's and the contempt for mankind displayed in Jonathan Swift's. It considered mankind amusing rather than contemptible. It specially savored 'Boobus Americanus'" (qtd. in Bode, "Mencken in His letters" 247). Mankind's folly saves him from bitterness. On the other hand, his

German elitism causes him to scorn such folly and sets him in search of the ideal man and the ideal society.

In his search for the ideal, he rejects democracy outright. He believes, as did Winston Churchill, that democracy is "the worst form of government except for the others." Malcom Moos, in his essay "Mencken, Politics, and Politicians," says that Mencken is an "immovable" and "consistent libertarian" and that liberty is "the cornerstone of his political beliefs" (158). Mencken regards the loss of liberty—be it the freedom to "do as one damn well pleases," to defy social custom, or to coin his own vocabulary—as the most serious weakness of the boobocracy. Ironically, the American boob relinquishes such liberty when he embraces equality to the exclusion of eccentricity.

Mencken believes that a democratic society leans toward sameness and consistency that obliterate individuality. An excellent example of this process as it applies to language is found in Mencken's Minority Report, in a comment on the word aristocrat:

> In what passes as the popular mind, words, like the ideas they represent, become formalized, fossilized, and emptied of intelligible significance. This is especially (though surely not exclusively) true in America, where all thinking tends to become cant and all language a sort of meaningless slang—a mere exchange of what the philologists call counter-words, ie., worn out rubber stamps. Thus, the concept "aristocrat" tends to become—and has, in fact, already become—extremely narrowed, and with it the meaning of the word. What it connotes intrinsically, is simply the "best" type of man. . . . But in the United States aristocrat has become almost indistinguishable from loafer. (185-186)

One could debate what Mencken means by "the popular mind," but assuming that popular is synonymous in this instance with bogus

pseudo, or boobocratic, one can make two important points: First, Mencken's definition of aristocrat closely parallels Thomas Jefferson's definition of natural aristocrat (323). And second, Mencken emphasizes the inseparability of words and ideas. One might say that "in what passes as the popular mind," ideas become "formalized, fossilized, and emptied of intelligible significance." In America, the average democratic man becomes like the "rubber-stamp" words that he uses.

Though Guy Forgue sees "evidence" of "fundamental democratic leanings" in Mencken's attitudes toward language, the palpable evidence is entirely on the side of elitism. But Forgue is accurate when he says that Mencken vigorously upholds "the vulgar speech of Americans, as contrasted with the more refined, but slightly vapid correctness of the cultivated" ("Mencken and Cooper" 3).

Forgue has used the precise adjective in "vapid." It is this watery, insipid formalism of boobus Americanus that Mencken despises—the conformity to some ridiculous stereotype that strips language of dramatic clarity. Forgue quotes Mencken as saying that "the instinct of the folk has triumphed over the imbecility of pedagogues and democracy, perhaps, has earned some praise." If Mencken accords democracy any praise at all, it is only faint and damning, and Forgue is quick to point out that Mencken's statement is not democratic: "Here goes the cosmopolitan aristocrat with his outspoken dislike of the mob" (3). But it is important to reiterate that Mencken's praise is for "instinct." Nowhere has Mencken ever praised the language of

the boob; in fact, it is frequently his language that betrays and stereotypes him as a charlatan. The "lodge-joiners, back thumpers, do-gooders and goose-steppers" (Stenerson, "The Forgotten Man" 687) have no individuality and have abandoned all instinct. The ideal man whose language Mencken admires is characterized by qualities other than "vapid correctness" and "cultivation."

The Genuine Aristocracy and the Forgotten Man

By rejecting democracy, Mencken is forced to look elsewhere for his ideal. In Stenerson's view, "Mencken found a close approximation of his ideal society" in the eighteenth-century Tidewater (Iconoclast 65). Mencken praises Jefferson, in his essay "The Heroic Age," as a man of "complete integrity" (392). With men such as Jefferson and Washington, Mencken believes in a true aristocracy which he best describes in his essay "American Culture." Frequently anthologized as one of his most typical pieces, the essay draws a clear picture of his ideal:

> Its first and most salient character is its interior security, and the chief visible evidence of that security is the freedom that goes with it—not only freedom in act, . . . but also and more importantly freedom in thought, the liberty to try and err, the right to be his own man. It is the instinct of a true aristocracy, not to punish eccentricity by expulsion, but to throw a mantle of protection about it. . . . It is the custodian of the qualities that make for change and experiment; it is the class that organizes danger to the service of the race; it pays for its high prerogatives by standing in the forefront of the fray. (978)

Believing in this ideal, Mencken sees the "capital defect" of American culture as the absence of a "civilized aristocracy":

> 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 stock-brokers' wives lolling obscenely in opera boxes, or of haughty Englishmen slaughtering whole generations of grouse, . . . 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, and by the scarcely less remarkable assumption that the peerage of England is identical with the gentry—that is, that such men as Lord Northcliffe, Lord Riddel and even Lord Reading were English gentlemen. (976)

He then dubs this American mutant the "bugaboo aristocracy."

> But this bugaboo aristocracy is actually bogus, and the evidence of its bogusness lies in the fact that it is insecure. One gets into it only onerously, but out of it very easily. . . . He must exhibit exactly the right social habits, appetites and prejudices, public and private. . . . It would ruin him, for all society column purposes, to move to Union Hill, N.J., or to drink coffee from his saucer, or to marry a chambermaid with a gold tooth, or to join the Seventh Day Adventists. (977)

Such insecurity breeds feelings of inferiority. The inferior man must then

> find himself superiors, that he may marvel at his political equality with them. . . . The inferior man needs an aristocracy to demonstrate, not only his mere equality, but also his actual superiority. The society columns in the newspapers may have some such origin. (976-977)

Because the American boob insists on such "democratic inequality," Mencken has no faith that a genuine aristocracy can flourish in America.

> No such aristocracy, it must be plain, is now on view in the United States. The makings of one were visible in the Virginia of the Eighteenth Century, but with Jefferson and Washington the promise died. (978)

Obviously, Mencken's distinction between the genuine and the "bubaboo" aristocracies is quite close to Jefferson's distinction between a natural and an artificial aristocracy. In Jefferson's famous letter to John Adams, he asserts,

> There is a natural aristocracy among men. The grounds of this are virtue and talents. . . . There is also an artificial aristocracy, founded on wealth and birth, without either virtue or talents; for with these it would belong to the first class. The natural aristocracy I consider as the most precious gift of nature, for the instruction, the trusts, and government of society. (323)

Mencken clearly has more in common with Jefferson than with Hamilton or Adams; he believes in inalienable rights for all people—not just for the elite (Stenerson, Iconoclast 26). Yet he disagrees with Jefferson on several points and believes that Hamilton's fears "have come to realization" ("The Heroic Age" 383). For example, he does not share Jefferson's belief in "the wisdom of the common people" (Stenerson, Iconoclast 26). Jefferson looks to the masses to "elect the really good and wise" (324), but Mencken believes the masses are incapable of such discretion. Liberty is a "two-headed boon," he argues, and Jefferson sees "only half of it." Jefferson recognizes the "liberty of the people as a whole . . . freedom from the despotism of the king," but he was blind to the "liberty of the individual man to live his own life, within the limits of decency and decorum, as he pleased—freedom from the despotism of the majority" ("The Heroic Age" 383). This second freedom would—in Mencken's ideal aristocracy—protect eccentricity and challenge the bogusness of society.

To the student interested in Mencken's attitudes toward language, this second freedom is crucial. A genuine aristocracy "is the custodian of the qualities that make for change and experiment." It gives the individual the right to be different. Where language is concerned, Mencken expects the elite, the genuine aristocrat, to exercise the freedom inherent in his status to experiment, challenge, and create. What Mencken sees, however, is no elite at all, but rather a deceived citizen who aspires to a false standard of elitism and so becomes in thought and in language an Elk, a Methodist, a chiropractor, or an English teacher. Mencken laments that the genuine aristocrat—the gentleman—survives in American culture "only as an anachronism; his day is done" ("The Heroic Age" 382).

According to Norris W. Yates, Mencken's ideal aristocrat or ideal gentleman is different from the two nineteenth-century models—the cavalier and the Christian gentleman.

> The cavalier was a sportsman, a drinker, a duelist . . . and something of a rake. . . . The Christian gentleman was none of these things. Both types were forthright with their peers, gentle with their inferiors, and courteous to all; both were responsible servants of the state and leaders of the people. (146)

Mencken rejected both of these ideals. His German ancestry and his reading of Friedrich Nietszche and Darwin would have made the nineteenth-century prototypes unacceptable. Yates says, "Mencken's aristocrat was too thrifty and prudent to be a cavalier, and too much of a materialist and evolutionist to be greatly swayed by the Christian ethic" (146).

According to Yates, Mencken owes his ideal aristocrat to William Graham Sumner, a social Darwinist from whom Mencken borrowed the phrase the Forgotten Man (150). "Both authors," says Yates, "saw the uncommon common citizen as victimized by boobus Americanus . . . and by the cads and crackpots who led the hordes of that species" (157). The "uncommon common citizen" is best defined as a combination of Jefferson's natural aristocrat and Sumner's "clean, quiet, virtuous, domestic citizen" who is "independent, self supporting and asks no favors" (Stenerson, "The Forgotten Man" 687). In the first issue of The American Mercury, January 1924, Mencken identifies the Forgotten Man as his audience—"the normal, educated, well-disposed, unfrenzied, enlightened citizen of the middle minority" ("The Forgotten Man" 686). It is important to note that although Mencken—the elitist—scorns and stereotypes the "rabble" middle class, here he is identifying or responding to an individual. As Stenerson has pointed out, he is acknowledging the colorful and the vital exceptions among the "rabble." Stenerson agrees; Mencken "scourged not the bourgeoisie, as such, but the 'booboisie.' That is, he resisted and ridiculed only those members of the middle class who were lodge-joiners, back thumpers, do-gooders and goose-steppers and thus, in his lexicon, qualified as boobs" ("The Forgotten Man" 687). He resisted the booboisie, which is blind to the individuality and variety within the bourgeoisie.

The Genteel Tradition

Since Mencken rejects the nineteenth-century aristocratic models of the cavalier and the Christian gentleman in favor of the forgotten man, he logically rejects the nineteenth-century "genteel tradition" in literature and language. Stenerson defines the genteel tradition as

> based on the premise that all the major issues of life and art were ethical problems to be judged and settled according to ideal standards. As a social pattern, the tradition stressed the sanctity of the home, the sacredness of the marriage ties, and strict observance of a rigid code of conduct, especially by women. (Iconoclast 67).

This ideal, which was dominant in American culture in the early 1890s, valued European standards of life and art over American standards. It touted English models, in particular:

> Literature produced in America, according to his view, was a tributary of English literature, and the language spoken in America was most acceptable when it followed British norms of usage. (Iconoclast 67)

The genteel tradition appealed strongly to the Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, middle class (Iconoclast 67)—the booboisie, in other words—which Mencken's German leanings could only force him to reject. At the turn of the century, when Mencken was becoming an adult, the tradition was already being challenged. Though the public responded slowly, Mencken accepted the challenge "eagerly and sympathetically," even as a high-school student (Stenerson, Iconoclast 71).

The main proponents of the genteel tradition were the Humanists—Paul Elmer More, Irving Babbitt, and his student Stuart Pratt Sherman. They and Mencken shared some beliefs—suspicion of

democracy, belief in the "inequality" of men, "general hostility to liberal humanitarianism," and belief in the sanctity of home and property (Williams 369). They and Mencken disagreed, however, on other issues. The Humanists rejected progress; Mencken embraced it. They believed in self-restraint; Mencken believed in "the full and free functioning of the ego." They saw culture as the "flowering of tradition"; Mencken saw it as the flowering of "everything contemporary." The Humanists objected to naturalism; Mencken wholeheartedly accepted realism and naturalism, which he saw as part of Darwinism (Williams 373).

Stenerson sees Mencken's promotion of the naturalist movement as the action that "most definitely" set him at odds with the proponents of the genteel tradition—the booboisie (Iconoclast 74). He supported Dreiser, for example, against censors like Stuart Sherman—the "prissy schoolmarms and withered academics who feared the play of the uninhibited ego and demanded conformity to an outworn and damaging puritan tradition" (Williams 382). Realism and naturalism were, he thought, "the best hope for a representative native literature." He was determined, says Stenerson, "to free the United States from literary colonialism" (Iconoclast 133).

Mencken is also determined to free the United States from linguistic colonialism. Just as he rejects the whole genteel tradition, he rejects genteel British English. In Mencken's view (prejudiced by his German upbringing), the genteel and Anglo-Saxon traditions were synonymous (Stenerson, Iconoclast 169), and the

characteristic he most despises is their hypocrisy: "The disparity between what is publicly approved and what is privately done," he claims, "is at the heart of the Anglo-Saxon, and especially of the American character" (Prejudices II 102). In literature this disparity produces "virtuous conformity," "complacent optimism," "sonorous platitude and easy certainty" (Stenerson, Iconoclast 186). In language, his hypocrisy produces a genteel standard of English that is publicly taught but privately rejected: "The poor little martyrs in the schools are still taught English instead of American," he argues. "And not the fluent, racy, loose-jointed English of living and breathing Englishmen, but . . . the petrified, bloodless, clumsy English of the pundits" ("His Language" 89). If a student dared use "such a strutting, artificial language outside the classroom," he goes on, "his companions would probably laugh at him as a prig, and his parents . . . would probably cane him as an impertinent critic of their own speech" ("His Language" 90).

Such Anglo-Saxon hypocrisy extends to all parts of the culture—not just to literature and language but even to politics. Stenerson says, "Mencken felt increasingly that the Anglo-Saxon traits he detested were typified by President Wilson and his administration" (Iconoclast 171). It is not surprising, then, that WWI brought many of Mencken's conflicting ideals and values into clear public focus. His German heritage, his Anglophobia, his rejection of the genteel, and his outspokenness made him one of the most controversial figures between 1914 and 1918.

World War I and the Twenties

During the war, minorities naturally chose sides; Anglophiles tended to sympathize with and support the "Motherland." Mencken, being an Anglophobe, naturally supported Germany and began to attack the follies of Anglo-Saxon culture—especially American culture (Williams 325). Before 1914, Mencken seemed, in Stenerson's view, more American than German and not particularly self-conscious about being a German-American. At first he even avoided publicly choosing sides (Iconoclast 170). But his Free Lance columns began to reflect his pro-German sympathies and began to appeal to the German-American standards he idealized (Iconoclast 163). Mencken abandoned the Free Lance in 1915, partly because he had assumed editorship of the Smart Set, but more realistically because of his pro-German stance. His column, says Stenerson, might have endured had it not been for the clash between Mencken's views and those of the Sun papers: "In the midst of editorials and news columns supporting Wilson and voicing the prevailing hostility against the Central Powers, Mencken's column seemed almost like an enemy outpost" (Iconoclast 175).

In late 1916, Mencken was sent to Germany as a war correspondent for the Sun; he returned in 1917 to a society ruled by "the mob man" who would no longer tolerate Mencken's views. According to Stenerson, this was a critical time for German-Americans. The Committee on Public Information, the Espionage Act, and the Sedition Act compromised their welfare: "For them, the war initiated a period of emotional crisis, divided loyalties, misunderstandings and

persecutions" (Iconoclast 166). The wave of anti-German feeling reinforced Mencken's Anglophobia, and he came to depend much more completely than he had before on German interests and associates for his intellectual and social life. It was during this time that he translated Nietzsche's The Antichrist (Iconoclast 181). And he finished The American Language in 1919—his most extensive attack on the British.

Stenerson says that The American Language "reinforced Mencken's efforts to create an American as opposed to an Anglo-Saxon tradition" (Iconoclast 219). But Stenerson has misjudged cause and effect. The American Language was the result of his efforts—not the reinforcement. Raven McDavid goes so far as to suggest that The American Language is the direct result of Mencken's Anglophobia and Germanophilia during World War I. In addition to the 1913 essay on language and the many columns devoted to American English, there would have been "further incidental pieces," McDavid speculates, "but almost certainly no systematic discussion" had World War I not broken out:

> But as a nation of wild-eyed hypermoral innocents entangled itself in the sticky web of international politics, Mencken—like many other good Americans—found himself officially muzzled. . . . In lieu of his editorials he devoted himself to the ostensibly harmless drudgery of philological comment, and in 1919 produced the first edition of "The American Language." (Abridgment vi-vii)

To the casual observer, Mencken's publication of The American Language at this time might appear to be just another of his contradictions. To laud in 1919 the language of a populace that he despised in 1914 seems hypocritical. But when one looks back to his

distinctions between the pseudo and genuine aristocracies—between the bourgeoisie and the booboisie—it becomes obvious that he was, by applauding American English, also attacking the Anglo-Saxon genteel tradition and reaffirming his belief in the ideal aristocrat.

The importance of World War I for Mencken's philosophy cannot be overestimated. Williams believes that the war "cemented" his prejudices (413). Carl Bode, his biographer, agrees:

> What he did as the result of the war was to hold on to them more firmly, to assert them even more extremely. He now realized more than ever how powerless the individual could be in struggling against either institutions or the populace. There is no doubt that the war deepened his contempt for both and made him all the more a rebel. (130)

Before 1914, Mencken went unnoticed as a rebel. In literature, manners, morals, and religion, he was—in Stenerson's assessment—a "comparatively isolated figure. . . . The ideas and values he held did not triumph until the twenties" (Iconoclast 161).

Mencken himself views the war as having delivered the final blow to the genteel tradition, freeing the United States from literary—and linguistic—colonialism:

> It was the war, in the end, that really broke down the old traditions. The bald fact that the majority of the adherents of that old tradition were violent Anglomaniacs, and extravagant in their support of the English cause from the first days of 1914, was sufficient in itself to make most of the younger writers incline the other way. The struggle thus became a battle royal between fidelity to the English cultural heritage of the country and advocacy of a new national culture that should mirror, not only the influence of England, but also that of every country that had contributed elements to the American strain. ("Introduction: Modern American Short Stories," Menckeniana 20: 3-4)

The result was that the "younger writers" and the younger audience in general were more open to Mencken's ideas. Most critics agree that after World War I Mencken enjoyed a popularity that he had never seen before. "Beyond doubt," says Louis Rubin, "the Twenties were his heyday, the era when he was, as the New York Times editorialized, the most powerful private citizen in the United States." Rubin calls Mencken both a "symptom" of the 1920s and a "symbol" of them (723). William Manchester sees 1919 as the "threshold" of Mencken's career: "Something had happened. A war had ended, but more: a new era had begun" (141). The American Language was so popular during this era that Mencken issued two further editions in 1921 and 1923. The twenties gave Mencken his most enthusiastic audience for attacks upon schoolmarm gentility, upon the British, and upon the booboisie.

The possible conclusions here are neither obvious nor simple. One can say that Mencken's social ideals are too complex to be systematized, that they submit to no logical analysis and leave it at that. To go further sometimes seems impossible. But there is consistency in his thought, though his ideas may not be systematic.

Mencken was consistently elitist, but he differentiated between two elites—the genuine aristocrat (the forgotten man) and the pseudo aristocrat (the American boob). The pseudo aristocrats espouse genteel cultural standards so they can feel superior in a democracy, which stresses equality. There is no doubt as to who the boobs are—Stuart Sherman, Wilson, Harding, Babbitt, More, the class of schoolmarms, etc.

The genuine aristocrats are not so easily identified because Mencken uses interchangeably such terms as forgotten man, average man, common man, plain man, and folk. Common to all these labels, however, is one characteristic. Douglas Stenerson says that the unifying feature of all Mencken's conflicting attitudes is his anti-democratic "insistence that the individual counts more than the group" (Iconoclast 30). Mencken's genuine aristocrat is an individual who has no false aspirations and is secure enough, though unconsciously so, to ignore the charlatans of the boobocracy. Consequently, his language is, like himself, natural, unaffected and clear.

CHAPTER III

MENCKEN AND THE SCHOOLMARM

The Middle-Class Concerns

If Mencken expected his ideal aristocrat to influence the growth of American English, he was disappointed. The greatest concern for language standards and the strongest influence on usage never come from the true elite—the natural or genuine aristocrat—but from the great middle class—businessmen, professionals, schoolmarms—all of whom are from Mencken's bugaboo aristocracy.

According to Albert H. Marckwardt, the middle class has always exerted the greatest influence on language:

> Within the history of modern societies it has always been the middle class which has manifested a greater and more anxious concern for the proprieties than either the lower class, which has tended toward indifference, or the upper, which has been protected by a thick coat of self-assurance. (American English 122-123)

Of these proprieties, says Marckwardt, "language has usually assumed a prominent position" (122-123). In eighteenth-century British society, the middle class "created the demand that led to excessive schoolmastering of the language." The "verbal prudery" of nineteenth-century American society is the consequence, according to Marckwardt, of its "predominantly middle-class character." He reminds us that the Puritans were largely middle class and that from them we have inherited—and still endorse—"a multitude of linguistic taboos" (123).

The upper and lower classes are rarely concerned with language propriety—the upper only if its self-confidence is threatened, the lower only if it aspires to the middle class. In either case, such individuals do not securely belong to the upper or lower groups and can be identified linguistically with the middle class, whose chief characteristic is insecurity. Marckwardt elsewhere labels these three classes "the assured, the anxious, and the indifferent" (Linguistics and Teaching 74). According to Dennis Baron, the anxiety and insecurity of the middle group are created by two forces: "The ranking of social and geographical dialects as superior and inferior, and an educational system based on a doctrine of correctness and purity in language that invariably conflicts with the observable facts of English usage" (228).

This "doctrine of correctness and purity in language" is certainly not limited to American culture. S. A. Leonard's The Doctrine of Correctness in English Usage 1700-1800 states that in England, before the eighteenth century, "little or no attention was given to questions of grammatical correctness" (9). During the 1700s, however, "everyone . . . appears to have noted the imperfection of the language and the necessity for remedial measures" (11):

> The prevailing view of language in the eighteenth century was that English could and must be subjected to a process of classical regularizing. Where actual usage was observed and recorded—even when the theory was promulgated that usage is supreme—this was, in general, done only to denounce and reform the actual idiom. (14)

Dennis Baron points out that this eighteenth-century concern for correctness was first carried into the school curriculum by

American—not British—pedagogues who suffered from a "colonial mentality that accorded New World English a second-class status." Baron argues that many Britishers and Americans still believe that British English is superior to American English (120). Dwight Macdonald is one such American. His 1962 essay "The Decline and Fall of English" has this to say:

> Today the best English is written and spoken in London—the contrast is painful between the letters-to-the-editor departments of the London Times and the New York Times—because there an educated class still values the tradition of the language. For English, like other languages, is an aesthetic as well as a practical means of communication. It is compounded of tradition and beauty and style and experience and not simply of what happens when two individuals meet in a barroom, or a classroom. (333)

Macdonald sounds remarkably like some of the eighteenth-century grammarians whom Leonard quotes in his Doctrine of Correctness—Bishop Lowth, Swift, Samuel Johnson, John Ward. Macdonald appeals to vague characteristics like "tradition and beauty and style." He implies that America has no "educated class" to carry on this tradition.

Anglophiles, as Mencken would call them, and proponents of genteel English argue that such a standard "is not just a bourgeois dialect." It is the accepted language of a democratic society. According to David Mackay, "Refusing to teach it to poor children would automatically condemn most of them to remaining poor and underprivileged, seal the division into sheep and goats" (Muller 63). The nation's business, law, and government are conducted in this "official dialect." One might argue that the poor—especially the

poor children—are denied access to their rights as U.S. citizens unless they are taught the official dialect.

Though the middle class demands such propriety and endorses a standard dialect, it is also skeptical of propriety. The average Elk, Baptist Sunday School Superintendent, realtor, or bank president (to list some of Mencken's favorite targets) is "uneasy" about his language, just as he is about his class. He is particularly uneasy if he has "risen" from the lower to the middle class. He and his peers "scorn cultivated speech and writing as fancy, effeminate, or highbrow" (Muller 67), yet they criticize themselves for their own improprieties. Herbert J. Muller uses Adlai Stevenson and Eisenhower as examples: Stevenson's "wit and style" earned him the label of "egghead," but Eisenhower's "manhandling of the language only proved that he was 'sincere'" (67). On this point, Albert Marckwardt cites James West's study Plainville, U.S.A. which concludes that "all but the most 'backwoodsy' [the indifferent?] speakers frequently ridicule and parody the stratum or strata of speech beneath or older than their own, and at the same time feel uncertain about their own usages" (Linguistics and Teaching 74).

The Schoolmarm

Such insecure attitudes toward language demand a symbol, one who decrees what ought to be, but is ridiculed when the middle class wants to adopt a common-man pose. The middle class needs a champion of correctness, one to whom it can look for standards of genteel

English and thereby earn a higher place in the class structure. But such a champion must be unattractive enough to merit scorn and must be willing to become a scapegoat when the middle class feels threatened by its own standards.

The symbol of middle-class dis-ease is, of course, the schoolmarm. H. L. Mencken, in his role as a libertarian and champion of free, natural speech, fought many adversaries, but none delighted him more than the English teacher. She is a caricature in American history, and yet every American—educated or not—knows her in the flesh. She has been stereotyped in a thousand portraints—Eudora Welty's Miss Julia Mortimer, Martin Joos and Henry Lee Smith's Miss Fidditch, Theodore Bernstein's Miss Thistlebottom. Dennis Baron calls her "an unattractive grammar monger" (226). According to Marckwardt, "she would rather parse than eat" (Introduction, The Five Clocks xiv). She is always coiled, ready to spring upon such utterances as "It's me," "between you and I," "different than." According to Donald J. Lloyd, she puts "triumphant exclamation marks in the margins of library books." She is "ready to tangle the thread of any discussion by pouncing on a point of grammar" (117). She is so ingrained in American consciousness that feminists have taken up arms against her appelation. Francine Frank and Frank Anshen, in their book Language and the Sexes, list Miss Fidditch as an objectionable label for the "stereotypical English teacher" (113).

Whatever we name her (or him), this character exists as fact as well as fiction, and she (or he) comes armed with the usage guide.

According to Dennis Baron, "English speakers have traditionally reached for these books as they have for other trappings of politeness and culture sought after by a largely middle-class society" (171). Baron's book Grammar and Good Taste traces the long ancestry of these usage guides and the pedagogues who write them. He cites a 1659 French work by Claude Faure de Vaugelas as one of the earliest such guides for a modern language (169). Over three hundred years ago, Vaugelas identified the great insecurity that drives the middle class to these rule books: "One incorrect word is all that is needed for a person to be scorned by a group" (171).

Throughout The American Language, Mencken depicts the "average American schoolmarm" as a classic representative of this insecure middle class—the booboisie—and suspects her of motives that have little to do with linguistic purity. "The chief guardian of linguistic niceness," he says,

> does not come from the class that has a tradition of culture behind it, but from the class of small farmers and city clerks and workmen. This is true, I believe, even of the average American college teacher. Such persons do not advocate and practice precision in speech on logical grounds alone; they are also moved by the fact that it tends to conceal their own cultural insecurity. (4th ed. 326-327)

The pedagogue is, in Mencken's view, a linguistic Babbitt who can no more accept "I seen" than a member of the boobocracy can "marry a chambermaid with a gold tooth." By promoting rigid standards, the schoolmarm conceals her own "cultural insecurity," and creates for herself a superior position—she thinks.

Like any other member of the boobocracy, she is never secure but is always beset by fears. The American pedagogue fears that

"natural growth of the language is wild and wicked" (TAL, 4th ed. 51), much the same as a prohibitionist fears alcohol or a religious fundamentalist fears Darwinism. "To this end," Mencken says, the schoolmarm and her colleagues "undertake periodical crusades against 'bad grammar,' the American scheme of pronunciation, and the general body of Americanisms" (TAL, 4th ed. 51). She is, he argues, a "half-wit" (Prejudices III 247).

In contrast to Mencken's indictment of English teachers, Richard Ohmann makes a case for their innocence. The schoolmarm is merely a tool in a cyclical movement, as much used as she is scorned. According to Ohmann, in the nineteenth century, writing came to be called upon to serve the needs of an industrialized society:

> Complex industrial firms needed a corps of managers who could size up needs, organize material, marshal evidence, solve problems, make and communicate decisions. Government and other bureaucracies had similar need for exposition and argument and allied skills. (93)

In Ohmann's view, the "goals of Freshman English, however they were adorned with academic and cultural ideology" were "framed in response to the needs of the industrial state and its governing class." And though Miss Fidditch and Miss Thistlebottom "show esthetic contempt for the language of businessmen, bureaucrats, advertisers," these "philistines" have created the typical freshman "theme" just as surely as English teachers have:

> The exchange is reciprocal. The leaders of industrialized society let English teachers know—indirectly, to be sure—what kind of writing they want; and English teachers help teach the next generation of leaders what kind of writing to want. (94)

Ohmann would argue that Mencken is wrong to blame English teachers for the promotion of genteel standards.

Though Mencken seldom praises this pedagogue, in the 1919 edition of The American Language, he admits that "the purist performs a useful office in enforcing a certain logical regularity" upon the linguistic process and thus "corrects our native tendency to go too fast" (28). Here, however, Mencken is acknowledging only his effect on the pace of change; he is not applauding his genteel English.

According to Louis Rubin, Mencken "wanted to get rid of the genteel tradition entirely, and substitute more realistic and worldly-wise literary standards in its place" (731). It is true that Mencken fought the genteel tradition in literature and language, but when Rubin says that Mencken "entertained no hopes of ever reforming . . . popular vulgarity," he comes dangerously close to misunderstanding Mencken (731). For reform, in general, Mencken has little use, and he certainly does not want reform of popular lingustic vulgarity. On the contrary, Mencken approves the bold, "barbaric inventions" of the American language:

> Let it be admitted: American is not infrequently vulgar; the Americans, too, are vulgar . . . ; America itself is unutterably vulgar. But vulgarity, after all, means no more than a yielding to natural impulses in the face of conventional inhibitions, and that yielding to natural impulses is at the heart of all healthy language-making. (TAL, 1st ed. 27)

The above quotation contains the core of Mencken's objections to the linguistic Babbitts: the backthumpers, do-gooders, and goose-steppers. These represent Jefferson's pseudo-aristoi and Mencken's boobocracy.

They are too insecure to flout convention and yield to "natural impulses." They are enemies of the "plain people" who "make their own language."

The Schoolmarm's Failure

The exact effect of the grammar monger is difficult to assess. Baron suspects that her brand of "instruction did less to reform the language of the mass of students than it did to instill in them a conviction that their own usage could never really match up to a linguistic ideal which in many cases they could not even understand" (166). Their conviction feeds their insecurity, and so the cycle leads to self-conscious individuals who know just enough to create strained and awkward sentences. Baron quotes the nineteenth-century "armchair linguist" Richard Grant White, who said, "Language is rarely corrupted, and is often enriched, by the simple, unpretending, ignorant man, who takes no thought of his parts of speech" (in other words, by the uninterested class); "it is from the man who knows just enough to be anxious to square his sentences by the line and plummet of grammar and dictionary that his mother tongue suffers most grievous injury" (204). In The American Language H. L. Mencken cites examples of just such injury. The schoolmarm's "crusades" against the colloquial "It is me" create "between you and I." Mencken believes that her attempt "to impose an inelastic and illogical grammar upon a living speech, succeeds only in corrupting it still more" (4th ed. 458).

The schoolmarm's corruption, however, is limited by the energy and life of the American language. Mencken believes that her influence is "negligible" and that "despite the gallant efforts of the pedagogues" American English has escaped "suffocating formalization" (TAL, 4th ed. 94). Mencken delights in the American who, "on his linguistic side, likes to make his language as he goes along," and he believes that not even the "hard work of the grammar teachers can hold the business back" (TAL, 1st ed. 22). Mencken notes in The American Language that a number of grammatical forms that the

> pedants rail against most vehemently—for example, the split infinitive, the use of between, either and neither with more than one, the use of than after different, the use of like for as, and so on—are so firmly established in the American vulgate that the schoolmarm's attempts to put them down are plainly hopeless. (4th ed. 472)

Here, as elsewhere, Mencken is reaffirming his faith that "the plain people, hereafter as in the past, will continue to make their own language" and that grammarians' "lives would be more comfortable if they ceased to repine over it, and instead gave it some hard study" (TAL, 4th ed. 473)

Sterling A. Leonard's 1932 monograph, Current English Usage, did just that. Originally issued in the English Journal, May 1927, it examined "what various judges have observed about the actual use or nonuse by cultivated persons of a large number of expressions usually condemned in English textbooks and classes" (2). Mencken may have believed that many forms "are so firmly established in the American vulgate that the schoolmarm's attempts to put them down are plainly hopeless," but Leonard shows that his judges (including fifty

college instructors belonging to MLA) had not given up. Among his 230 items, he lists the following forms as Disputable Usages:

> Either of these three roads is good.
> The British look at this differently than we do.
> It looked like they meant business.
> Do it like he tells you. (8-9)

These are the same items that Mencken had listed in The American Language.

Leonard instructed his 229 judges to "score according to your observation of what is actual usage rather than your opinion of what usage should be," but Marckwardt and Wolcott find that this charge was "more honored in the breach than by the observance" (67). Consequently, in 1938 Marckwardt and Walcott submitted Leonard's 230 expressions to a survey of recorded usage in such authoritative sources as the Oxford Dictionary and its Supplement, Webster's New International Dictionary, Modern American Usage, and English Usage. In Marckwardt and Wolcott's study, 106 of the 121 Disputable items "are, on the basis of recorded fact, actually in cultivated use today" (49). Their study would seem to prove Mencken's point; "pedants" fail in their attempt to "put down" the American vulgate.

Marckwardt and Wolcott note that Leonard's work "was the subject of much adverse journalistic comment," which generally was "flippant or indignant"; reviewers "seized upon what seemed to be some of the most startling of the findings and used them as a point of departure to predict the disintegration of the English language" (1). The scholars and language historians, on the other hand, gave it "little notice" (2-3). Thus, a work which provided classroom

teachers with a "hard look," to use Mencken's phrase, at actual usage patterns was generally ignored by the professionals.

H. L. Mencken's criticism of what Baron calls such "colonial mentality" was sustained throughout his career. His 1913 essay "The American: His Language" charged that "the poor little martyrs in the schools are still taught English instead of American" (89). His 1919 edition of The American Language launched an attack on schoolmarm ignorance of her native tongue. Mencken argues that the schoolmarms tout the English language of England as "the only reputable standards of American" (2). This practice, he says, "has worked steadily toward a highly artificial formalism, and as steadily against the investigation of the actual national speech" (3).

Of the several reasons for the schoolmarms' failures, the most obvious, then, is that they misunderstand, and therefore mishandle, the very language they try to teach—the American language. Mencken argues in Minority Report that

> not one in ten of them has any sort of grasp of the subject he professes, or shows any desire to master it. . . . It is actually full of subtleties and snares, as every professional writer of any capacity is well aware, and imparting it, if done effectively, must be very difficult. (121)

This statement is reinforced by a similar observation in the 1919 edition of The American Language:

> What thus goes on out of school does not interest the guardians of our linguistic morals. No attempt to deduce the principles of American grammar, or even of American syntax, from the everyday speech of decently spoken Americans has ever been made. There is no scientific study, general and comprehensive in scope, of the American vocabulary, or of the influences lying at the root of American word-formation. No American philologist, so far as I know, has

> ever deigned to give the same sober attention to the sermo plebius of his country that he habitually gives to the mythical objective case in theoretical English, or to the pronunciation of Latin, or to the irregular verbs in French. (4)

If the pedagogues would examine their own language rather than that of their British cousins, they would, Mencken believes, at least understand the grammar of their pupils. But by ignoring the colloquial language of the average American and espousing "a book language which few of us ever actually speak and not many of us even learn to write," they create, in effect, two different languages. One is colloquial and comfortable; the other formal and uncomfortable. Mencken argues that even though a student may learn to write the artificial "book language," he "never thinks in it or quite feels it" (TAL, 1st ed. 3).

> What their professors try to teach is not their mother tongue at all, but a dialect that stands quite outside their common experience and into which they have to translate their thoughts, consciously and painfully. . . . Thus the study of the language he is supposed to use, to the average American, takes on a sort of bilingual character. (TAL, 1st ed. 3)

To the average student, formal English is a dialect, almost a foreign language.

The "indefatigable schoolmarm" has not been able to "put down the American vulgate" because her pupil never "encounters" this "highly artificial formalism" outside the classroom; he "never speaks it or hears it spoken" and seldom reads it (TAL, 1st ed. 3). The "moment" that her pupils "get beyond reach of her constabulary ear they revert to the looser and more natural speech-habits of home and

work-place." Mencken argues that "they prefer a tongue that is easier, if less elegant" (TAL, 4th ed. 417).

The "loose" and "natural" qualities of language, in the home and workplace, are, of course, the very qualities that Mencken admires, and the very qualities that frighten the American booboisie. Finding the schoolmarm brand of elegant correctness uncomfortable, the middle class rejects it. Linguistic purity becomes a double standard, approved of for public appearance but rejected in more personal levels of communication. Though Mencken finds this "double standard" unacceptable, Martin Joos shows in The Five Clocks that most speakers commonly use several different levels of communication.

The final reason for the schoolmarm's failure, according to Mencken, is the student's lack of mental equipment. He believes first that the schoolmarm operates on the "faulty inference" that "the writing of English may be taught" (Prejudices V 197). She draws her inference from a "sound observation": "The great majority of American high-school pupils, when they attempt to put their thoughts upon paper, produce only a mass of confused and puerile nonsense—that they express themselves so clumsily that it is often quite impossible to understand them at all." But the inference that "what ails them is a defective technical equipment—that they can be trained to write clearly as a dog may be trained to walk on its hind legs"—is "all wrong." Mencken believes that they are defective not in "technical equipment" but in "natural equipment": "They write badly simply because they lack the brains" (Prejudices V 197-198).

These sentiments may seem to be the irresponsible rantings of an elitist against the mob, but they are the heart of Mencken's most fundamental premise: Usage and effective expression cannot be taught. Sound expression comes from sound thought, and no amount of dressing up can improve empty ideas. His premise is much like Henry David Thoreau's observation concerning the superfluities of life—particularly with regard to clothing. Thoreau says that "A man who has at length found something to do will not need to get a new suit to do it in" (Walden 1234). Mencken would say, "A man who has at length found something to say will not need to learn a new language to say it in."

The Schoolmarm and the Teaching Profession

The schoolmarm's failure to convert the middle class extends far beyond her role and her classroom to the whole teaching profession, which, in Mencken's view, is woefully inadequate. In the 1936 edition of The American Language, he accuses Miss Fidditch's and Miss Thistlebottom's "professional superiors" of folly:

> They have provided her with a multitude of textbooks, most of them hopelessly pedantic, though others are sensible enough, and they have invented a wealth of teaching methods, mostly far more magical than scientific, but they have not thrown much light upon the psychological problem actually before her. In particular, they failed to make an adequate investigation of the folkspeech she tries to combat, seeking to uncover its inner nature and account for its vitality. (417)

Though her superiors' failings are the same as hers—an inadequate investigation of their native language—they are perhaps more

blameworthy because they are her superiors, what Mencken calls the "higher variety of gogues" (TAL, 4th ed. 52).

The farther Mencken goes up the ladder of "goguery" the more caustic becomes his criticism. His special ire is reserved for the teachers and philologists at the top and for their professional journals: "The papers printed in the English Journal, the Proceedings of the Modern Language Association and similar periodicals seldom show any professional competence or contribute anything worth knowing to the subject" (Minority Report 122). As an editor and a reviewer across whose desk came hundreds of books, essays, and manuscripts, Mencken had ample support for his prejudice. In a review of Charles S. Pendleton's 1925 book The Social Objectives of School English, Mencken blasts this Peabody pedagogue's attempt "to find out what the teachers who teach English hope to accomplish by teaching it." According to Mencken, of the 1581 objectives that Pendleton accumulated, the number one objective was "The ability to spell correctly without hesitation all the ordinary words of one's writing vocabulary." The number two objective was "The ability to speak, in conversation, in complete sentences, not in broken phrases." Still another objective, fortunately much farther down the list, was "The ability to sing through—words and music—the national anthem" (Prejudices V 142-144). Mencken acknowledges that these goals would not be startling had they been elicited from a random selection of ignoramuses in the street. But he is horrified to learn that Professor Pendleton's poll was taken among "eighty teachers of such

professional keenness that they were assembled at the University of Chicago for post-graduate study." Mencken's response is scathing:

> I present Dr. Pendleton's laborious work as overwhelming proof of a thesis that I have maintained for years, perhaps sometimes with undue heat: that pedagogy in the United States is fast descending to the estate of a childish necromancy, and that the worst idiots, even among pedagogues, are the teachers of English. It is positively dreadful to think that the young American species are exposed day in and day out to the contaminations of such dark minds. (Prejudices V 145)

A review of a 1926 publication, Academy Papers: Addresses on Language, is even more vitriolic. The eight contributors to this volume are, in Mencken's terms, "the ancients of the American Academy of Arts and Letters": Paul Elmer More, Bliss Perry, Paul Shorey, Brander Matthews, Henry van Dyke, Robert Underwood Johnson, William Crary Brownell. Mencken's assessment of these "higher gogues" is scorching:

> Eight of them join forces to write a book of 282 pages—and the result is sheer emptiness, signifying nothing. Their subject is the language all of them are supposed to write, not merely well but better than any other eight men in the country—and what seven of them have to say of it is simply what one would expect from a baker's half-dozen of school-ma'ms, chosen at random. (Prejudices VI 159)

Two other 1926 books, Fred Newton Scott's The Standards of American Speech and L. A. Sherman's How to Describe and Narrate Visually, receive similar epithets:

> Scott devotes a chapter to proving that "of the 10,565 lines of 'Paradise Lost," 670, or 6.3%, contain each two or more accented alliterating vowels," another proving that in such word-groups as "rough and ready," 68% put the monosyllable first and the dissyllable second. . . . So much for Scott. Sherman fills 364 pages with windy platitudes on the writing of English and lays chief stress on the revolutionary discovery that visual images are very effective.

> Such are two of the great whales of literary science among us. God help the poor yokels who have to sweat through their books! God help the national letters! (Prejudices VI 160-162)

Like his review of Pendleton's book, this diatribe against the professionals ends with a statement of sympathy for the students—the poor "yokels."

If Mencken is appalled that in 1925 and 1926 the primary objective of the nation's best schoolmarms was to teach correct spelling and that the nation's most prestigious professors were counting the accented alliterating vowels in Paradise Lost, he would be even more appalled that, sixty years later, the usage battle still rages. According to Henry Bosley Woolf, the grammarians haven't ceased, and Mencken was "unduly sanguine in his belief that the purists are on the run." Woolf argues that though they may be fewer than they were in Mencken's day, there are still English teachers who "consider a split infinitive a serious flaw and who frown on the use of colloquial expressions in student papers" (106).

Mencken would be horrified to learn that today's college freshman wrestles with Chapter 19 of the Harbrace College Handbook and the subtleties of hung and hanged, aggravate and irritate, would of and would have (226-245). In the 1936 edition of The American Language, Mencken says, "the literary hanged is never heard. 'The man was hung,' not hanged" (432). He believes that "not even the most meticulous purist would think of objecting to" aggravate, "in the sense of to anger" (141-142). Mencken shows that would have has become would've and would of and woulda in the American vulgate (471).

He cites David Humphrey's 1815 glossary as evidence that liaison is a natural linguistic process (472).

Like the college freshman, today's high-school student wrestles with Chapter 5 of Warriner's English Grammar and Composition, which tells him, "Speakers of nonstandard English can, and often do, rise to positions of importance in business, government, and elsewhere, but they generally master standard English along the way" (79). The student is then told to consult American Usage: The Consensus, by Roy H. Copperud, to find out whether a particular form is acceptable (80).

Perhaps the best evidence that Mencken is "unduly sanguine in his belief that purists are on the run" is the National Teacher Examination which includes twenty questions on English Usage and twenty-five questions on Sentence Correctness. A quick survey of the sample questions from the 1982-83 NTE Study Guide (159-166) shows a number of schoolmarm entries. Three out of forty-five have to do with the who/whom distinction. Mencken argued in 1913 that "no such distinctions exist" in American English ("The American: His Language" 90). Two deal with the use of leave for let:

> Leave us face the fact that we're in trouble.
> Our teacher won't leave us come into the room after the gong sounds.

In the 1936 edition of The American Language Mencken says, "To let is being supplanted by to leave, as in 'Leave me be'" (433). Other points of usage in the National Teacher Examination are amount and number, like and as, and the use of the possessive before the gerund.

What these examples tell us is that in 1985 teachers are still held accountable for a standard of language that is more purist and British than common American. And yet, the continued efforts of purists really only prove Mencken's point: Their influence is negligible. Students continue to write different than; schoolmarms continue to lead uncomfortable lives; the professionals continue to train schoolmarms.

The overwhelming question is why the "colonial mentality," to quote Baron, persists. Though the field of linguistics has flourished in the twentieth century, it has not been able to change the attitudes of a nation of grammar-mongers. Several points must be addressed here. First, all but a few of the higher gogues and lowly schoolmarms remain outside the range of linguistic influence. Dennis Baron, writing in 1982, states flatly that in the history of American education, English teachers have been inadequately prepared (128): "Among teachers of English in general and those who write on usage in particular, even a small degree of formal linguistic training is still the exception rather than the rule" (227).

A. H. Marckwardt, in his book Linguistics and the Teaching of English, admits that knowledge of linguistics will not "furnish quick and easy answers to problems that have been plaguing English teachers for years." On the other hand, if the myth of schoolmarm grammar is to be dispelled, "there can be no question about the value for every teacher of becoming acquainted with various ways of looking at language which have engaged the attentions of steadily increasing numbers of scholars and students" (6).

It seemed that during Mencken's lifetime the nation was indeed developing sounder attitudes toward language and that the schoolmarm was "on the run." As noted above, Sterling Leonard's Current English Usage was published in 1932, and Marckwardt and Walcott's Facts About Current English Usage followed it in 1938. Marckwardt and Walcott concluded that the "governing principle in the use of language . . . is clarity of thought" (135). Consequently,

> there is little doubt that both average and superior students alike will profit more by attention to the interest and clarity of their oral and written work, to the richness of their observation of life, the soundness of their thought, the organization of their material, and the originality of their expression, than by the most thorough and painstaking usage drill. (133)

In 1950, twelve years later, Robert A. Hall published Leave Your Language Alone which was "addressed to the general public, in favor of a scientific attitude towards language and of linguistic relativism and tolerance" (vii). In the final chapter, "There's Nothing Wrong with Your Language," he addresses the "snobbery and social discrimination which goes on in the name of 'correctness'" (235).

> Untutored and natural speech is very often made an object of reproach and condemnation; the general attitude towards talking naturally, the way we learn to from family and playmates without benefit of schoolmastering, is usually that it shows ignorance, neglect, carelessness, or stupidity. (235)

Hall argues that "Linguistics . . . points out that such standards, although they have a perfectly real existence in many people's behavior, have nothing to do with language itself" (235-236). He believes that "meddling" with language "in the name of 'correctness,' of spelling or of nationalism is harmful" (248).

Hall's line of thinking became a controversial issue in all levels of the profession in 1972 when the Executive Committee of the Conference on College Composition and Communication passed the resolution that came to be known as "Students' Right to Their Own Language." A position statement which appeared in the Fall 1974 issue of College Composition and Communication was reprinted in the February 1975 issue of College English. It exposed the schoolmarm's prejudice: "The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert dominance over another" ("Committee on CCCC Language Statement" 710-711). It debunked the handbook: "Many handbooks still appeal to social-class etiquette and cultural stasis rather than to the dynamic and creative mechanisms which are a part of our language" (718).

The brouhaha following this publication made it clear that neither the profession nor the middle class had changed its attitudes toward language during the 1960s, when an individual's right to "be himself" was paramount. The successful launching of Sputnik in 1957 had filled the nation with insecurity. The federal government, concerned that the nation's security depended partly on the competent use of written English, began funding programs for the teaching of English—for both native speakers and foreigners. The National Defense Education Act of 1958 was followed by the Higher Education Act of 1965 and the Education Professions Development Act of 1969 which was "aimed at assisting native-speaking pupils designated as 'disadvantaged' because they spoke a nonstandard variety of English" (Alatis 44-45).

Robert A. Hall's goals were realized only in part. The profession came to admit that many varieties of English existed, but it continued to espouse the standard variety. In James Sledd's view, linguistics has made no progress, and the linguist has fallen prey to his own hypocrisy. "Miss Fidditch is not popular any longer among educators," says Sledd. He believes that "the world at large" still agrees with her but that "the vulgarizers of linguistics drove her out of the academic fashion years ago, when they replaced her misguided idealism with open-eyed hypocrisy" (308). The hypocrisy he refers to is the acknowledgment, on the one hand, that no dialect is better than another, but the insistence, on the other, that students—though they have a right to their own language—need to be taught standard English as a second dialect. But David Mackay has pointed out that refusing to teach that "official" standard dialect merely sharpens class distinctions (Muller 63).

Sledd would say that Mencken and Hall are wrong in believing that attitudes toward language will change:

> There is no possibility . . . that the present middle class can be brought to tolerate lower-class English or that upward mobility, as a national aspiration, will be questioned. Those are the pillars on which the state is built. (1312)

Proof that writers like Mencken and Hall were overly optimistic and that Sledd was partially right is found in the continued popularity of grammatical self-help books through the 1960s and 1970s. Norman Lewis has a long list—Dictionary of Correct Spelling (1962), Correct Spelling Made Easy (1963), Dictionary of Modern Pronunciation (1963), The New Power with Words (1964), Thirty Days to Better English (1964),

RSVP—Reading, Spelling, Vocabulary, Pronunciation (1966). In 1970 Wilfred Funk and Norman Lewis's Thirty Days to a More Powerful Vocabulary (originally published in 1942) was reissued by Funk and Wagnalls. The book opens with the threatening statement,

> Your boss has a bigger vocabulary than you have.
> That's one good reason why he's your boss. (3)

Funk and Lewis report that this "discovery" has been made "not by theoretical English professors, but by practical, hard-headed scientists who have been searching for the secrets of success" (3). The distinction here between "theoretical" and "hard-headed" is interesting. Funk and Lewis peddle the classic schoolmarm line under the guise of science. They say that "after a host of experiments and years of testimony they [italics mine] have found out:

> That if your vocabulary is limited your chances of success are limited.
> That one of the easiest and quickest ways to get ahead is by consciously building up your knowledge of words.
> That the vocabulary of the average person almost stops growing by the middle twenties.
> And that from then on it is necessary to have an intelligent plan if progress is to be made. No hit-or-miss methods will do.

Funk and Lewis conclude that one must use standard English (what Mencken calls linguistic Babbittry) if he is to raise himself out of mediocrity. The introduction ends with "words can make you great" (5)! Mencken would argue that middle-class, democratic, standard English will make you mediocre.

The Schoolmarm in Great Permitter's Clothing

As Sledd observed in 1969, although Miss Fidditch and Miss Thistlebottom had been rejected by educators, they have remained paramount in the popular mind. The 1970s saw the emergence of a new generation of usage critics—what Baron calls the popular "linguistic amateurs." They were journalists, newscasters, poets, art critics, political analysts—not linguists (226). They became the nation's new grammar-mongers. Such writers as Dwight Macdonald, Edwin Newman, and William Safire decry the fall of the English language from the pages of newspapers and news magazines, from public lecterns, and from television screens. Ironically, these purists' crusades were most popular in the mid-seventies at the very time that educators were, mistakenly or not, embracing linguistic pluralism.

In "The String Untuned," a 1962 essay, Dwight Macdonald discusses the change that he perceives as having taken place between 1934, when the second edition of Webster's New International Dictionary was published, and 1961, when the third edition came out:

> A revolution has taken place in the study of English grammar and usage, a revolution that probably represents an advance in scientific method but that certainly has had an unfortunate effect on such nonscientific activities as the teaching of English and the making of dictionaries—at least on the making of this particular dictionary. This scientific revolution has meshed gears with a trend toward permissiveness, in the name of democracy, that is debasing our language by rendering it less precise and thus less effective as literature and less efficient as communication. It is felt that it is snobbish to insist on making discriminations—the very word has acquired a Jim Crow flavor—about usage. And it is assumed that true democracy means that the majority is right. This feeling seems to me sentimental and this assumption unfounded. (289)

Macdonald predicts that by 1988, "if the Structural Linguists remain dominant, there will be a fourth edition, which will simply record, without labels or warnings, all words and nonwords that are used widely in 'the American language community'" (304).

Macdonald objects to the leveling forces of democracy much as did Mencken, but their objections lead them to different conclusions about the language. Mencken objected to too much discrimination; Macdonald fears that there is not enough: "One drawback to the permissive approach of the Structural Linguists is that it impoverishes the language by not objecting to errors if they are common enough" (304-305). In other words, abandonment of schoolmarm scruples in favor of actual usage patterns is unacceptable. He cites nauseous and nauseated, deprecate and depreciate, disinterested and uninterested as discriminations that Webster's Third has lost (305). Macdonald argues, "If nine-tenths of the citizens of the United States were to use inviduous, the one-tenth who clung to invidious would still be right, and they would be doing a favor to the majority if they continued to maintain the point" (315). Ordinarily, Mencken might applaud Macdonald's support of the one-tenth minority, but not in this case where the minority is upholding the genteel standard!

Macdonald does acknowledge that language changes, but he argues that someone must decide when a word has become acceptable: "The decision, I think, must be left to the teachers, the professional writers, and the lexicographers" (315). Mencken would say that the decision must be left up to the secure and totally free individual. Macdonald's essay ends with the statement that the lexicographer no

longer fits Dr. Johnson's definition—"a harmless drudge." He has become dangerous—he has "untuned the string, made a sop of the solid structure of English, and encouraged the language to eat up himself" (316). (Macdonald obviously believes that English once had a solid structure.) Mencken too believes that the lexicographer can be dangerous, but his reasons are the opposite of Macdonald's. Mencken objects to too much imposed regularity; Macdonald objects to too little.

In his essay "The Decline and Fall of English," Macdonald gives lip service, once again, to the notion that language does change, and he lists those "grammarians' fetishes" which he finds completely acceptable: "It's me," the split infinitive, prepositions at the end of sentences, and "who do you wish to see?" (318). "Such finicky 'refinements,' analogous to the extended little finger in drinking tea, have nothing to do with the problem of good English" (318). This statement sounds remarkably like Mencken, who states that It's me is "perfectly good American" (TAL, 4th ed. 422). Macdonald even identifies these as social—not linguistic—refinements.

Macdonald again takes to task the structural linguists. He says that they have underestimated "the influence of purists, grammarians and schoolmarms" and therefore cannot assert that "correctness rests upon usage" (323). He attacks Robert A. Hall's Linguistics and Your Language, as "one of the far-out books in the canon" (324), and questions the "academic establishment" which Hall

represents (325). He argues that the language has been fixed for two hundred years, and in doing so, he openly admits that "correctness" has more to do with class structure than with language:

> The new-rich classes wanted to show they were cultured gentlemen and so offered a market for dictionaries and grammars, which played the same social role as the books of eqiquette which first became popular then. (329)

Unlike Mencken, Macdonald fully endorses this prejudice and asks the teachers, writers, and lexicographers to apply the "brakes": "It is their job to make it tough for new words and usages to get into circulation so that the ones that survive will be the fittest" (332-333). How he judges the fitness of a word he doesn't say. He appeals to vague aesthetic qualities and to style and tradition. Though he condescendingly accepts "who did you ask," his subtle distinctions show that he is an elitist—another schoolmarm.

Another popular "linguistic amateur," this one of the 1970s, is Edwin Newman whose Strictly Speaking came out in 1974—to thunderous applause—just as the CCCC and NCTE were taking a stand against the schoolmarm tradition. Newman begins his book with the question, "Will America be the death of English?" He answers, "It will" (13). Newman asserts, "Language is in decline. Not only has eloquence departed but simple, direct speech as well, though pomposity and banality have not" (17). Newman, like Macdonald and Mencken, argues that ideas and language are the same: "Our politics would be improved if our English were" (17). He states further, "Those for whom words have lost their value are likely to find that ideas have also lost their value" (17). Newman sounds remarkably like Mencken

who argues that "style cannot go beyond the ideas that lie at the heart of it" (Prejudices V 201) and that the American becomes like the rubber-stamp words that he uses (Minority Report 185-186).

Though Newman believes that language is in decline, he cites a number of misuses of language which he says cannot be improved upon: "Them is my chief dread." "Oi were thunderstruck" (19). Mencken, too, frequently cites such examples, especially in the Free Lance column: "I like a belt that's loosern what this one is" (July 10, 1914); "Them things oughtn't to bother you none" (August 11, 1911). The difference between Newman and Mencken, however, is that Newman argues in favor of "rules" even while he is citing acceptable breaches of those rules: "Respect for rules has been breaking down and correct expression is considered almost a badge of dishonor" (22). He believes, further, that this disrespect for rules is the result of "rapid change" of the 1960s (22). Macdonald sees the revolutionary change as having come in the 1940s and 1950s. Mencken sees change, too, though he does not call it disrespectful. Between 1919 and 1936 he argues that the changes are producing a healthy, vigorous American language that should be encouraged—not impeded by rules (TAL, 4th ed. vi).

Newman's tone belies his true sympathies:

> To choose a lower order of speech is, I suppose, anti-establishment in motive and carries a certain scorn for organized, grammatical, and precise expression. Object to it and you are likely to be told that you are a pedant, a crank, an elitist, and behind the times. (30)

Though Newman, like Macdonald, wants to admit that "the rules of language cannot be frozen and immutable," he firmly believes that

"we would be better off if we spoke and wrote with exactness and grace, and if we preserved, rather than destroyed, the value of our language" (32). In 1913, Mencken noted that the American "is willing to sacrifice every purely aesthetic consideration" for the sake of clarity. ("The American: His Language" 95).

After Strictly Speaking was published in 1975, Newman found—as did Mencken—that the public is eager to talk about language. In short, he was deluged with material "cheering [him] on in the struggle for the language" (15). (He refers to himself here as a champion.) Consequently, A Civil Tongue came out in 1976. In this volume he argues,

> If American English is to be saved, it will, in my view, have to be saved by individuals, or by small guerilla groups that refuse to accept nonsense, send back unclear and pompous letters with a request for a translation, and insist that organizations they are part of speak plainly. This cannot be done on orders from above. It requires rebelliousness, buccaneering, and humor, qualities that organizations are short of. (16-17)

His statement conjures up visions of schoolmarms in camouflage, fighting guerilla warfare in city hall. And though his tirade sounds quite anti-academic, he fights many of the traditional schoolmarm battles to the final chapter—for example, misuse of the emphatic pronoun: "Phyllis, Irv, and myself will be back at half-time" (185). Dennis Baron observed that in spite of Newman's liberal-sounding approach, he always implies that "corruption has come from below" (231).

Newman distinguishes between mistakes that are innocent and those that are pompous. He says that "it would be a shame to lose"

the innocent ones and that they are acceptable. He is "arguing for naturalness, even when it leads to mistakes. There is no reason that naturalness cannot be joined to correctness, but even when it isn't, clarity and genuineness can come together" (191-192). As noted above, Mencken believes that naturalness produces clarity, but these two qualities have nothing to do with correctness. Newman assumes—as does Macdonald—that there is a "right way."

Another of these modern schoolmarms is William Safire whose book On Language was published in 1980. In the opening essay, "The Great Permitter," Safire says he was uncomfortable playing the role of "Usage Dictator" in his Times column because he has no "linguistic credentials, not even a college degree" (xi). Nevertheless, he makes a dictatorial and Newman-like pronouncement:

> There is a big difference between being conscious of your language and being self-conscious about the way you write and speak. To be conscious of language is to be proud of the magnificent and subtle instrument in your hands; to be self-conscious about the possibility of error, or fearful of the derision of your listener at your experiments with the instrument, is to be a nerd, a schnook, and a wimp. (xii)

Mencken would certainly agree. Safire then declares himself one of the Great Permitters, one who detests "fuzziness of expression that reveals sloppiness or laziness of thought" (xii). He states, "we are not fuddy-duddies." (All these writers are sensitive to the schoolmarm label.) "If we want to carefully and deliberately split an infinitive, we do so with zest, knowing that the most fun in breaking a rule is in knowing what rule you're breaking" (xii). And he asks the question, "Are we to be good scientists, clinically descriptive,

or are we to be activists for clarity, prescribing the usage that helps a string of words make more sense" (xiii)? This, too, sounds quite Menckenesque.

Safire chooses to be an activist; he must then choose between the libertarian activist and the traditional activist. The traditional activist "derides and often sensibly resists change in language." The libertarian activist is the real discriminator; he "is not one of those relax-and-enjoy-it purely descriptive types." For him, "it's a matter of taste" (xiv). This type of activist admits and welcomes change but wants "to give this change a shove in the direction of freshness and precision" (xiv). When Safire brings in the aesthetic quality of taste, his argument veers sharply from Mencken's.

After Safire makes these fine distinctions and avows that he is not a schoolmarm, he comes right back to the one elitist point of usage: "To paraphrase Emerson on being well-dressed, the knowledge of speaking correctly gives the speaker an inner tranquility that religion is powerless to bestow" (xv). Mencken's ideal American cares little about correctness; correctness, after all, has nothing to do with inner tranquility. Though Safire denigrates "Language Snobs, who give good usage a bad name" (xv), he is, in essence, the worst kind of snob. He touts "the unchanging values of clarity and grace" and boasts, "all of us in the legion of language lovers may have more linguistic influence and cultural potency than we realize" (xv). Mencken had repeatedly argued, however, that the influence of "language lovers" on the American vulgate is probably nil.

Macdonald, Newman, and Safire have curious affinities. They deny that they are schoolmarms; after all, they do accept language change. They acknowledge that usage has taken on negative connotations. Though they wrestle with the question of who is to prescribe, they do believe that the prescriptivists have influence and power, and they suspect the linguistic scientists—the descriptivists, the structural linguists—of promoting anarchy. These writers further acknowledge that usage is a social—not a linguistic—issue. They declare, however, that their battles have nothing to do with social codes and everything to do with such qualities as clarity, power, and grace. They believe that knowing the rule doesn't necessarily make one secure; knowing the rule well enough to break is willfully gives one the right to be secure. Not everyone has the linguistic skill to misuse who.

Sledd and Woolf are right and Mencken is wrong: The purists prevail. Forms that Mencken identified in 1913 as acceptable American usage are still considered unacceptable by the schoolmarms. Though the popular linguists of the sixties, seventies, and eighties try to dress the schoolmarm in great permitter's clothing, they have not lessened middle-class insecurity, have not made American English "clear" and "graceful." Macdonald, Newman, and Safire do not always make the same distinctions as do Miss Fidditch, Miss Thistlebottom, and Miss Julia Mortimer, but their reasons for the distinctions are the same. Their primary difference from Mencken is that they all

endorse the social bias inherent in such distinctions. Mencken's ideal American is indifferent (to use Marckwardt's word) to any connection between language and his social standing.

CHAPTER IV

MENCKEN'S ATTITUDES TOWARD STYLE

Mencken's Views on Bad Writing

Mencken's criticism of the schoolmarm and her insecure progeny is simple: She and her disciples use language to create a pseudo-aristocracy, "to demonstrate, not only [her] mere equality but [her] actual superiority" ("American Culture" 976-977). Aspiring pedagogues, professional academics, and politicians are forced to "dress up" their language—to clothe their thought in new suits—because too frequently their thought is itself shabby.

In Mencken's view, politicians are particularly adept at writing well-clothed inanity. Mencken describes Woodrow Wilson's prose as "diplomatic and political gospel-hymns." He characterizes Wilson as "constitutionally unable to reason clearly or honestly." Whether Wilson could think clearly may be open to question, but the gospel-hymn quality of his prose is unmistakable. The conclusion to his "War Message," given before both houses of Congress on April 2, 1917, exemplifies Mencken's criticism:

> It is a fearful thing to lead this great peaceful people into war, into the most terrible and disastrous of all wars, civilization itself seeming to be in the balance. But the right is more precious than peace, and we shall fight for the things which we have always carried nearest our hearts,—for democracy, for the right of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their own Governments, for the rights and liberties of small nations, for a universal dominion of right by such a concert of free peoples as shall bring peace and safety to all nations and make the world itself at last free.

> To such a task we can dedicate our lives and our fortunes, everything that we are and everything that we have, with the pride of those who know that the day has come when America is privileged to spend her blood and her might for the principles that gave her birth and happiness and the peace which she has treasured. God helping her, she can do no other. (231-232)

In spite of Wilson's inability to think, says Mencken, his

> burbling . . . caresses the ears of simple men. Most of his speeches, during the days of his divine appointment, translated into intelligible English, would have sounded as idiotic as a prose version of "The Blessed Damozel." Read by his opponents, they sounded so without the translation. (Prejudices III 167)

Wilson is not, however, Mencken's favorite political target. Harding and Coolidge, "more than any other American Presidents," says William Nolte, "delighted Mencken, for their persons constituted prima-facie evidence that democracy was a scrofulous disease afflicting dunderheads, politicians, and idealists" (H. L. Mencken, Literary Critic 51). Democracy is the villain because, as noted above, inferior minds are never content with equality, but must create an aristocracy with which they can feel equal. Thus, in reality, they feel superior.

Mencken believes that inferior minds are, for this reason, attracted to the schoolmarm's doctrines. They believe that "the more refined, but slightly vapid correctness of the cultivated," as Guy Forgue has described it, "raises them above the common mob" (4). They believe, as does the schoolmarm, that their speech can "conceal their own cultural insecurity" (Mencken, TAL, 4th ed. 1). Though their "burbling" may "caress the ears of simple men," it could only chafe Mencken.

Another President whose prose Mencken abhorred was Warren Gamaliel Harding. In fact, he coined the word Gamalielize which means, "To reduce a proposition to terms of such imbecility that it is immediately comprehensible to morons" (Nolte, H. L. Mencken, Literary Critic 51). Carl Bode has remarked that the English language has "seldom . . . been as genially maltreated" as in Harding's "rambling speeches and presidential addresses" (Mencken 178). The following excerpt from his essay "What of Our Children" illustrates Bode's point:

> I firmly believe that our country, along with others that claim a share in the world's leadership, has lately achieved one victory in behalf of a better understanding and more intelligent grasp of these problems. I refer to the bestowal upon women of full participation in the privileges and obligations of citizenship. With her large part wider in influence in the world of affairs, I think we shall see woman and her finer spiritual instincts at length leading mankind to higher planes of religion, of humanism and of ennobling spirituality. (Our Common Country 113-114)

Bode also points out that "Harding's errors were not the vulgar ones" (Mencken 178). Indeed, Mencken does not criticize him for the constructions that would horrify the schoolmarm ("different than" or "it is me"). Rather, Mencken hates such Harding "inventions" as normalcy or betrothment (Bode, Mencken 178) because they are the work of an individual who obviously does not choose plain and simple language.

Though politicians are among Mencken's favorite targets, the products of academe are no less his whipping boys. Thorstein Veblen and Henry James elicited some of Mencken's most vitriolic criticism. Veblen was guilty of the same sins as were Wilson and Harding—he tried to dress up shabby thought: "He states his hollow nothings in

such high, astounding terms that they must inevitably arrest and blister the right-thinking mind" (Prejudices I 67). But Veblen's greatest transgression was that he had fallen prey to the schoolmarm's formal, uncomfortable English:

> Though born, I believe, in these States, and resident here all his life, he achieves the effect, perhaps without employing the means, of thinking in some unearthly foreign language—say Swahili, Sumerian, or Old Bulgarian—and then painfully clawing his thoughts into copious but uncertain book-learned English. (Prejudices I 66-67)

A typical Veblen sentence from The Theory of the Leisure Class illustrates Mencken's point:

> The pressure exerted by the environment upon the group, and making for a readjustment of the group's scheme of life, impinges upon the members of the group in the form of pecuniary exigencies; and it is owing to this fact—that external forces are in great part translated into the form of pecuniary or economic exigencies—it is owing to this fact that we can say that the forces which count toward a readjustment of institutions in any modern industrial community are chiefly economic forces; or more specifically, these forces take the form of pecuniary pressure. (135)

Joseph Epstein describes Mencken's attack on Veblen as classic, "vintage Mencken, the throttle full out" (32-33). Mencken's diatribe speaks for itself:

> It is as if the practice of that incredibly obscure and malodorous style were a relentless disease, a sort of progressive intellectual diabetes, a leprosy of the horse sense. Words are flung upon words until all recollection that there must be a meaning in them, a ground and excuse for them, is lost. One wanders in a labyrinth of nouns, adjectives, verbs, pronouns, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions and participles, most of them swollen and nearly all of them unable to walk. It is difficult to imagine worse English, within the limits of intelligible grammar. It is clumsy, affected, opaque, bombastic, windy, empty. It is without grace or distinction and it is often without the most elementary order. The learned professor gets himself enmeshed in his gnarled

> sentences like a bull trapped by barbed wire, and his efforts to extricate himself are quite as furious and quite as spectacular. (Prejudices I 70)

It is typical of Mencken to describe poor writing as diseased—"intellectual diabetes," "leprosy of the horse sense," "swollen" and lame parts of speech—and to describe the type of writing he detests in such vivid and metaphorical prose. Says Edwin Castagna, "This barrage at Veblen shows the kind of pretentious language Mencken hated and his own effective method of exposing it" (4).

Castagna agrees with Mencken's appraisal of Veblen and says that "a contemporary economist, John Kenneth Galbraith has not made Veblen's mistake. . . . His meanings are not hidden under a smog of verbiage" (4). This quotation from Galbraith's Economic Development in Perspective supports Castagna's appraisal:

> I doubt that a university can be wholly successful unless it reposes strong and responsible power in those who teach and unless those who teach delegate as needed to their own representatives. In recent times Latin American universities have been experimenting with highly democratic direction in which students, graduates, and faculty all participate more or less equally. Democratic or not, it is a formula for deterioration, incoherence, and chaos. I believe the university is by nature an oligarchy of its faculty. This is especially so if education is regarded purposefully as an investment from which the most of what is needed must be obtained. (55)

Castagna suspects that Mencken would ridicule Galbraith's ideas but "applaud Galbraith's writing" (4). It is true that Mencken frequently cannot, or will not, separate ideas from words, but he never attacks good prose just because he disagrees with its argument. Good writing frequently clothes ideas which are unacceptable to him. Bad writing, on the other hand, is never acceptable.

Mencken's attack on Veblen is colossal; his attack on Henry James is relentless. Vincent Fitzpatrick's article "The Elusive Butterfly's Angry Pursuer: The Jamesian Style, Mencken, and Clear Writing" chronicles Mencken's "rabid anti-Jamesian" stance (14). Mencken is antagonized by two aspects of James's prose: his style and his attitude toward common American speech. Mencken believes that James's prose is as gnarled and diseased as Veblen's:

> Take any considerable sentence from any of his novels and examine its architecture. Isn't it wobbly with qualifying phrases and subassistant clauses? Isn't it bedraggled . . . loose, frowsy, disorderly, unkempt, uncombed, unbrushed, uncurried, unscrubbed? (Mencken qtd. in Fitzpatrick 15)

And as for a typical "Jamesian sentence," Mencken asks whether it "doesn't often bounce along for a while, and then, of a sudden, roll up its eyes and go out of business entirely" (Fitzpatrick 15). Any page of Jamesian prose can furnish examples of the genteel English that Mencken so despised:

> Newman took an interest in French thriftiness and conceived a lively admiration for Parisian economies. His own economic genius was so entirely for operations on a larger scale, and, to move at his ease, he needed so imperatively the sense of great risks and great prizes, that he found an ungrudging entertainment in the spectacle of fortunes made by the aggregation of copper coins, and in the minute subdivision of labor and profit. (The American 56)

Fitzpatrick notes that Mencken never lets up on James. He mimics his style in a 1908 letter to John Edwin Murphy: "I must, in duty bound, hate all Irish, but . . . in the present case (as I have told you before, this detestation is a mere theoretical abstraction.) (a Henry James sentence.)" (Fitzpatrick 15-16). Mencken describes James's "cruel cacophony of style" in a 1912 review of The Outcry,

and as late as 1948 he says of James, "To nine readers out of ten he is completely unreadable" (Fitzpatrick 15).

James initially antagonized Mencken in a 1905 attack on the newspapers, which is ultimately an attack on American speech. The newspapers, James says, "are nothing more than black eruptions of type. . . . The newspapers . . . are influences which keep our speech crude, untidy, and careless" (Fitzpatrick 13). Sounding too much like the progeny of the schoolmarm, James provokes Mencken's worst anger. Being not only a "rabid anti-Jamesian" but also a rabid Anglophobe, Mencken "bristled" (to use Fitzpatrick's term) at another 1905 article, "The Question of our Speech," in which James argues that the American language has deteriorated into a "mere slobber" (Fitzpatrick 15). Such an indictment of American language (even fourteen years before Mencken's voluminous work on the subject) was a red flag to the champion of vulgarity—the "yielding to natural impulses" which is "at the heart of all healthy language-making" (TAL, 1st ed. 9).

Mencken's Views on Good Writing

Though Mencken detested the empty-headed prose of Wilson and Harding and the stilted styles of Veblen and James, his attacks on these men are important not so much for their exposure of other writers' faults as for their testimony to Mencken's own strengths. The first is "his insistence on clarity," which Fitzpatrick calls the touchstone of Mencken's work (16). Whether writing about his own

style or another's, Mencken always emphasizes clarity. It is what he praises in Abraham Lincoln's prose: "a style . . . as bare of rhetorical element and the niceties of professors as a yell for the police" (Fitzpatrick 17). Mencken insists that "clarity" and "forthright simplicity" are the "hallmarks of sound writing, at all times and everywhere" (Fitzpatrick 17).

While Lincoln represents Mencken's first tenet, Ring Lardner epitomizes the second, a belief in the integrity of common American speech patterns. In 1924, Mencken wrote to Sara Haardt, "I have just finished a new Ring Lardner book. It made me yell. Lardner knows more about writing the short story than 200 head of Edith Whartons" (Letters, Bode 181). Mencken is attracted to Lardner's "philological exactness": "For the first time, the common speech of the American people—the so-called American language—was accurately reported" ("Introduction to Modern American Short Stories," Menckeniana 23: 2).

The book Mencken refers to is probably Lardner's How to Write Short Stories. This quotation from the preface illustrates why Mencken would have been so attracted to Lardner:

> In fact, the most of the successful authors of the short fiction of to-day never went to no kind of a college, or if they did, they studied piano tuning or the barber trade. They could of got just as far in what I call the literary game if they had of stayed home those four years and helped mother carry out the empty bottles. (v)

Obviously, Lardner's style opposes the Henry James-Edith Wharton, booklearned, "cultivated" style. Lardner succeeds, in Mencken's view, where the schoolmarm and the "higher gogues" fail: "His understanding of the common American of today, and of common American ways of

speech and thought, is almost perfect" ("Introduction to Modern American Short Stories," Menckeniana 23: 2). Though Mencken would not have all writers be Ring Lardners, the politicians, pedagogues, and pedants could well learn from Lardner the lesson of simple and honest representation of American speech:

> I doubt that anyone who has not given close and deliberate attention to the American vulgate will ever realize how magnificently Lardner handles it. He has had more imitators, I suppose, than any other living American writer, but has he any actual rivals? If so, I have yet to hear of them. (Prejudices V 51).

The American vulgate which Mencken describes is the language that the genuine American aristocrat will use naturally, both in his writing and in his speech. In fact, Mencken argues that the written word and the spoken word are "precisely the same," a premise which endangers the schoolmarm species but which explains his reverence for Lardner over Wharton and James. In an essay called "The Fringes of Lovely Letters: Literature and the Schoolma'm," Mencken states,

> Any human being who can speak English understandably has all the materials necessary to write English clearly, and even beautifully. There is nothing mysterious about the written language; it is precisely the same, in essence, as the spoken language. If a man can think in English at all, he can find words enough to express his ideas. The fact is proved abundantly by the excellent writing that often comes from so-called ignorant men. It is proved anew by the even better writing that is done on higher levels by persons of great simplicity, for example, Abraham Lincoln. (Prejudices V 198)

The significant qualification here is whether a "man can think in English at all." Mencken obviously believes that the Wilsons and Hardings cannot think and that Veblen cannot think in English. Thought is always the first prerequisite to good prose.

Mencken's further emphasis on the simplicity—of both the writer and his prose—is a key to his concept of style. As an editor who passed judgment on thousands of pieces of writing, Mencken frequently wrote about style—not just in criticism of specific speakers and writers, such as Wilson, Harding, Veblen, James, Lincoln, and Lardner, but in broad and theoretical terms as well. He frequently reiterates on the general level what he has argued in a specific instance. For example, he repeatedly maintains that

> Style cannot go beyond the ideas which lie at the heart of it. If they are clear, it too will be clear. If they are held passionately, it will be eloquent. Trying to teach it to persons who cannot think, especially when the business is attempted by persons who also cannot think, is a great waste of time, and an immoral imposition upon the taxpayers of the nation. (Prejudices V 201)

That style and idea are one thing and that they cannot be taught are two of Mencken's strongest generalizations about writing. The subject of style, he says, "seems to exercise a special and dreadful fascination over schoolma'ms, bucolic college professors, and other such pseudo-lterates. . . . Their central aim . . . is to reduce the whole thing to a series of simple rules." The result is that "all the books on style in English are by writers quite unable to write" (Prejudices V 196-197). (Mencken has nothing good to say about Strunk and White.) These books—forced on students who more than likely cannot think anyway—produce a dreary prose.

Though Mencken consistently praises simplicity, he acknowledges that style is complex and organic and not easily analyzed: "The essence of a sound style is that it cannot be reduced to rules—that

it is a living breathing thing, with something of the devilish in it" (Prejudices V 197). Mencken believes, in fact, that style is part of the man.

> It fits its proprietor tightly and yet ever so loosely, as his skin fits him. It is, in fact, quite as securely an integral part of him as that skin is. It hardens as his arteries harden. . . . In brief, a style is always the outward and visible symbol of a man, and it cannot be anything else. To attempt to teach it is as silly as to set up courses in making love. (Prejudices V 197)

Mencken believes that style is an "integral part" of all artists, not just writers. In "Five Little Excursions: Brahms," he goes so far as to make it a moral assertion: "In music, as in all the other arts, the dignity of the work is simply a reflection of the dignity of the man. The notion that shallow and trivial men can write masterpieces is one of the follies that flow out of the common human taste for scandalous anecdote. . . . When a trashy man writes it, it is trashy music" (Prejudices VI 166-167). He also applies to music the same statements about brains and thought that he applies to writing: "What makes great music is brains. The greatest musician is a man whose thoughts and feelings are above the common level, and whose language matches them. . . . He is the precise antithesis of Mr. Babbitt" (Prejudices VI 168). In other words, a member of the booboisie would be incapable of great music or a distinguishing style.

In the same essay on Brahms, Mencken makes an interesting distinction between a musician's art and his craft: "Above all, he is a master of his craft, as opposed to his art. He gets his effects in new, difficult, and ingenious ways" (Prejudices VI 168). Though

Mencken is usually skeptical of all claims concerning truth, he maintains here that the creation of "immovable truths" is the proper end of an artist's craft. "They did not exist before; They cannot perish hereafter" (Prejudices VI 169). A Lincoln, a Brahms, a Jefferson, a natural aristocrat—"the precise antithesis of Mr. Babbitt"—will be the great musician, writer, artist in spite of rule books. His thought is led by its natural integrity to simple expression in the vulgate. At bottom, Mencken's statements about music simply echo his generalizations about style: it "cannot go beyond the ideas which lie at the heart of it."

Mencken's Style

Many readers believe that Mencken's style, more than anything else, places him at the forefront of American letters. Joseph Wood Krutch predicted that

> the time will come when it will be generally recognized, as by a few it already is, that Mencken's was the best prose written America during the twentieth century. Those who deny that fact had better confine themselves to direct attack. They will be hard put to find a rival claimant. (154)

Charles Fecher agrees that "it was the style . . . that made Mencken what he was and gave him the reputation that he had—far more than his ideas, which . . . were not really very ususual or radical" (311). Like Fecher, Harry C. Bauer praises Mencken's style apart from his ideas: "The attraction was not so much what he said, but how he said it" ("Mulling Over Mencken's Mercury" 13). Even those who reject what Mencken says often praise how he says it. Donald Davidson comments

that Mencken is not trustworthy as a "purveyor of ideas" (Davidson, Krutch, and all the Fugitives had a longstanding feud with Mencken's ideas), but "the vivacity and brilliance of his style" are "unparalleled" (131).

Joseph Epstein agrees with Krutch that "H. L. Mencken devised one of the few original and unmistakable prose styles of the current century. He has great orchestral power" (30). The phrase "orchestral power" is a typical description of the force of Mencken's prose. It is an orchestration of many components, and Mencken is the first to acknowledge that such a style is not achieved early. Rather, it grows through a series of influences. In his essay "The Poet and His Art," Mencken quotes Otto Jespersen who states, "A good prose style . . . is everywhere a late acquirement, and the work of whole generations of good authors is needed to bring about the easy flow of written prose" (Prejudices III 146). Through Jespersen is speaking of centuries of cultural development, his statement can be applied to the decades of development for an individual.

In a piece from Minority Reports, Mencken acknowledges the many good writers from whom he learned. In the early days, his models came, he says, not from his colleagues on the Baltimore Morning Herald—"not one of them was a competent writer"—but from the editorial page of the New York Sun, which was both a good and a bad model: "good because it taught me that good sense was at the bottom of all good writing, but bad because it showed a considerable artificiality of style, and made me overestimate the value of smart

phrases" (291-292). Some would say that Mencken never outgrew the smart phrase, but in his own mind, it was but a brief diversion from his

> first idol, Thomas Henry Huxley, who was as smart as the best of them but always put clarity first. I am still convinced that his prose was the best produced by an Englishman in the Nineteenth Century. . . . No matter how difficult the theme he dealt with, Huxley was always crystal clear. (Minority Report 292)

Such praise for an Englishman from a staunch Anglophobe like Mencken proves that he could put prejudices aside when he read good writing.

Carl Bode and Edgar Kemler have cited other influences on Mencken's style: "charm and allusiveness from James Gibbons Huneker, the art of epigram from Ambrose Bierce, ribald lyricism from Rabelais, and an omniscient air from Macaulay" (Bode, Mencken 54). In spite of all these "tricks," however, Mencken developed an appreciation for clarity and simplicity early in his career. He recalls his pleasure when Ellery Sedgwick praised a 1901 short story, "The Flight of the Victor," for its "directness, simplicity, and vividness." Later, he says, he "succumbed to more sophisticated and tortured devices" which were evident in his book on Shaw and in his Smart Set reviews (Minority Report 292). By his own estimation, however, he had settled down, stylistically, by the age of thirty:

> I had developed a style that was clear and alive. . . . The imbeciles who have printed acres of comment on my books have seldom noticed the chief character of my style. It is that I write with almost scientific precision—that my meaning is never obscure. (Minority Report 293)

Clarity and life are the two stylistic elements that Mencken consistently praises. These two ideals, sometimes antithetical to

the goals of the schoolmarm and the Babbitt, explain why Mencken believes so strongly in natural American speech patterns. In The American Language, fourth edition, he cites "the Hallmarks of American" as

> first, its general uniformity throughout the country; second, its impatient disregard for grammatical, syntactical and phonological rule and precedent; and third, its large capacity (distinctly greater than that of the English of present-day England) for taking in new words and phrases from outside sources, and for manufacturing them of its own materials. (90)

Though he does not cite clarity as a chief character of American English, the emphasis on uniformity is tantamount to it. Highly distinctive dialects obstruct communication; the uniformity of American dialects paves the way for clear communication.

The most important characteristic, however, is life. Like a good style, the American language is "a living breathing thing, with something of the devilish in it" (Prejudices V 197). Mencken would argue that impatience with "rule and precedent" and receptivity toward new and outside influences give American English life. The hallmarks of American English are, then, the hallmarks of good writing in general and the qualities that Mencken aspires to in his own style. (It must be noted, however, that Mencken himself never violates the conventions of grammar and usage.)

Like his attitudes toward the aristocracy and the masses, Mencken's style defies analysis—and appropriately so. If dissection can reveal its secret, then it has no life. A living entity will always hold something back from the probing inquisitor—as life

escapes the physician, or truth the philosopher. Nevertheless, Mencken's style has intrigued many of his critics. Its "devilish" contradictions invite analysis, and each analyst probes and imposes his own formula. Charlotte Downy, for example, identifies fifteen characteristics of Mencken's style: application of ridiculous words to serious subjects, coinages, signal words, definitions, words used in an incongruous environment, invective, plain speech, damning phrases, irony, parody, metaphor, understatement, overstatement, proverbs and epigrams, translation, and repetition. Downy might as well argue that Mencken uses "every trick in the book." Harry Bauer, on the other hand, writes a five-page essay on Mencken's use of and—"The Glow and Gusto of H. L. Mencken's So and So's."

The Life of Mencken's Style

The ultimate concern of such probers and analysts is how Mencken achieves those qualities which characterize his style—life and clarity. Undoubtedly, one influence on his style is his career as a journalist. Carl Bode surmises that Mencken's "readiness at writing" is the result of his days at the Herald and the Sun, where he produced "reams of copy . . . nearly always pushed by a deadline" (Mencken 53). This sense of immediacy is present in almost everything Mencken wrote—the feeling that there is no time to dawdle, to loll. Mencken wants to get on with it. Joseph Goulden, writing about Mencken's energetic descriptions of political conventions, states that the liveliness of his prose is attributable to the time he wrote: "Mencken reported during the era before television took de facto

possession of political conventions, transforming them into living room entertainment" (5). Mencken of necessity made his prose "acutely visual—and visceral" (5).

But the life of Mencken's style is more readily identified with his immense vocabulary—Charles Fecher estimates it at 25,000 words, "the largest, one may safely venture, of any writer in the English language" (312). Though Mencken uses hundreds of self-devised "tricks of style," as Bode calls them (Mencken 54), at the heart of each trick is clever manipulation of vocabulary. Mencken's deftness with words is analyzed at length in several essays by Henry Bauer who calls Mencken "Grand Master of the Word Art." "He will chiefly be remembered as a consummate performing artist in the verbal category" (6). In another essay, Bauer compares Mencken to Muhammad Ali. These men have one thing in common—"words at will" ("Mulling over Mencken's Mercury" 13).

One of Mencken's chief artistic tricks was to pepper his prose with rare words. According to Kemler, "Whenever he encountered a rare but an illuminating word, he went to the Sun office dictionary for its origin and meaning and noted it down in his file cards for later use" (32). Mencken came to be so closely identified with this trick that his prose is frequently cited for its use of unusual words. Huntington Cairns notes that the controversial Webster's Third New International Dictionary quotes Mencken 117 times for his use of such words as camorra, hunker, scotch (to mean a chock placed under a wheel to prevent its rolling), subaltern, mariolatry, onomatope, tendenz, viagrom, wowser (8-10).

Associated with rare words are words used in archaic senses—"to fetch," "to haul up," "to have at," "the which," "wenching" (Kemler 32). In this quotation from Heathen Days, Mencken uses the past participle holden instead of held: "This, precisely, was the dose that made the Democratic national convention of 1920, holden in San Francisco, the most charming in American annals" (176).

An important quality of many of the rare or archaic idioms is that they are part of the vernacular but not part of standard English—for example, "to have at" or hunker, meaning "to squat." Davidson identifies Mencken's love of the vernacular as one of his most praiseworthy qualities:

> He is a master of a style that is both explosive and vulgar; nor do I mean these terms as marks of blame. Mr. Mencken has given new life to the neglected Anglo-Saxon branch of the husky vocabulary that pretentious journalism stays politely clear of. The way he mixes in his Latinisms is equally deft . . . while he flings in hearty vulgarisms to flavor the mass. (175-176)

An excellent example of the Anglo-Saxon word as it is "flung" into an ordinary phrase is the word lights in this quotation from Happy Days:

> The real princes of Washington . . . were the newspaper correspondents. They outlasted Senators, Congressmen, judges and Presidents. In so far as the United States had any rational and permanent government, they were its liver and its lights. (216)

Lights is a Middle English name for the lungs of a slaughtered animal.

When the rare word, the archaic word, or the vernacular will not suffice, Mencken borrows. He borrows from Dutch, German, Greek, and Latin, and coins hundreds of words—many using Latinate elements. Such words as burgomaster (Free Lance, November 20, 1914) and Kultur

(Free Lance, March 8, 1915) appear in his Free Lance columns. He did not hesitate to use a word like dephlogisticated based on the Greek phlogistos: "Such was life in sterilized and dephlogisticated Naples, once so gay with iniquities and stinks. Such, I reflected sadly, was human progress" (Heathen Days 141).

Latinate words abound in Mencken's prose—boobus, boobus Americanus, bibliobibuli, and ombibulous (Downey 3). In Minority Report, Mencken expresses distaste for "the man with violent likes and dislikes in his drams": "I am omnibibulous, or, more simply, ombibulous," he says (102-103).

Frequently, Mencken is after the fun of a particular turn of phrase, and more often than not the humor comes from the sound of the word. A discourse in Minority Report on his opinion of "talkers" uses the word clapper-clawing:

> A good part of my time, in my earlier days, was spent in listening to speeches of one sort or another, and to watching their makers glow under the ensuing clapper-clawing. (126)

Applause would not have sufficed; it is too mundane. Clapper-clawing is precise. It conveys a sense of the absurdity of the event because it sounds clangorously absurd.

The life of Mencken's prose, in fact, depends heavily on absurdity—flamboyance, iconoclasm and shock combined with humor. To that end, he uses lists—catalogues of metaphors, nouns, adjectives—which manipulate vocabulary for humorous effect. In a letter to Philip Goodman in 1928, Mencken described the site of the Democratic national convention as a town "full of balloon-bubbied

cushion-hipped, air-cooled, worm-feed [sic], twin-screw, stall-fed, Bible-assed she-gals" (Letters, Bode 221). This unparalleled melange of gaudy adjectives is worthy of Babcock's descriptor—"lowbrowisms" ("A Vocabulary on Hysterical Principles" 6). Mencken characteristically juxtaposes incongruous elements in such lists. Bonner refers to these "tricks" as Mencken's whangdoodle style: When Mencken "dons his whangdoodle hat . . . the style then exhibits clang-tints, illogical and often absurd juxtapositions of ideas, and catalogues of epithets long enough to baffle Walt Whitman" (15).

The July 10, 1914, Free Lance contains a list that would horrify schoolmarms and purists of her ilk, but its cumulative effect is powerful:

> Thirty, or even twenty, years ago the average intelligent European, when he thought of us at all, thought first of our highly efficient chase of the dollar. But now he thinks first of our enormously increasing body of sumptuary and tartuffian laws, our incredible submission to endless "reforms" and "crusades," our pollution of politics with the concepts and phrases of the camp-meeting, our complaisant sufferance of a huge and growing class of professional sin-hounds, snouters and instructors in egg-sucking, our neglect of such able and honest men as Elihu Root in favor of such mountebanks and bogus martyrs as Sulzer and Roosevelt, our ridiculous pretension to a morality superior to that of other civilized peoples, our offensive playing of the international school-master and Sunday-school teacher.

This excerpt is fertile ground for all the analysts and probers who would uncover the life of Mencken's style. It is a Whitmanesque catalogue of the effects of "Pecksniffs and Pharisees" upon the national character. It is filled with phrases like tartuffian laws, professional sinhounds, bogus martyrs, instructors in egg-sucking, and international schoolmaster. Babcock calls these "incompatible

verbal intimates." They belong in a category with such juxtapositions as journalistic street walker and cow-state Messiah ("A Vocabulary on Hysterical Principles 6). This quote also contains what Bauer calls Mencken's "so and so's"—"two words riveted by and" ("The Glow and Gusto of H. L. Mencken's So and So's" 19): sumptuary and tartuffian, reforms and crusades, concepts and phrases, able and honest, huge and growing, Sulzer and Roosevelt, international school-master and Sunday-school teachers. These are in essence double lists—catalogues within catalogues—with multiple combinations of epithets. The effect is like a "good one-two punch," to use Bauer's phrase ("The Flow and Gusto" 19).

A variation on incongruous juxtaposition is the trick of ending a catalogue with an odd item. A quotation from Minority Report illustrates this technique:

> Most Americans are now mere machine-tenders: the machine is superior to the man. But no machine has yet been invented to do the work of a college president, a United States Senator, or a movie queen. (169)

This trick in reverse is also common. "The Divine Afflatus," collected in Prejudices: Second Series, is a masterpiece of sustained metaphor which examines poetic inspiration and "writer's block":

> A man may write great poetry when he is drunk, when he is cold and miserable, when he is bankrupt, when he has a black eye, when his wife glowers at him across the table, when his children lie dying of smallpox; he may even write it while crossing the English channel, or in the midst of a Methodist revival, or in New York. (159)

Ending the catalogue with New York is like a final crack of the whip. All other items in the list are absurd. Placing New York at the end

heightens the absurdity and taints what would ordinarily be a perfectly acceptable item. James Kilpatrick calls this trick "the cracker":

> It is the last word, often a one-syllable word possessed of a diphthong or a long vowel, or with one of those glottal phonemes that go off with the finality of a mouse trap. (7)

Most of these lively tricks of vocabulary seem submissive to analysis; consequently they invite imitators. In Mencken's heyday—from the 1920s to the mid 1930s—both his ideas and his style were copied by such writers as Edmund Wilson, Carl Van Doren, Ernest Boyd, Burton Rascoe. Of this group, Van Doren remarked, "In his [Mencken's] hands, the style is supreme, but in the hands of his copyists it becomes mere flubdubbery. Some of it is atrocious" (Kemler 131). Joseph Wood Krutch, who praises Mencken's style as the best of the twentieth century, agrees: "Most of his imitators were contemptible because his style was inimitable and only he could use as a genuine instrument of expression a vocabulary and a rhythm which in other hands stubbornly refused to yield to anything except vulgarity" (154-155). Alistair Cooke observes that

> During the 1920s, American newspapers and magazines, even The Smart Set and the American Mercury themselves, were full of Mencken imitators, who imitated only the windy rhetoric, the facetious polysyllables, the verbosity. There must have been some awful undergraduate essays spawned by Mencken's fame. ("Mencken and the English Language" 99)

The rhetoric, polysyllables, and the verbosity are traps to imitators because the life of Mencken's prose goes beyond mere verbal chicanery. Readers have observed in Mencken's writing, for example, a fusion of style and idea which parallels Mencken's belief that idea

and style are inseparable. Bonner has observed the organic nature of his prose. Mencken's style is "one appendage of an invisible structure. With Mencken, content and form, matter and manner, are but two sides of the same coin" (14). The inseparability of style and idea is partly the result of the personal nature of Mencken's prose. Charles Fecher notes in Mencken "the constant practice of interjecting not only himself into the matter under discussion but his audience as well." His "tendency" to be autobiographical "even carries over into the immense scholarship of The American Language" (29).

These characteristics—the inseparability of idea and style, the autobiographical nature, the life of his prose style—make for highly quotable, if inimitable, prose. Cairns, in his study of Mencken's appearances in Webster's Third International Dictionary, notes that Mencken is quoted 117 times to Edmund Wilson's 191, Sherwood Anderson's 175, Faulkner's 82, and Hemingway's 65 (9). Says Cairns,

> Mencken's quotability is a major mark of his writings. The seemingly endless stream of clippings quoting his writings and remarks which have flowed into the editorial chambers of Menckeniana since its establishment are evidence of his continuing vitality as an author. He is quoted in learned journals and comic strips, on the floor of Congress and on the stage. The distinctive badge of his quotations is their humor which enjoyed a remarkable durability. Today he is quoted more often than any other American writer including Mark Twain. (10)

Many of the reasons for Mencken's quotability are obvious—the force, exaggeration, polysyllables, epigrams, humor. But several readers have noted an ironic quality, related to humor, perhaps, or

springing from it—pleasantry or uplift. In spite of the deliberateness, the crudeness, the loudness, Mencken's prose is largely attractive for its delight. Even Donald Davidson, who mistrusted Mencken's ideas, praised this quality:

> Read Mr. Mencken for his ideas, and you will only hug the viper of melancholy to your bosom. Read him as you would read Mark Twain, you will not only escape the virus, but you will have a rare, indeed a unique, entertainment. (131)

Joseph Epstein, too, acknowledges that Mencken would be appalled to "find himself accused of uplift," and yet he "unfailingly" lifts one "out of the gloom, and away from the valley of small and large woes" (30). Joseph Goulden says that half an hour with Mencken is tantamount to a sauna and a rubdown, or a good dose of spiritual salts" (3).

The Clarity of Mencken's Style

Suffice it to say that nobody has ever accused Mencken of writing lifeless prose. The subject of clarity is, however, another matter. When Mencken's own writing is examined for the quality that he held foremost among the characteristics of a good style, his prose is sometimes found wanting. Mencken was himself quite conscious of the criticism that, in spite of his insistence on clarity, his meaning is often anything but clear. He confesses,

> The complaint that I hear most often is that my English is unintelligible—that it is too full of "hard" words. I can imagine nothing more astounding. My English is actually almost as bald and simple as the English of a college yell. My sentences are short and plainly constructed; I resolutely cultivate the most direct manner of statement; my vocabulary

> is deliberately composed of the words of everyday. Nevertheless, a great many of my readers in my own country find reading me an uncomfortably severe burden upon their linguistic and intellectual resources. (Prejudices III 258)

No one denies that Mencken writes "short and plainly constructed" sentences. In fact, such clarity frequently gets him into trouble. William Nolte says that Southerners objected "more vociferously" to Mencken's criticism of the South than they did to Faulkner's

> because Mencken's meaning was never obscure: even the semi-literate, once they had consulted a dictionary, knew precisely what he was saying. . . . Faulkner, on the other hand, avoided being lynched by obscuring his meaning in a cloud of prolixity and syntactical involutions that only the supra-literate could penetrate. ("Mencken, Faulkner, and Southern Moralism" 45)

Complaint is never lodged against Mencken's sentences or syntax; it is Mencken's vocabulary—the very life of his prose—that is charged with obfuscation. Edward Jervey points out that even a common term like Methodist, whose meaning ought to be obvious, can be confusing. It is difficult to know when Mencken uses the word for its denotation and when he uses it in the broadest sense to include all Protestant groups whom he opposes: "Baptists, United Bretheren, or Disciples, and parts of the Lutherans" (77). Harry Bauer repeatedly acknowledges that "Mencken's sentences are so short and neat they can be read with easy by any literate person" ("Iteration in HLM's Idiom Attic" 2). The problem, says Bauer, is with "unusual words and quaint phrases" that "undoubtedly serve as stumbling blocks to the uninitiated." Bauer lists dozens of examples and argues that Mencken "never worried very much over content so long as his words in context were full of harmony and lively bounce" ("Iteration in

HLM's Idiom Attic" 2). He seems to be accusing Mencken of the kind of writing that Mencken despised—"burbling," "diplomatic and political gospel hymns," cleverly clothed inanity.

Bauer's list of stumbling blocks is impressive: alliteration, metaphor, descriptive adjectives, difficult words like pantaloons, antinomian, biogenetic theory, and all the common idioms such as soon or late, first and last, year in and year out, in point of fact, at bottom, heirs and assigns. He seems to be saying that Mencken is also guilty of the trite, the commonplace. To use Bauer's phrase, Mencken not only iterates but reiterates, using these favorite "verbal delicacies" over and over. One of Bauer's most salient examples is Mencken's variations of Bible Belt: Mailorder Belt, No-More-Scrub-Bulls Belt, Foreign Missions Belt, Pellagra and Goitre Belt. When Mencken resorts to saleratus belt, Bauer says it has no meaning at all; it "simply means something funny" ("Iteration in HLM's Idiom Attic" 2-5).

Another example of good-sounding nonsense is Mencken's allusion to a line from Hedda Gabler, "vine leaves in his hair." When Mencken writes that a Richard Strauss score is "no more than our stout and comfortable old friend, the highly well-born bausfrau [sic], Mme. C. Dur_____ with a vine leaf or two of C sharp minor or F major in her hair," Bauer says, "the words mean nothing, but they sound beautiful" ("Iteration in HLM's Idiom Attic" 6). Mencken frequently stated that sound is more important than content, which is practically the same observation that Krutch and Davidson make when they praise

Mencken's style over his ideas. In an essay from Prejudices: Third Series, "The Poet and His Art," Mencken makes a similar judgment about Shakespeare:

> The virtue of such great poets as Shakespeare does not lie in the content of their poetry, but in its music. The content of the Shakespearean plays, in fact, is often puerile, and sometimes quite incomprehensible. No scornful essays by George Bernard Shaw and Frank Harris were needed to demonstrate the fact; it lies plainly in the text. One snickers sourly over generations of pedants debating the question of Hamlet's mental processes; the simple fact is that Shakespeare gave him no more mental processes than a Fifth Avenue rector has, but merely employed him as a convenient spout for some of the finest music ever got into words. (164-165)

Anyone who has read even a little Mencken recognizes his desire for effect. But Bauer seems to miss the richness of Mencken's daring linguistic creations. This is the writing of a man who makes up his language as he goes along.

Perhaps the most valid criticism of Mencken's vocabulary is that it is cryptic; it must be decoded. Bauer believes that Mencken's vocabulary is not easy to "decipher without recourse to a good dictionary and an alert intuition." The stumbling blocks here are the same qualities that give his style its life—"German words, dog Latin, synthetic words, strange tropes." This list includes "bibelot, cabotin, conycatcher, eyeground, fantod, gemara, glacis, gravamen, gravid, gyneolatry, haruspex, jehad, jenkins, narcolepsy, nonmenon, obfuscate, omphalist, paralogy, pasquinade, peruna, punditic, and shofar." Another obstacle to decoding Mencken is his love of proper names: Marguerite Gautier, Ponzi, Horace Fletcher, Colonel George Brinton, McClellan Harvey, John Alexander Dowie,

James N. Wood, Dr. Frank Crane, Frank Wedekind, Edwin Krebs, and Wickham Steed ("Grand Master of the Word Art" 11). Bauer is correct when he states that few readers—particularly in the last half of the twentieth century—recognize these proper names, but their obscurity does not convict Mencken of schoolmarm stylistics. At the very worst, they date his prose.

In spite of these supposed obstacles, Mencken never intends for his style to confuse, and Bauer freely admits that these linguistic snags are not "crutches." Mencken is obviously "capable of writing wonderful articles completely free of unlikely turns of phrases or obscure words" ("Grand Master of the Word Art" 11). Mencken's Happy Days essays are perfect examples of his clear, clean prose. Another point, and one that Bauer has perhaps unknowingly conceded, is that Mencken's vocabulary "disconcerts the innocent but entices the enlightened" ("Grand Master of the Word Art" 11). In his article "Iteration in HLM's Idiom Attic," Bauer states that Mencken's prose is a problem for the "uninitiated" (2). It is exactly the initiated and enlightened audience for whom Mencken writes. As Singleton has noted, "Mencken did not write primarily to 'stir up the animals,'" as is frequently charged. His essays were intended for the amusement and instruction of his cronies and the intelligent minority" (76). Mencken supports this justification in Minority Report.

> The ignorant have often complained that my vocabulary is beyond them, but that is simply because my ideas cover a wider range than theirs do. Once they have consulted the

> dictionary they always know exactly what I intend to say. I am as far as any writer can get from the muffled sonorities of, say, John Dewey. (293)

In his attitude toward style, Mencken is finally an elitist who puts the burden of understanding on the reader.

In spite of all the probing and analysis, the quibbling about life and clarity; for all of Mencken's bellowing about the American vernacular and his insistence that the spoken language is no different from the written language, Mencken's prose never violates the schoolmarm's rules. His vocabulary may not succumb to schoolmarm gentility, but his grammar is as careful and tidy as any English teacher's. Furthermore, he falls into many of the same traps that catch the great permitters like Safire. For example, he commits some of the sins that he condemns others for. Though he ridiculed Harding for normalcy, Mencken used it himself in a letter to George Jean Nathan: "Sara will not come with me: she is still a bit too wobbly to travel. But she is recovering fast, and is almost restored to normalcy" (Letters, Bode 249).

It is true that Mencken is attracted to the vernacular—the English language that Ring Lardner so adeptly recreates. It is also true that his essays are sometimes flavored with common structures that one might hear in the street. Such examples appear frequently in his Free Lance column.

> It would be a joke if them ex-Sheriffs was to fool the newspapers and let the case go on. But it don't hardly seem likely none. (September 17, 1912)

It should be obvious to any reader that this is the voice of Mencken the parodist. If anything, Mencken is using the vernacular much as

any elitist would, to ridicule a situation—not as a valid and acceptable form of expression.

Mencken is at bottom as much an eighteenth-century elitist in his prose style as he is in his thinking. Louis Rubin describes Mencken's writing in this way

> He had a fine, eighteenth-century kind of style, about as far removed from poetry as good prose can be, endowed with the specifically prose virtues, deftly concrete but never cluttered, and playing off elevated discourse against the choicest of colloquial vulgarity in fine good humor. (737)

"Elevated discourse" and choice "colloquial vulgarity" are precisely the two extremes that he deals with in all his material on language—and especially the two extremes he analyzes at length in The American Language.

Mencken would be horrified to be told that his prose style carries a distinct British flavor. Singleton comments that

> A surprisingly pervasive body of metaphor in the Prejudices is drawn from "medieval" tropes—or, more precisely, from the stereotyped language used by Enlightenment and progressivist nineteenth-century authors to describe the benighted era of the "Dark Ages."

Singleton gives a long list of examples: peasantry, yeomanry, Berserker, nave, paladin, vandal, sorcery, mountebankery, medieval despotism, charlantry (74). Alistair Cooke suggests that to the British themselves, Mencken seems remarkably English:

> The truth is that till the day he died, Mencken's own style, while it may be more pungent and outrageous than that of his English contemporaries, is hardly different in any particular of vocabulary, syntax, or cadence from that of the prevailing English models. Indeed, it often struck his English contemporaries as being rather behind their time, a powerful and verbose variation of the invective style of Bernard Shaw. ("Mencken and the English Language" 86-87)

The quality that Mencken notes as a hallmark of the American language—life—is certainly the hallmark of his own style. He gains that life, however, not by violating rules but by asserting himself, which is exactly what any great writer does—or any musician or athlete or painter. The rules work for him within the context of his personality. Mencken differs from the schoolmarms, the Newmans, the Macdonalds, the Safires only in one respect: he does not use language to make social distinctions.

CHAPTER V

THE AMERICAN LANGUAGE

The Beginnings

In the basement of the Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore, within a maze of wire cages, are thirty-four file boxes containing the materials for The American Language. When they are carted up to the Mencken Room and organized in a row, the dusty boxes almost fill the long table from end to end. Each box contains a disarray of material—letters from all over the world, clippings from dozens of newspapers, with Mencken's editorial notes scribbled here and there. The material has been fingered by only a few people since Mencken himself culled and organized it, one being Raven McDavid when he wrote the abridgment of the fourth edition and the two supplements.

One wonders, leafing through this material, whether Mencken ever guessed that his initial curiosity about American English would produce such an avalanche of paper. This query and others like it were obviously put directly to Mencken, for in the preface to Supplement I he says,

> Here I seize the chance to answer a question that reaches me frequently, to wit, What aroused my interest in the subject, and when did I print my earliest discussions of it? The answer to the first part is that I began to observe American speechways as a young newspaper reporter, working in the police-courts of Baltimore at the turn of the century, and that I was urged to a more systematic study by a chance encounter with a file of Dialect Notes in the Enoch Pratt Free Library of the same city, probably about 1905. . . . I

> was a steady customer of Dialect Notes after my discovery of its riches. . . . When, in 1910, the Baltimore Evening Sun was launched, and I was set to doing a daily article for its editorial page, I began experimenting with an occasional discussion of the common speech of the country, and by October was engaged upon an effort to expound its grammar. These inquiries brought a pleasant response from the readers of the paper, who took to sending me additional material, and I soon began that huge accumulation of notes and commentaries which still engulfs me. (ix-x)

The articles (noted in Chapter I) that produced such a favorable response were "The Two Englishes," "Spoken American," "More American," "American Pronouns," and "England's English"; these essays are the larval stage of the first edition of The American Language. According to Carl Bode, two factors contributed to their success. First of all, at that time newspapers were more inclined than they are now to address "linguistic matters." And secondly, Mencken's personality and style were popular with the readers: "Mencken's brisk opinions and provocative queries drew added attention to the topic and helped to swell the mail. His widening circle of correspondents sent in additions and occasional corrections" (Mencken 120). His mail would continue to "swell" with each revised edition.

In 1913 Mencken polished his ideas for an essay which was published in The Smart Set: "The American: His Language." Mencken intended to include this essay in a long work called The American. In a letter to Ellery Sedgwick, May 30, 1915, he mentioned this proposed book but said that little of it was "fit to print" except for the material on the American language (Letters, Bode 54). This was the

original typescript of The American Language, not fifty pages long in its 1915 version, but it mushroomed to 374 pages by 1919 (Bode, Mencken 120).

The First Edition

The 1919 subtitle proclaimed the first edition a "Preliminary Inquiry into the Development of English in the United States." Conscious that no such inquiry had ever been undertaken, Mencken explained in the preface, "What I have tried to do here is make a first sketch of the living speech of These States" (vii)—not as a teacher, prophet, or reformer, he argued, "but merely inquirer" (vii). In sketching the American language, Mencken aimed to show its divergence from British English and to argue that the language of the common man deserved to be studied. According to Mencken's preface, "certain American pedants" argued that it was "an anti-social act to examine and exhibit the constantly growing differences between English and American." He attributed this reluctance to their "childish effort to gain the approval of Englishmen" (TAL, 1st ed. vi-vii).

Mencken's stance, though biased toward professional linguists, academics, and the British, is nevertheless a major tenet of this initial edition, which included nine chapters. The first chapter, "By Way of Introduction," explained Mencken's rationale for undertaking this preliminary sketch: Though the common speech of Americans began to diverge from the English of England with the first

colonists, the academics ignored the changes and refused to study them. Chapter II, "The Beginnings of American," and Chapter III, "The Period of Growth," traced "the growing independence of the colonial dialect" (TAL, 1st ed. 37), its absorption of many foreign influences, and the growing rejection of it among the literati. Chapter IV, "American and English Today," focused on the differences between American and British vocabulary, usage, honorifics, euphemisms, and forbidden words. By far, the longest sections were Chapter V, "Tendencies in American" (47 pages, and Chapter VI, "The Common Speech" (66 pages). These two segments, which made up almost one-third of the work, included those examples of the vernacular (vocabulary, syntax, and usage) that Mencken had culled and collected for twenty years and had used previously in his journalistic essays. These chapters provided Mencken's substantive evidence that English and American are different. In Chapter VII, Mencken addressed "Differences in Spelling" and in Chapter VIII, "Proper Names in America." His ninth chapter, "Miscellanea," was just that—a collection of material that could not be categorized under any of the other headings—proverbs, slang, and the future of the language. One of the most significant features of the 1919 edition was the bibliography—twelve pages and 274 entries. This was a first collection of material on the subject of the American language.

A survey of Mencken's correspondence shows how he felt about having written this "preliminary inquiry." He said to Philip Goodman, "I finished that damned American language book last night" (Letters,

Bode 93). He complained to Ernest Boyd in late 1918 of the fatigue of doing the indexes (Letters, Forgue 133), and a month later, January 18, 1919, he told Boyd, "Never again! Such professorial jobs are not for me" (Letters, Forgue 144).

Though the work had obviously been tiring and tedious, he could joke about it, showing slight embarrassment at having done such an impressive book. He told Burton Rascoe that this "fat, formidable tome [is] certain to get me an S.T.D. from the North Carolina Baptist University" (Letters, Forgue 122). With Louis Untermeyer he joked that it "runs to more than 250,000 words. Dreiser will be jealous. I have written a book larger than 'The Genius'" (Letters, Forgue 150). To Dreiser, Mencken sent a copy of The American Language with this description: "It is a gaudy piece of buncombe, rather neatly done" (Letters, Forgue 144). He seemed to have been awkwardly proud but apologetic for having done a serious work. He told Colonal Fielding Garrison in June of 1919 that its good notices were making him "respectable" (Letters, Bode 102).

Such respectability startled him. As reactions to The American Language began coming in, he saw immediately that he was gaining acceptance among the very people he had "twitted" for years—the schoolmarms, the "higher varieties of gogues." Reactions to the first edition were largely favorable. Those that were not favorable "missed the mark entirely," according to Raven McDavid, for they attacked Mencken's "lack of academic training" and his gall in writing "what the academics were afraid to undertake." The favorable

reviews came from "such giants" as George O. Curme of Northwestern, and Brander Matthews of Columbia ("The Impact of Mencken" 4-5). Reviewing the book for the New York Times, Matthews called it "interesting and useful": "It is a book to be taken seriously; it is a book well planned, well proportioned, well documented, and well written" (157). The Nation was more skeptical: "The task has been large enough to make him, for the time being, nearly humble" ("De Vulgaria Eloquentia" 698). It accused Mencken of "barking up the wrong tree": "You might think he had never heard London cabbies at their compliments." In spite of such skepticism, however, the final evaluation was highly favorable:

> These confusions, however, may be overlooked for the sake of the fine gusto for the vernacular in which Mr. Mencken surpasses all who have written on this theme. Along with wide researches into colonial speechways, much knowledge of sectional and special locutions, and a most competent acquaintance with grammars, dictionaries, monographs, and printers' rules goes a jolly delight. ("De Vulgaria Eloquentia" 698)

The New Republic admitted that Mencken was "hyperbolic at the beginning" and that "without a parallel investigation of unsophisticated usages in English" Mencken's thesis was unsound. Nevertheless, The New Republic praised the first edition for "its sagacious thoroughness":

> It covers every sort of American idiosyncrasy in idiom, in spelling, in pronunciation, in grammar, in slang. To do so with piquancy was natural to Mr. Mencken, but the delight of the volume is its workmanship. And Mr. Mencken is not less marvelous in his ingenious generalizing than in his inexhaustible information. ("The Living Speech" 155)

Critics generally praised the first edition as a "synthesis of available information, a set of conclusions based on that information,

and an appeal for more research" (McDavid, "The Impact of Mencken" 4-5). William Manchester summarized the reaction from all quarters:

> Even the pedagogues were stirred. The New York Sun, alarmed, asked "Can English be Saved?" . . . The Atlantic Monthly acclaimed the "opening up of a new line of research," and even Brander Matthews, lately an ally of Stuart Sherman (who was greatly upset by this attempt to "split asunder the two great English speaking peoples"), approved it in the New York Times. . . . In circles where language is written and taught, the battle was on: Dr. Louise Pound at the University of Nebraska and Frank Moore Colby, editor of the New International Encyclopedia, were Mencken's chief defenders, and Sherman and his band of schoolmarms were the attackers. (139-140)

Manchester surmised that Mencken had "with one powerful stroke . . . hewed in half the umbilical cord which philologically bound this nation to England" (139-140).

Mencken's response was typically Mencken, but it clothed a sincere pleasure in what he had done. To Ernest Boyd he complained that he had "suffered the ignominy of being favorably reviewed by Brander Matthews. The truth is that the academic idiots are all taking it very seriously, greatly to my joy" (Letters, Bode 98). Mencken's joy was not in being taken into the academic fold, so to speak, but in feeling that he had put one over on the whole lot of professionals. In the summer of 1919, for example, Mencken was invited to join the Authors' Club in New York, an honor he scorned. On the other hand, he considered it significant enough to mention it in three different letters—one to Ernest Boyd, one to George Sterling, and one to Burton Rascoe. He wrote to Boyd that the Club was "the morgue of the senile and the respectable" (Letters, Bode 105). He told Sterling that he would pass the invitation on to Witter Brynner

in hopes that the Authors' Club, being a "moral organization," could "improve him" (Letters, Bode 107). He told Rascoe that Frank Vizetelli wanted him to join the ranks of "the other professors" in the Club (Letters, Forgue 156). He playfully declined the invitation, telling the Club that he was leaving the country—"resigning from all American Clubs," moving to Europe, and renouncing American citizenship (Letters, Forgue 156). But a letter to Burton Rascoe in the summer of 1920 shows a more bitter, less jocular Mencken. He seemed genuinely horrified that he might be taken seriously: "I have no ambition to be praised by eminent professors. The reviews of my American Language actually made me sick. I don't want to get into the school literature books when I die" (Letters, Forgue 189).

Response to the first edition was heavy; Mencken knew immediately that he would have to revise the book. Already by June of 1919, he could tell Colonel Garrison, "The book needs a thorough overhauling, but it will have to wait at least a year. The first edition is almost sold out" (Letters, Bode 102). In July of 1919 he wrote Joseph Hergesheimer, "Fresh material is pouring in from pundits from all over the world, and when the mails are open I daresay the Germans will flood me." He admitted to Hergesheimer, "The job of rewriting the book is anything but appetizing" (Letters, Forgue 149-150). Already—only four months after its publication—he was dreading the revision. In the preface to the fourth edition, he said that "so much new matter came in from readers" of the first edition "that a revision was undertaken almost at once" (v). In mid-October, he

told Colonel Garrison, "The American Language correspondence becomes enormous. Today I received from a man in Philadelphia the longest letter ever written—actxally 10,000 words, and every page full of interesting observation." The correspondence was so massive that Mencken expected the revision to "run to 30 or 40 volumes folio" (Letters, Forgue 157).

The Second Edition

By 1920 it was clear that his publisher desperately wanted a revision; it was also clear that Mencken dreaded the work. He spoke of it only with dismay: "Knopf keeps bawling for a revision . . . and I haven't even opened it. The job will be fearful—six more months of loathsome malpractise [sic] among pedagogues, philologists and other such foul fowl" (Letters, Bode 129). One suspects that he feared the "respectability" that the work was bringing him as much as he dreaded the sheer work. He did not want to be accepted among the pedagogues and philologists. In October 1919, however, he admitted to Colonel Garrison that he was "thinking of employing some professor" to help him with the work (Letters, Forgue 157). A safe guess as to who this professor was would be Louise Pound, one of a small flock of "foul fowl" whom he respected. In October of 1920, he wrote to her, "I wish you had the task of rewriting 'The American Language'—not because I wish you ill, but because you could do it much better than I." He minimized his own ability: "I have long since got beyond my very meagre knowledge of language." Material was still "pouring in

in from all parts of the world," and Knopf was "bawling for copy for a new edition." Mencken argued that he had neither the time nor the skill to complete the task (Letters, Forgue 205).

He told Louise Pound in November of 1920, "I must now do the thing myself, and it will be very hard work, and I'll make a mess of it" (Letters, Bode 133). He seemed resigned to the scourge of having written such a popular book. Mencken's publisher, Knopf, told him that "the plain people bawl for another edition . . . The orders rolling in drive him frantic" (Letters, Bode 133). This was Mencken's only mention of the plain people. All his attention seemed to be on the professionals. But he also became aware, at this point, that the book was making money! "The royalties on the small first edition run to more than all my other books have ever earned. The moral is plain: fraud pays" (Letters, Bode 133). In a letter to Knopf, he joked about the work: "All I ask is that you make The American Language good and thick. It is my secret ambition to be the author of a book weighing at least five pounds" (Letters, Forgue 228).

Just over a year later—December of 1921—the second edition was published. The book had grown from 374 to 492 pages; the price from $3.00 to $6.00, In this revised edition, Mencken reprinted the preface to the first edition but added a new preface which explained that "nearly every page shows changes" (xi). The subtitle could no longer justify the label preliminary, so that word was dropped from this and all subsequent editions.

The major changes included the addition of four chapters, an appendix, and an extended bibliography. Chapters I-IV remained

virtually the same in format; most of the changes involved correction of errors and addition of the new material which had engulfed him. Chapter V, "International Exchanges," was new; in the 1919 edition it was part of "Tendencies in American," which became Chapter VI in the 1921 edition. Chapter VII, "American Pronunciation," was also new, having been the concluding section of "The Common Speech" (VI) in the first edition. Mencken also switched the discussions of spelling and the vulgate. "American Spelling" became Chapter VIII and "The Common Speech" became Chapter IX. Chapter X, "Proper Names," was not much changed, but "American Slang" (XI) and "The Future of the Language" (XII), both of which had been part of the 1919 "Miscellanea," were given full chapters.

The Apparatus reflected some of the most dramatic changes. The addition of three appendices was highly significant. The first, "Specimens of the American Vulgate," included Mencken's translation of The Declaration of Independence into the American vulgate, two pieces by Ring Lardner, and a poem by John V. A. Weaver, "Elegie Americaine," which Mencken said was the first use of the American vulgate in serious verse. The second appendix listed "Non-English Dialects in America"; the third discussed "Proverb and Platitude," which were part of "Miscellanea" in the 1919 edition.

The bibliography grew from 12 pages in 1919 to thirty-two pages in 1921. Mencken organized the revised bibliography into sixteen sections which roughly followed his chapter divisions. The last section, "Bibliographies of American English," was one of the first of its kind, though it included only nine items.

Unlike the bibliography, the "List of Words and Phrases" actually decreased in number of pages and in number of items because Mencken thoroughly revised it. He told Gamaliel Bradford that he spent three weeks on the word list and "came near murdering two stenographers, both virtuous and Christian girls, but utter damned fools" (Letters, Bode 148).

Mencken's joke about the word list was typical of his attitude once the work was finished, but his letters show that the revision had been physically demanding: "The business of writing the book turned out, in the end, to be fit for Hercules. . . . What with that labor and a lot of routine editorial work I closed the year in a state of collapse." And though he swore, "No more philology!" (Letters, Bode 148), in March he told Louise Pound, "The book will kill me yet. It is still full of errors, and I must make another revision before the plates are cast." At this time, Knopf had already sold 2,200 copies (Letters, Forgue 234). It sold well because it was published in the United States and in England (TAL, 3rd ed. vii). Mencken noted that it was being read even in Germany: "'The American Language' brought me a pleasant note from Jespersen this morning, and the German philologs are writing in for review copies" (Letters, Forgue 234). Such popularity demanded yet another edition.

The Third Edition

The third edition, published in February of 1923, was roughly the same length as the second edition—489 pages. (The price,

ironically, dropped from $6.00 to $5.00.) The table of contents exactly duplicated that of the 1921 edition, with one exception: Lardner's Ham-American dialogue was replaced with Mencken's translation into the American vulgate of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. Though the structure of the book remained otherwise unchanged, Mencken noted in the preface that new material was added to "nearly every chapter" and that all chapters were "diligently scrutinized for errors" (vii).

The most significant feature of the 1923 revision is Mencken's consistent argument that though interest in American English was growing, the professionals still largely ignored the American vulgate. Evidence of the growing interest in American English was seen in Krapp's The English Language in America whose manuscript Mencken had already reviewed (though it would not be published until 1925). Another favorable sign was that the Society for Pure English—in existence in England since 1913—had "extended its activities to this country," and had appointed an American secretary, Dr. Henry Seidel Canby.

> The ostensible aim of the society is to improve standard English by importing words and idioms into it from the English dialects, including the American, and by restoring to it the bold and enterprising habit which marked it in Elizabethan days, but is now chiefly confined . . . to what the London Times has called Amerenglish. This aim, I believe, is honestly cherished by the Poet Laureat, Dr. Bridges, as his writings on the subject sufficiently demonstrate but I am inclined to think that many of his American collaborators are rather intent on no more novel or intelligent aim than that of augmenting the authority of standard English in America. That is to say, they are simply Anglomaniacs. (viii)

Mencken further regretted that no study of American surnames, American slang, or the "grammar of vulgar American" had been undertaken. In spite of his misgivings, however, he did believe that American philologists were beginning to abandon their disdain of American English: "Judging by the communications that I have received from many of them—some, alas, rather waspish!—I incline to believe that the successive editions of the present work have broken down some of their old aloofness. Maybe the inquiries that I have suggested are being made even now" (ix).

Indeed, reactions to Mencken's language study were "waspish"! In 1923, Henry van Dyke, of Princeton, told an International Conference of British and American Professors of English that "the language of the United States [is] English and not American." Van Dyke declared that "the natural style of the persons who gravely make the proposal [for an American language] gives rise to frightful dreams of the kind of new language they probably would make if they were let loose on the job" (Kemler 134). In 1924, at the annual meeting of the NCTE, Fred N. Scott, University of Michigan, delivered a paper on "Improving the English of America" which argued that "we [Americans] must not be judged by the language H. L. Mencken says is American" ("Fourteenth Annual Meeting" 48). Though it is true that Henry van Dyke and Fred N. Scott do not agree with Mencken, the discussion of these topics at international conferences and at annual meetings of the NCTE is evidence that Mencken's study was "making inroads" among the professionals.

The Fourth Edition

No new edition of the work would appear until 1936, thirteen years after the third edition. Mencken says he was forced to "shelve the book" because he and George Jean Nathan "launched" The American Mercury (Supplement I x). This was also the period when Mencken would abandon his bachelorhood and become a widower. He married Sara Hardt in 1930; she died in 1935. But the most telling reasons for his long absence from the linguistic work are summarized by Raven McDavid in the introduction to the Abridgment: "If philologians wonder at the time that elapsed between the third and fourth editions, social historians do not. The third decade of this century, in the United States at least, was an unparalled era of buncombe." Mencken's return to The American Language project "coincided with a decline in his activity as a social satirist during the New Deal and the subsequent American involvement in World War II." Ironically, "This was also the period in which the study of the national tongue began to establish itself in Academe" (vii-viii).

Mencken's letters during this period substantiate McDavid's view of the 1930s and provide a chronology of the work's progress, just as they do for the earlier editions. Mencken's correspondence also shows his reasons for returning to the work when he did, in 1933. First of all, the response to the third edition was overwhelming, and the people—both plain and professional—"bawled" for a revision. In November of 1933, Mencken wrote William Carlos Williams that he would begin a new edition "within the next year, for an enormous mass

of material has accumulated" (Letters, Bode 298). In June of 1934, he wrote, "I have spent the last month sorting out my notes for a new edition of 'The American Language'. In all probability it will run to two volumes. The amount of material that has turned up since my last revision is really astonishing" (Letters, Bode 323).

This revision, like the others, clearly took its toll on him. In October, he was "still grinding away horribly at the revision." Behind every "batch of notes," he says, "another begins to bloom." He questioned whether he would "ever be able to finish the job" and joked that it "threatens to run to forty or fifty volumes" (Letters, Bode 323). In November of 1934, he told Ezra Pound that he had been "hard at work on the revision for two or three months" but was "still far from the end." He described the "accumulation of material" as "colossal": "I actually had thirty pounds of newspaper clippings alone" (Letters, Bode 328-]29). In March of 1935 his tone intensified—to Kemp Malone he called it "my infernal book" (Letters, Bode 349). In May, his tone worsened: "I am still grinding away at my infernal book," he told Theodore Dreiser. "The trouble with it is that the new material accumulates almost faster than I can work it into the manuscript." Though he hoped to "bring the business to an end by August 1st" (Letters, Bode 353), his plans were interrupted. Sara died on May 31, 1935. Mencken did not return to the manuscript until July; in his words, he resumed his "slavery." He called it the "damned revision" and declared, "the thing becomes a pestilence." At this point he adopted liquid measurements for the accumulated

material: "During the month I was away another gallon or two of material accumulated" (Letters, Bode 359).

Though his correspondence suggests that he did not enjoy the work, it nevertheless may have pulled him through the period of grief. Three years after the fourth edition was published, April 6, 1939, he told Joseph Hergesheimer, "I floundered around for a year after Sara's death, and pulled myself together only by hard work on 'The American Language,' fourth edition" (Letters, Forgue 431). The work was finished in April of 1936.

The fourth edition was considerably different from its three predecessors. The book had changed as Mencken had aged. In 1919 he was thirty-nine years old; by 1936 he was fifty-six—middle aged. His experiences had sobered and matured him. The tone of The American Language had sobered and matured as well. McDavid says that the fourth edition was a "trifle more sedate" than the third edition (Abridgment viii).

Its thesis, too, had changed. Mencken argued in the 1919 edition only for the recognition of the divergence of American English from British English. In 1936 he argued that the American language would displace British English. His new thesis grew out of the gallons of material which he collected in response to each edition—the letters (including the one which ran to 10,000 words), the clippings, the notes, and the growing publications of Dialect Notes and American Speech (TAL, 4th ed. vi). Mencken explained its evolution in the preface to the 1936 work:

> When I became interested in the subject and began writing about it (in the Baltimore Evening Sun in 1910), the American form of the English language was plainly departing from the parent stem, and it seemed at least likely that the differences between American and English would go on increasing. This was what I argued in my first three editions. But since 1923 the pull of American has become so powerful that it has begun to drag English with it, and in consequence some of the differences once visible have tended to disappear. The two forms of the language, of course, are still distinct in more ways than one, and when an Englishman and an American meet they continue to be conscious that each speaks a tongue that is far from identical with the tongue spoken by the other. But the Englishman, of late, has yielded so much to American example, in vocabulary, in idiom, in spelling and even in pronunciation, that what he speaks promises to become, on some not too remote tomorrow, a kind of dialect of American, just as the language spoken by the American was once a dialect of English. (vi)

In addition to the change in the thesis, the structure of the book changed. The 1923 "Introductory" became two chapters—"The Two Streams of English" and "The Materials of the Inquiry." Mencken preserved the 1923 arrangement of materials in Chapters II, III, and IV, but Chapter V, "International Influences," was absorbed by Chapter V, "The Language Today," in the 1936 edition. The order of the remaining chapters was unchanged, though the material was thoroughly revised.

Other significant revisions were reflected in the Appendix and Bibliography. The fourth edition dropped from the Appendix the examples of American vulgate and the discussion of proverb and platitude, restricting the Appendix entirely to a discussion of Non-English Dialects in American. Mencken said he dropped his own translations into the vulgate of the Declaration of Independence and Lindoln's Gettysburg Address because they "were mistaken by a number

of outraged English critics for examples of Standard American, or of what I proposed that Standard American should be" (vii). Changes in the bibliography were even more significant. The thirty-two pages of citations were incorporated into the text, making it easier for readers to run "down the byways of the subject" (vii). Conscious of the growing bulk of the work (the List of Words and Phrases, for example, ran to 82 pages), Mencken tried to include all new material but also to produce a book that was easy to use.

Mencken's efforts on the revision were Herculean. He told his Uncle Charles Abhau, "There were days when I actually worked thirteen Hours." He said, "Why I undertook this job God alone knows," and he joked with his uncle, "Conscientiousness . . . is one of the curses of this family" (Letters, Bode 375). But a letter to Jim Tully in September of 1936 makes plain his reasons for undertaking a project that was a pestilence: "You are quite wrong about 'The American Language.'" (One wonders whether Tully had taken seriously Mencken's many complaints about doing the work.) Mencken avowed, "It is worth every moment of time that I put into it. It will long outlast anything else that I have ever written" (Letters, Forgue 395).

He was right. The fourth edition was issued in Braille and in a British edition (Supplement I v); it was reprinted fourteen times and was a Book-of-the-Month-Club selection which sold over 90,000 copies by the end of 1939. According to Carl Bode, "It would end as a classic, something few foresaw when it appeared in 1919" (Mencken 122).

The Supplements

After the fourth edition was issued, Mencken set the work aside. Nine years elapsed between the 1936 edition and Supplement I in 1945. Mencken made no excuses for his long absence from the project, but one of his reasons may have been his failing health. In 1942 he was cautioned that he risked a "severe stroke," and in early 1945 he noted himself that his mental faculties were slipping (Bode, Mencken 369). His biographer, Carl Bode, describes the gradual deterioration of both his mind and body during these years when he pushed himself to maintain his usual productive pace—particularly on the two supplements (Mencken 368-369). Their style was perhaps a reflection of Mencken's changing physical and mental condition—"somewhat more diffuse and anecdotal than in the Fourth Edition" (McDavid, Abridgment vii). McDavid observed that "the examples are more numerous and somewhat less selective; the documentation is much more extensive" (Abridgment viii).

The date when Mencken began work on the supplements is not clear. His correspondence before 1941 shows little reference to the proposed first supplement, and then he said only that he would "probably tackle" the project in March (Letters, Bode 478). A year later, April 1942, he was still "hoping to tackle" the work (Letters, Bode 495), and in October still hoping "to fall to work" on Supplement I (Letters, Bode 504). Not until 1943 did he finally say, "I am up to my ears in the supplement." He anticipated that it would take him "a year at least" (Letters, Forgue 476).

Unlike his comments during his writing and revision of the first four editions, these are bland, matter of fact statements, lacking the intensity, the humor, even the bewilderment he displayed toward the earlier editions. In December of 1943, he reported that he was "plugging away" and that it was "really a dreadful job." Because of his "reasonable good health," he reported that he had written more than 100,000 words of the proposed 400,000 (Letters, Bode 531). In early January of 1944, he reported "fair progress," but the usual stumbling block was tripping him—the mass of material that the fourth edition spawned: "Unhappily, it will be impossible to get more than ten per cent. of the accumulated material into it" (Letters, Bode 534).

In May of 1944, Mencken still described the work as "dreadfully tedious and laborious," but he could also say, "nevertheless I enjoy it" (Letters, Bode 541). This was one of few statements that he liked the work, despite its tedium. In December of 1944 he said to George Jean Nathan, "I am in the midst of my two long indexes—a really fearful job. If God is kind, I should finish by Christmas" (Letters, Bode 548). And he was indeed able to finish them by Christmas, but publication was delayed because of paper shortages—though Knopf's rabbi prayed that the "coordinators" would let him have paper (Letters, Bode 552).

Supplement I, issued on August 20, 1945, contained 874 pages of material purely supplemental to the first six chapters of the 1936 edition. Mencken explained in the preface that the new attention to

American English had produced voluminous material from several sources—the professional literature, newspaper clippings, and Mencken's own correspondence. No sooner was the work out than it generated yet another mountain of material. By October 1945 it was already in its third printing. That same month, Mencken reported to Nathan, "The mail produced by Supplement I is large and vexatious: many of the letters ask questions that have to be answered and are troublesome" (Letters, Bode 555). If Mencken seems somewhat nettled here, it can be attributed to his failing health and his age—now sixty-five years. But his conscientious attention to the mail is proof that he continued to take the language work seriously.

During the following year, 1946, Mencken made little mention of the work on Supplement II, but as Carl Bode has pointed out, "this was his final year of sustained effort" (Letters 558). In December of 1946 he reported to Hans Kurath that he would be reading "a few pages" of the manuscript of Supplement II to the meeting of the Dialect Society in 1947. He also included his usual lament that the work was "dreadful" and that half of the accumulated material would have to be omitted (Letters, Bode 569). He finished the first draft of his "accursed" Supplement II by May of 1947, but he still had the "horrible revision," the proofing, and the two indexes to complete (Letters, Bode 547). In October he was still "up to his neck" in the proofreading and indexing—"a truly dreadful job" (Letters, Bode 580).

Supplement II, issued in early 1948, covered Chapters VII through XI of the fourth edition. Unfortunately, Mencken did not

include Chapter XII on "The Future of the Language," which should have refined the 1936 thesis. Neither of the prefaces to the supplements, in fact, addressed the 1936 thesis. Mencken also omitted the Appendix. He explained in the preface to Supplement II that he had hoped to add a second appendix for such untouched themes as "the language of gesture, that of children, the names of political parties, cattle brands, animal calls, and so on." The material he accumulated from the laity and the professionals had become so voluminous that he ended Supplement II with Chapter XI, "lest it grow to an impossible bulk" (v). Supplement II had already grown to 933 pages.

On November 23, 1948, Mencken was completely debilitated by a stroke. Ironically, he had already said in the preface to the second supplement, "It is highly improbable that I'll ever attempt a Supplement III" (v). He never wrote again, though The New Yorker published articles that he had written before 1948 based on ideas which grew out of the fourth edition and the two supplements.

The Abridgment

When Raven McDavid tackled the Abridgment, he was faced with this long metamorphosis of Mencken's work. The discipline itself, which Mencken could "survey intelligently" in 1910, had grown so much that, according to McDavid, "A simple bibliography of linguistic publications since World War II would make a volume as fat as the 1919 edition" (Abridgment x). McDavid could neither incorporate "all the major linguistic discoveries and social changes of the past

fifteen years," nor could he remain completely faithful to Mencken's "inspired text and offer a dated work" (Abridgment xi). What he and Knopf settled on was an "abridgment and condensation of Mencken's three volumes, with updating where necessary and editorial commentary at critical points" (Abridgment xi-xii). McDavid addressed the difficulty of completing the Abridgment:

> The American Language is not just another reference work, but a work of art in its own right, and it would be madness to destroy its unique flavor under the guise of bringing it up to date. . . . The restriction of the task to an abridgment made the completion that much easier. ("Mencken's Onomastics" 95)

The Abridgment was published in November of 1963; it sold for $12.95 a copy. It was issued in paperback in 1977 and underwent a seventh printing in October 1979. McDavid followed Mencken's 1936 table of contents, excluding the Appendix. Even so, the work ran to 777 pages, not including the 95-page List of Words and Phases and the 29-page index.

The value of McDavid's abridgment was that by omitting repetitious material but preserving what was valuable, he produced a highly readable, accessible book. In 1986 the abridgment is a delight to the lay reader and a textbook in dozens of college courses. Mencken has suffered the further ignominy of being anthologized in college texts. Language Awareness, A Writer's Reader, and The American Language in the 1970's include him along with the likes of Edwin Newman, William Safire, S. I. Hayakawa, Paul Roberts, and of all people, Witter Bynner, the one man Mencken believed could be uplifted by membership in the Authors' Club of New York.

The Abridgment has kept alive Mencken's attitudes toward English in America for the professional linguist as well as the college student. Lee Pederson, a student of McDavid, wrote in 1965 that the value of the Abridgment "to dialectology cannot be overestimated":

> Earlier editions . . . were handbooks for the pioneers of American linguistic geography; Mencken's work staked out the field and gave direction to the investigators. Equally important, Mencken exchanged information with those who shared his interest in our language, and he encouraged young students to take up the search. (63)

Henry Bosley Woolf's review of McDavid's Abridgment praised the enduring qualities of Mencken's work—his firm grounding in criticism of American politics and religion, his attitude toward purism, his "ability to assimilate and synthesize vast quantities of material" (108-111). Woolf said that Chapter V, "The Language Today," should be "required reading for all those who teach, study, or write about American English" (108). Of Chapter IX, "The Common Speech," he said, "One wishes that the entire chapter was in the hands of all teachers of English, especially those who have been in the classroom for many years and who have neglected to keep abreast of current linguistic studies" (113).

Woolf did point out some of the weaknesses of the Abridgment which are ultimately flaws in Mencken's—not McDavid's—work. Some of the material has become dated; Chapter VI is "superficially quite impressive," but a search of the dictionaries current in 1965 shows it to be "highly inaccurate" (110). Chapter VII on American pronunciation is equally weak; it "does not show Mencken at his best and

yet it is a considerable achievement for one who had no formal training in phonology or phonetics" (111).

CHAPTER VI

MENCKEN'S LINGUISTIC SOPHISTICATION AND INFLUENCE

Mencken's Questionable Standing as a Linguist

Woolf's review of the Abridgment raises the old issue of whether Mencken was ever qualified to write The American Language. His standing as a linguist is often questioned. He is accused of being an upstart journalist (or, to use Angoff's phrase, a "lifelong irresponsible boy") who was academically unfit to write on the subject of language. Mencken himself never disputes the accusation. He refers to his work on the revision of the 1919 edition as "loathsome malpractise [sic]" (Letters, Bode 129). He tells Louise Pound that in the revision he has "got beyond" his "meagre [sic] knowledge of language" (Letters, Forgue 205). The unequalled success of his work did not give him confidence. In the preface to Supplement II, Mencken makes it clear that he fully understands his reputation within linguistic circles:

> I am not trained in linguistic science, and can thus claim no profundity for my book. It represents the gatherings, not of an expert in linguistics, but simply of a journalist interested in language, and if there appears in it any virtue at all it is the homely virtue of diligence. Someone had to bring together the widely scattered field material and try to get some order and coherence into it, and I fell into the job. My professional friends, I have no doubt, have often had their teeth set on edge by some of my observations and conclusions, but they have nevertheless shown a generous and accommodating spirit, and I owe a great deal to their friendly if somewhat pained interest. (v-vi)

Such "modesty," says Lee Pederson, was "badly misinterpreted" by some scholars and "some academicians paled before his unorthodox approach" (64).

Before one can address the issue of Mencken's linguistic orthodoxy, one must examine the linguistic climate within which he worked. At the time Mencken published the first edition of The American Language (1919), the linguistic climate was changing. The turn of the century was, according to Geoffrey Sampson, "an important turning-point in the history of modern linguistics." The move to the twentieth century marked a shift from historical, or diachronic, linguistics to synchronic linguistics (13). As Julia S. Falk has pointed out, the historical approach was not suitable for the kind of linguistic analysis that many American linguists were engaged in at the turn of the century (Franz Boas, for example). What emerged was a descriptive approach which focused on sounds. According to Falk, the attention to sound was necessary because these linguists—many of whom were anthropologists and some of whom were missionaries (e.g., Nida)—were not fluent in the languages they studied and, therefore, could not deal with syntax, which is more complex than sound (9).

Mencken's work corresponds, in part, with this type of investigation, which came to be known as structural linguistics. He agrees with the descriptive nature of their approach and with the focus on modern languages. He disagrees, however, with the attention to sound—morphology and phonology were never of any interest to him.

For example, Mencken rails against the inclusion of phonological studies in American Speech. On April 21, 1937, he writes to Atcheson Hench:

> Confidentially, it seems to me that too much space in American Speech is devoted to phonology. Certainly it seems absurd in a magazine of such a title to list things like "The Main Types of Russian Intonation," and "The Audibility of Esperanto." . . . But the long and irrelevant bibliography of phonology exhausts the space that could be given to bibliography and so the bibliography of American speech remains incomplete. (Vandercook 2)

Upon being appointed to the Advisory Board of American Speech in 1941, Mencken again writes Hench, "I . . . have once more renewed my protest against devoting so much of its space to general phonology" (Vandercook 2). In a 1946 interview with Hench, Mencken even ridicules useless phonetic symbols: "I offer a barrel of beer to any philolog who from transcription can recognize that a speaker is Truman" (Vandercook 4).

Such disrespect certainly does not endear Mencken to the structuralists. However, Raven McDavid, who probably knows Mencken's American Language better than anyone else, defends Mencken's attitude. Mencken's approach to language, says McDavid, was never

> the slapdash buffoonery that some of our ivory-bowered colleagues so blithely assume. He read widely, and generally well, and until his stroke in 1948 he kept up with all serious work . . . that might impinge on the study of American English. Of course, he did not always fully assimilate, or accept, this new knowledge; particularly, he was often bewildered by the punctilios of phonemic churchmanship and the arcane jargon of the high-church structuralists. . . . But it is only fair to add that Mencken's bewilderment on these matters has been shared by many inmates of academe, including some professional linguists of the first water. ("Mencken's Onomastics" 94)

Though it is true that Mencken has little patience with such topics as phonology, phonemic theory, and structural grammar, McDavid points out that reasonable linguists—like all reasonable people—must admit to more than one approach or method.

> His [Mencken's] occasional impatience toward more recent developments in phonemic theory and rigorous structural grammar can perhaps be excused. As James Sledd, for instance, has repeatedly declared (and most serious linguists agree), there is as yet no single analysis uniformly valid for all times and occasions; as many other linguists will concede, the pressure to analyze and describe with mathematical rigor, and to convince one's scientific colleagues of the validity of one's scientific methods, has too often resulted in a crabbed, infelicitous style that sometimes merely conceals muddled thinking. (Abridgment ix)

Though Mencken has little respect for the structuralists, his interests are superficially akin to one area of their study—dialectology. Mencken was always keenly interested in the Linguistic Atlas project, for example. In the 1936 edition of The American Language, Mencken traces the growth of the Atlas from the first MLA proposal in 1924 to the issue of the first map in 1936 (55). Initially, Mencken's interest was in non-English dialects (as witnessed by the long appendix to the 1921 edition), but his knowledge of American dialects grew as he accumulated more and more material on American English. In 1936 he added to Chapter VII, the "Pronunciation of American," a twenty-two page section on dialects. In Supplement II, this section was expanded to 170 pages, in which Mencken briefly discusses dialects in every state—Alabama to Wyoming—and in Alaska, Hawaii, the Phillipines, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, and Canada.

But this is as far as Mencken's study of dialects resembles dialectology. He differs from the dialectologists mainly in his

method. They were engaged in careful, systematized field research. Mencken, on the other hand, openly appealed to his popular audience for materials. In response to a query from A. G. Keller, of Yale, about how he collected materials, Mencken wrote the following:

> Most of them come from volunteers. In every edition I have invited such contributions and they pour in on me constantly. Once I received a letter fully ten thousand words long. Moreover, it was rich with good stuff. In addition, of course, I buy all the current books on the subject, take all the learned journals that deal with it, and have a London clipping bureau send me every mention of it in the papers of the British Empire. At the present moment I have at least fifty pounds of notes assembled for the supplemental volume. This scheme accumulates materials rapidly and without too much labor. Unhappily the job of sorting them out is really stupendous. (Letters, Bode 494-495)

Though his "scheme" accumulated materials quickly, Mencken obviously had no organized system for investigating the changes in pronunciation, spelling, and grammar of British and American English—not to mention the vast vocabularies and dialects. He was completely free to draw whatever conclusions he liked as he tackled the "stupendous" job of sorting each pile of notes. There were no controls or checks to assure that Mencken drew the right conclusions, and one is forced—if he wants to give Mencken's scheme credibility—to trust Mencken's wide reading as a journalist, his good sense, and his honesty.

Undeniably, Mencken's unorthodox methods, along with his disdain for structural linguistics, place him outside the mainstream of all linguistic study in the 1920s and 1930s—not just outside the mainstream of dialectology. There is, perhaps, one exception: the structuralists of the first half of the twentieth century avoided value judgments. Mencken is close to that tradition; though he

disagrees with their approach, he agrees with their conclusions. Such agreement places him solidly in the tradition of one popular development of the structuralist period—the controversy over correct and incorrect usage. (Mencken's position in the usage battle is addressed in Chapter III of this study.)

The primary figures in this tradition are Sterling A. Leonard, Robert Pooley, Albert A. Marckwardt, Fred G. Walcott, and Charles Carpenter Fries, all of whom published during the period when Mencken was reassessing and revising his American Language. Sterling A. Leonard's monograph (examined in Chapter III of this study) was published by the NCTE in 1932. Mencken's fourth edition uses it authoritatively in the notes to Chapter IX, "The Common Speech." Prior to Leonard's work, Mencken had no objective analysis of the usage features he discussed. For example, in the 1923 edition, Mencken's discussion of the use of who and whom cites Krapp's Modern English:

> Krapp explains the use of who on the ground that there is a "general feeling" due to the normal word order in English, that "the word which precedes the verb is the subject word, or at least the subject form." This explanation is probably fanciful. Among the plain people no such "general feeling" for case exists. (304)

In the fourth edition, Mencken adds Leonard's 1932 study in which linguists label who (as in "Who are you looking for?") as established usage. Mencken no longer relies on speculation; Leonard's study provides support from the professional ranks.

In this regard, Mencken's work is in step with one of the major movements of the period. In Supplement II, for example, Mencken again

cites Leonard's Current English Usage and notes that Robert C. Pooley, one of Leonard's students, has "supported its conclusions with examples from the historical dictionaries and the belles lettres of the language, and concluded with a recommendation that the books [of 'correct' English] be given a drastic overhauling" (337). Mencken also cites Marckwardt and Walcott's 1938 study of Leonard. According to Mencken, their Facts About Current English Usage found that "a large percentage of the usages marked 'disputable' were to be found in English and American authors of high rank, and that many of the rest were recognized as allowable in colloquial speech by generally accepted authorities" (338). Mencken quotes Marckwardt's and Walcott's conclusion: "To preserve in our textbooks requirements no longer followed by the best current speakers is not grammatical but ungrammatical" (339). Mencken believes that their study is evidence of a "considerable tendency" among grammarians to "yield up this dogmatism" (339).

When Charles Carpenter Fries' American English Grammar was published in 1940, Mencken found additional support for many of the arguments he had been making since 1919. Mencken describes Fries' conclusions as "somewhat vague" (342) and more "conservative" (341); nevertheless, they provided further evidence that American linguists were moving toward a more realistic treatment of spoken American English. In Supplement II Mencken admits that American English Grammar "at least turned its back upon the cock-sure dogmatism of the old-time grammarians. It was not the long-awaited realistic grammar

of the American common speech, but it brought that grammar a few inches nearer" (342).

Except for this close kinship with the linguists of the 1920s and 1930s who questioned certain conventions of usage and who began to examine the language Americans actually spoke, Mencken remains a renegade among linguists. He denounces the structuralists, and his methods are too cavalier to make him acceptable even to those who share his interest in word collection—the dialectologists. This is not to say, however, that Mencken is ignorant in the field of linguistics. On the contrary, his scholarship is well documented. As a graduate of the Baltimore Polytechnic Institute, Mencken could claim no formal training in linguistics, but one need only read The American Language and its supplements (especially the bibliographical material) to appreciate Mencken's wide reading and thorough investigation of his subject. When Hans Kurath consulted Mencken about the Linguistic Atlas project, Kurath is said to have been "suprised and delighted" to find at 1524 Hollins Street "the best private linguistics library in the United States" (McDavid, "The Impact of Mencken" 3). Though Lee Pederson has charged Mencken with "naivete in some matters of pure and applied linguistics" (64), it is more accurate to charge him with prejudice or narrowmindedness. He simply rejected the whole tradition of linguistic study that predated him as well as much of what his contemporaries were doing. Mencken calls Otto Jespersen "probably the most profound student of English of the last half century" (Supplement II 342), but he speaks only with disdain for the whole tradition which Jespersen represents.

In an essay from Prejudices: Third Series entitled "Education," Mencken makes this comment about the state of linguistics when the first edition of The American Language was published.

> Very few professional teachers, it seems to me, really know anything worth knowing, even about the subjects they essay to teach. If you doubt it, simply examine their contributions to existing knowledge. Several years ago, while engaged upon my book, "The American Language," I had a good chance to test the matter in one typical department, that of philology. I found a truly appalling condition of affairs. I found that in the whole United States there were not two dozen teachers of English philology—in which class I also include the innumerable teachers of plain grammar—who had ever written ten lines upon the subject worth reading. It was not that they were indolent or illiterate; in truth, they turned out to be enormously diligent. But as I plowed through pyramid after pyramid of their doctrines and speculations, day after day, and week after week, I discovered little save a vast laboring of the obvious, with now and then a bold flight into the nonsensical. A few genuinely original philologians revealed themselves—pedagogues capable of observing accurately and reasoning clearly. The rest simply wasted time and paper. Whole sections of the field were unexplored, and some of them appeared to be unsuspected. The entire life-work of many an industrious professor, boiled down, scarcely made a footnote in my book, itself a very modest work. (250-251)

Of course, Mencken surveyed the linguistic material with a biased view and with one question in mind: How were American professionals treating the object of Mencken's interest—American English? And clearly the answer came: They weren't treating the subject at all. In the preface to the 1919 edition, Mencken recounts his search for "some work that would describe and account for" the differences between American and British English: "I soon found that no such work existed, either in England or in America—that the whole literature of the subject was astonishingly meagre [sic] and unsatisfactory" (v). He uncovered a few "woefully narrow and

incomplete" dictionaries of Americanisms, "casual essays" on American pronunciation, virtually nothing on American spelling, and "nothing whatever" on American grammar. His research uncovered a still more shocking fact: "An important part of the poor literature that I unearthed was devoted to absurd efforts to prove that no such thing as an American variety of English existed" (TAL, 1st ed. vi).

Mencken's view of the professional linguists never changed. As late as 1936 he was arguing that "The higher varieties of gogues . . . show a considerable reluctance to deal with American as the living language of a numerous and puissant people, making its own rules as it goes along and well worthy of scientific study" (TAL, 4th ed. 52). He indicts the professional journals for their negligence:

> It is rare for any discussion of it to appear in such journals as Modern Language Notes, Modern Philology, Language, the American Journal of Philology, the English Journal, and the Journal of English and Germanic Philology, or for it to be undertaken seriously at the annual meeting of the philological associations. (TAL, 4th ed. 52)

He also indicts such noted American scholars as Franz Boas, of Columbia, whose Handbook of American Indian Languages was published in 1911; Edward Sapir, of Yale, whose Language (1921) became a classic in the field; and Leonard Bloomfield, of the University of Chicago, whose Language (1933) established him as the founder of the American linguistic school. Their "intimate connection with scholarship in Europe" (Laird 442) would have been sufficient to make them suspect in Mencken's eyes, when all his reading and observation told him that what was needed was an investigation of Americanisms,

American pronunciation, American spelling, and American grammar. He felt that the professional scholars—the Bloomfields and Sapirs—considered these topics beneath them.

Mencken argues further that American linguists ignore the two journals that are devoted to American English—Dialect Notes (established in 1890) and American Speech (1925): "Both have had very meager support" (TAL, 4th ed. 52). And though he is usually "fond of twitting" (Laird 442) the professional scholars as a group, he does reserve praise for those American linguists who supported these journals and who "studied the general speechways of the country": Louise Pound at the University of Nebraska, who founded American Speech along with Kemp Malone at Johns Hopkins, and Arthur G. Kennedy at Stanford (TAL, 4th ed. 53-54)—all clearly representative of "the higher gogues."

But for the most part, the rift between the professionals and Mencken was permanent. As Carl Fecher has pointed out, the nature of linguistic studies prior to 1910 and the nature of Mencken's own interests are antithetical:

> Thus while the professional philologians busied themselves with Hittite, Goidelic, Old Church Slavonic, and various obscure Indian tongues, and played around with such semantic subtleties as phonemes, morphemes, and enthymemes, Mencken was concentrating his attention on the language that 120,000,000 people actually spoke. (302-303)

Fecher makes the further point that Mencken "had to write The American Language . . . because all those who in theory should have been competent to do it regarded the task beneath their dignity" (139). Mencken's contemporaries were "so busy investigating the

decay of inflectional endings in Middle English that they could give no time to the living speech of the 120 million people around them" (Fecher 139). Mencken was left to "run the lines" himself, as he put it in the 1919 preface, insisting from the very first that the "work calls for the equipment of a first-rate philologist, which I am surely not" (vi).

Pederson's observation that the professionals "badly misinterpreted" Mencken's modesty is probably wrong. Mencken was prejudiced toward the whole lot and aspired only to be exactly where he was—on the questionable fringe, a renegade pricking the consciences of the "gogues."

Next to Mencken's linguistic training, the professional linguists most often question Mencken's honesty, which may have been compromised by two factors—his Anglophobia and his style. Mencken's Anglophobia (discussed in Chapter II of this study) is blatant and well-documented. In Chapter I of The American Language, Mencken charges the British with "suspicion" of American English (Abridgment 17) and with "aspersion" of American culture, "whether in a book or in one of their reviews" (23). Mencken ends the section with characteristic sarcasm:

> To this day English reviewers are generally wary of American books, and seldom greet them with anything properly describable as cordiality. In particular, they are frequently denounced on the ground that the Americanisms which spatter them are violations of the only true enlightenment. (Abridgment 25)

Henry Bosley Woolf admits that the whole of Chapter I is a "valuable account of the attitudes toward American English held by both

Englishmen and Americans over more than two centuries" (105). He objects, however, to Mencken's insistence that the British are prejudiced. In Woolf's view, Mencken's claim "is far from the truth even when allowances are made for Mencken's tendency to exaggerate" (195). Furthermore, he says, "anyone who regularly reads the Times Literary Supplement knows" that this is an unfair judgment (105).

Ironically, Mencken expresses contradictory views toward the British. In a letter to Edmund Wilson, July 25, 1946, Mencken uncharacteristically praises British reviewers:

> Save for your reviews in the New Yorker, I know of no book notices now that are worth reading, at least in this great free Republic. I go through the London Times Literary Supplement every week, and have been doing so for many years. I order books on its recommendation, for I have learned by long experience that its reviewers really know the subjects they are discussing. This is certainly not the case on this side of the water. The New York reviews are all bad, and those of the provinces are ten times worse. (Letters, Bode 564)

On the other hand, Mencken says in a letter to Harry Leon Wilson, in August of 1934, that the English exhibit outright disdain for all things American:

> The English reviewers denounce my books, but otherwise they treat me politely. I know a good many of them and have boozed with most of them in London. The common belief that Englishmen are hypocrites is probably inaccurate. They are really rather frank fellows, and their dislike for the United States is never concealed. Only the politicians over there pretend that it doesn't exist. (Letters, Forgue 377)

Whether the British dislike Americans is a moot point and important only in relation to Mencken's statements about the language. If his 1936 thesis is merely the prejudiced rantings of an Anglophobe, then the whole work can probably be discounted.

There are, however, valid reasons for Mencken's stance. As Edgar Kemler has noted, the common American speech (the speech that Mencken tried to "sketch" in the 1919 edition) is "uniquely the speech of the illiterate elements"; the language of the "gentry" is "pure" English—an imitation of British English: "In the clash of these dialects, vulgar American was bound to make inroads upon polite English" (33). Few linguists question this influence of American on British English and are content with the 1919 thesis, but when Mencken argues in 1936 that the American language will displace British English, linguists become suspicious. Kemler will permit Mencken's 1936 thesis no ground. He says only that "eventually a compromise would be reached between the two, producing an American Language as distinct from English as Bulgarian from Russian" (33-34).

Alistair Cooke, in his essay "Mencken and the English Language," agrees with Kemler that Americans indeed developed a new culture and even "new syntactical forms" producing "a new dialect at least as different from British as the language of Brazil is different from that of Portugal or the Spanish of Mexico from that of Spain" (86). But this is as much ground as Cooke will allow Mencken, in spite of his great admiration for The American Language which led him to describe Mencken as the "classical authority on the English of the United States" (Intro. vi). Cooke, being a true Englishman, goes on to say that "Mencken pushed too far in his frequent assertions that American English was altogether more robust and virile than the English of England" ("Mencken and the English Language" 86). Though

Cooke and Woolf generously permit Mencken his 1919 thesis, neither will grant him his 1936 conclusion that American English will eventually become so strong that British English will become one of its "dialects." On the other hand, neither accuses him of petty prejudices; he merely disagrees.

Mencken supplied good evidence for his assertion that American English was encroaching into British territory. For example, English reviewers of the second edition objected to Mencken's distinction between the American use of the word homely, to mean unbeautified, and the British use, to mean domestic, unpretending, home-like. The British "insisted that the former was in universal use in England" (TAL, 3rd ed. vii). The reviewers' intention is to show that Mencken cannot claim as American a definition which is equally British. Mencken interprets their objection as simple blindness to his very point: "So many Americanisms have gone over into standard English of late that Englishmen tend to lose the sense of their foreignness" (TAL, 3rd ed. vii).

And yet, Mencken argues in the fourth edition that "the plain people of England and the United States, whenever they come into contact, find it difficult to effect a fluent exchange of ideas" (Abridgment 93). What seems to be a contradiction here is actually not. The two dialects remain distinct—so much so that communication is impeded. But American so subtly displaces English that the British hardly know that their "foreignness" is being compromised. The prominent British linguist Randolph Quirk agrees with Mencken's thesis:

> American expressions have become so very common in Britain that it's genuinely difficult for us now to know when we are using American expressions, whether a particular newish locution that we are using is indeed American. (qtd. in Woolf 105-106)

Such a statement from a prominent English scholar—one who is certainly an authority on the subject—makes Mencken's 1936 thesis sound less like petty Anglophobia and more like a solid judgment based on good evidence. This is not to say that Mencken was right—only that he did not fabricate his conclusions from sparse evidence.

Mencken's Anglophobia certainly weakened his credibility among linguists, but the one characteristic of his work that made him most suspect in the eyes of some professionals was his raucous, unorthodox style. After all, most linguistic studies are serious and technical. William Nolte says that in The American Language Mencken "outscholared the scholars," for even in a work on a typically dull subject, he wrote with "joy and gusto." "Mencken composed a delightfully alive book on a subject (philology) that has never been known for the qualities of excitement or joy" (H. L. Mencken, Literary Critic 50).

It must be remembered that Mencken wrote for a broad audience, because of his background in journalism and editing—an audience not limited to the field of philology. McDavid cites section 2, on "The Verb," of Chapter 9, "The Common Speech":

> As an example of Mencken's skill in presenting linguistic facts to the layman, his account of the disappearance of discrete noun inflections in English . . . is a model of simplicity, elegance and clarity—and plain good writing. . . . Approaching his task with the aim of a scholar-journalist rather than that of a university don, he was less interested in becoming an authority himself . . . than in stimulating the development of new authorities. ("Mencken's Onomastics" 94)

In other words, Mencken's style "flushes out the quarry" for "scholars to bag." Given this purpose, it is not surprising that Mencken uses attractive stylistic bait. He "naturally" would use "the pungent phrase and the salty example, and under the guise of objectivity present the fantastic explanation along with the plausible, in the well-founded hope of stimulating someone to settle the business once and for all" (McDavid, "Mencken's Onomastics" 94)

What, then, can finally be said about a man who produced the definitive work on American English, who consciously played renegade to the whole linguistic tradition, and whose Anglophobia and writing style probably make him suspect even among those scholars who are interested in American English? The linguists have largely ignored The American Language. Except for George O. Curme, author of volumes II and III of A Grammar of the English Language, Mencken's book was reviewed by the likes of Edmund Wilson, Brander Matthews, and the Right Reverend J. B. Dudek, Chancellor of the Catholic diocese of Oklahoma City and Tulsa. Even those linguists whose work was most akin to Mencken's rejected him. C. C. Fries mentioned Mencken only twice in his American English Grammar—both times to discredit Mencken's work. In Chapter IV, for example, Fries criticized Mencken's method, saying that one cannot—as Mencken has—"depend upon general impressions and note only the special forms that attract attention" (34). Pooley's Teaching English Usage listed Mencken in the bibliography but gave him only a passing reference in the text and omitted him entirely from the list of books dealing with English usage.

With few exceptions, Mencken's defenders have come from the popular audience and from the people who themselves have some self-interest in supporting him—Carl Bode (his biographer), Raven McDavid (his abridger), Lee Pederson (McDavid's student). Bode says simply that The American Language speaks for itself—it is a "solid foundation for Mencken's eminence as a linguistic scholar" (Letters, Bode 95). But generally, those who are intent on defending Mencken turn to qualities other than his linguistic skill. McDavid argues that Mencken's strengths are his "sound intuitive judgment and impressionistic and practical observations" (Abridgment ix), though to Fries and others these qualities must have appeared "slapdash." Mencken's methods may have been unorthodox, but they well served his purposes—to unsettle the professionals and to pique interest in the unexplored areas of the American vulgate.

For example, Mencken's correspondence shows him to be knowledgeable (if skeptical) about linguistics but seeking information that was largely unavailable (he was still "running the lines" himself) and consulting the best authorities in the nation and elsewhere for good material. A 1923 letter to Father J. B. Dudek on "the contribution of the Czech language to American" shows Mencken to be well informed. Dudek had suggested that "all the races of man once spoke one language." Mencken's response is a tactful chastisement: "I believe that this is now disputed by philologists." He says it is more likely that the "gorillas began having strange, idealistic, forward-looking children in widely separated places" who "developed

different forms of speech." He points out, using the Zulu click as an example, that the "fundamental structure of certain languages, and even the physiological process of making them, differs from what we know in Christendom" (Letters, Bode 175).

A letter to William Carlos Williams shows that, though Mencken was generally knowledgeable, he eagerly asked to be informed where he was ignorant, and that he went to the best authority on the subject—in this case, modern poetry:

> My failure to make greater use of modern American poetry is simply due to the fact that at the time the last edition was under way I found it impossible to unearth suitable materials. Since then I have done some rather extensive reading in the field but the lack continues. Some of the experiments that I have encountered are immensely interesting, but it seems to me that relatively few of them are likely to have any effect on the future progress of the language save in relatively narrow circles. However, I am conscious that I may be wrong about this, and so I turn to you for advice. (Letters, Bode 298)

In areas where no authority was available, Mencken went to the most likely sources. When he needed information on the word mortician for the fourth edition, he wrote to the secretary of the National Selected Morticians. Mencken asked a number of questions about the word and concluded with this observation: "I want to make my book as accurate as possible. The dictionaries are all very vague about the origin and history of mortician" (Letters, Bode 346-347).

On the subject of differences between American and British English, Mencken asked for help from H. W. Seaman, Esq., of Norwich, England. (Mencken must have put aside his Anglophobia momentarily.) He asks Seaman to examine an enclosed list of words and "strike out

all of the English forms that are out of use in England and all of the American forms that have come in there." This approach seems like more slapdash methodology, on the surface, but the letter explains Mencken's problem. He admits right away that the list is a miscellaneous one and that "it is full of imbecilities." But, he explains, "whenever I consult an Englishman in this country he differs abysmally from the last Englishman and so I remain somewhat confused. I trust to your notorious sagacity to rescue me" (Letters, Bode 348).

Obviously, no authority existed, as was the case with the Syriac and Bulgarian influences on American English which he wanted to discuss in the fourth edition. He wrote to Vasil Grammaticoff, asking for direction concerning Bulgarian, and to N. G. Badraw, for help with Syriac. In both cases he asks for information on how the languages interact with American. More importantly, however, he asks if they can direct him to authorities or existing studies (Letters, Bode 349-350).

Perhaps the best proof that Mencken was indefatigable and thorough in his efforts to produce an honest, accurate linguistic volume is one of his most ridiculous errors, which has been documented in an article by C. Merton Babcock, "Dancing to the Tune of the Pied Typer":

> Despite his [Mencken's] yawping about the incompetence of English teachers and the pedantisms of professional journals in the "academic grooves," the Sage endorsed without a whimper one of the most brazen examples of "dephlogisticated piffle" ever palmed off on an unsuspecting readership by a professor of English in the sanctified pages of the divinely inspired Publications of the Modern Language Association. (14)

When he was working on Supplement I, Mencken found an article by James M. Purcell on "Melville's Contributions to English." Says Babcock, "Since no other study of the novelist's vocabulary had yet appeared, it was either this or nothing." Unwilling to settle for nothing, Mencken looked over Purcell's list of 180 words and phrases, which were supposedly Melville's "linguistic innovations," and cited it in his fourth edition. According to Babcock, Purcell made glaring errors, even listing as a word tihs, which was merely a typographical misspelling of the word this (14-15). Mencken cannot be blamed for failing to recognize the errors. After all, that exercise should have fallen to the editors of PMLA. Instead, his error points to two factors in Mencken's favor: One, he searched out whatever was available on the subjects he was investigating. Two, even the professional linguists were no better off than he. Or, to quote Babcock, "the investigator"—Purcell—did not possess "even a flirting familiarity with the tools of his trade" (14), though he had been endorsed and published by the leading professional publication in languages and literature.

Had Mencken been aware of his error he would no doubt have "howled," to use his phrase. But this is not to say that he took his work lightly. "If he liked to pull the leg of the American public," says Raven McDavid, "he never perpetrated a deliberate falsehood. Behind a facade of entertainment, there was always a framework of fact" ("Mencken's Onomastics" 99-100).

Mencken's Influence

Where Mencken's salty examples and fantastic explanations appeal to the plain people, his plausible explanations attract the professionals. Thus his work has captured the broadest possible audience and has influenced studies of the English language in immeasurable ways. On the one hand, the plain people adopted the work comfortably. Edgar Kemler calls it an "institution, unique of its kind":

> A cult of amateur word-addicts has grown up about it; in every state of the Union and in almost every English-speaking community around the world, thousands of shop girls and ranch hands, schoolteachers and convicts, observe and report back the slightest swerve in the linguistic stream. (36)

Charlton Laird says that The American Language "has become almost a fad" with the common man (442). On the other hand, it has also gained an impressive audience among the professionals. It is true that Mencken is not listed today among the important linguists of the twentieth century. Carl Fecher notes that "many of the men and women working in the field today are only dimly aware of H. L. Mencken." These same men and women, however, "could not do what they are doing" had Mencken not "cleared the ground before them." Without his work, "the very academic discipline in which they specialize would not be what it is" (304). He sees Mencken's role exactly as Mencken himself would have described it:

> The American Language freed the living tongue of more than a hundred million people from bondage to archaic rules and pointed it in the direction of a power, growth, and vigor that it had not known since Elizabethan times. (20)

Charlton Laird also credits Mencken with considerable influence within an academic audience. Laird acknowledges Mencken's initial interests, his controversial style, and finally his contribution:

> Beginning mainly after the first World War, Henry L. Mencken, a journalist, critic, and editor, began berating Britons for their condescension to American speech, and bethwacking his fellow countrymen for their neglect of the native idiom, which he preferred to call the American language. His attacks were spirited, verging at times on the tantrumic, but he was also witty, devoted, and indefatigable, so that as he revised, he reformed both his irascibility and his wayward linguistics until The American Language grew into a momument of scholarship, indispensable to any study of American English. (442)

Though these writers—Laird, Kemler, and Fecher—agree that The American Language is indispensable, monumental, and an institution, it is difficult to assess Mencken's exact and direct influence within the professional ranks. As noted above, the book emerged at a time when the whole linguistic focus was shifting from the diachronic to the synchronic approach. Mencken's greatest criticism of American philologists, also noted above, was their historical approach to language; they paid too much attention to Latin and Greek models—schoolmarm grammar—and too little attention to the language of common Americans.

Obviously, this shift from the diachronic to the synchronic in all scholarship was concurrent with Mencken's focus on American English. Raven McDavid admits that "the times were ripe" for Mencken, and he cites as proof the appearance of Thornton's two-volume American Glossary, the progress of George Philip Krapp's The English Language in America, and the growth of The Oxford English Dictionary

("The Impact of Mencken" 2-3). Though it cannot be said that Mencken influenced the initial shift, one must admit that prior to 1910, most linguistic scholarship ignored spoken and written language in America; after 1919, interest in American speakers of English and in American speech blossomed. Perhaps the new attention to the American language was a natural part of the changing focuses of nineteenth- and twentieth-century linguistics. But it is likely that Mencken's relentless attacks upon the professionals and the example of The American Language spurred the change on.

Carl Fecher states that "it would be going too far to claim that works like the Dictionary of American English and the Linguistic Atlas owed their inspiration to Mencken" (303). On the other hand, the emergence of these and other publications alongside Mencken's various editions is surely not mere coincidence. McDavid postulates that the remarkable growth of "linguistic science in North America, and particularly the study of the varieties of English spoken in the Western Hemisphere . . . has been a response to the challenge which Mencken's work provided." McDavid believes that Mencken's bethwacking and berating of the professionals awoke "the best minds" to his cause (Abridgment v). If the times were ripe for the 1919 edition, if the seed was then planted, the period between the third and fourth editions saw the harvest. McDavid cites an impressive list of projects and publications that commenced in this period.

> This same period saw the founding of the Linguistic Society of America, of American Speech, and of the International Journal of American Linguistics; the beginnings of the Linguistic Institutes, of the "Dictionary of American English" and of the

> Linguistic Atlas project; the publication of Leonard Bloomfield's "Language" and of George Philip Krapp's "The English Language in America." Perhaps even more important than any of these phenomena was the establishment of the basic tradition of American linguistics; hardboiled objectivity in observing and classifying the evidence and free and generous co-operation in research and in exchange of information. In creating this new climate of opinion Mencken and "The American Language" played an important part. (Abridgment vii-viii)

Unlike Carl Fecher, McDavid is willing to say that many of these major works were direct responses to Mencken's appeal for additional research and study:

1. The Dictionary of American English (1938-1944)
2. Dictionary of Americanisms (1951)
3. The English Language in America (1925)
4. American Pronunciation (1924)
5. The Linguistic Atlas of New England (1939-1943)

McDavid argues further that the offshoots of these major works can be attributed to Mencken's influence, including Fries' American English Grammar (1940) ("The Impact of Mencken" 5).

Out of this list, two works emerge as having the closest ties with Mencken—Krapp's English Language and Kurath's New England Atlas project. Mencken reviewed Krapp's manuscript for Alfred A. Knopf—an act which in itself demonstrates his influence in the field of American linguistics. Mencken encouraged Knopf to publish Krapp's book, not as two volumes but as a series. Such an endorsement of a book which could have competed with his own shows Mencken's "free and generous co-operation":

> I think it would be a good idea to take the second volume, and to suggest to Krapp that he expand each of these chapters into a separate volume. This second volume, coming after my book, should arouse a good deal of interest in American English, and so pave the way for others. Thus you would have a monopoly on the subject. (Knopf 304)

Krapp's work was indeed published (by Century for the MLA, not by Knopf), and Mencken was even able to acknowledge it in his preface to the third edition.

Perhaps the most impressive project ever to come directly under Mencken's influence was Hans Kurath's linguistic atlas. When the Linguistic Atlas of the Middle and South Atlantic States was published in 1979, McDavid reviewed it for Menckeniana. In his view, "No one outside the editors and their friends ever took as close interest in this project" as did Mencken. When Kurath ran out of funds for the New England Atlas field work, he called on Mencken who scared up "a few suckers" to support the research in Maryland ("H. L. Mencken and the Linguistic Atlas" 8-9). Mencken's interest in the work was keen; he was "one of the few to buy a personal copy of the Linguistic Atlas of New England, and he had carefully read it." McDavid also notes that the fourth edition of The American Language carried "the first acknowledgment of the Atlas." In short, Mencken's uses of the Atlas in The American Language and the Supplements show that he not only supported it but that he knew it well: "It is a pity that some of the sociolinguists . . . have not read the New England Atlas as closely" ("H. L. Mencken and the Linguistic Atlas" 8-9).

Another important publication which grew directly out of Mencken's influence is American Speech, founded in 1925 by Louise Pound, Kemp Malone, and Arthur Kennedy—supposedly at Mencken's insistence. Louise Pound, its first editor, always received Mencken's highest praise. He once told Hench that he got Pound to start the publication when she visited him and Malone in Baltimore. (He was impressed that she was also a champion golfer and "could drink as much beer as the next.") He called her a "great woman" (Vandercook 4).

In addition to Louise Pound, Mencken directly influenced the lives of several noted individuals within the field. He always spoke highly of Allen Walker Read, calling him "one of the best of the younger American Philologians" (Letters, Bode 528). According to McDavid, it was "through Mencken's encouragement" that Read was able to publish his English of England, a study of the Briticisms "that the English of England do[es] not share with other varieties" ("The Impact of Mencken" 3).

In his review of the 1979 Atlas, McDavid names two other individuals who came under Mencken's direct influence—David Mauer and McDavid himself, who is probably better qualified than anyone else to assess Mencken's importance. In an article entitled "The Impact of Mencken on American Linguistics," McDavid outlines six major reasons for the lasting influence of The American Language. First is its "accurate observation." Here McDavid addresses Mencken's supposed naivete. Mencken's own observations were frequently the only ones available, and he "can be pardoned for lacking information

that nobody else had at the time" (4). The second reason for Mencken's influence is his "familiarity with source material and scholarship in the field, and an attempt to keep informed on both." On this point he admits that Mencken neglected "new theoretical and technical linguistics of the forties." McDavid says that as "one of the bretheren, in tolerable standing," he sympathizes with Mencken. "By any standards his familiarity with the materials was remarkable" (5-6).

McDavid's third reason is "intellectual flexibility." Mencken's opinions changed as he collected new evidence; consequently, The American Language is an "organic volume" (6). The fourth reason for his influence is style: "It is well written." McDavid describes Mencken's "deftness" in writing linguistic material clearly: "Mencken's style is so lucid that by comparison even the best writing by technical linguists for a popular audience seems awkward or patronizing" (6). The fifth reason is Mencken's generosity: "He was prompt in acknowledging even the most trivial contributions from the rankest amateur," a practice which "enhanced Mencken's own reputation" (6-7). McDavid's sixth reason is Mencken's recognition that language is a "living and developing organism" which cannot be reduced to "a set of formulas" (7).

In short, McDavid has recognized as strengths many of the very qualities for which Mencken has most often been criticized—his supposed ignorance of linguistics and his style, for example. But McDavid's assessment clearly shows that Mencken worked as a

gadfly, a forerunner of exciting linguistic developments that would never have come about had Mencken not "stirred up the animals."

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that H. L. Mencken's attitudes toward American English were shaped by a number of factors—his upbringing in the middle-class household of a German-American cigar maker, his experiences as a journalist, his early reading in Dialect Notes, his experience as a magazine editor and essayist. Though Mencken became adept enough in language study to produce The American Language, his chauvanistic treatment of American English and his methods of collecting information barred him from the ranks of the professional linguists. He was—and is—considered an amateur, a dilettante, a man unsophisticated in linguistics.

One major reason for this assessment of Mencken's philological interest is that is work is full of contradiction. For example, he exposes the schoolmarm as an incompetent boob and ridicules her allegiance to genteel British English. The 1919 edition of The American Language argues that British English is inferior to American English, and the 1936 edition argues that American English will eventually swallow the British variety. Such arguments stem (at least in part) from Mencken's Anglophobia, which characterized his public stance on all issues—not just language. Though he was publicly an Anglophobe, he admitted privately to Edmund Wilson that he trusted the London Times Literary Supplement over all other sources for its good, sensible reviews: "I order books on its recommendation," and "have been doing so for many years" (Letters, Bode 564).

Such discrepancies between his public and private attitudes might discredit the thesis of The American Language. But realistically the thesis is unimportant. No one in 1985 would defend it or question it; no one gives it much attention. What does command attention is Mencken's lifelong devotion to a "sketch" of American English. The history and evolution of his linguistic work are much more important than its thesis—or, for that matter, than Mencken's contradictions and prejudices.

Though Mencken was prejudiced (and his diaries, soon to be published by Knopf, promise to show how prejudiced he was), his bias does not detract from the attention that he gave to common American speech or from the thousands of examples he collected. In compiling the volumes, he communicated with the most important figures in American linguistic studies (e.g., Hans Kurath, Allen Walker Read, Philip Krapp, Louise Pound) and in American literature (e.g., Edmund Wilson, Theodore Dreiser, William Carlos Williams). In addition, his journalism and his wide correspondence put him in touch with the great American middle class. His newspaper columns sparked an interest in language that overwhelmed even Mencken. In short, his linguistic material was read by the broadest possible audience.

In spite of his popularity, however, Mencken was himself an elitist—an aristocrat. Though he listened to the American vernacular, recorded it in the Free Lance, analyzed it in "The American: His Language," devoted a lifetime to collecting it in The American Language, and always argued that it was a superior dialect, he himself

never used it in writing. His prose is impecably "standard." Yet Mencken can never be accused of writing "schoolmarmese." He berated schoolmarms as "the most hunkerous and unobservant folk in all the world" ("The American: His Language" 89). Mencken may himself be labeled hunkerous, but he can never be accused of being unobservant. It is such observation that makes his work important.

Mencken saw qualities in the vernacular that—though he did not use them—he admired. His admiration led him to collect and record. His "hunkerousness" led him to flaunt the collected vernacular before a "genteel" pseudo-aristocracy—the self-conscious booboisie—who, in Mencken's view, took itself far too seriously. Mencken's lasting value is that he set before a growing community of linguists a work which inspired other philologists to collect and analyze. The thesis of The American Language was but one of many catalysts for American linguistic study in the twenties and thirties. It is important because it came from a sophisticated man of letters who twitted the professionals and piqued the booboisie into action.

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