

Essay by Joseph Epstein

THE MUSIC OF THE GRAND AMERICAN SHOW



“Amilia ~ what is a whoopee parlour?”
Drawing after a cartoon by Peter Arno

Language, in fact, is very far from logical. Its development is determined, not by neat and obvious rules, but by a polyhedron of disparate and often sharply conflicting forces—the influence of the schoolma’am, imitation (often involving misunderstanding), the lazy desire for simplicity and ease, and sheer wantonness and imbecility.

—H.L. Mencken

The American Language: Supplement Two

IN THE PREFACE TO *HAPPY DAYS*, THE first of his three autobiographies, H.L. Mencken remarks on his own good fortune, noting that there is nothing in his life, had he to live it over, he would have changed. “I’d choose the same parents, the same birthplace, the same education...the same trade, the same jobs, the same income, the same politics, the same metaphysic, the same wife, the same friends, and...the same relatives to the last known degree of consanguinity, in-

cluding those in-law.” Henry Louis Mencken was a happy man, a fact that attentive readers will soon enough discover burbling out nearly everywhere in his writing. Walter Lippmann, America’s last great newspaper columnist, wrote of Mencken: “When you can explain the heightening effect of a spirited horse, of a swift athlete, of a dancer really in control of his own body, when you can explain why watching them you feel more alive yourself, you can explain the quality of his influence.”

Mencken won vast popularity and its accompanying emoluments for doing what he loved to do most: to write vividly about the grand circus that for him was American life. In his essay “On Being an American,” Mencken wrote that he liked America “because it amuses me to my taste. I never get tired of the show.” Politicians, preachers, prohibitionists, professors, quacks, the South (that “Sahara of the Bozart”), the manifold hypocrisies of the “booboisie” (“*Homo boobiens*”), and much else kept him more than busy.

During the period after World War I and before the onset of the 1930s, Mencken’s fame reached its zenith. His iconoclasm, expressed in a style at once elegant and comical, everywhere found a ready audience in the young. “So many young men get their likes and dislikes from Mencken,” Ernest Hemingway wrote in *The Sun Also Rises*. In *Black Boy*, his autobiography, Richard Wright tells of discovering a book of Mencken’s in the Memphis public library. The then-young Wright, beginning to read it, “was jarred and shocked by the style, the clear, clean, sweeping sentences.” Until discovering Mencken, Wright claimed not to know one could use words as weapons.

Mencken was no mere iconoclast. He attacked the genteel tradition in literature, true enough, but he also championed the fiction of Joseph Conrad, Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, and Willa Cather. Nor was Mencken’s fame on the intellectual-magazine scale merely; it was national. He published a column in the *Baltimore Sun*, which, as an impressive self-promoter, he arranged to have syndicated



round the country. In 1924, with the drama critic George Jean Nathan, he began the *American Mercury* magazine. His reporting of the 1925 Scopes Trial on evolution in Drayton, Tennessee, helped elevate it into one of the great trials of the 20th century.

In good part Mencken's fame was owed to his humor. "Mirth," he wrote, "is necessary to wisdom, to comfort, above all, to happiness." Elsewhere he noted that "one good horselaugh is worth 10,000 syllogisms." Although he may be best remembered for his savage yet always delightful mockery, he was a serious thinker whose thought was informed by a deep, life-long skepticism. What he was skeptical about above all was our hope of ever achieving even rudimentary understanding of our place in an uncaring universe. In one of the essays in his books of *Prejudices* he wrote:

No one knows Who created the visible universe, and it is infinitely improbable that anything properly describable as evidence on the point will ever be discovered. No one knows what motives or intentions, if any, lie behind what we call natural laws. No one knows why man has his present form. No one knows why sin and suffering were sent into this world—that is, why the fashioning of man was so badly botched.

And, he might have added, anyone who tells you he does know these things is a fool if not a liar, and richly deserving of Mencken's contumely.

An Astounding Intellectual Feat

H.L. MENCKEN WAS ONE OF THAT small but superior club of laughing pessimists that among Americans included George Santayana and Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes. Holmes, writing to Harold Laski, remarked on Mencken's "sense of reality," adding "and most of his prejudices I share."

The 1930s were nowhere near so generous to Mencken as the '20s had been. Much of the youthful audience captivated by his writing—Mike Gold, editor of the *New Masses*, accused Mencken of "killing social idealism in young America"—now went over to socialism and some among it to revolutionary Marxism. Because of the exaggerated hatred in the United States of all things German once America entered World War I—Beethoven and other great German composers were often barred from major symphony programs; sauerkraut was rechristened "liberty cabbage"—Mencken, who was himself of German ancestry, became distrustful of anti-German sentiment,

which caused him to misapprehend the intentions, if never the idiocy, of Adolf Hitler. Part of the reason for his doing so was Mencken's detestation of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, or "Roosevelt II" as he often referred to him. So great was this hatred that FDR's desire for American entry into World War II was sufficient for Mencken to be against it.

This congeries of opinions, views, and prejudices caused Mencken's journalism to be banned from most magazines and newspapers, including the *Baltimore Sun*, for which he had written since his youth and on whose board he sat. He could scarcely have known it at the time, but this was a blessing in disguise. Being largely excluded from journalism freed him from the ephemera of contemporary politics and caused him to fall back on the writing of books. A number of the books he wrote dur-

volumes during the 1940s, finishing the second in 1948, just before the devastating stroke that rendered him bereft of speech and the ability to write, though he lived on, in this sad condition of incapacitation, until 1956.

Mencken claimed to be a bit of a fraud himself when *The American Language* became a commercial publishing success, for he had no formal training either as a philologist or in linguistic science. In fact, he never went to college. As he wrote in the preface to *Newspaper Days*: "At a time when the respectable bourgeois youngsters of my generation were college freshman, oppressed by simian sophomores and affronted with balderdash daily by chalky pedagogues, I was at large in a wicked seaport of half a million people, with a front seat at every public show, as free of the night as of the day, and getting earfuls and eye-fuls of instruction in a hundred giddy arcana, none of them taught in schools."

That a man unarmored by any degrees or other insignia of formal learning wrote this great theoretical lexicographical work of more than 2,300 pages, called *The American Language*, with (at my estimate) no fewer than 10,000 footnotes was, and remains, an astounding intellectual feat. Apart from the knowledge entailed, the work tested Mencken's organizational powers. "An extraordinarily maddening manuscript" he called it. Elsewhere he referred to it as "that damned American language book," which, in a depressed moment, he likened to "a heavy, indigestible piece of cottage cheese"—and this was early in the project when a smaller book was planned. The immensity of the reading, the lavishness of the material, the amplitude of the correspondence required, the mere logistics of the filing—all, taken together, were enough to sink any intellectual enterprise. But Mencken kept at it to its completion, though coming near the conclusion of his second *Supplement* volume (his excellent biographer Marion Elizabeth Rodgers reports in *Mencken: The American Iconoclast* [2005]) he had come to feel something close to hostility at the thought of the language of his countrymen.

Proper English?

READERS OF *THE AMERICAN LANGUAGE* will feel nothing of the kind. Quite the reverse, they are more likely to feel wonder at the endless invention, comedy (conscious and unconscious), and richness of American English as set out by Mencken. The work is organized into twelve chapters: The Two Streams of English, The Materials of the Inquiry, The Beginnings of American, The Period of Growth, The Language Today,

Books discussed in this essay:

The American Language: An Inquiry into the Development of English in the United States, by H.L. Mencken. Alfred A. Knopf, 816 pages, out-of-print

The American Language: Supplement One, by H.L. Mencken. Alfred A. Knopf, 769 pages, out-of-print

The American Language: Supplement Two, by H.L. Mencken. Alfred A. Knopf, 889 pages, out-of-print

Mencken: The American Iconoclast, by Marion Elizabeth Rodgers. Oxford University Press, 672 pages, \$37.50 (cloth), \$36.95 (paper)

ing this time—his *Happy Days*, *Newspaper Days*, *Heathen Days*, and *The American Language* with its two thick *Supplement* volumes—are H.L. Mencken's true literary heritage and his best claim to lasting fame as an important American writer.

In its survey of the 100 greatest non-fiction works in English, the *Guardian* included—along with Hobbes's *Leviathan*, Boswell's *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, and Webster's *An American Dictionary of the English Language*—Mencken's *The American Language*. The book in its first edition was published in 1919, but Mencken set to work polishing and enlarging it until its fourth and final edition in 1936, and then added two hefty *Supplement*



American and English, The Pronunciation of American, American Spelling, The Common Speech, Proper Names in America, American Slang, and The Future of the Language. The first *Supplement* volume added to the material in the first six of these chapters; the second *Supplement* volume to five of the final chapters. The *Supplements* provided more up-to-date matter—much of it supplied to Mencken by correspondents, both professional linguists and amateurs among them—corrected his errors in the original volume, and added the findings of his voluminous reading. Various appendices and elaborate indices are included. English and American honorific titles are also taken up as are “the flowery fields of euphemism” used “to engaud lowly vocations” (“janitor” into “custodian,” etc.), elevate products (“used” to “previously-owned” cars), and perhaps death (“passing” and worse) above all. On the subject of death and euphemism, one imagines Mencken would have appreciated the joke about the McCormick Company going to court to sue against death being called the Grim Reaper; asked what he would prefer death be called, the company’s attorney answered “The International Harvester.”

The distinction between the language spoken and written in America and England is one observed throughout Mencken’s immense work. At the outset, English correctness reinforced by snobbery and further backed up by what Mencken calls “Anglomaniacs” prevailed over American latitudinarian inventiveness. In fact, as he points out, “Emerson and Poe wrote English English; so, too, Hawthorne, Thoreau, Longfellow and Holmes.” Mencken nevertheless predicted, accurately, that American English would in time predominate over the language spoken and written in England. He made this prediction based on his view that the English of Americans “is much more honestly English in any sense that Shakespeare would have understood,” and more so than the so-called Standard English of England, and this on the “very plausible grounds, that American is better on all counts—clearer, more rational, and above all, more charming.” Logan Pearsall Smith, the American-born English essayist, brother-in-law to Bertrand Russell, had it right when he wrote that “it is chiefly in America—let us frankly recognize the fact—that the evolution of our language will now proceed...for in language it is the *fait accompli* that counts, and in the capacity for putting new words over, the Americans, if only because they have twice the population, are bound to win every time.”

The roster of English writers who looked askance at American English is impressive.

A number of them, I regret to have to report, are figures from my own pantheon of literary gods, among them Samuel Johnson (“the finicky and always anti-American Samuel Johnson” Mencken calls him), Charles Dickens, Mrs. Frances Trollope, Sydney Smith, John Ruskin, George Bernard Shaw, and H.W. Fowler, who held that “Americanisms are foreign words, and should be so treated.” The pro-American side among the English, with Robert Bridges, Wyndham Lewis, and Virginia Woolf, is less impressive.

In the United States, the lineup against American English notably featured Henry James (who wasn’t quite an American, but, as T.S. Eliot called him, “a European but of no known country”) and Ambrose Bierce. On the pro-American side were James Fenimore Cooper, Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, and Sinclair Lewis. William Dean Howells found the difference between the English written and spoken by Americans and Englishmen, far from deplorable, highly desirable, and added that one has only to depart one’s stud-

The terms from the domain of booze, from “hooch” to “bootlegger,” from “chaser” to “bartender,” including the word “booze” itself, are American inventions.

ies or editorial offices “to go into the stores and fields to find a rebirth of the spacious times of great Elizabeth’ again.”

Americanisms

“AN AMERICANISM,” WROTE JOHN S. Farmer, a linguist quoted by Mencken, “may be defined as a word or phrase, old or new, employed by general or respectable usage in America in a way not sanctioned by the best standards of the English language.” Mencken’s own criteria for Americanism are “first, its general uniformity throughout the country...secondly, its impatient disregard of rule and precedent, and hence its large capacity...for taking in new words and phrases and for manufacturing new locutions out of its own materials.”

Throughout the pages of *The American Language* Mencken reminds us of American inventions, some formed by clipping off

longer words, back-shortening, or back-formation. He provides the several instances of words formed from the American “-ize,” “-ate,” “-ify,” “-acy,” “-ous,” and “-ment” endings; also words with an “-ery,” “-ette,” “-dom,” “-ster,” and other suffixes. Then there are the countless words formed out of pure imagination: “rough-house,” “has-been,” “bust,” “duck” (not the animal), “scary,” “classy,” “tasty,” “gumshoe,” “nothin’ doin’,” “for keeps,” and “billboard.” Toss in the trade names that became generic words: “vaseline,” “listerine,” “kotex,” “kleenex,” “coke,” and more. The terms from the domain of booze, from “hooch” to “bootlegger,” from “chaser” to “bartender,” including the word “booze” itself, are American inventions. Add in the borrowing from Spanish, Yiddish, German, Scandinavian, Chinese, and other immigrant groups. One could go on and on, and Mencken does, compiling lists of words numbering in the thousands, through the pages of his three volumes, remarking along the way on those characteristics that set the American off from the Englishman: “his bold and somewhat grotesque imagination, his contempt for dignified authority, his lack of aesthetic sensitiveness, his extravagant humor.”

Many pages and footnotes in *The American Language* are devoted to etymology. No one is certain, for example, of the origin of that most internationally popular of all Americanisms, “O.K.” Mencken provides a lengthy footnote on “hot dog,” which is thought to derive from a vendor at the old New York Polo Grounds who was the first to heat the rolls for what until he came along were more popularly known as “weenies” or “frankfurters.” The word “phoney” is another Americanism without clear origin. Other words without known provenance include “hokum,” “sundae,” and “jazz,” though the last is often taken to have been a synonym for sexual intercourse.

Which brings us to words that, in Mencken’s phrase, “suggest blushful ideas.” The most obvious is the room in which the toilet is installed. Many are the synonymns for it, among them “john,” “jakes,” “donniker,” “the plumbing,” “necessary room,” and “loo” (deriving from Waterloo). My own favorite, “the House of Commons,” does not show up in Mencken’s pages. Although no prude, Mencken largely takes a pass on the rich trove of words describing sex and the veritable thesaurus of words for the genitals, male and female. Only toward the close of his second *Supplement*, does he bring up the grand f-word, never spelling it out but noting that during World War II “it became an almost universal verb, and with *-ing* added, a universal adjective; another, beginning with s,



ran a close second to it." Neither word, fair to say, has lost its vast popularity, and cable television has given them even wider currency.

Mencken expends many pages on proper names (also on American place-names). He lists the most common first and last names of his day in America. He takes up ethnic names, first and last. He notes that, during the strong wave of anti-German feeling during World War I, people who had the suffix "stein" in their last names changed the pronunciation to "steen" in the hope of not falling foul of this feeling. Front, or first, names are of course greatly subject to the winds of fashion. Two that have nearly disappeared since Mencken's day are "Bob," the short version for Robert, and "Dick," that for Richard. Today overwhelmingly Roberts are Robs or Robbys, Richards are Ricks or Richs. The Jewish boys' names of my own generation,

Irving, Seymour, Norman, Arnold, Harvey, Ronald, Marvin, Melvin, Marshall—names, I have always thought, more fit for English hotels than human beings—have given way to Tyler, Tucker, Taylor, Madison, Belmont, and Scott. Even now there may well be an F. Scott Feldman applying to Princeton. On the distaff side, there are all those Brittanys, Tiffanys, Brandys, and Ashleys. The only thing I can recall from Nora Ephron's novel *Heartburn* is that the heroine's unfaithful husband claims to have dated "the first Jewish Kimberly." Who can say, a Kelly Rabinowitz may even now be walking the streets.

Distinctions and Definitions

INTERESTING DISTINCTIONS AND DEFINITIONS are in play throughout the pages of *The American Language*. Mencken sets

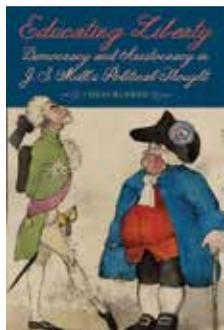
out the distinctions among "imbeciles," "idiots," and "morons," among "hobos," "tramps," and "bums," and among "slang," "argot," and "cant." He gives several definitions his own spin. "To go Hollywood," for example, is "to abandon the habits and ideas of civilization and embrace the levantine life of the richer movie folks." One of the definitions of "professor," at least as used in the United States of Mencken's day, and one as a university teacher I myself always favored, is the man who plays piano in a bordello.

A few heroic figures emerge from the pages of *The American Language*. Mark Twain is frequently cited for his excellent ear for Americanism; so, too, Ring Lardner. A linguist named Louise Pound is relied upon as an authority. The work of Otto Jespersen in this realm is uniformly praised. Walter Winchell, one of what Mencken calls "America's keyhole columnists," who along with *Time* and *Variety* specialize in "low aesthetic visibility," is nonetheless credited with many inventions: "infanticipating" (for expecting a child), "debutramp," "Reno-vated" (for contemplating a divorce), the "Hardened Artery" (for Broadway), and many more. John Galsworthy, Arnold Bennett, and Arthur Conan Doyle are cited for misusing Americanisms in their fiction.

Among the lengthy lists comparing English and American words and expressions, setting out the special language of various trades from soda jerks to steelworkers, recording the infiltration of the everyday language of England by Americanism, noting the manifold oddities and idiosyncracies of a language always on the move, what keeps the pages of *The American Language* humming, the work's occasional longueurs tolerable, are its many Menckenisms. Mencken was death on pretension, and especially on people with shaky pretensions to learning. He refers to political science as "the lugubrious discipline." Freudianism gets the back of his hand, mentioned in a footnote, to the effect that "the popular craze...struck the United States in 1912 or thereabout, in succession to Coueism, the Emmanuel Movement, and paper-bag cookery." As for the American Ph.D., in England "it is seldom if ever given to persons trained in the congeries of quackeries which passes, in the American universities, under the name of 'education.'" He cites a book put out by the Modern Language Association as providing "a sufficiently depressing proof of the stupidity of the learned." He writes that in American colleges and high schools "there is no faculty so weak as the English faculty," which is "the common catch-all for aspirants to the birch who are too lazy or too feeble in intelligence to acquire any sort of exact knowledge, and the professional incompetence of its

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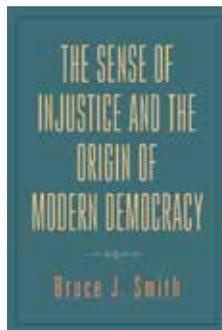
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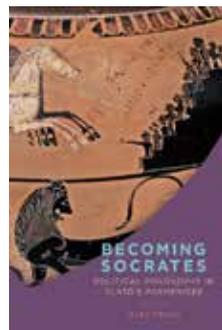
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typical ornament is matched only by his hollow coxsureness." In a passing reference to Emory University he mentions "the students there incarcerated."

If He Were Alive Today

MENCKEN NEVER COMES OUT DIRECTLY to announce his own views about language, but these are easily enough surmised. He himself never wrote other than clear, clean English, highlighted at times by a baroque vocabulary and always informed by a comic vision. (Who else but Mencken could refer to the work of funeral parlors as "human taxidermy," to drinkers as the "bibuli," to cussing as "sulphurous language," to the practice of medicine as "leechcraft.") He describes himself at one point as a "purist," but he was a purist who appreciated inventive language, useful neologisms, tangy slang, new words required for medical and scientific discoveries. Above all he understood, as he put it in his second *Supplement*, that "language does not follow a rigid pattern but is extraordinarily flexible and changeable," and any attempt at "fixing a language in a groove is cherished by pedants." In the end he viewed our language as the music accompanying the grand American show.

Some years ago a man with theatrical interests and a heavy wallet approached me with the idea of my writing a one-man show called *Mencken Alive!* "People are always wondering," he said, "what Mencken if he were alive would think or say about nutty things going on today." Nice to think there may still be some people around still wondering, but, whether there are or not, I believe one can sense how Mencken might view most of the changes in American language since his death in 1956.

Mencken is not likely to have been impressed by the slang of the 1960s—"not my bag," "just doing my thing," and the rest—which died early in the 1970s. The dreary drug scene has left only the single word "high." The language bestowed by digital culture—"reset," "default position," "google it"—are unlikely to have wowed him. That the phrase "no problem" has largely replaced "you're welcome" he is unlikely to have viewed as an advance in refinement, while the replacement of "problem" by the word "issue" (as in "I have a knee issue"), causing the loss of the useful word "issue" as an idea or subject in the flux of controversy, would not have come as heartening news to him.

Nor would the word "fun" as an adjective—as in "fun time," "fun place," "fun couple"—have struck Mencken as a happy advance in the language. If someone were to offer him the all-too-commonplace, always perfectly perfunctory salutation "Have a nice day," he fig-

ures to have replied, "Thank you but I have other plans." As for contemporary slang, he might have approved "kick back" and "chill out," but be less than enamored of "rock on" and far from awed by "awesome." The use of "community"—as in "artistic community," "Hispanic community," "intelligence community"—would probably have struck him as overdone; and the designation of a "homeless community" as no less than a sick joke.

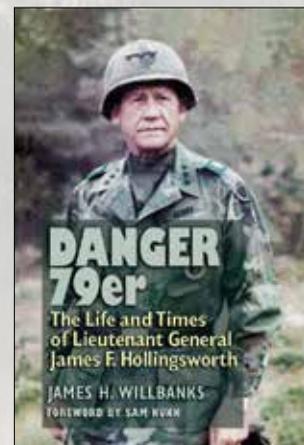
Political correctness would surely have appalled him. As early as the late 1940s he was on the attack against "saviors of the downtrodden" who forbade Jewish and Negro (as the respectable word then was) jokes. He doesn't figure to have gone any easier on those who wish to save the sensibilities of all women, every minority, and people whose sexual interests he described as "non-Euclidian." He would not have been amused by all the *he and she-ing, him or her-ing* ruining the rhythm of academic sentences, which usually don't have all that much rhythm to begin with, though he might be amused in a contemptuous way at the increasingly popular I'm-all-right-Jack sentences that put the feminine pronoun where the masculine is usually found: "Every long-distance truck driver knows that *she* figures to be up against tough winter weather." His reaction to such lilting phrases as "gender norms" would have been the very reverse of delighted. He would shake his head at the rise of the word "guys" to address men and women, owing to waiters and waitresses (I mean "servers," of course) and others being fearful of saying "ladies." That he himself might be described as an "icon" or "iconic figure" he would have viewed as an insult to his standing as a famous agnostic.

What Mencken figures to have found most objectionable is the soft language of psychobabble that has resulted in all that "reaching out," and "thanks for sharing," and the use of "journey" as a metaphor (so that cancer, depression, or whatever else you happen to have round the house is a *journey*.) A "caring person" does not figure to be someone in whose company he would be caught dead. As for "caregiver," he would have preferred the English word "minder" to describe the costly help hired to tend to the ill or elderly. The heavy overuse of "input," "feedback," and "focus" (in place of "concentrate") would not have been his idea of charming additions to the language. I could go on—and on, and on....

Ah, me, Henry Louis Mencken, perhaps it's best thou shouldn't be alive at this hour.

Joseph Epstein is an essayist, short story writer, and a contributing editor for the Weekly Standard. He is the author, most recently, of Charm: The Elusive Enchantment (Lyons Press).

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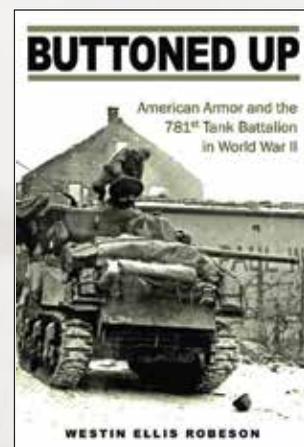


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