

THE AMERICAN CRITIC

BY VINCENT O'SULLIVAN

THE tendency is to depreciate the critic. How many epigrams in all lands have been broken over his back! He is not recognized generally as an artist; your Jules Lemaitre or Saintsbury is put on a level with the drudge who 'reviews' ten books at ten lines to each on the same day. Yet good criticism is among the rare things of art. It would take time to number all the qualities which go to make a good critic. In every generation you will find about one first-rate critic for six excellent poets and a dozen respectable novelists.

In the United States at present there is a vast deal of what may be called academic criticism. Considerable knowledge is often at the base of it; it is not eccentric, it is well behaved, it is prudent, it is the output of a citizen who has a reputation for decorum to keep up, it is written and punctuated carefully, and published luxuriously. It is not easily to be distinguished from a mass of the same kind of writing published in other lands. The worst thing about it is that it is vacuous by dint of respectability. Its bland impersonal presentations, sometimes haughty, urbane at times, often irritable, and always dogmatic, have absolutely no effect on the poets and novelists of the United States. Some of them may read it, some of them may even believe in it. But influence them it does not. It could n't. It is too lifeless.

Among all this criticism there is one critic. His name is H. L. Mencken. He may provoke animosity, he may

rouse protestations even vehement, but he is read, he is attended to. With foundations perhaps solidier than any solemn professor of them all, he is not solemn. He is not bored: whether or not he approves of the American welter, it does not bore him. He attacks his material with gusto. A criticism by him is as absorbing as a well-planned short story. Just as much art goes to it. Besides, he is genuinely American — only out of the states could just that accent, that way of looking at things, come. Such weeklies as the *New Republic* and some of the other critical papers published in America have nothing specifically American about them. They might be the work of the staff of the *London Spectator* or *Nation* transported to America and set to writing on American topics. But Mr. Mencken does not derive from England or from anywhere else but the U.S.A. He is as peculiarly American as pumpkin pie or a Riker-Hegeman drug store. In this sense he is the first American critic, except Poe. For Lowell, E. P. Whipple, W. C. Brownell, and so many others, what are they, after all, but products of European, and chiefly English, culture, who have continued the European tests on the American body, even as Henry James did so mistakenly?

Mr. Mencken tests America by America. To say truth, he treats Columbia rather rough. He takes liberties with her. Oh, Lord, yes, he takes all the liberties in the world. Her house is his own, you see. If he

sometimes takes her on his knees and treats her to a little boisterous fondling, ere long he has her up and hits her a shrewd whack over the shoulders or a box on the ear. But behind it all one feels there is considerable affection: it is in the manner of Him who chasteneth because He loveth.

His new book, *Prejudices*,* I have found the most interesting book of criticism which has appeared since George Moore's *Impressions and Opinions*. Some of the subjects are not so important as Moore's but that is not Mencken's fault: you don't find Verlaines and Degas and Manets and Antoine's Theatre Libre fresh and unknown every day. Mencken takes what is under his hand and, without Moore's material, makes his book as interesting as Moore's. Not that his style or method resembles Moore's in the least. He is more like W. E. Henley in these, and he is most like himself. As an example, I take the following passage: it is from the chapter on 'The New Poetry Movement in the United States'; he is combating a statement which he finds in some book that the 'new' poetry is 'inherently American and democratic':

'Pondering excessively, I can think of nothing that would be more untrue than this. The fact is that the new poetry is neither American nor democratic. . . . Practically everyone of its practitioners is under some strong foreign influence, and most of them are no more Anglo-Saxon than a samovar or a toccata. The deliberate strangeness of Pound, his almost fanatical anti-Americanism, is a mere accentuation of what is in every other member of the fraternity.

'Many of them, like Frost, Fletcher, H. D., and Pound, have exiled themselves from the republic. Others, such

as Oppenheim, Sandburg, Giovannitti, Benét, and Untermeyer are palpably Continental Europeans, often with Levantine traces. Yet others, such as Miss Lowell and Masters, are little more, at their best, than translators and adapters—from the French, from the Japanese, from the Greek. Even Lindsay, superficially the most national of them all, has also his exotic smear, as I have shown. . . . There is no more "inherent Americanism" in the new poetry than there is in the new American painting and music. It lies, in fact, quite outside the main stream of American culture. Nor is it democratic, in any intelligible sense.

'The poetry of Whittier and Longfellow was democratic. It voiced the elemental emotions of the masses of the people; it was full of their simple, rubber-stamp ideas; they comprehended it and cherished it. And so with the poetry of James Whitcomb Riley, and with that of Walt Mason and Ella Wheeler Wilcox. But the new poetry, grounded firmly upon novelty of form and boldness of idea, is quite beyond their understanding. It seems to them to be idiotic, just as the poetry of Whitman seemed to them to be idiotic, and if they could summon up enough interest in it to examine it at length, they would undoubtedly clamor for laws making the confection of it a felony.'

Elsewhere, he writes on the same subject:

'Well, what is the net produce of the whole uproar? How much actual poetry have all these truculent rebels against Stedman's Anthology and McGuffey's Sixth Reader manufactured? I suppose I have read nearly all of it—a great deal of it, as a magazine editor, in manuscript—and yet, as I look back, my memory is lighted up by very few flashes of any lasting brilliance. The best of all the lutists of the

* *Prejudices*. By H. L. Mencken. New York: Alfred Knopf. cf. *A book of Prefaces* (1916), *The American Language* (1918).

new school, I am inclined to think, are Carl Sandburg and James Oppenheim, and particularly Sandburg. He shows a great deal of raucous crudity, he is often a bit uncertain and wobbly, and sometimes he is downright banal—but, taking one bard with another, he is probably the soundest and most intriguing of the lot.

‘Compare, for example, his war poems—simple, eloquent, and extraordinarily moving—to the humorless balderdash of Amy Lowell, or, to go outside the movement, to the childish gush of Joyce Kilmer, Hermann Hagedron, and Charles Hanson Towne. Often he gets memorable effects by astonishingly austere means, as in his famous “Chicago” rhapsody and his “Cool Tombs.” And always he is thoroughly individual, a true original, his own man.’

One has to be an American, or at least to know American conditions very well, to estimate at its just value criticism so obviously fearless and sincere. In reading *Prejudices*, as in most of Mr. Mencken’s books, you get not only a view of American literature as it exists at present, but views opening on all sides into American life. No country is so much in need just now of impartial criticism *from the inside* as the United States. Such criticism as the French and English have given themselves almost since they became articulate, America has never had. There has been a vague belief that it was unpatriotic to show the dark side of the American state. What there was of this kind of criticism came from foreigners such as Dickens, and it was accordingly discounted. In Europe the novel has been a great instrument of criticism, but it is only quite lately, with Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, Abraham Cahen, and one or two others, that the American novel has come to anything like frank and

sincere terms with American life—the life led by the millions of plain people. Such novelists have had to make their way painfully against furious opposition; from no authorized source have they received any help. Alone among the critics, Mr. Mencken fought their battles for them against obtuseness, against malignity and hypocrisy and against that tepid sentimentalism which is, I do believe, the national vice; and if things are to-day a little more easy for the novelist who wishes to be veracious, it is chiefly to him that thanks are due—to him and to Dreiser, who has had church and bench and bar, police and law and order, and most other phantasms and formulas mobilized against him for nigh on twenty years, and has refused to be bullied and cowed. One has to be an American to estimate properly the innovation of Dreiser and his courage, for lifted out of the American atmosphere there is nothing very startling about his novels (his affiliation really is to the French Naturalists) and a European of some culture reading them would find them the expression of a healthy mind, not in the least anarchic or revolutionary, and with nothing particularly new about them but their subject matter—just that rendering of plain American life which I have spoken of.

But it is impossible to regard them thus calmly in America, as Mr. Mencken, who has had to give and take many a blow in Dreiser’s cause, knows well. There, Dreiser is a banner for all those who want to do something else than produce pale novels for pink people like those of the Harold Bell Wrights, the Gene Stratton Porters, and other Sydnor Harrisons. Mr. Mencken writes: ‘It is not the artistic merit and dignity of a novel that make for its success in the United States. The criterion of truth applied

to it is not the criterion of an artist, but that of a newspaper editorial writer; the question is not, "Is it in accord with the profoundest impulses and motives of humanity?" but "Is it in accord with the current pishposh?" What, besides the all-pervading sentimentalism, goes to determine the judgment of the editorial writer, and of a perhaps more influential person when it comes to book, the municipal librarian, I do not pretend to know. My own book, *The Good Girl*, which has led a blameless and quiet life in England for seven or eight years,—only the other day I had a letter from an aged lady in Brighton, who told me she had read it twice with great profit,—was barred out from the public libraries of New York and Boston, and doubtless other cities, when it was published in my native land. A few years ago a new edition was issued by a Boston publisher, and the poor old book was treated something cruel in the press for indecency, immorality, and the whole orchestra; and it is still barred from the public libraries.' As Mr. Mencken says: 'A literary craftsman in America is never judged by his work alone.' There must be something on the side. Sarah Bernhardt or Madame Melba, or somebody equally competent must look on the work and pronounce it good. The late Theodore Roosevelt was a great resource. His opinions might afflict the judicious, but a book to which he gave clearing papers sailed triumphantly over the stormy seas of the department stores and anchored in the haven of the municipal library.

Against patrioteering, against fraud and violence and tyranny disguised as freedom, against the hand of the oppressor wrapped in the cap of liberty, against words that are froth, against a crafty hypocrisy which is the death of all originality in art, against uniform-

ity, against the dead level, against erecting the mediocre opinions of the majority into canons of art, against a mean flattery of the mob and playing down to it — against these Mr. Mencken has always nobly and bravely contended, and doubtless will contend for many years more, for he is still a young man, and these evils are likely to last our time. In fact, a sensible person does not contend against them in the hope of removing them, for they have been always in the world and will probably remain in some shape or other till the world is done — no, but in the hope of mitigating them, and there is some encouragement for this. There is no question that owing to the campaigns of Mr. Mencken and one or two others, the American poet and novelist and, to a certain extent, the dramatist is infinitely freer to develop his work logically and veraciously than he was ten years ago.

Glancing again through the chapters which make up *Prejudices*, the chapters on the American Magazine, on the Genealogy of Etiquette, on Wells and on Arnold Bennett, on Professor Thorstein Veblin (this last is a critical grotesque, a perfect work of art of a kind which no other living man in any country with the language of which I am acquainted is capable of writing), on the Ulster Polonius (G. B. Shaw), on Sex and Art, and the others, one is confirmed in the impression that there is a certain hostility to democracy latent in all of them. If Mr. Mencken were an Englishman, I should think he would be considered a Tory. The explanation of this attitude is, perhaps, to be found in some words of Disraeli. In *The Infernal Marriage*, describing the Elysians, by whom he meant the English aristocracy, Disraeli wrote:

The Elysians, with a splendid climate, a teeming soil, and a nation made on purpose to wait on them, of course enjoyed

themselves very much. The arts flourished, the theatres paid. . . . All the arts of society were carried to perfection in Elysium; a dull thing was never said, and an awkward thing never done. The Elysian, indeed, being highly refined and gifted, for they comprised in their order the very cream of terrestrial society, were naturally a liberal-minded race of nobles, and capable of appreciating every kind of excellence. If a gnome or a sylph, therefore, in any way distinguished themselves; if they sang very well, or acted very well, or if they were at all eminent in any of the other arts of amusement, ay! indeed, if the poor devil could do nothing better than write a poem or a novel, they were sure to be noticed by the Elysians.

'The arts flourished'—I suppose it is in such patronage that Mr. Mencken sees the advantage of such an ordering of the world. Therein, and in a far wider chance for the individual to develop according to his idiosyncrasy. According to Mr. Mencken, and this part of his contention is undeniable, the whole tendency of the American democracy is to make a man conform to the average. 'Be like the rest of us or we'll try to kill you.'

Surely no one will maintain that the American millionaire is an effective substitute as a patron of the artist. I should like to see the 'map' of the American millionaire, who usually confuses the novelist and the poet with the newspaper reporter in a general contempt, if he were asked to subsidize a poet as the English aristocrats, the real aristocrats, have done in bygone years again and again. If the American millionaire did 'part,' he would probably say when he got up town: 'I gave a dirty loafer who said he was a poet ten dollars. I might as well have thrown it in the gutter. I told him he ought to go to work.' But the English aristocrats gave much more than ten dollars to poets, as anybody who reads Johnson's *Lives*, can see, and they made no bones

about it, and they did not call the poet a dirty loafer, or insult him at all.

As a social question in the large sense, I do not agree with Mr. Mencken's view, but I believe he is right so far as the arts are concerned. Richard Wagner and many others are examples to show that even the greatest art sometimes cannot make headway without patronage, and to be a patron of artists needs a training which is not acquired in a democracy, least of all in the United States. You will hear people call Whitman a poet produced by democracy. It is possible that democracy produced Whitman, in so far that his work would have been different if he had lived under a monarch. But democracy certainly did not nourish Whitman. It tried to put him in jail, it turned him out of his small post in a government office because he was the author of *Leaves of Grass*, it let him live in poverty and be buried by charity. The mass of the American people never took the least interest in his poetry during his life, and I don't believe they do now. A meeting was organized among the working classes in France this year to celebrate Whitman, 'poet of democracy.' I never heard of such a thing in America. D'Annunzio is much more properly a democratic poet than Whitman; he really has a people at his back. There is no valid reason why a poet should not have as clear an eye in politics and administration as your lawyer or stockbroker, but the reception given to the first news of D'Annunzio's descent on Fiume showed that the democracies did not think so. By holding on and imposing himself on the world, D'Annunzio has raised the prestige of the whole race of poets, and nowhere more than in America where the prestige of the poet was at the lowest.

The New Witness

ECONOMICS, TRADE, AND FINANCE

BUSINESS NEWS FROM SOVIET RUSSIA

THE Bolshevik official newspaper, *Pravda*, commenting four months ago on a British Government promise to evacuate North Russia, remarked that the Soviet system of finance and industry was never seriously discussed by the foreign press, because the foreign press had been taught to believe that the 'counter-revolutionists' would soon sweep Lenin from power, after which Russia would be a *tabula rasa* for entirely fresh economical construction, so that it would be of merely historical interest to know what happened in the economical domain between the Bolshevik Revolution of November, 1917, and the 'counter-revolution.' A month ago, discussing Kolchak's defeats, the same newspaper predicted that Soviet Russia's finances and nationalized industry would become a matter of immediate and of permanent interest to foreigners. 'The reestablishment of commercial relations with the outside world as the result of the counter-revolutionists' collapse,' said the *Pravda*, 'is inevitable, and foreigners will no longer be able to ignore our economic system. But we shall in turn have to take into account theirs, and to conduct our affairs in such a way that when the time comes it may be possible, in the interests of trade, to link the two inimical systems.'

This is one of the numerous moderate Bolshevik utterances, which alternate with the wildest intransigence — the Bolsheviks quite like their Western enemies, change their tactics from day to day in accord with changes in the military situation. At present, being

relatively successful, they are unpromising in politics, but all the more inclined for compromise in the economic domain. The expected complete defeat of the foreign-helped 'counter-revolution' can bear fruit, they reason, only if it leads to a restoration of trade; and for a restoration of trade, as the *Pravda* declares, the condition precedent is a Soviet economic system, which will not wholly antagonize the system of the rest of the world.

Hence the Soviet newspapers are now busily discussing currency reform. The Moscow politician, Tchudskayeff, who, as author of the tax in kind on the peasants, is naturally not averse to Finance Commissary Krestinsky's plans for universal trade in kind and for currency annulment, declared in a recent speech that though barter might do for domestic trade, and had done for foreign trade during the war ('compensation trade being practically barter'), Soviet Russia must establish some kind of currency practicable for foreign trade. He complained that instead of doing this the Moscow Government has increased the confusion by its issue (from June 1) of new Soviet money intended to replace gradually the former 'Tsar,' 'Duma,' and 'Kerensky' paper rubles.

The official *Ekonomicheskaya Zhizn* practically admits that this charge is true, for it declares that the new money, which is accepted unwillingly, remains in circulation, while the old money is being hoarded. Instead of being withdrawn, the old money will be kept by the peasants, in the conviction that it will be worth something when the great cleaning up takes place — there is no reason why the peasants