

A SATURNALIA OF BUNK

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# INTRODUCTION

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LATE IN LIFE, H. L. Mencken (1880–1956) estimated that he had published ten to fifteen million words as a journalist, essayist, reviewer, critic, and general man of letters. With such an immense body of work, it is not surprising that much of it—especially the newspaper work, which by its nature tends toward the local and the ephemeral—remains uncollected. It remains a fact, however, that a great many of the books Mencken compiled in his lifetime—notably his six-volume series of *Prejudices* (1919–27), which established him as America’s leading literary and cultural critic of the 1920s—were stitched together from newspaper or magazine articles. It is a bit more puzzling that neither Mencken himself, in his late compilation of a lifetime’s writing, *A Mencken Chrestomathy* (1949), nor any subsequent editor has seen fit to preserve one especially notable treasure trove of journalism between the covers of a book: with few exceptions,<sup>1</sup> his 1,228 contributions to his column *The Free Lance* of 1911–15, comprising a million and a half words, remain embalmed in the pages of the *Baltimore Evening Sun* where they first appeared.

Perhaps the very immensity of this mass of writing has proved intimidating; certainly, most present-day newspaper columnists would suffer apoplexy at the thought of writing a 1,200-word column six days a week for four and a half years. Perhaps, also, scholars have assumed either that this column represented apprentice work that could not stand up to the scintillating journalism Mencken produced in the decades following or that it was exclusively concerned with local affairs

and personalities of minimal relevance to contemporary issues. A judicious reading of the best of the Free Lance columns puts the lie to both these assumptions.

By 1911 Mencken could hardly have been considered a cub reporter. Having graduated from high school (the Baltimore Polytechnic Institute) in 1896, he went to work in his father's cigar factory, with the expectation of taking over the business when his father retired; but the work proved most uncongenial, and only days after his father's unexpected death in January 1899 he secured a job at the *Baltimore Herald*, one of the lesser papers in his hometown. His advancement on this humble paper was swift: by September 1901 he had become drama critic; a month later he was editor of the *Sunday Herald*; in 1903 he became city editor of the *Morning Herald*; in 1905 he was appointed managing editor of the *Herald*. Mencken came to dislike the executive or administrative aspects of the newspaper business: writing, whether repertorial or editorial, was his chief passion. When the *Herald* folded in June 1906, he was immediately hired by Charles H. Grasty to be news editor of the *Baltimore Evening News*; but although he did write some unsigned editorials and some installments of a Mere Opinion column, he again felt ill at ease in an administrative capacity and leaped at the chance to write for Baltimore's oldest and most established paper, the *Sun*, when the opportunity presented itself in late July.

For the time being, Mencken was unconcerned about his unceremonious departure from the *Evening News*; for the next four years he put most of his efforts into the *Sun*, writing unsigned editorials, drama reviews, and other work. But in 1910, Grasty (who had sold the *Evening News* to the wealthy magazine and newspaper magnate Frank A. Munsey in 1908), wishing to return to the Baltimore newspaper arena, gained control of the *Sun* after a struggle with Walter, Arunah, and Charles Abell, the feuding descendants of the paper's founder. Mencken expected to be fired for having snubbed Grasty by resigning from the *Evening News*, but Grasty, knowing a valuable property when he saw it, forgave him and kept him on.

Mencken quickly became involved in the *Sun*'s plans to establish an evening paper. As he wrote in his posthumously published memoir, *Thirty-Five Years of Newspaper Work*, Grasty "was notoriously (and correctly) convinced that destiny was on the side of evening papers, and in that

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doctrine nearly all the other more reflective newspaper men of the time agreed with him.”<sup>2</sup> At a time before television or even radio had gained the devotion of the general public, it was assumed that hardworking citizens would wish to absorb the day’s news on returning home from the office or factory. Moreover, an evening (or, more properly, late afternoon) paper could actually report on noteworthy events of that day: in later years, Mencken’s celebrated reports of the Democratic and Republican national conventions would be telegraphed to the *Evening Sun* offices by early afternoon for immediate publication, providing the closest thing to live coverage then technologically possible in the print medium.

Mencken appeared in the debut issue of the *Baltimore Evening Sun* (18 April 1910) with a column of miscellany on the editorial page—the haven for the great majority of his newspaper writing for the next thirty years. His articles at this time covered a wide range, from local events to literary and dramatic criticism to social and political topics to such whimsies as “Victuals: A Reverie” (19 May 1910). These columns would appear perhaps three or four times a week; Mencken also wrote hundreds of unsigned editorials (traditionally appearing in the first two or three columns of the editorial page, and representing the paper’s official policy on issues of the day). It was, however, Harry C. Black, who had recently been elected to the paper’s board of directors, who proposed to Grasty that Mencken be given his own daily column. Mencken further suggested “that it would be more effective if it were made more personal, and I were free to ride some of my hobbies.”<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, after one column (8 May 1911) titled “The World in Review,” *The Free Lance* was born on May 9.

It should be noted that work for the *Evening Sun* was far from Mencken’s only literary activity at the time. He had already published two monographs, *George Bernard Shaw: His Plays* (1905) and *The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche* (1908), and in 1908 had become a monthly book reviewer for the *Smart Set*, a position he would retain until the end of 1923. Writing as many as twenty-five 1,200-word newspaper columns a month, on top of a 3,000-word book review column (necessitating the reading of fifteen to twenty books each month), points to Mencken’s prodigious energy as he threw himself headlong into journalism on both a local and a national level.

At this juncture, Mencken as a journalist would have been called a “paragrapher”—that is, his column consisted of discrete paragraphs

on a wide range of subjects, separated by a horizontal rule; the rule was present even when Mencken chose to discuss a single subject over several paragraphs or an entire column. (In some anomalous instances, Mencken would be forced to terminate a discussion in midsentence, sometimes even in the middle of a word, and resume it the next day. On some occasions he would promise to resume a discussion but then neglect to do so.) Whether Mencken was influenced by his great nineteenth-century predecessor, Ambrose Bierce—who in his fifty-year newspaper career, first for the *San Francisco News Letter* (1867–72) and later, more famously, for William Randolph Hearst’s *San Francisco Examiner* (1887–1906), consistently adhered to this “paragrapher” format—is not clear; but the entire run of the Free Lance retains this structure, and Mencken clearly felt comfortable with it. (His subsequent weekly editorials for the *Evening Sun*, beginning in 1920, finally abandon the “paragrapher” format, although they are customarily, and somewhat mechanically, divided into four numbered sections.)

While a fair proportion of the Free Lance column was devoted to sparring with local political, social, and religious figures—most notably the hapless J. Harry Preston, mayor of Baltimore for the entire period of the column’s existence, whom Mencken referred to as a “very vain and sensitive fellow”<sup>4</sup>—it becomes abundantly clear that these debates were merely the springboards for broader discussions of the significant issues of the period. Grasty had once told Mencken that he must not feud with clergymen, for this would undermine the *Evening Sun*’s chosen self-image as a family paper; but Mencken easily got around the restriction by persuading Grasty to allow him, in simple fairness, to respond to attacks by the clergy and others on himself. Mencken facilitated this task through his role as editor of the letters to the editors section, variously called “Editorials from the People” or “The Forum.” In this way Mencken gleefully printed searing (but usually inept) attacks on himself in the letters column and rebutted those attacks, almost before they were out of their writers’ hands, in *The Free Lance*.

No one could fairly conclude, however, that *The Free Lance* was merely a haven of abuse and billingsgate. A systematic reading of the columns allows us to ascertain a nearly complete view of Mencken’s political, religious, social, and cultural philosophy as it had evolved up to this point—and that philosophy underwent relatively few

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alterations in the course of his subsequent career. In the space of this introduction it is possible only to supply the barest outlines of that philosophy, but the columns themselves supply a wealth of detail and nuance.

The central pillars of Mencken's worldview are freedom of thought and action and a sincere devotion to the truth as he saw it. Sundry combinations of these two principles may well account for all the anfractuositities—complex and at times seemingly contradictory—of his views on politics, society, religion, art, and general culture. In today's parlance Mencken would be considered a libertarian, and he explicitly referred to himself as such; but unlike so many present-day libertarians, who frequently restrict the notion of freedom to the sphere of economics, Mencken maintained that freedom of thought and speech were central and essential. In a book review column of 1922 he wrote: "I am, in brief, a libertarian of the most extreme variety, and know of no human right that is one-tenth as valuable as the simple right to utter what seems (at the moment) to be the truth. Take away this right, and none other is worth a hoot; nor, indeed, can any other long exist."<sup>5</sup> The ideal of personal freedom outlined in a *Free Lance* column of 1913—in which the citizen is "bound to do nothing that will endanger [his neighbors'] lives or imperil their property. He is bound to respect their liberties so long as the exercise of those liberties does not invade his own"—is closely in accord with the principles that John Stuart Mill established in *On Liberty* (1859). Mencken followed Mill in advocating the most minimal government involvement in those aspects of social life (particularly the legislation of morality) that have no direct relation to the protection of the citizen from external foes or internal threats.

Mencken, however, drew a curious corollary to his principle of freedom, especially as it related to the America of his own day: "it follows necessarily that I can be only an indifferent citizen of a democratic state, for democracy is grounded upon the instinct of inferior men to herd themselves in large masses, and its principal manifestation is their bitter opposition to all free thought."<sup>6</sup> That Mencken would so forthrightly expound his hostility to the very principle of democracy—a view so far outside the bounds of acceptable political discourse, then as now, as to be all but unspeakable—is, at a minimum, a testament to his desire to "utter what seems (at the moment) to be the truth."

Mencken's objections to democracy—as with so many other facets of his overall philosophy—derive from his absorption of Nietzsche, although it could well be asserted that he would not have responded so ardently to this feature of Nietzsche's thought if he were not already inclined toward it. It appears that Mencken took quite seriously Nietzsche's ideal of the superman, insofar as it was practicable to do so in the United States of the early twentieth century. In his treatise on Nietzsche he described the concept as follows:

To put it simply, the superman's thesis will be this: that he has been put into the world without his consent, that he must live in the world, that he owes nothing to the other people there, and that he knows nothing whatever of existence beyond the grave. Therefore, it will be his effort to attain the highest possible measure of satisfaction for the only unmistakable and genuinely healthy instinct within him: the yearning to live—to attain power—to meet and overcome the influences which would weaken or destroy him.<sup>7</sup>

Abstract as this sounds, it gets to the heart of the Menckenian notion that the properly civilized person is under no obligation to restrict his own freedom of action—and, perhaps even more important, his freedom of thought—in the face of the moral disapproval of his “inferiors.” There is no sense either in Nietzsche or in Mencken that the superman will be a political or military dictator: it is not that he wishes to fetter other people's thoughts or actions; it is simply that he does not wish his own thoughts or actions to be fettered by others.

Mencken's opposition to democracy has far-reaching ramifications well beyond the sphere of politics and morality. “It is a capital mistake,” he wrote in a *Free Lance* column of 1914, “to assume that the common people are stupid but honest.” The common people are, instead, both stupid and dishonest. Democracy was based on envy; it is “a device for giving to the relatively inefficient and unsuccessful (and hence, bitterly envious) majority, by the artificial and dishonest device of the ballot, that preponderance of power and influence which belongs rightfully to the minority [i.e., the supermen] by reason of its superior efficiency, honesty and intelligence.” It is thus no surprise that Mencken fought unrelentingly (and, it must be admitted, largely unsuccessfully) to restrain the

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power of government—in such matters as the direct election of senators by popular vote (instituted by the Seventeenth Amendment in 1913), the initiative and referendum, and even the very existence of a state legislature—because any augmentation of governmental power over the citizenry would inevitably result in limiting the freedom of thought and action of the “minority” by means of onerous laws passed through the influence of an ignorant and morally obtuse majority. Mencken’s seemingly audacious proposal to repeal the Fifteenth Amendment, which had granted African Americans the right to vote, rested on the belief that a substantial majority of whites did not deserve the vote either: “the franchise is a thing a citizen must earn by his ability and his industry.” There would inevitably come a time for “the frank disfranchisement of those whose incapacity for reason is palpable and undisputed.”

Is it, then, a paradox that Mencken persistently advocated woman suffrage throughout his *Free Lance* column, and would continue to do so until the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920? Mencken did not see any difficulty in doing so. His remarkable essay on woman suffrage, spanning six columns between 1 and 7 February 1912, systematically destroyed all the then-fashionable arguments against allowing women to vote: that many women don’t want the vote; that women are too “refined” to engage in the rough-and-tumble of politics; that women could not “enforce” the laws they pass by brute strength; that working women can rely on already existing laws (passed by men) to protect them.<sup>8</sup> Mencken was pointing out that the paradox, if any, rested on the side of those who professed to support the principle of democracy: prohibiting a large class of citizens from voting merely on the basis of sex was a subversion of the essence of democracy. Let it pass that Mencken later came to oppose woman suffrage: perhaps he, like many supporters, experienced a certain disillusionment when women voters proved themselves no less subject to folly and chicanery than their male counterparts.

Mencken devoted a large proportion of his *Free Lance* column to battling individuals and organizations who were seeking the moral reform of the city and the nation in such areas as prostitution, alcohol consumption, and cigarette smoking. Here again Mencken’s libertarianism and his scorn of popular opinion come to the fore. While recognizing that these things may in fact be vices, and while he himself had

no desire to engage in any of them except the moderate consumption of alcohol, he was averse to granting the government a heavy hand in their suppression. Nor was he about to concede the moral high ground to the crusaders: he in fact referred to them as “incurably immoral” for their intellectual dishonesty, their bigotry, and their intolerance. As a signal example he held up Charles J. Bonaparte, a former attorney general of the United States who maintained that anyone who opposed the complete eradication of prostitution from the city of Baltimore must be deriving profits from the trade or seeking to make brothels more accessible to those who wished to patronize them. Such outrageous suggestions of bad faith on the part of one’s opponents was, in Mencken’s view, typical of the methods of vice crusaders.

Mencken was also well aware that moral legislation was almost invariably unsuccessful. In his *Free Lance* columns he took delight in showing how ineffective were the various state prohibition statutes in preventing the widespread sale and consumption of alcohol. His argument against the attempt to wipe out prostitution (which on occasion he, as was common during this period, referred to by the euphemism “the social evil”), as expressed in a double-length *Free Lance* column of 7 November 1912, rested on the practical ground that such an attempt would only scatter brothels throughout the city rather than restricting them to a known red-light district. One of his later columns takes note of the formation of the Baltimore Vice Commission designed to look into the issue of prostitution in the city. He reported on the findings of the commission in three separate articles in late 1915, after his column had come to an end. His conclusions were simple: that it is impossible to obliterate prostitution, because the desire (sexual activity) it seeks to satisfy is a natural and not a pathological one; that segregating prostitutes has a more beneficial effect in the real world than the attempt to eliminate them altogether; and that the real problem with prostitution is not its actual practice but its engendering of venereal diseases—a purely medical problem that can, in principle, be solved.<sup>9</sup>

The issue of prohibition brought down even greater fulminations from Mencken: he came to believe that the imposition of a state, and even a national, prohibition statute was inevitable, but he was no less unrelenting in his opposition for all that. Alcohol was indeed a vice, but is it not the essence of freedom to allow people to engage in a vice, “so

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long as the enjoyment it produces is not outweighed by the injury it does”? There were already statutes on the books against public drunkenness; was there really a need for the entire elimination of alcohol from the fabric of the nation—an elimination that, in any event, could never be even approximately complete? Here again Mencken relied on his standard distinction between the civilized minority and the boorish majority: prohibition was being fostered only by those who could not use alcohol in moderation, and hence they sought to take it away even from those who could. In this argument—pressed repeatedly both in his *Free Lance* columns and throughout the long years when the Eighteenth Amendment was in effect—Mencken came close to employing exactly those *ad hominem* attacks he criticized in others. In the end, of course, he was proven right, but only after the nation had been put through thirteen years of government corruption and unrestrained criminal activity that proved, if any further proof were necessary, that morality could not be legislated.

It was no accident that Mencken took repeated potshots at the clergy, for it was they—especially the leaders of the Baptist and Methodist churches—who took the lead in prohibition and other moral crusades, whether under the aegis of such lobbying organizations as the Anti-Saloon League or on their own hook. Mencken’s careful reading of the Bible allowed him to demolish a local preacher’s assertion that the prohibition of alcohol was scripturally based; he argued, cleverly, that such a prohibition was not in fact Christian but Muslim. Mencken may not have been a full-fledged atheist, but his anticlericalism—once again derived at least in part from the atheist Nietzsche—was scarcely ever in abeyance. He boldly declared that preachers should get out of the business of politics—not because they should not concern themselves with political (or even moral-political) issues, but because “their training does not give them any appreciable fitness for judging politicians.” It was the clergy that repeatedly advocated the retention of archaic laws on the statute books, notably the Sunday laws that, in the Baltimore of Mencken’s day, prohibited such harmless activities as baseball, golf, or even a symphony orchestra performance on Sundays. Late in life he came to believe that such an issue as the reform of restrictive divorce laws could not be effected “until the discussion is purged of religious consideration.”<sup>10</sup>

When the evangelist Billy Sunday's histrionics garnered public attention in the early 1910s, Mencken saw in him a symbol—not of Christian revival, but of the “decaying corpse of evangelical Protestantism” heading toward its ultimate dissolution in the United States. In this prediction he was sadly off the mark, although it could well be said that his participation in the Scopes trial of 1925 was instrumental in causing fundamentalism to go underground for half a century. Mencken cannot be held responsible for the recrudescence of an aggressive and intolerant Christianity in our day, but he can be credited with prescience in his comment that “the ideal Christian of today [is] . . . one who pursues his brother with clubs and artillery.”

Purely literary matters rarely come up in the Free Lance columns: that was the preserve of his *Smart Set* review column, which, in the course of fifteen years, all but established a canon of contemporary American literature, with Theodore Dreiser at the pinnacle and other such worthies as Sinclair Lewis, Willa Cather, Sherwood Anderson, James Branch Cabell, and F. Scott Fitzgerald not far behind.<sup>11</sup> But on occasion Mencken did write on general issues relating to language, literature, and art. Several columns anticipate his vigorous advocacy of an “American language” starkly different from standard (British) English—something he extensively codified decades later in *The American Language* (1936) and its successors. One column reprinted here (11 December 1914) anticipates his famous “Sahara of the Bozart” article (in *Prejudices: Second Series*), condemning the cultural deficiencies of the South. On occasion he wrote brief reviews of some new books, and he also took occasion to skewer the many hopeless poetasters of his day, usually by the simple expedient of quoting the choicest of their lame verses with a minimum of comment.

Where Mencken did speak out was in his repeated warning against censorship of the theater or of literature. Here again the lust of an intolerant majority to take away the pleasures of the civilized minority was the central issue, and it was encapsulated in the figure of the redoubtable Anthony Comstock, who in his half century of lobbying against “obscene” books caused the suppression of thousands of books and magazines and, worse, the self-censorship of many authors and magazine editors who feared prosecution and the destruction of their reputations. As the 1920s advanced, the burgeoning Modernist literature of the

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period found in Mencken a valuable ally against puritanical attempts to suppress it, and by 1930 Mencken could take justifiable pride in believing that Comstock's notorious legacy had come to naught.

It should not be assumed that *The Free Lance* is entirely devoted to dour reflections on the weighty issues of the day; indeed, even when discussing substantial topics Mencken is careful to leaven them with pungent wit and satire. He remarked, "My *Free Lance* job was the pleasantest that I had ever had on a newspaper . . . and I enjoyed it immensely,"<sup>12</sup> and there is no reason to think that his readers were any less entertained. Some of his most engaging columns treat what he called quackery—astrology, Christian Science, the *New Thought* (a fuzzy mix of mysticism and self-help), patent medicines, antivivisection, antivaccination, and the like. But once again, Mencken's fundamental principles come into play: these quackeries enjoy such widespread popularity because they appeal to the limited understandings of the common people, who—especially in the realm of medicine, where such tremendous strides had been made that the field was now hopelessly beyond the comprehension of the layman—are always quick to seek a simple answer to a complex problem. Quackery, indeed, is the inevitable product of democracy: "the ultimate adjudication of medical controversies, as of all other controversies, lies with the ignorant and unintelligent mob, and . . . this mob is animated by that chronic distrust of learning which always marks the lower orders of men."

Medicine was a particularly sensitive issue with Mencken, who had a touch of hypochondria. He counted among his friends several of the leading figures in the Johns Hopkins Medical School, and he repeatedly defended them against frauds and charlatans—such as those who had organized the National League for Medical Freedom that sought to question their authority and to advance the claims of such dubious professions as homeopathy, osteopathy, and chiropractic. In the case of antivivisection, Mencken had no sadistic desire to carve up defenseless animals but recognized that animal testing was a crucial and indispensable aid in the treatment of human diseases; he also exposed the antivivisectionists in numerous instances of bad faith and bad science. The issue of public health was also a great concern to Mencken: throughout his *Free Lance* column he would print the standings of what he termed the National Typhoid League—a grisly parody of baseball standings in

which the leading cities of the nation were ranked by the number of annual typhoid deaths; Baltimore was, lamentably and shamefully, near the top of the list for years.

Where Mencken parted company with nearly all his *Evening Sun* readers, even those who were sympathetic to his belaboring of clerics, his lampooning of astrologers, his broadsides against public officials, and his nose thumbing of vice crusaders, was in his screeds in the first year of the Great War. Mencken claimed, perhaps a bit disingenuously, that his advocacy of the German side of the war had little or nothing to do with his own German American heritage: "I was born in Baltimore of Baltimore-born parents; I have no relatives, near or remote, in Germany, nor even any friends (save one Englishman!); very few of my personal associates in this town are native Germans," and so on. One suspects that Mencken was protesting too much. Although, as his biographer Fred Hobson has pointed out, Mencken wrote several editorials in 1910–11 critical of Germany,<sup>13</sup> there is more to his fervent defense of Germany and his unrelenting, at times abusive, denunciation of England and the Allies than mere contrarianism or a desire for fair play.

Perhaps central to Mencken's stance in the war was the fact that both English and American propagandists almost immediately blamed the outbreak of war on Germany's absorption of militaristic ideas from the baneful Nietzsche. Mencken, for whom Nietzsche always remained an intellectual mentor, was not about to stand by and see his idol abused. Far from denying such a Nietzschean influence on modern-day Germany, he embraced it: Kaiser Wilhelm was, as his detractors claimed, no democrat, and it was good that he was not; England, in turn, had fallen into decay precisely because it had allowed the democratic principle to run amok and raise such demagogues as Churchill and Lloyd George to power. The bold, courageous Englishmen who had established a worldwide colonial empire had given way to sniveling cowards who drafted other nations to do their fighting for them. And as for Americans, who were theoretically neutral in the early stages of the conflict, their half century of peace since the Civil War had engendered both a military and a moral softness that made them ill-equipped to take a place on the world's stage.

A detailed analysis of the causes of the war—and even a brief analysis of Mencken's views on the causes of the war—is not possible in this

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space. Let it suffice to say that Mencken's assertions that Germany's rapid augmentation of its military might in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was purely defensive are both largely false and to some degree disingenuous. There is no reason to believe that, even given Germany's increasing economic rivalry with Britain and its threat to match Britain's superiority as a naval power, a confrontation between the two nations, let alone a world war, was inevitable. Mencken's claim that "Germany was doomed to battle for her very life" is mere bluster and after-the-fact exculpation.

Mencken's fanatical support for Germany led him into increasingly untenable positions as the war progressed. He wrote a plangent lament for France, but when he turned his attention to Belgium he shocked readers by declaring flatly that its fate was merely "academic and sentimental"—that, as a weak country, it was destined to be overrun by the strong. When Germany's campaign of submarine warfare began, Mencken was once again an ardent advocate. He argued that commercial or passenger liners that failed to pull up when hailed by a U-boat were themselves to blame if they were subsequently sunk when pursued—an argument that conveniently ignored those numerous instances when vessels had been sunk without any advance warning. Mencken's most notorious column was published the day after the sinking of the British liner *Lusitania* on 7 May 1915; among its 1,200 dead were 128 Americans. But as with other such incidents, the *Lusitania* had, in Mencken's view, brought about its own destruction by being an armed vessel. Americans' outrage over the incident—exacerbated by Germany's unexpectedly belligerent response to President Wilson's demand for an explanation and apology—came close to plunging the United States into war. Such an eventuality was Mencken's (and Germany's) worst fear, for he knew that Germany could not stand up to the united forces of England, France, Russia, and the United States. Americans' isolationism quickly reasserted itself, however, and Wilson won his reelection campaign in 1916 chiefly on promising to keep the United States out of the war.

But that was more than a year in the future; for the time being Mencken had to face the overwhelming obloquy that his Free Lance columns were engendering. In *Thirty-Five Years of Newspaper Work* he states that his cessation of the column on 23 October 1915 was purely

a result of lack of time: in the fall of 1914 he and George Jean Nathan had taken over the editorship of the *Smart Set*, and he goes on to state that “when I gave up the Free Lance in October, 1915, it was on my own motion entirely.”<sup>14</sup> And yet, Mencken had to face the brutal fact that his war views were opposed not only by the generality of Baltimore citizens but by the *Evening Sun* itself, which was resolutely supportive of the Allied cause. One of his last columns furiously condemns his own paper for “bogus neutrality” and for arousing hostility against German Americans by printing lies about the Germans. Two months after this column appeared, the Free Lance was silenced—though whether by his own decision, or by a joint decision by Mencken and the *Evening Sun*’s editorial board, it is now difficult to know.

Matters would get worse for Mencken before they got better. Although he resumed writing separate articles for the *Evening Sun* in 1915–17, he resolutely refused to discuss the war. The United States’ entrance into the conflict in April 1917 caused him to withdraw from the paper altogether, since he felt that newly imposed censorship regulations would prevent him from writing freely about the war. (The situation was worse than he knew: a thick file on his wartime activities, such as they were, was kept by the Justice Department, as well as by a notorious private anti-German group, the American Protective League.<sup>15</sup>) Mencken published nothing in either the *Sun* or the *Evening Sun* from 29 March 1917 until 9 February 1920, when his weekly editorials began appearing every Monday. He occasionally sat in on editorial meetings, but no article bearing his name appeared. Of course, he was still writing his book reviews for the *Smart Set*, and some of his most distinguished early volumes—*A Book of Prefaces* (1917), the first volume of *Prejudices* (1919), and *The American Language* (1919)—appeared to good notices. Mencken had grand plans to write a multivolume work on American involvement in the war, but they came to nothing.<sup>16</sup>

By the time his Monday editorials began in 1920, The Free Lance appeared to be ancient history. A number of books produced during this period, including *A Book of Burlesques* (1916), *Damn! A Book of Calumny* (1918), and even the monograph *In Defense of Women* (1918), had been largely assembled from newspaper and magazine work, but for reasons still not entirely clear he chose, with the one exception previously noted, not to use any of the Free Lance material therein. Was Mencken himself

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overwhelmed with the bulk of his writing? What is not in doubt is his own realization of the lasting benefits of the column. In speaking of the influence of the column on his subsequent work as author and editor (especially in one of his most visible roles, the editing of the *American Mercury*, 1924–33]), Mencken writes:

My belief is that running the column was very beneficial to me, professionally speaking, for it not only rid me of the last vestiges of executive work, but also served to clarify and organize my ideas. Before it had gone on a year I knew precisely what I was about and where I was heading. In it I worked out much of the material that was later to enter into my books, and to color the editorial policy of the *American Mercury*.<sup>17</sup>

The best of the Free Lance material ranks with the best of Mencken's journalism overall—in its satirical pungency, its rapierlike strokes of logic, its deadpan exposure of fallacy, hypocrisy, and absurdity, and its intellectual cogency as the reflections of a man who had worked out his philosophy of life both in broad parameters and in the smallest details. His trenchant and chilling column (4 January 1913) on witnessing a hanging must rank as one of the most pungent examples of his journalism. It is true that on many occasions Mencken lapses into language that today would be considered highly objectionable (such as his repeated and half-jocular references to African Americans as “niggeros,” “darkies,” and “blackamoors”); but this is part and parcel of a linguistic exuberance—exemplified by frequent use of German idioms (“katzenjammer,” “geheimrat,” etc.), esoteric terms (“xanthiate,” “saprophytes”), and slang—that Mencken deliberately employed to convey his point as vividly as possible.

The argumentative sparring in which Mencken engaged in his Free Lance column stood him in good stead when he came to tackle the opaque rhetoric of Warren G. Harding, the fundamentalist obfuscation of William Jennings Bryan, and the labored pomposities of the puritans, charlatans, and crusaders with whom he tangled in the 1920s. Even if many of the individuals against whom he battled in the Free Lance columns have now lapsed into merited oblivion, the issues he dealt with remain with us: To what degree should religion influence politics? How can unpopular minorities be protected in time of war?

Can democracy survive if the electorate is, by and large, ignorant and dishonest? Is America, indeed, the land of the free or merely a haven of intolerant conformity? Mencken's answers to these and other questions, whether we agree with them or not, are undeniably those of a man who has thought long and hard about what it means to be a free citizen, and how much would be lost if we ceased to utter what seems, at the moment, to be the truth.

A NOTE ON THIS EDITION

In compiling this relatively slim volume of selections from a million and a half words of Mencken's The Free Lance column, I have performed some emendations that result in a somewhat different reading experience from that presented by the original material. First, I have removed the horizontal rules that separate every paragraph from beginning to end of the column's existence; second, I have affixed titles (which I hope I am in keeping with the spirited and satirical tone of the text) to Mencken's discussions of a given subject. I have supplied the date of publication of the excerpt at the conclusion of the selection; I have not felt the need to include page numbers, as all the Free Lance columns appeared on the editorial page of the *Baltimore Evening Sun*, almost invariably on page 6, but occasionally (especially toward the end of the series) on page 8.

Given that Mencken is such an inveterate name-dropper, I have, as in my previous editions of Mencken's work, prepared a glossary of names to present background information on those individuals, many of whom are now obscure, whom Mencken cites. Such a glossary reduces the need for footnotes and allows readers to look up only those individuals with whom they may be unfamiliar. Names that an educated person can be expected to know are not included, except to draw attention to Mencken's writings about them. Other points are clarified in a section of notes.

I am under a considerable debt to Vincent Fitzpatrick, curator of the H. L. Mencken Collection at the Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore, who supplied some texts that were unavailable to me and assisted in the transcription of some items. I secured microfilm copies of most of the Free Lance columns from the McKeldin Library of the University of Maryland, College Park. I am grateful for the general

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