

## H.L. Mencken: The critic as artist

G.E.B. CHARING

*Prejudices: First, Third, and Sixth Series*, by H.L. Mencken. Octagon Books, 254, 328 and 317 pp., \$13.

H.L. Mencken: *Critic of American Life*, by George H. Douglas. Archon Books, 248 pp., \$15.

*The Superfluous Men: Conservative Critics of American Culture, 1900-1945*, edited by Robert M. Crunden. University of Texas Press, 289 pp., \$14.95.

"THE MOTIVE OF THE critic who is really worth reading," Mencken wrote in 1921, "is not the motive of the pedagogue, but the motive of the artist." As much as any creative writer, that is, the critic is "simply trying to express himself. He is trying to arrest and challenge a sufficient body of readers, to make them pay attention to him, to impress them with the charm and novelty of his ideas, to provoke them into an agreeable (or shocked) awareness of him."

All these objectives Mencken himself realized far more fully and handsomely than any other critic in American literary history, save possibly his longtime friend and professional colleague, George Jean Nathan. And there can hardly be any question that in the narrower field of political and cultural criticism, Mencken arrested, challenged, impressed and provoked more readers during his career, and made more of them pay shocked, outraged attention to him, than any other such critic either before or since.

For the abovequoted remarks on criticism (pub-

lished first in 1921 in Mencken's book review column in *The Smart Set* and revised the following year for inclusion in *Prejudices: Third Series*) apply equally well to all kinds of criticism, whether of literature, the theatre, the arts, philosophy, politics or the culture. And there is every reason to believe the Sage of Baltimore intended to apply them to his own case. He described himself as a "critic of ideas". And in his criticism he was far less the teacher than the creative showman.

Take as a case in point Mencken's 1927 essay on "The Nature of Government" (Part 3 of "From the Memoirs of a Subject of the United States" in *Prejudices: Sixth Series*), in which the Great Libertarian argues that Government is properly apprehended "not as a committee of citizens chosen to carry on the communal business of the whole population, but as a separate and autonomous corporation, mainly devoted to exploiting the population for the benefit of its own members. Robbing it is thus an act almost devoid of infamy—an exploit rather resembling those of Robin Hood and the eminent pirates of tradition. When a private citizen is robbed a worthy man is deprived of the fruits of his industry and thrift; when the government is robbed the worst that happens is that certain rogues and loafers have less money to play with than they had before."

Contrast this passage with the following one, extracted from Murray N. Rothbard's 1965 essay "The Anatomy of the State": "Briefly, the State is that organization in society which attempts to maintain a monopoly of the use of force and violence in a given territorial area; in particular, it is the only organization in society that

obtains its revenue not by voluntary contribution or payment for services rendered but by coercion."

Now the chief difference between these quotations is not in their content, where they are virtually identical, but in their form. Mencken's formulation of the content is highly metaphorical; Rothbard's is

general idea of the fight of the individual against the State. In a word, we are expected to see the story of *We the Living* as a metaphor for the sorts of ideas we might seek in a different form in a place like Herbert Spencer's *Social Statics*.

Metaphor, the embodiment of abstractions in



Mencken—as captured by publisher and friend, Alfred Knopf

mercilessly literal. And this is precisely the difference, at bottom, between imaginative literature and any other serious writing. Imaginative literature is metaphorical. It presents us with particular persons, places, things and events which we are expected to see as symbolic representations of general ideas, as (to borrow Ayn Rand's phrase) "embodied abstractions".

In Rand's novel, *We the Living*, for example, we are presented with the particular tragic fight of Kira Argounova and Leo Kovalensky against the newly established Soviet state. But we are expected to see this fight as a symbolic representation of the more

particular, carefully chosen concretes, is the *sine qua non* of the novelist, the poet, the short story writer—of every imaginative writer. And this includes the essayist, in whose category the critic ordinarily belongs. As the novelist and short story writer make metaphors for human character traits and human action, as the poet makes metaphors for frames of mind, so the essayist makes metaphors for the process and content of thought. Not What literally is the State? but What is the State like? and What is it like to contemplate the State? This is the province of the essayist.

Robert Frost called Mencken the greatest



American essayist. And it is easy to see why. Mencken does not merely say the State makes its living by coercion. He concretizes the idea. He says the State is a corporation of rogues and loafers which exploits the population for the benefit of its worthless members. He says further that to rob the State is to commit the act of a Robin Hood, a noble pirate. And it is no mere coincidence that this last metaphor has since found its way, not into the writings of political philosophers and political scientists, but into the writings of fiction writers like Ayn Rand, who makes extensive use of it in her 1957 novel, *Atlas Shrugged*.

H.L. Mencken may not be America's greatest essayist (that title must belong to James Branch Cabell), but he is certainly among the most brilliantly accomplished artists ever to direct his attention to libertarian ideas. And the proof—if you are among those fortunate readers for whom the proof is still wanting and for whom all the Sage's marvellous books wait undiscovered—the proof is in the six volumes of *Prejudices* published during the 1920s by Alfred A. Knopf and recently reprinted in hardcover by Farrar, Straus and Giroux's Octagon Books.

Or try instead the choice excerpt from Mencken's *Notes on Democracy* (1926) which University of Texas professor Robert M. Crunden has reprinted in his anthology, *The Superfluous Men*. It lies in wait there with such other choice items as Ralph Adams Cram's "Why We Do Not Behave Like Human Beings" (which will not be every libertarian's cup of tea, but is nevertheless an important work in what might be called the tradition of misanthropic libertarianism, and should

be more widely known) and Albert Jay Nock's "Anarchist's Progress".

The only problem with Crunden's excellent collection, in fact, is its subtitle—and the intellectual confusion on which it is based. "Conservative thought has revived in the 1970s," he writes in his introduction, "Names like Daniel Boorstin, Edward Banfield, Irving Kristol, Nathan Glazer, Seymour M. Lipset, and Daniel P. Moynihan are simply too prominent in the 1970s to ignore."

But what has all this to do with Mencken and Nock? They too, it seems, are conservatives. "The most important single doctrine in the conservative frame of reference," says Crunden, "is that the best things in life are not political and cannot be obtained by political means. Conservatives generally have an acute sense of what makes life worth living, and they do not associate it with political activity. The business of politics is to keep the larger society functioning efficiently and invisibly, so that people may worship, write, create, cultivate, . . . do what gives their lives meaning."

The business of politics is to keep the larger society functioning efficiently? Is this an accurate characterization of Nock, who declares in "Anarchist's Progress" that "no State known to history originated in any other manner, or for any other purpose than to enable the continuous economic exploitation of one class by another"? Is it an accurate characterization of Mencken, who called government "an agency engaged wholesale, and as a matter of solemn duty, in the performance of acts which all self respecting individuals refrain from as a matter of common decency"? Precisely what do such statements have in common with the empty ponti-

fication of the likes of Kristol and Moynihan? Precisely how are these men "conservatives"?

Critics of American culture they are undoubtedly, however, and as such, artists, metaphorists. In explaining why the State should be regarded as an instrument of confiscation and oppression, rather than as a tool for insuring the public safety, Nock urges his readers to

Suppose vast numbers of people to be contemplating a machine that they had been told was a plough, and very valuable—indeed, that they could not get on without it—some even saying that its design came down in some way from on high. They have great feelings of pride and jealousy about this machine, and will give up their lives for it if they are told it is in danger. Yet they all see that it will not plough well, no matter what hands are put to manage it, and in fact does hardly any plowing at all; sometimes only, with enormous difficulty and continual tinkering and adjustment can it be got to scratch a sort of furrow, very poor and short, hardly practicable, and ludicrously disproportionate to the cost and pains of cutting it. On the other hand, the machine harrows perfectly, almost automatically. It looks like a harrow, has the history of a harrow, and even when the most enlightened effort is expended on it to make it act like a plough, it persists, except for an occasional six or eight per cent of efficiency, in acting like a harrow.

Surely such a spectacle would make an intelligent being raise some enquiry about the nature and original intention of that machine. Was it really a plough? Was it ever meant to plough with? Was it not designed and constructed for harrowing?

Nock, like Mencken, was an artist of liberty.

And literary artists, as every college graduate in the land must know by now, have become the province of academia. There is almost literally no

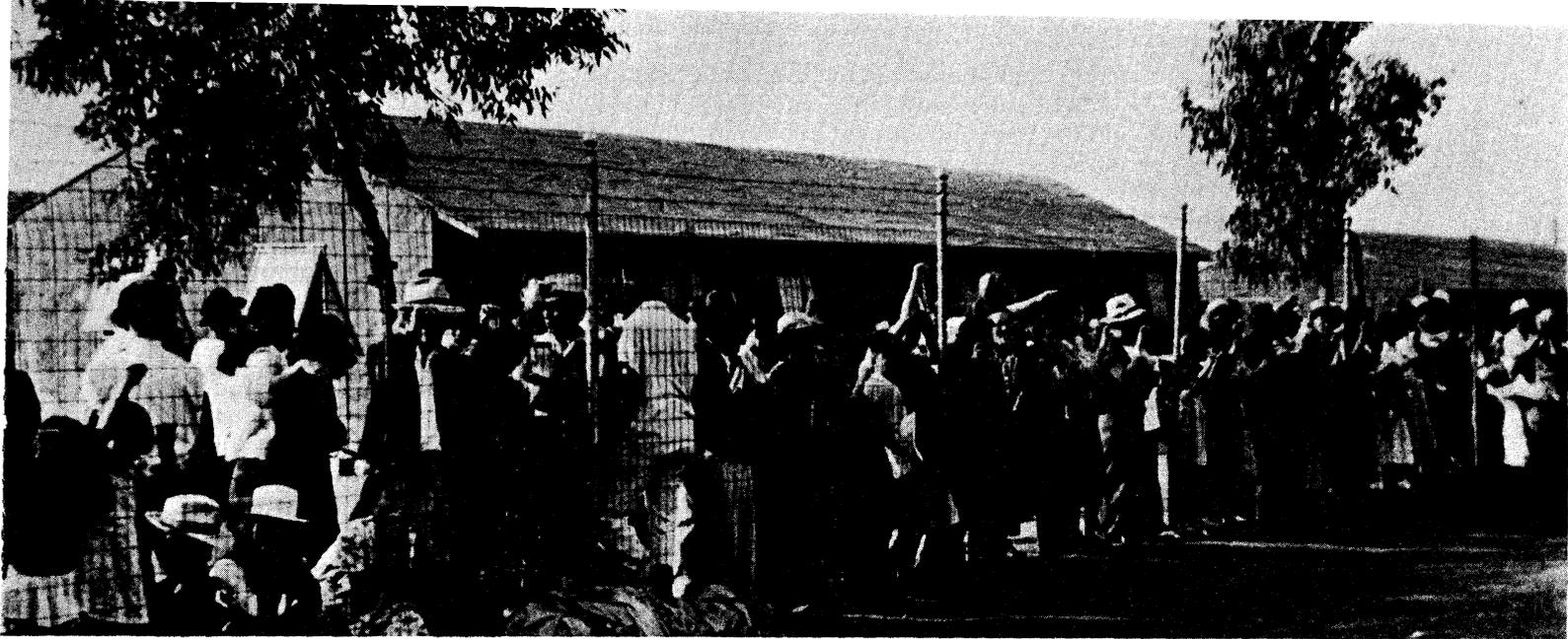
writer so obscure that some American pedagogue has not published a "study" of his work—a "study" which consists in the main of feeble, flat, and profoundly unimaginative paraphrases of the originals. One such "study" is professor George H. Douglas's new book, *H.L. Mencken: Critic of American Life*.

As his title suggests, the professor has correctly grasped the nature of Mencken's work (he was a critic) and its subject matter (the American culture). He has even grasped the metaphorical character of Mencken's method as a writer: in warning against the temptation of considering Mencken's essays "dated" because they treat of forgotten popular figures, he writes that "he was a man of ideas, of abstractions, and if he picked on a Bryan or a Harding it is because he could not have gotten across his ideas unless he wrapped all his abstractions in a concrete garb." Professor Douglas considers Mencken's political essays "among his finest achievements as a writer", and correctly understands that his political ideas derive from those of the "early American libertarians" who "were determined to establish a society which could survive and prosper with a very minimum of governmental interference."

But for all his grasp of his subject, for all his enthusiasm, for all his historical perspicacity, professor Douglas is a professor. And his book, alas, is at least four fifths unimaginative gloss. Ah well, as Mencken observed, the motive of the critic who is really worth reading is not the motive of the pedagogue. Professors of the world take heed.

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"The American concentration camps were directed as an integral auxiliary of the wartime administration's propaganda machine, to firm support for the war."

JAPANESE AMERICAN CITIZENS LEAGUE

## Prison camps of the propaganda machine

JAMES J. MARTIN

Years of Infamy: The Untold Story of America's Concentration Camps by Michi Weglyn (introduction by James A. Michener). William Morrow and Company, 351 pp., \$5.95

ONE FEATURE OF World War II which went far beyond the wartime innovations of the previous half-century was the mass population transfers and large-scale incarceration of whole classes of people along racial and ethnic lines. World War I had seen extensive internment camps for civilians (there are still readers of e.e. cummings's *The Enormous Room*, but who today remembers Aladar Kuncz's *Black Monastery?*), though they did not rival the much larger and more conventional prisoner-of-war installations. But the imprisonment of civilians in the fray of 1939-1945 exceeded in scope anything ever before known. Thanks to unremitting propaganda still in full cry 40 years after the fact,

most Americans have at least a passing acquaintance with the German concentration camps of 1933 and after, though they held far, far fewer people than the much more numerous, older, and much larger ones operated by the Bolshevik-Stalinist regime in Russia.

The fate of half a million Volga Germans and many other peoples at the hands of the Stalinist regime during wartime has been aired in a variety of studies, though the subject of Soviet concentration camps was effectively smothered by the generally Red-sympathizing American literary establishment for a generation and a half, and only recently caved in as a consequence of the global attention it all received stemming from Alexander Solzhenitsyn's grim *Gulag Archipelago*. Until very recently, Americans preferred to be regaled with stories of the allegedly unique and exclusive German malfeasance. Their preferred model for a hated and all-pervading police force is still the 1933-1945 German *Geheimstaatspolizei* (Gestapo), not the much more ferocious and efficient and now 60-year-old Soviet Communist police machine, encompass-

ing the globe in its enterprises, by which standard the far more notorious German institution was little better than the sheriff's department an American county of some size might sport.

It is always more comfortable to dwell upon the failings of others, and the more distant they are, the easier it is to feel superior about it all. For that reason, whatever it may know about sin abroad, the general populace in the USA in this day is only faintly aware of the American participation in the business of mass population roundups and incarceration on the sole basis of ethnic or racial origin. Yet this participation has caused much distress among those few who have considered its impact in terms of historical and future legal consequences, let alone the somewhat more intangible effects of a psychological or psychic nature. The literature on the subject is already vast.

Those who pay attention to TV credits as they roll past at the conclusion of shows, and who watched the Perry Como Show for eight years, may dimly recall a credit which read "Costumes by Michi." This is the professional name of

Michiko Nishiura Weglyn, a Japanese-American woman of uncommon talents, brains and good looks. One of the nation's best at what she does best, theatrical costume designing, Mrs. Weglyn took time out from her expertly-written works on costuming, and related matters pertaining to both professional and personal grooming, to write a historical work on the experience of the American Japanese who spent the time of the noble Liberals' War, 1941-1945, expelled from their homes, stripped of all but their most simple belongings, and herded into ten bleak concentration camps from the California desert to Arkansas, for the duration. All 120,000 of them were locked up on a totality of evidence which, the anguished liberal legalist Eugene V. Rostow later admitted, would not have served to bring about a conviction for having stolen a dog.

The original projected title of *Years of Infamy* was *Days of Infamy*, but apparently a reverential editor thought that smacked too closely of reflection upon the adored departed master, FDR, who had employed the singular—"day of infa-