

critics. It is the issue which involves the closed mind of Puritanism and the tight mind of classicism.

On the very page opposite Beeman's "Intelligent Eating" in the current McClure's there is a fragment of Harvey O'Higgins's searching and luminous article on *The American Mind*. And in the centre of this dislocated lump of text there rests an apt diagnosis of the Puritanism to which America is heir. From this quotation alone one may infer the human difficulties to which Mr. More and Mr. Babbitt never advert. They are not themselves optimists, but in their belief that liberalism means anarchy they prevent the operation of criticism. Their unwillingness to examine "idealism" in human terms results in a perpetuation of innumerable falsities.

"Our fiction and our theatre betray our state of mind. We want stories always of success. We must have a hero who 'does things.' We cannot endure the art that pictures our own problems; we read and go to the theatre to escape from ourselves. We particularly like to escape from our Puritan repression of the instinct of sex, but our art has to be very sly about that, in order to evade our own moral censorship; hence the popularity of those novels and plays which prove that the wages of sin is death but go through a thorough exposure of the sinful life in accomplishing their moral purpose. Necessarily, these aspects of our art are childish to the foreigner."

Here are the facts that every American liberal knows. And because he knows them, through holding himself responsible to the truth, he is not likely to subscribe to any optimism or "idealism" which bids him close his mind. This must be the basis of whatever new critical tradition is forming in the United States. Such anti-Puritanism is not less responsible than the respectable tradition now invoking conservative ideals out of which came the World War. It is more responsible. It suspects the diplomatic decorum, the chivalry, the military disciplinarianism, the ideas of glory and herd-obedience and loyalty, out of which the war was concocted quite as much as out of natural brutalities and incivilities. But in criticizing brutalities and incivilities, demagoguery and diplomacy, the informed liberal will not, like his antagonist, instantly resort to the black mark and the pedagogic cane. It is not enough to whip and suppress. We must realize that subordinated impulses are merely bullied impulses, sullen and rebellious and incorrigible, until there is a freedom such as Tchekov interpreted—responsible government applied to the impulses. To argue for less, even for a monarchy on the Babbitt lines, is to necessitate indigestion compromised with classic pepsin. It is to miss the valor of personality in seeking to avoid its vulgar caricatures.

FRANCIS HACKETT.

Mencken: An English Complaint

Prejudices, Second Series, by H. L. Mencken. New York: A. A. Knopf.

THE abuse of America by Americans is, to a European, a phenomenon of some little interest. No Englishman, so far as I know, ever abuses England. Towards its government, of course, he is apt to be ferocious. He may arraign a class, an institution, or a national habit: the aristocracy, say, or the Labor party; the Church of England or the non-conformist conscience; the savages who eat beef, the slaves who drink cocoa, or the simple and dangerous folk who take the dope at the hands of Horatio Bottomley. He may assert, in the fruitiest language, that the vices of

the lower orders are driving the country to the devil. But his anger or scorn always presupposes one thing: that the party or influence he is denouncing is bad because it offends against or denies the England of his love and pride.

Quite otherwise, as it seems to me, is the manner of a certain kind of American writer. Here is Mr. H. L. Mencken, who was named the other day by St. John Ervine, and rightly named, as one of the lights of American criticism. He is a man of remarkable endowments. Whatever one may think of his critical method, there is no gainsaying his critical power. He is delightfully different from the best sellers, and his pen is a weapon of point. But I, for one, cannot help feeling a little sorry for him—and he hates pity not less than he hates gratitude and uplift—because he is a man so outrageously without a country. There is nothing in the universe, you surmise after reading him for a quarter of an hour, that he finds so detestable as these United States—moving, according to a high authority of the moment, along their onward normal way. For Mr. Mencken, everything in and about America is wrong: the "founding fathers," the Constitution, the political creed and system; liberty and equality, the average and the majority; the dream and the business; the North, because it tries to be interested in the affairs of the mind; the South because it does not; the West, I suppose, because it could not. The so-called "typical" products of modern America provoke him to an ecstasy of fury: "members of the Drama League and the Y. M. C. A., weepers at chautauquas, wearers of badges, 100 per cent patriots, children of God." And with such specimens of the chosen he associates what he calls the salient American gifts to culture—"the moving picture, the phonograph, the New Thought, and the bichloride tablet."

It is, however, not merely America that Mr. Mencken enjoys himself in decrying. With equal gusto he proclaims his vexation with the whole of mankind and their ways. Speaking generally, he confesses, all men repel him. The only explanation he can suggest for the offensive practice of marriage is that to nearly every man there falls a moment when some woman who disgusts him rather less than do all the others comes within his range. Of the no less deplorable habit, so mysteriously prevalent among men, of mutual liking and helpfulness, this discerning philosopher has not, I imagine, found any explanation at all. But he knows that gratitude would be hateful if it ever existed, while anything expressive of faith between human creatures would be a poisonous negation of that "unshakable egoism" which is "the essence of a self-reliant and autonomous culture." It all sounds rather extravagantly foolish, coming from an immensely clever man with a vivid interest in artistic creation, if not, so far as one can see, in ideas.

Mr. Mencken has no remedy for the state of affairs he so insistently laments. He is sure there cannot be one. In philosophy he is a plain determinist. Whatever is must be; and whatever is wrong—except, perhaps, Joseph Conrad and Theodore Dreiser. All is for the worst in the worst of all possible Americas. And it always will be. Nothing can alter it. Indeed, as Mr. Mencken is considerate enough to remind us, nobody has ever been able to change anything, or if he has, it has been just the same, or worse. For ten thousand years the simpletons of every zone have been worrying over the plan of reform; and think of our plight at the end of it all—with Bryan and Roosevelt, Harding and Billy Sunday (there is a fine impartiality about Mr. Mencken's disgusts), "puritanism, democracy, monogamy, leagues of nations, and Wilsonian

piffle"! But why then, since men and things are what they are, and nobody can help it—why not take them with a reasonable measure of good humor, and at least get some fun out of a scene that should be amusing even to a Mencken? Why this absurd and tiresome spate of ill-temper? After all, even Broadway and the cheapest prints jeer at most of the things over which Mr. Mencken wastes his time and his astonishing nervous energy. There is, you would say, precious little in the game for him. Nevertheless this second series of Prejudices contains some rather tremendous pieces of writing. I myself would pick out in especial two chapters: first, the pitiless assault on the South—which, if it be justified to the extent of one-fifth, would prove that America cannot hope to recover from the Civil War; and, secondly, the "autopsy" on Roosevelt, which, notwithstanding its inept conclusion, is as brilliantly effective a thing of its kind as I remember to have read in some years.

Oddly enough, in the eleven short sections making up the essay on the National Letters, Mr. Mencken does not appear to have added anything of value to the analysis by the men he quotes, from Whitman to Van Wyck Brooks. He has taken a much too easy road, and come out at a very familiar point. And yet he cannot very well refuse the challenge of the task he has set himself. He wants a disinterested creative criticism. He complains that America produces no critics, or next to none, capable of forming and stating an aesthetic judgment unvitiated by moral, or social, or other illicit or accidental references. The answer is that Mr. Mencken should produce a few examples of his own. Invite him to suggest a way out of the clotted miseries about which he grows so destructively eloquent, and he will say, and does say, that there is no such way, and anyhow it is none of his business. But criticism is his business, although he tries to escape it by the continuous repetition of his prejudices—nuisances with which an intelligent man need not concern himself in his books. The only thing that makes a prejudice interesting is a play of mind around it, but that is a pleasure which Mr. Mencken does not allow to himself or his reader. He treats his prejudices precisely as his friends the puritans have always done. He should recognize that if he insists upon them, so, and with just as much reason, will the Bryans, the Comstocks, and, monstrous as it may sound to him, the Woodrow Wilsons. But surely, notwithstanding the label he has selected, Mr. Mencken's prejudices are only his fun: his judgments are there, and are given an intelligent backing? Well, you are not likely to find them in the peculiarly gross pages devoted to the opera, or to death, still less among the absurdities of dogma which he delights to scatter as he goes: such as, that one can't make a friend of a man who is less clean than oneself, that women enjoy having maternity thrust upon them, that the ordinary man does not mind how thickly a lip-stick is applied, or that genius cannot function under wifely devotion or while its possessor suffers from constipation, though it may flourish gaily along with general paralysis of the insane! It seems, when all is said, hardly worth while to remark upon the intolerable dreariness of the world in which Mr. Mencken's interests or prejudices are seeking satisfaction—a world in which men dislike men and are nauseated by women; in which one can't enjoy the spring because Boston and Kansas are still there and Pussyfoot Johnson has not yet been choked with brandy; where one's reading roams lugubriously between Theodore Dreiser and James Branch Cabell. Mr. Mencken, of course, is

perfectly free to inhabit this fantastic realm, and to employ his pen in the effort to commend it to a public which for the present is voluntarily sharing the depressions of Mrs. Doctor Kennicott of Gopher Prairie. On the whole, perhaps, we may agree to leave them alone, and not to shout at them. They will not exchange their idols for those to which Mr. Mencken is given over. As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord!

S. K. RATCLIFFE.

The Social Consciousness of William Dean Howells

IT is a far cry from Sir Thomas More's political-philosophic romance, *Utopia*, or from Harriet Beecher Stowe's anti-slavery story, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, to such a novel as William Dean Howells's *Hazard of New Fortunes*. But all three books have more in common than would appear to the casual reader, for all three show their authors' interest in the particular social and governmental problems of the time which they represent. It is true that *Utopia* is the work of an author who was primarily a political scientist, and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was primarily an abolitionist's pamphlet, while *A Hazard of New Fortunes* is the product of an author who was first of all an artist; yet the social interest in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* is none the more negligible because it is clothed in an artistic form that makes it inconspicuous.

Howells acknowledged the influence of Tolstoi upon his life and writings, and stated himself, in one of the chapters of *My Literary Passions* as well as elsewhere, that he could not overestimate this influence upon his life and works. But the reader of this chapter is likely to be misled by Howells's statement of the Russian author's influence, unless he bears in mind that its effect was upon his social consciousness, rather than upon his literary craftsmanship. His novel writing divides itself into two periods, the first of which includes the novels written between 1871 and the middle eighties, before his acquaintance with the writings and the social teachings of Tolstoi; and the second of which includes his novels from 1887 until his death. In both periods his style and his methods are the same; it is in the matter of the author's recognition of social problems and responsibilities that the books of the two periods differ. In the earlier group he is concerned with people and places and ways of living as he has observed them; in the later period he is more often concerned with characters as they meet their social responsibilities or as people and conditions affect them. *Their Wedding Journey* and *The Lady of the Aroostook*, of this earlier period, are delightful portrayals of the externalities of American life. *A Foregone Conclusion*, published in 1875, becomes somewhat more serious, involving as it does Don Ippolito's problem of his duty to his church as opposed to his duty to the larger possibilities of life which his American friends open to him. But the problem here is an individual and not a social one. In *A Modern Instance*, which followed a few years later, we find a more intense and powerful portrayal of individual problems than in *A Foregone Conclusion*, and a sharp contrast to the pleasing externalities of *Their Wedding Journey*. The author's sense of the inevitableness of life, only vaguely evident in *A Foregone Conclusion*, becomes undeniable here, and the reader is glad that it stops on the pleasant side—even though very near the verge—of bitter-