



Hung-Up Henry

by Kenneth S. Lynn

Professor Hobson's book is the outcome of years of work by a conscientious scholar.¹ No earlier biography of Mencken is nearly as informative. At the same time, it is almost never equal to the challenge of its materials, even when the issue at hand is Menckanian humor. Among the many superb examples of the Baltimore bad boy's risible power that go unrelished in *Mencken: A Life* is the ridicule he lavished upon the custodians of the genteel culture who set out to destroy Theodore Dreiser's *The "Genius"* (1915).

Although Mencken was Dreiser's doughtiest champion, he heartily disliked the prolix story the novelist told in *The "Genius"* of a womanizing young artist named Eugene Witla. But when John S. Sumner, the infamous Anthony Comstock's successor as the head of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, was able to prevent the distribution and sale of the book by citing instances in the text that "proved" it to be in blasphemous and obscene violation of a long-established code of decency, Mencken persuaded scores of creative artists, ranging from Robert Frost and Edwin Arlington Robinson to Willa Cather and Sherwood Anderson, to join him in protesting the ban. And two years later, in the course of a long essay on Dreiser in *A Book of Prefaces*, he devoted a wickedly funny paragraph to

the Sumner organization's summation of the moral horrors of young Witla's adventures.

In 1922, Sumner finally agreed to the publication of *The "Genius."* What made his surrender inevitable was the fact that he and his fellow Comstockians had never recovered from the assault on them five years earlier by the most masterful polemicist in the history of American literary journalism:

The Comstocks arose to the bait a bit slowly, but nonetheless surely. Going through [Dreiser's] volume with the terrible industry of a Sunday-school boy dredging up pearls of smut from the Old Testament, they achieved a list of no less than 89 alleged floutings of the code—75 described as lewd and 14 as profane. An inspection of these specifications affords mirth of a rare and lofty variety; nothing could more cruelly expose the inner chambers of

the moral mind. When young Witla, fastening his best girl's skate, is so overcome by the carnality of youth that he hugs her, it is set down as lewd. On page 51, having become an art student, he is fired by "a great, warm-tinted Bouguereau"—lewd again. On page 70 he begins to draw from the figure, and his instructor cautions him that the female breast is round, not square—more lewdness. On page 151 he kisses a girl on mouth and neck and she cautions him: "Be careful! Mama may come in"—still more. On page 161, having got rid of mama, she yields "herself to him gladly, joyously" and he is greatly shocked when she argues that an artist (she is by way of being a singer) had better not marry—lewdness doubly damned. On page 245 he and his bride, being ignorant, neglect the principles laid down by Dr. Sylvanus Stall in his great works on sex hygiene—lewdness most horrible! But there is no need to proceed further. Every kiss, hug and tickle of the chin in the chronicle is laboriously snouted out, empaneled, exhibited. Every hint that Witla is no vestal, that he indulges his unchristian fleshliness, that he burns in the manner of *I Corinthians*, VII, 9, is uncovered to the moral inquisition.

The zestfulness of Mencken's writing has led generations of readers to believe that he was a supremely happy man. Hobson's command of recently released biographical materials as well as of previously known facts leads us to a darker figure. At the age of 17, Mencken had contemplated killing himself. Subsequently, he dismissed the episode as noth-



¹ *Mencken: A Life*, by Fred Hobson. Random House, 650 pages, \$35.

Kenneth S. Lynn is at work on a book on the life and times of Charlie Chaplin.

ing more than a "green sickness of youth." But we now can see that his adolescent longing for death was a prophecy of a psychologically troubled maturity.

In 1927, he spoke of life in one of his *Prejudices* essays as a "progress . . . to the death house," as a "gray emptiness," as "fundamentally . . . not worth living." Hobson points out that this anguished outburst was by no means an aberration, for Mencken had "always concealed" a deep reservoir of pessimism beneath his buoyant public persona. Following the death, in 1925, of his mother, with whom he had continued to live as a grown man, he told a friend that he found it very hard to "reorganize" his ways. In the mid-1930s, he admitted in a letter to a distant relative that "I have had the blues steadily for thirty-five years." In other letters he referred to "doldrums" and "depressions" and to being in "a bad state mentally," and in one of his late autobiographical volumes, *Heathen Days* (1943), he declared that he "suffered from recurrent depressions and despairs."

Unfortunately, Hobson assumes that by marshaling these quotations he has largely fulfilled his biographical obligation to them. Implicit in his proclamation in the first chapter that "Mencken has never been adequately explained" is the fond belief that he, at long last, has done the job. But the ironic truth is that his haunted-mind portrait renders the enigma of Mencken more enigmatic than ever. For although *Mencken: A Life* establishes a connection between a teenaged boy's suicidal impulses and the bitterness he felt about his father's insistence that he abandon his dreams of becoming a newspaperman and go to work instead in the family's cigar factory, it doesn't address the question of whether the boy's extreme reaction to his father's tyranny was rooted in earlier experiences of family life. Nor does Hobson have anything beyond the perfunctory to say about the depressions and despairs that plagued Mencken the man, or about the limits of his self-understanding, or about the possibility that he deliberately misled his confidantes about what was really bugging him.

Additional analytical blanks turn other aspects of Hobson's chronicle into

puzzles. An example is a diary entry written at the age of 64 in which Mencken paused to reflect on his literary accomplishments. Along with more than a dozen books, he had written thousands of essays and newspaper articles and more than a hundred thousand letters. Yet the diarist ended this reflection by saying that "my only regret is that I didn't work even harder." Hobson quite appropriately asks, "Why was he so driven to work? What motivated him—particularly if life, as he so often maintained, was meaningless?" Nevertheless, we come away from his book without having received any clarifying answers.

In rich detail, Hobson illustrates Mencken's lifetime habit of making exhaustive lists of his physical problems. Around 1910, for instance, he noted that he was currently suffering from hemorrhoids, hyperacidity, neuralgia, "flabbiness," hay fever, tonsillitis, sore throat, and "tongue trouble." On one particular morning, he was also aware of a pimple inside his jaw, a sour stomach, a pain in the prostate, burning in the "gospel pipe," a cut finger, a small pimple inside his nose, a smarting razor cut, and "tired eyes." Some of these itemizations were surely recorded in a spirit of jest—which Hobson is too sober-sided to catch. But the majority were set down in all seriousness, and Hobson can't think of what to say about them other than to state the obvious—Mencken was "hypersensitive, if not hypochondriacal"—and to agree with the obscurantist comment of August Mencken that his brother "was always working at such a pitch that a slight discomfort or slight ailment that wouldn't disturb the normal person at all, to him was of enormous proportions." Perhaps the truth lies somewhere between brother August's piety and the predictably dire view of Dr. Otto Fenichel's omnium gatherum of psychopathological data, *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Neurosis*, that the typical hypochondriac is a conspicuously narcissistic, monomaniacal creature whose dammed-up feelings—whether loving or angry—about other people become focused on the organs of his body; and that, in addition, the complaints of the male

hypochondriac are often expressive of a castration anxiety.

In regard to Mencken's sex life, Hobson repeats the commonplace of his biographical predecessors: "In his own period of greatest influence, in the early twentieth century, this archfoe of the Victorian Genteel Tradition was himself, particularly in sexual matters, often Victorian; this most famous twentieth-century opponent of 'puritanism' was, in many respects, a puritan himself." But if Hobson had thought harder about the findings of his research, he might have gone on to wonder whether Mencken was more at ease with complaisant women who were not his social equals than with those who were. In Baltimore, the young bachelor ventured into the night in search of whores, and from one of them he contracted gonorrhea, or so he later told a physician friend. During stays in New York when he was in his thirties, he came to know "a slim, not too young and far from beautiful woman," Kay Laurell, who had "all the arts of the really first rate harlot." But in this case Mencken was attracted not by the harlot's body, but by her fund of inside dope about New York scandals. As he confessed in his 2,000-page reminiscence of "My Life as Author and Editor" (which remained under lock and key in the Enoch Pratt Library in Baltimore until 1991, when Jonathan Yardley went to work on a shortened edition published last year by Knopf), Laurell's physical appearance "damped" his "natural fires" to such an extent that "more than once I have lain in a bed with her at her apartment without having the slightest impulse to use her carnally."

From 1914 to 1919, he was sexually involved with perkily attractive Marion Bloom, who had grown up in desperate poverty in Carroll County, Maryland. They spent nights together in Washington and New York, and Mencken showered her with letters. Yet while he expressed affection for Bloom, he always held something back, as Hobson trenchantly observes. "I kiss your hand with sentiments of the highest esteem," he would say, or "Need I say that your aspect yesterday was extremely pleasing to the eye." Ultimately, he cast her off. "Following an idyllic afternoon," Bloom would

recall, he "swatted me cold in Union Station [in Washington] with the statement that if I had a background, financial security, in brief, our affair might be different." He explained his "calculation," she continued, "on the ground that he was a high-born German and had it in him to desire his wife to make a fine showing before his world." "Merely writing famous books," she bitterly concluded, "doesn't make a gentleman in my definition of the word." In saying that, was Bloom moved by a premonition of how contemptuously she would be dealt with in Mencken's memoirs? Although *My Life as Author and Editor* covers the years of their romance, it refers to her only once, in a footnote to an appendix, as "a woman with whom [Willard Huntington] Wright, Claire Burke and I used to dine in the Italian restaurant in Lexington Avenue."

Hobson shows that a number of women entertained serious hopes of marrying Mencken. The most glamorous of the lot was a sophisticated and cultivated Hollywood beauty, Aileen Pringle, who came from a prominent San Francisco family and had attended schools in London and Paris before achieving success as a movie actress. Hobson asserts that "her letters make it clear that [she and Mencken] were surely lovers." But if he means by that that they were sexually intimate, he is pushing his evidence. For her protestations that "I am the most love sick individual to whom you have ever written a line" and her exclamations of "how I adore and worship you" prove nothing about their physical relationship. Furthermore, Mencken refused an invitation to spend his entire visit to Los Angeles under her roof in the fall of 1926, and in the course of the next two years he managed to keep a whole continent between them, even though Pringle was "always wondering when next we will meet." With her dazzling combination of breeding, brains, and beauty, she may very well have induced an anxiety in Mencken that caused him to shy away.

In any event, he never proposed to her. Instead, he chose to marry Alabama-born Sara Haardt, a teacher of English at Goucher College. Haardt shared many of the feisty ideas of the author of *Prejudices* about puritanism, the

booboisie, and the cultural achievements (i.e., the lack thereof) of the American South. Yet in spite of the liberated character of her intelligence, she soon became all but totally dependent on Mencken. That he rejoiced in his position of authority in her life is undeniable, even though her dependence was in large part based on the grim state of her health. Within months of their first meeting in the spring of 1923, a lesion was found on one of her lungs. Six years later, doctors discovered a tubercular infection in her left kidney. After the kidney was removed, she was informed that she probably had no more than three years to live. At which point Mencken vowed he would marry her and make her final years as happy as possible.

In the wake of her death, Mencken's renewed eligibility for a trip to the altar aroused thoughts of matrimony in the minds of more than a few of his women friends, including Aileen Pringle. In all likelihood it was in early 1940—the year Mencken turned 60—that she wrote him a pointed letter. His response to it makes poignant reading:

I am too immensely fond of you to even think of hail and farewell. But there always remains the uneasy feeling that you have deceived yourself—that the whole thing is simply an illusion. . . . You are still young, and beautiful, and still eager for life, and the best of it is ahead of you. But I am beginning to crack, and in a few years I'll be a sad sight indeed. . . . What is ahead for me? I see a few more books (if, in fact, I can actually pump up the energy to write them), and then a long dullness. I have practiced a trade that uses men up, and leaves them empty. It looks easy now when I have (at least transiently) an audience, but getting that audience was a violent and exhausting business, and now I have no respect for it. . . . Maybe there is something left and maybe there isn't. But it would distress me horribly to see you sharing that chance. You are infinitely charming even to think of it.

The discrepancy between Mencken's burning desire to humiliate morally inhibited men like John Sumner and his entrapment within his own hang-ups was only one of the contradictions in his make-up that await explanation by future biographers. Although he hated the South with a

vengeance, he refused to move to New York when he had the chance, and he proclaimed himself a Southerner. He salted and peppered his conversation with racist references to "coons" and "blackamoors," at the same time that he opened his home to black writers and published their works in the magazines he edited. While he jeered at businessmen as boobs, he took enormous pride in his service on the board of directors of the *Baltimore Sun*. Unquestionably, he was a vile-mouthed anti-Semite—but his latest biographer is right to emphasize that for a considerable period of years *most* of his closest friends and associates were Jewish. For decades, he worked brutally hard to acquire and hold a readership, only to lose his respect for it. In the self-assessment he offered to Aileen Pringle at 60, the hypochondriacal author spoke of feeling empty and used up. Yet he did so in order to let Pringle down easy. For in a stunning act of self-renewal, he produced three best-selling volumes of autobiography between 1940 and 1943. All three of them are charming—and all of them are masks that offer few hints of his complexity. □

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Hate Trick

by Grover G. Norquist

In the 1930s, traditional Catholics, evangelical Protestants, and Orthodox Jews were valued members of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal Coalition. Today, they are the target of a coordinated campaign of vilification that has seen them denounced as the "fire breathing Christian radical right" by Vic Fazio, chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee; the "unchristian religious right" by Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders; and "card carrying members of the flat earth society" by Democratic consultant Mark Wellman. The Democrats are panicking, not just in the face of this fall's elections, but in the realization that Reagan Democrats are becoming Republicans for the long haul.

The most dramatic sign of the shift are religious/political organizations such as Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition. Religious conservatives, who only twenty years ago were central to Democratic domination in Virginia, today form the bulwark of a Virginia Republican Party whose convention this spring—attended by a record 14,400 voting delegates—put Oliver North on the senatorial ballot. The 1994 Texas Republican convention that elected Reaganite Tom Pauken state party chairman drew 6,004 delegates, a historic high for the state.

James Carville had bragged that the White House would bring evangelical Christians back into the Democratic fold with an unprecedented number of presidential visits and White House invitations. If anyone was cut out for the task it was Carville, but early Clinton policies so offended grassroots Christians that one-on-one courting of

evangelical leaders proved futile and was abandoned. Democrats now hope to neutralize the religious right by demonizing it, betting that fears of intolerance will boost the turnout among their liberal base for the November election. There are growing signs, however, that it is Republicans who are being energized by this year's more-volatile-than-usual politics. Michael Barone, a columnist at *U.S. News & World Report* and author of *The Almanac of American Politics*, points out that the Democrats' share of the two-party vote in the California primary fell from 57 percent to 53 percent from 1990 to 1994.

Clinton supporters hope attacks on the religious right will distract voters and the press from a lengthening menu of domestic scandals and foreign policy bungling, and divide the GOP by heightening longtime liberal Republican fears about these newcomers to the Republican coalition. Congenital Republicans are themselves made uncomfortable by a more crowded party, and its many new and unfamiliar faces. Once known as "Rockefeller" Republicans, they used to argue that the party must broaden its appeal—by moving left. Instead, they now see the local caucuses swell in number and activism with new members who are solidifying the conservative nature of the modern GOP.

The Democrats' strategy is fraught with danger. A *U.S. News* poll last March found that 65 percent of Americans think religion is losing its influence in America, while 62 percent say that religion is increasing its influence in their own lives. This is not the portrait of a nation of individuals hostile to religion and fearful of too much religion in public life. Self-identified church-going evangelicals, Protestants, and Catholics represent 39 percent of all registered voters. The Christian Coalition

itself has 1.2 million dues-paying members, and 18–20 percent of Americans identify themselves as members or supporters of it.

The ecumenical alliances such groups can form may be even broader than that, for strong bonds have developed between traditional Catholics, Orthodox Jews, and evangelicals. The Christian Coalition worked directly with John Cardinal O'Connor of New York in distributing 2 million voter guides for the fall 1993 school board elections: 56 of 80 pro-family candidates won. Another 300,000 flyers were distributed in Philadelphia in May in a similar joint effort between the archdiocese and the Christian Coalition. The Coalition has long worked with Toward Tradition, a Jewish organization led by Rabbi Daniel Lapin.

Attacking religious conservatives is not a new strategy, and in the past two years it has not been a successful one. In the 1993 Los Angeles mayor's race, Democrat Michael Woo ran television commercials attacking Richard Riordan as a pawn of Pat Robertson. Riordan ran strongly with Orthodox Jews and Catholics, and won 54 to 46 percent. In Arkansas, Mike Huckabee, a minister and the former president of the Arkansas Baptist Convention, survived an attack on his religious background to become lieutenant governor—the first statewide Republican victory in twelve years.

Last summer, Mary Sue Terry enjoyed a 29-point lead in Virginia's gubernatorial race, when Democrats began to denounce Republican candidates as puppets of Pat Robertson. Evangelicals cast 38 percent of the votes, double their 1992 turnout, to sweep Republican George Allen into office, 58 to 41. Republicans picked up six additional seats in the House of Delegates.

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