

... and what can move us but some silent hope that the inborn inclination of our soul shall not always be without an object? The recital of a noble action moves us; the sight of everything harmonious moves us; we feel then as if we were not altogether in a foreign land; we fancy we are nearer the home, towards which our best and inmost wishes impatiently strive.

There is a tendency among those modern writers who examine our best wishes, and who are still willing to recognize them as the best, to insist that such wishes will find no earthly object, that the things the searching soul hopes to find can be found only in the soul itself, that sublimity is to be enjoyed strictly in solitude: this is the strain of magnificent loneliness that runs from Cervantes through Rousseau and on to Joyce. The more superbly appointed one's own interior happens to be, the less likely one is to find suitable accommodation elsewhere. Rousseau describes this affliction in *The Confessions*, sadly and concisely: "... seeing nothing that existed worthy of my exalted feelings, I fostered them in an ideal world which my creative imagination soon peopled with beings after my own heart."

To Goethe, such solitary ardors seem fever-stricken. There is a rare hopefulness to the story of Wilhelm Meister, a joyous worldliness that confirms the young seeker in his confidence that what he aches to have is out there, somewhere, to be found. Wilhelm Meister takes the long way around to the happy fulfillment of his destiny; the determined misdirection of the course he takes has something both horrible and pitifully ludicrous about it, like the wandering path of a man who is lost in the wilderness but somehow has a suspicion that there is a fine hotel in the vicinity. The joy of his eventual arrival makes the trouble of getting there seem not an undue price to pay, but one cannot help wishing nevertheless that someone had found him earlier, aimed him in the right direction, and given him a kick in the pants to speed him on his way.

One's true regret, of course, is that no messianic bellhop or other agent of fate has arrived to direct oneself to salvation, where one can bask in the warmth of *amor fati* and recollect without sorrow the past's tortuous ways. Such regret, or hopefulness, Goethe teaches—for the sake of those who've failed to learn as much elsewhere as in books—is a sign of bad character and a virtual assurance that one is fated to continue in his feckless search. Such teaching, Goethe also reminds us, is as much as one can justly hope to find in books, for the story of another man's search for happiness might help one see that he happens to be lost himself—and that is a momentous discovery—but such a story cannot show a reader the

course that he must take. Each man's fate is his own to understand and to decide, and finding one's way through life is a serious business for serious men, more demanding than even the devout legions of the cult of self-development are inclined to suspect. Lifestyle swamis abound, and multitudes proclaim the

glory of feeling good about themselves. It is even harder now than it was in Goethe's own shabby time to find a man with the strength to be true. Yet no one now reads Goethe, who offers those who desire such strength as much of it as one can find in any other man's imagined life. □

enthronement of all kinds of frauds—these never go out of style.

So said, La Rodgers has put together an impressive collection of almost 200 pieces. The classics are here, of course: "The Sahara of the Bozart," "Imperial Purple," "Valentino," "Bryan." But the riches of *The Impossible H. L. Mencken* are as multifarious as the man, and one can just let the book fall open and come upon some treasure. Consider his 1918 observations on Americans and their quest for status, later so well catalogued by Tom Wolfe:

The character that actually marks off the American is not money-hunger at all; it is what might be called, at the risk of misunderstanding, social aspiration. . . . The fruit of all this appetite to get on, this desire to cut a better figure, is not the truculence that might be imagined, but rather timorousness. The desire itself is bold and insatiable, but its satisfaction demands discretion, prudence, a polite and ingratiating habit. The walls are not to be stormed; they must be wooed to a sort of Jerichoan fall.

Or take "How Much Should a Woman Eat?"—an antique from 1908. Here Mencken comments upon several news items of the day about stingy husbands and how much they give their wives for provisioning:

A Duluth man sought a divorce from his wife on the grounds that she fried and consumed a peck of Bermuda onions daily, and so made his house uninhabitable, his bank account a theoretical abstraction and his dream of happiness a mere hallucination. The world, perhaps, contemplates these men

THE IMPOSSIBLE H. L. MENCKEN:
A SELECTION OF HIS BEST
NEWSPAPER STORIES
Edited by Marion Elizabeth Rodgers/Doubleday/707 pp. \$27.50

Joe Mysak

He died thirty-five years ago, but Henry Mencken is always with us. Last year a "Quotable Mencken" and the *Diary*; this year a fine, fat collection of his previously uncollected newspaper work; next year or the year after, two recently opened manuscripts on his life as an editor, author, and newspaperman—more than a million words' worth. Marion Elizabeth Rodgers, author of the 1987 *Mencken and Sara: A Life in Letters* and an unreconstructed fan, quotes this magazine's patron saint: "I am at my best in articles, written in heat and printed at once." And again: "The stuff I wrote for the *Evening Sun* included some of my best, and yet it is buried in their files."

Although Mencken was a career newsman, surprisingly few of his daily stories have been preserved, and most of those in books known chiefly to buffs. The regular reader, if he knows Mencken at all—beyond the *Diary* uproar, that is—knows him for his aphorisms, the three autobiographical *Days* books, or *The American Language*. A lucky few know his *Prejudices* essays; and perhaps his own Collected Mencken, the *Chrestomathy*. This new collection, says editor Rodgers, "attempts to provide one of the most comprehensive editions of Mencken's articles, showing the full range of his talents and interests, which made him so famous during five decades of American history. At least three-quarters of the essays have not been seen since their first appearance in the newspaper where they were praised or damned over sixty years ago."

They have not been seen, but they are familiar. Mencken was a great saver, reworking most of the topics and themes of his newspaper work into books later on. He was known as much for his style as for his "irritating and irresistible"

point of view, and if we haven't read these exact versions before, we've no doubt read something very much like them, right down to turns of phrase.

And they all still make very good, very stimulating reading, which is why Mencken is still with us. So much newspaper work concerns frauds long dead and forgotten, and old newspaper controversies of a dark and expired age, as Mencken would have put it, that collections of them seem unthinkable. His own work, on the other hand, comprises two main ideas: "I am strongly in favor of liberty and I hate fraud." And that is why today Mencken can be read on Prohibition, or the Scopes trial, or censorship, or politics, without lengthy glosses and still with a great deal of pleasure. Attacks on our liberties, and the

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Joe Mysak, *The American Spectator's* chief saloon correspondent, is the managing editor of the daily *Bond Buyer*.

and their acts with mingled amusement and contempt, but in sober truth they have not a little justice and equity on their side.

Mencken reasons that such men become the way they do because of deliberate deception:

In the army, the dietetic demands of the soldier are worked out to three places of decimals. A private carrying 80 pounds of luggage, with the temperature at 65 degrees, can march 18½ miles in 16¼ hours upon three ham sandwiches, half a pint of stuffed olives and a plug of plantation twist. A general weighing 285 pounds can ride a cayuse up four hills, each 345 feet in height, on 6 ginger snaps and 12 Scotch highballs. Experiments are made to determine these things, and the results are carefully noted in official handbooks, and so attain the force of military regulations.

Not so the young husband! During the courtship, his sweetie eats nothing but lettuce sandwiches and celery shoots. On their honeymoon, she continues the ruse:

But by the time the pair set up housekeeping in their own dear little flat the demands of hunger begin to grow irresistibly, and one morning Clarence is astounded and appalled to see his Mayme wade into five mutton chops, a rasher of bacon and half a dozen hot rolls. That night, at dinner, she eats six ears of corn, a quart of lima beans, a joint of mutton, a bowl of potato salad and two thirds of a shad. The next day, getting her true gait, she makes away with a beef-steak that would suffice for a starving commercial traveler. Is it any wonder that the unfortunate man loses his reason and runs amuck?

This is wonderful work, lost until now.

But in *The Impossible H. L. Mencken* there is also plenty of the kind of material that made the *Diary* such an embarrassment for certain conservatives, and certain conservative journalists. There was nothing surprising in the *Diary*, not to those who knew the iconoclastic and curmudgeonly Mencken. Only consider that Mencken wrote in 1927:

Of late every American reader must have noticed the inaccuracy and imbecility of most of the special correspondence issuing from Washington. In it all the frauds, high and low, who flourish in the town are treated with the utmost gravity, and their cheapest and most venal maneuvers are depicted as masterpieces of statecraft. . . . The Washington correspondents who write it willingly and in good faith—they are too stupid to penetrate the fraudulencies by which they are surrounded.

Mencken the newspaperman is worthy of adulation, and emulation. He should certainly inspire any newspaperman worth his ink today. But conservative journalists, who should be fans, have a problem with him. It is easy to embrace the “beery” Mencken, if you will, but the essential Mencken is an-

other matter. He believed that the role of the newspaper, and the newspaperman, in a democracy was “to stand as a sort of chronic opposition to the reigning quacks.” He also believed “that all government is evil, and that trying to improve it is largely a waste of time.” He understood very well that the chief cry of pols and uplifters is *Give us more money*. In 1937, at the height of the New Deal, he wrote:

Soon or late the money to pay the State’s mounting bills will have to be found, and there is only one place to look for it. That is in the pockets of persons who earn the communal income by doing some sort of useful work. Politicians never earn it, and neither do the uplifters. It must always come, in the last analysis, from men who go to work in the morning and labor hard all day.

Mencken wrote, “I belong to no party. I am my own party.” This complete independence is apparently wondrous to American journals of conservative, monarchist, Tory, and otherwise reactionary stripe today. And it makes them uneasy. The swinishness and horror of Stalin and his ilk, and the concerted assault by the left on all that conservatives hold dear, drove almost all but those with a sort of blasted Muggeridgean detachment right into the camp of—the politicians. And there they have seen fit to find redemption, and make cozy, as surely as Ben Bradlee in the lap of the Kennedys. In so doing, they have bought an entire packaged line of thinking, which extends from politics to economics, and even to culture.

When Reagan took the White House, conservatives, many journalists among

them, descended upon the District of Columbia like nothing so much as a pack of Andrew Jackson’s mountain men, pounding the table, eager for the spoils. The spectacle may have been unseemly, but the behavior of the fledgling Menckennii was more so. Can anyone imagine in all seriousness Mencken the presidential speechwriter? Or Mencken the White House fellow? I seem to recall reading the youthful memoirs of one impressionable Menckenista, a lady journalist, who recounted a tale of her White House days and how she practically achieved sexual bliss just by being on Air Force One. It was a frank confession, and, I thought at the time, a sad one.

Our young Menckens collectively swooned into, shall we say, compromising positions with their pols, and with the handmaidens of the pols. But it is difficult to have it both ways. After their suckling, and their fellowships, and their sinecures, ran out, they moved on to such places as the editorial page, there to don Menckennian poses again, but to turn out—what? I think of a publication that rightly chides the President for not having given General Schwarzkopf another ten hours of open-field running, but then stoutly defends Milkenism and their own dreamy “democratization of capital.” Or another which actually published this astounding bit of revisionist sing-song recently:

Before Michael Milken, the high-yield bond market was the final resting place for securities of bankrupt corporations. His genius turned it into a financial breeding ground for start-up companies. The transformation gave the 95% of American corporations that

are too small, too new, or too unknown for investment-grade credit ratings (including nearly every company run by a minority member, a recent immigrant, or a woman) access to credit markets for the first time in history.

Can anyone imagine Mencken writing such whim-wham, or making such a blatant pact with the devil? Here is Mencken, circa 1925, on businessmen:

I can’t recall a single one who wasted any breath cackling about Service, or who made any pretense, in an other way that he was in business for any purpose save to make profits. I see nothing discreditable in that motive. It is honest, it is honorable, and it is sound. . . .

He faults the mountebanks who fill businessmen with a feeling that there is something disgraceful about that. And he concludes:

The best business man is not the one who roves the world searching for opportunities for Service. He is not the one who wastes his time listening to idiotic speeches. He is not the one who bellows for Idealism. He is instead, the one who devotes himself strictly and wholeheartedly to his business, who likes it and gets fun out of it, and who masters every least detail of it.

This is not packaged thought, and not the product of the automatic writing that is the product of automatic thinking. So, I like the word “impossible” in the title. It says a lot about the state of journalism today, and the difficulty of being Mencken-pure in an ideological age.

The foreword by Gore Vidal is another matter entirely. The introduction by editor Rodgers is a fine, competent piece of work. Why now invite the simpering, silly, and overrated Vidal to the party? Why honor him with such a job? I give you an example: “He is very funny about the Noble Experiment to prohibit alcohol (1919-33), which made the United States the world’s joke-nation, a title still uncanceled.” Or this: “Like all good writers, Mencken is a dramatist, at his best when he shows us the ship of state in motion on high seas while his character studies of the crew of this ship of fools still give delight, though every last one now lies full fathom five. Ding dong dell.”

Such is the glorious Vidal. They squeezed him in, and the price was the exclusion of twenty-two of Mencken’s largely unknown stories contained in the galley proof, although the Doubleday publicist assures me that this was done because it “was important to make this book an accessible length—a length that invited readers to dip in and discover the immense talent consistently revealed in Mencken’s day-to-day journalism.” As if that were ever in doubt. □



REFLECTIONS OF AN
AFFIRMATIVE ACTION BABY
Stephen L. Carter/Basic Books/286 pp. \$22.95

Arch Puddington

America's controversial experiment with racial preference, now two decades old, has produced the country's first affirmative action generation. The progeny of affirmative action range from television anchormen to Ivy League professors to corporate executives to government officials. They represent, in a sense, the modern version of the Talented Tenth, the young, smart, and energetic of an earlier generation who, W. E. B. DuBois believed, would one day constitute the leadership class of the Negro race.

But there is an important difference between the youthful achievers of DuBois's time and ours. Whereas the Talented Tenth earned their accomplishments against daunting odds in a per-

vasively bigoted environment, blacks now are the beneficiaries of policies that give them an advantage in university admissions and the job market. At least this is how it appears to the rest of society. No matter how creative, efficient, driven, or ingenious he may be, it is assumed that a black owes his position in at least some measure to the wide array of benefits society distributes on the basis of race. A new and corrosive stereotype—the black professional as recipient of a novel form of welfare for the university-credentialed—has been added to the long list of unfavorable images black Americans have had to overcome throughout their history.

It is concern about the implications of the affirmative action stereotype that has motivated Stephen L. Carter's impressive book. Carter's own encoun-

ters with affirmative action vividly illustrate the dilemma preferential policies pose for those who want not only to achieve but also to be seen as having done so on their own merits. The son of a Cornell faculty member, Carter was an intensely competitive and high-ranking student, yet was never permitted to forget that his race somehow gave him a leg up on his white classmates. Teachers told him that entry to prestigious universities was assured because he was "black and smart"—always, Carter notes, in that order. An admissions officer from Harvard Law School, which had initially rejected Carter, called to apologize; the university had overlooked the fact that he was black, and now wanted him. (Insulted, Carter went to Yale.) And, of course, Carter will forever be known above all else as the first tenured black at Yale Law School, rather than as an expert in his chosen—non-racial—specialties: the separation of powers, intellectual property law, and the relationship between law and religion.

Carter is not complaining, merely citing his own experience to highlight the challenge blacks face in convincing society (and themselves) that they can make it on their own. He knows that clinging to preferential policies reinforces the notion that blacks cannot compete without a bit of government coercion on their behalf. He proposes

that policies centering on race be phased out in favor of policies based on financial need, a position articulated by Clarence Thomas during his confirmation hearings.

This, at least, is Carter's position on affirmative action at the elite level. Unfortunately, he declines to offer judgment on the blue-collar occupations. This is not a minor omission, for rebellion against affirmative action was provoked largely by its assault on standards, and it is not law firms or universities that have been compelled to lower standards or resort to the notorious practice of race norming, but fire departments, utility companies, road crews, and the like. Yet one can understand why Carter wants to concentrate on the Talented Tenth. He is convinced that, if the playing field is not exactly level, enough progress has been made to enable middle-class blacks to compete effectively. As long as the affirmative action mindset predominates, blacks will find it difficult to advance beyond the label, "First black, best black, only black."

Carter is particularly disturbed at the corruption of affirmative action by the "diversity movement." The idea, as advanced in a *Columbia Law Journal* article, that "diversity is part of quality" is seen by Carter as precisely the kind of dangerous thinking that

Arch Puddington, a former aide to the late Bayard Rustin, works for Radio Free Europe-Radio Liberty in New York.

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