

THE EMPORIA STATE
Research Studies

DUATE PUBLICATION OF THE KANSAS STATE TEACHERS COLLEGE, EMPORIA



**A Critical Study of the Work of H. L. Mencken
As Literary Editor and Critic of
The American Mercury**

By Johnny L. Kloefkorn
August 1958

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VOLUME 7 June 1959 NUMBER 4

THE EMPORIA STATE RESEARCH STUDIES are published in September, December, March and June of each year by the Graduate Division of the Kansas State Teachers College, Emporia, Kansas. Entered as second-class matter September 16, 1952, at the post office at Emporia, Kansas, under the act of August 24, 1912.

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This publication is a continuation of *Studies in Education*
published by the Graduate Division from 1930 to 1945.

Papers published in this periodical are written by faculty members of the Kansas State Teachers College of Emporia and by either undergraduate or graduate students whose studies are conducted in residence under the supervision of a faculty member of the college.

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DATA PROCESSING

FEB 23 1983

Acknowledgment and Purpose

Immediately following World War II, William Manchester, then returning veteran and student, chose the University of Missouri for graduate study because, among other reasons, the school possessed a complete file of H. L. Mencken's long defunct *The Smart Set*. He wished to examine the formative years of Mencken's literary reputation as critic and establish, as fact would allow, Mencken's perception and influence on American letters. The result was *A Critical Study of the Work of H. L. Mencken as Literary Critic for the Smart Set Magazine* (Thesis presented to the graduate school of the University of Missouri, August, 1947), a heavily documented study of Mencken's earned and growing reputation. Mr. Manchester, who was later to become Mencken's recognized biographer (*Disturber of the Peace, The Life of H. L. Mencken*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951), novelist, and essayist, was interested, primarily, in the phenomenon of Mencken's rise to literary eminence.

Now, a decade later, Mr. John Kloefkorn has traced the fall of that reputation: The work of H. L. Mencken as literary critic on *The American Mercury*. Every copy of *The American Mercury*, under Mencken's editorship, rested in the stacks of Emporia State's library. Mr. Kloefkorn's purpose was to establish, as evidence would approve, Mencken's gradual indifference toward *belles lettres*, his increasing obstinacy in fields political, his surprising obtuseness and contradiction, his final desertion of the literary scene. Mr. Kloefkorn offers some analysis of the rich and teeming life of the late 1920's, but he is primarily interested in Mencken's descent from Parnassus, each weary, rock-disturbing step.

Green D. Wyrick

CHAPTER I

An Introduction to the Mercury

Daffy-Down-Dilly has come up to town,
In a yellow petticoat, and a green gown.

—Anonymous

The yellow-hued mood of melancholy and disillusionment which settled over the nation's literature following World War I had just begun to assert itself when, in late December of 1923, the first issue of the green-backed *American Mercury*, dated January, 1924, appeared. The editors of this new periodical, as the large black print on the cover made clear, were H. L. Mencken and his associate of long-standing, George Jean Nathan. The publisher was New York City's Alfred A. Knopf, a man with whom Mencken had been connected since 1917, when Knopf published Mencken's *A Book of Prefaces*. Planned as a quality magazine that would appeal to only a small group of intellectuals, the *Mercury* surprised its editors by being immediately received with enthusiasm and acclaim throughout the country. William R. Manchester, Mencken's biographer, vividly described the event:

The opening number . . . was swept off the news-stands. By December 28 they were on the presses with the second edition of the issue, and Knopf excitedly sent Mencken word from New York that the circulation department was already 670 subscriptions behind. Within a month the number had been reprinted a second time and the February issue was headed for a twenty-five-thousand circulation—this in a fifty-cent magazine which its editors never expected to go over twenty thousand. So rapidly did the subscription lists mount that the printers, who had taken credit for the first few numbers, were paid off at once and the *Mercury*, in effect, had financed itself.¹

With this encouraging beginning, the *Mercury* was soon firmly established in the top ranks of the quality periodicals of the day, and the co-editors were jubilant.² Actually, however, Mencken had been planning the *Mercury* for some time. While he and Nathan served as joint editors of *The Smart Set* (1914-23), Mencken had nurtured the thought of founding a new magazine "to give American intellectuals of the Twenties the magazine for which they were yearning."³ In the main, *The Smart Set* was concerned with art and literature, and Mencken, by that time, wanted a vehicle through which he could voice his opinions about things political, as well as literary. Returning from a trip to Europe early in 1923, Mencken found Knopf willing to take the step.⁴ Since Mencken and Nathan had been partners for so long, there was little question but that they should continue as such in the new enterprise. However, Nathan, unconcerned with politics and quite content to deal exclusively with the literary aspects

of the American scene, was skeptical.⁵ Nevertheless, he accompanied Mencken into the new project, despite his lack of enthusiasm. But the partnership was doomed to be short-lived, for Nathan's distaste for the political carnival that Mencken loved so well soon pulled him away from the editorial responsibilities, and, a year after the magazine appeared, Nathan withdrew and Mencken became its sole pilot. After that time, Nathan merely contributed theatre reviews and wrote a department called "Clinical Notes"; Mencken was then free to direct the magazine as he chose.

Once Knopf had agreed to speculate on the *Mercury*, Mencken and Nathan were kept busy making preparations and decisions about the content of the magazine. Throughout 1923, they discussed the formation of the periodical with Knopf, and wrote numerous letters to their friends in an attempt to solicit manuscripts for the new publication.⁶ Several of the departments that they placed in the *Mercury* were carried over from *The Smart Set*.⁷ Thus the final version of the *Mercury* was a blending of the old and the new.

The aims of the *Mercury* were outlined in an editorial in the first issue, which stated that the editors were "committed to . . . keep the common sense as fast as they can, to belabor sham as agreeably as possible, to give a civilized entertainment."⁸ The intent was to direct the magazine to the "Forgotten Man—that is, the normal, educated, well-disposed, unfrenzied, enlightened citizen of the middle minority."⁹ As for *belles lettres*, the editors would

welcome sound and honest work, whatever its form or lack of form, and carry on steady artillery practise against every variety of artistic pedant and mountebank. They [the editors] belong to no coterie and have no aesthetic theory to propagate. They do not believe that a work of art has any purpose beyond that of being charming and stimulating, and they do not believe that there is much difficulty, taking one day with another, about distinguishing clearly between the good and the not good.¹⁰

The plan, in reference to fiction, was to include "one or two short stories in each issue, such occasional short plays as will merit print, some verse (but not much), and maybe a few other things, lying outside the categories."¹¹ Book reviews were to cover only those works which the editors chose to comment upon.¹² All in all, the primary aim was "to attempt a realistic presentation of the whole gaudy, gorgeous American scene."¹³ and to "ascertain and tell the truth,"¹⁴ hoping, meanwhile, "to introduce some element of novelty into the execution of an enterprise so old."¹⁵

These were the aims of the *Mercury* when it entered the arena in late 1923, dressed in a Paris-green cover, and filled with the things that the young intellectuals had, judging from its immediate popularity, been thirsting for.

The original format of the *Mercury*, conceived by Mencken, Nathan, and Knopf in 1923, was changed very little during Mencken's ten years with the magazine. It was designed by Elmer Adler and printed in Gara-

mount type.¹⁶ The first issue of the magazine carried, in addition to the main body which encompassed essays, articles, short stories, plays, poetry, an editorial, and various other unclassifiable pieces from contributors, eight special sections, or departments. These were labeled "Americana," "The Arts and Sciences," "Clinical Notes," "The Theatre," "The Library," "The American Mercury Authors," "Check List of New Books," and "Editorial Notes." Some comment about the purpose and general content of each of these departments follows:

"*Americana*"—In this section of the magazine, several pages (usually three, four, or five) were devoted to a recording of brief excerpts which Mencken culled from newspapers, periodicals, pamphlets, and various other sources. Primarily humorous in content, the excerpts were chosen to illustrate a multitude of shenanigans, absurdities, and imbecilities which showed up in the nation's provincial press. Mencken listed the quotations alphabetically, by states, and wrote a short introductory paragraph for each. Typical of the entries in this department were the following two concerning the state of Kansas:

KANSAS

From resolutions adopted by the Lyon county W.C.T.U.:

Passages in Mother Goose which mention tobacco or alcoholic beverages should not be read by children, and songs which mention tobacco should not be tolerated at state music contests.¹⁷

Marvel reported by the alert Fredonia *Herald*:

A hog bit part of John Eisenbrandt's left thumb off Monday while Eisenbrandt was engaged in putting a ring in the hog's nose on his farm near Fort Scott. Whether it was the quickness of the bite or the sharpness of the animal's teeth is not known, but it is a fact, according to Eisenbrandt, that he did not know that the hog had bit him until he chanced to look down and saw the end of his thumb was missing. It was the sound of the hog's teeth clinking together that caused him to look down.¹⁸

Mencken made no comments about the material he inserted in "*Americana*"; the items were allowed to speak for themselves.

"*The Arts and Sciences*"—Included in this department were articles of varying lengths by authorities in the scientific fields. Discussions of almost every recognized scientific subject—chemistry, astronomy, medicine, and the like—were placed under this heading. For instance, the first issue carried articles dealing with architecture, medicine, and philology, and covered a total of nine pages. The number of pages given over to the section varied slightly with each issue.

"*Clinical Notes*"—This section began as a joint enterprise by Mencken and Nathan, and it remained in the periodical until February, 1930. However, the department was written exclusively by Nathan after 1925. The articles in the section ranged in size from lengthy essays to brief, three- or four-line witticisms, and the discussions dealt with everything from advice to bachelors ("Toward men, ever an aristocrat; toward women, ever a commoner—that way lies success."¹⁹) to tracts on hedonism. An entry which captures the mood of the section:

Text for a Wall-Card—It is lucky for a young woman to be just a bit homely. The fact helps her to get a good husband, and, what is harder, to keep him after she has got him. The flawless beauty has no durable joy in this life save looking in the glass, and even this departs as she oxidizes. Men, knowing her intolerable vanity, are afraid of her, and, if snared into marriage with her, always look for the worst.²⁰

"The Theatre"—Covering the whole panorama of the New York stage, Nathan wrote this section each month until February, 1930. Here he commented on every conceivable facet of the drama as it was then conducted in New York.

"The Library"—In this section, Mencken reviewed one or more books each month, sometimes singly and sometimes in groups according to subject. Other reviewers had a hand in the section for the first few issues of the magazine, but this practice was soon discontinued, and thereafter, Mencken wrote all of the reviews. This department will be discussed more fully in a later chapter.

"The American Mercury Authors"—Appearing on the final page of the magazine, this department contained brief, one-paragraph notes about the authors whose works were printed in that particular issue of the magazine. Various bits of information concerning the author's life and writings were included in these informal discussions.

"Check List of New Books"—This department was placed with the advertisements at the end of the magazine, and included short comments about many new books and reprints.

"Editorial Notes"—Also placed with the advertisements in the latter pages of the *Mercury*, this section was utilized by Mencken to air topics which consisted, in the main, of comment about the publication of the magazine—circulation, editorial policy, contributors, and so forth.

Advertisements were confined to the outside pages of the *Mercury*, and were printed on slicker, better quality paper than was the integral portion of the magazine. As mentioned previously, few alterations were made by Mencken in the format of the magazine during the decade. Beginning in January, 1931, he introduced a section called "Music," and this department, consisting of discussions of that phase of the fine arts by outside contributors, continued to appear throughout the remainder of that year. The name of the department was changed to "The Music Room" in January, 1932, and its purpose was much the same as that of its predecessor. However, "The Music Room" survived for only a few months, and was dropped from the magazine in September, 1932. Another section, called "The Soap Box," became a part of the *Mercury* in October, 1932. Here Mencken printed letters from readers, along with subscribers' queries and their answers. The plan allowed the readers a portion of the magazine wherein they could contact other readers to make requests for all types of relatively obscure information. Outside of the addition of these innovations and the loss of Nathan's contributions, only insignificant changes were wrought on

the *Mercury*. Toward the end of his editorship, Mencken discontinued writing his usual editorial, and substituted for it a monthly article called "What's Going on in the World." This article served as the lead story in several of the last issues, but its tone and general contents differed little from that of the editorials.

By far, the majority of the *Mercury's* space was allotted to articles dealing with some segment of American life. A glance at the *Mercury* for those years attests to the heterogeneous nature of the articles which Mencken selected to bring before his readers. Manchester discussed the matter as follows:

As a quality magazine unafraid to make the common man respectable, the *Mercury* was working in a virgin field, and hence was untroubled by competition. Stories by jailbirds on penitentiaries, by prostitutes on whoredom, by vagrants on how to bum a meal—stories which could never have got beyond the slush heaps in the *Atlantic Monthly* or *Harper's*—found an eager reader in Mencken.²¹

Since so many pages were given over to the articles and departments, only a relatively small amount of space was granted to the publication of imaginative prose and verse—less than ten percent of the *Mercury* was allowed to *belles lettres*.

The overall size of the *Mercury* was ten by seven and one-half inches, and was priced at fifty cents a copy or five dollars a year. Even when the magazine began to suffer drastic losses in circulation, Mencken did not reduce the price. Charles Angoff, Mencken's assistant editor, reported that Mencken was "delighted that the *Mercury* sold at fifty cents a copy and five dollars a year, and that it was so expensively put up,"²² and he quotes Mencken as saying, "If we printed the same sort of stuff in a magazine selling for twenty-five cents or even thirty-five cents, . . . we'd be ruined. They'd think we were a bunch of tramps, not worth listening to."²³ The pages in the magazine were numbered consecutively, by volume, and each volume included four issues of one hundred and twenty-eight pages each. This was the general make-up of the magazine that occupied the national spotlight when Mencken was at its helm.

When Nathan and Mencken deserted their posts on *The Smart Set* to found *The American Mercury*, Mencken's reputation was soaring higher than it ever had before. Moreover, he was not only a popular writer; he was also an astute literary critic who had made some worthwhile contributions to the field of letters in America. For, as Manchester concluded in a study of Mencken's work as critic on *The Smart Set*, Mencken was "fighting a battle . . . His reviews . . . were annihilating the writers of romance and helping pave the way for the disciples of realism."²⁴ The same study ended with this evaluation of Mencken's literary efforts on *The Smart Set*:

Mencken stands, despite his obloquy, his iconoclastic style, and his seeming nihilism, as an achiever who, as critic and thinker, reaffirmed certain basic beliefs, such as liberty of expression and intellectual honesty, who called for artistry in creativity and an end to cant in American life, and who pre-

pared the way for the cultural renaissance which was to produce a coherent American literature for a nation which had known only a handful of talented writers.²⁵

During World War I, Mencken's political viewpoints forced him to remain silent, and, during those turbulent years, when the people's patriotic zeal precluded their championing the "original, and hence subversive, ideas"²⁶ which were the core of Mencken's existence, he retreated into what amounted to an almost self-imposed retirement. But, at war's end, the national climate shifted to the opposite pole, and the services of his bombastic pen were highly in demand. As Manchester described the phenomenon,

Something had happened. A war had ended, but more: a new era had begun. The day of the American protective league, of the war saboteurs, of the *Evening Mail's* pussyfooting and Theodor Hemberger's terror, the day when to be German was to be suspect, when . . . Dreiser and Mencken [could be] gagged—that day had passed . . . It was 1919. The Twenties were on the threshold. And so was H. L. Mencken.²⁷

Another factor in elevating Mencken's reputation had also occurred at this time—the publication of his massive philological work, *The American Language*.

The impact of the book was terrific. With one powerful stroke he had hewed in half the umbilical cord which philologically bound this nation to England. Later strokes were to come—and he [Mencken] was to deliver them—but the immediate effect of that first edition, coming as it did with the dying echoes of rifle fire in France, was tremendous.²⁸

In the end, the upshot of these propitious happenings was that Mencken's fame received a tremendous boost, and, what was even more significant, he once again had a chance to express his opinions in whatever manner he chose. Within the next five years, he had published four books (the series of his *Prejudices*) and co-authored, with Nathan, two others (*Helioabalus: A Buffoonery in Three Acts*, and *The American Credo*). Naturally, these works aided in keeping Mencken's name in the limelight. He was immediately adopted by the war generation as a saint, and his renown gathered steam accordingly.²⁹

Thus did the Twenties come to Mencken. The champion of intellectual unrest, of disillusion, he tapped this new vein with a flourish and zeal that staggered the Philistines and brought the jaded literati flocking. In the gaudy covered *Smart Set* and in his stream of books and magazine articles, they found their unspoken thoughts brilliantly couched.

He was compared to Juvenal, Dryden, Swift, Voltaire, and in the *Glasgow Herald*, to Sam Johnson. Overnight, it seemed, his face became international.³⁰

The accolades which Mencken attracted during this period were not all, of course, prompted by his writings about aesthetic matters; but, in terms of reputation, the results were the same—he was being listened to, and the ranks of admirers swelled daily. There were detractors, too, but, as is always true, his popularity with the opposite wing was merely increased by their invective.

In the area of *belles lettres*, Mencken's "social energies were devoted to cultivating and whooping up the young talent which had sought out *The Smart Set*."³¹ Mencken tooted his horn for such writers as Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, Eugene O'Neill, and F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Manchester wrote that

it was this critical tutelage, given the first faltering steps of nearly every major writer of the Twenties, which accounts for Mencken's elevation to critical sainthood by the first war generation. For almost a decade there was scarcely a major writer in the country who did not trace his career from a first acceptance by *The Smart Set*.³²

Needless to say, Mencken's activities did not go unnoticed by other critics of the day. Writing in 1923, Carl Van Doren said of Mencken that "no one holds out a quicker hand of encouragement to any promising beginner in literature or scholarship."³³ Perhaps the best testimony to Mencken's reputation and influence during those years came from Angoff, who grew up with the war generation and was one of the young intellectuals who cherished Mencken's leadership:

Like so many other young men of my generation, I had been a faithful reader of *The Smart Set* The stories in *The Smart Set* seemed like no stories in any other magazine. The same was true of the articles and poems, but it was H. L. Mencken's book reviews and George Jean Nathan's drama reviews that attracted most of the young people I knew. They were dazzlingly written, and they expressed the rebellion that we all felt. Groups of us would discuss these reviews—always enthusiastically. Some of us could recite by heart paragraph upon paragraph of certain reviews by Mencken and Nathan.³⁴

So it was that when Mencken and Nathan produced a new magazine, a large following awaited them. Mencken's writings in *The Smart Set*, his books, his magazine articles—all had served to place him in the spotlight, and he was in a position to attract an even larger audience and to continue his role of intellectual leadership in *The American Mercury*. "The war played into his hands . . . as into those of hardly any other literary American,"³⁵ and, from his tower atop the *Mercury*, he was free to manipulate the gushing flow of literature in the United States.

CHAPTER II

Mencken as Literary Editor of the Mercury

Hark, Hark,
 The dogs do bark,
 The beggars are coming to town!
 Some in rags,
 And some in tags,
 And one in a velvet gown.

—Anonymous

Like the unknown beggars in the nursery rhyme, the nation's writers responded to H. L. Mencken's clarion-like call for manuscripts that would conform to the tone and standards of his new magazine. The manuscripts, too, were like the beggars—some were dressed in rags, some in tags, and a few in velvet gowns. It was Mencken's task to choose the velvet ones, and he knew what he wanted, as the following letter from Mencken to Sinclair Lewis, written when Mencken was soliciting manuscripts a few months before the *Mercury* appeared, clearly illustrates:

'I shall try to cut a rather wide swath with it, covering politics, economics, the exact sciences, etc., as well as *belles lettres* and the other fine arts. I have some promises of stuff from men who have something to say and know how to write, and I hope to stir up the animals. In politics it will be, in the main, Tory, but *civilized* Tory. You know me well enough to know that there will be no quarter for the degraded cads who now run the country. I am against you and the Liberals because I believe you chase butterflies, but I am even more against your enemies.'

Motivated by letters such as this one and advance advertising, the writers scurried to ship their "stuff" to Mencken and thus make a bid for space in the *Mercury*. For Mencken, then, the problem that remained was one of selection, and it is this process which is interesting here. In fact, perhaps the most rewarding evidence pertaining to Mencken's critical acumen while editor of the *Mercury* is to be found, not in his editorials and book reviews, but in the articles, stories, plays, and poems which he selected for publication within the magazine's covers. The writings he bought reflect directly upon his tastes and abilities as editor and critic.

Works by approximately seven hundred writers appeared in the *Mercury* while Mencken was its editor, but a large percentage of the articles which found their way into the periodical were concerned with politics, economics, science, prohibition, and a host of other subjects outside the realm of pure literature. As mentioned previously, short stories, poetry, plays and other articles which could be classified as fiction constitute less than ten percent of the total volume of the *Mercury*.

Of the one hundred and seventy-five authors of fiction whose writings Mencken published, more than a third sold only one story to the *Mercury*.

Other authors, some having a story, poem, or play in the magazine almost on the average of once each year, were more prolific, and it appears that Mencken, having made a decision about a certain writer, gave the author his unwavering support by publishing that writer's offerings again and again. All of the articles of a reportorial nature are of no concern here, except to note that they consistently dominated the contents of the magazine; the others, the works of imaginative fiction, along with the men and women who wrote them, deserve consideration. However, it would be unfair, if not impossible, to evaluate each contribution in terms of its literary importance and significance. It was felt that the best test of Mencken's critical insight as editor of the *Mercury* was to discover how the magazine's contributors have fared in the world of letters; to explore their contribution to *belles lettres*; to ascertain, as closely as possible, their positions among American writers and their reputations as craftsmen in the art of fiction. To accomplish this investigation, the author has, of course, utilized his own knowledge of the field. However, as must naturally happen, many of the people who wrote for the *Mercury* and who attained some distinction as writers, are practically unheard of today and would be only names to the student of literature. Therefore, three well-known reference works which list authors of importance were consulted in this investigation: William Rose Benét's *The Reader's Encyclopedia*; James D. Hart's *The Oxford Companion to American Literature*; and *Twentieth Century Authors*, by Stanley J. Kunitz and Howard Haycraft.² It can only be assumed that a writer who is not listed in one or more of these three works has failed to make any notable contribution to the field of American letters.

No attempt has been made to classify the writers according to their reputations or to place them in the order that their works appeared in the *Mercury*. Therefore, the authors are listed in alphabetical order according to last names. The first section covers prose writers and the second deals with writers of poetry. The *Mercury's* prose writers:³

Abdullah, Achmed—This British author published one story in the *Mercury*, and is mentioned in *Encyclopedia* and *Authors*. Mencken's antipathy towards the English is well-known, and Abdullah is one of the few men from that country to make the grade in the magazine.

Adamic, Louis—All three references list Adamic. He published twice in the *Mercury*.

Anderson, David Merrill—No mention of this author is to be found in any of the three references. One piece by Anderson was in the magazine.

Anderson, Nels—This author, who appeared once in the *Mercury*, receives no attention in the references.

Anderson, Sherwood—It almost goes without saying that Anderson is listed in all three references, for his place in American letters is a high one. It is to Mencken's credit that three stories by Anderson appeared in the magazine.

Armstrong, John—Although this man published twice in the *Mercury*, he has earned no particular distinction among writers, and is not listed in the references.

Barrett, Richmond—This author, who published one story in the magazine, is also not mentioned in the reference works.

Beach, Joseph Warren—The *Oxford Companion* recognizes this writer, who has done some notable literary criticism. He is not mentioned in the other two references. He published twice in the *Mercury*.

Beer, Thomas—Listed in all three references, Beer is a fairly well-known novelist. One work by him appeared in the magazine.

Bercovici, H. LeB.—One story by Bercovici found its way into the magazine. He is not mentioned in the reference works.

Blake, Robert—Blake had one play in the *Mercury*. He is not cited by the references.

Booth, Ernest—One work of fiction by this author was in the magazine. He is not listed in the references.

Boyd, Albert Truman—Apparently a writer of no distinction, Boyd printed one article in the *Mercury*. No mention of him is found in the references.

Boyd, Thomas—This writer, who published once in the magazine, has written two or three novels of merit. He is listed in all three of the references.

Brody, Catherine—One work of fiction by this writer appeared in the *Mercury*. The three references contain no mention of her.

Brown, Bob—Having made one prose contribution to the magazine, Brown is not listed in the references.

Burnett, W. R.—This writer's novels, of which *Little Caesar* is perhaps the best, have earned him some distinction. He published once in the *Mercury*, and is noted in all three references.

Cabell, James Branch—Probably no student of literature has not heard of Cabell, who was one of America's most prolific writers. He was one of Mencken's favorites, as will be brought out in a later chapter. He wrote three times for the magazine, and is listed in all the references.

Cahill, Holger—This writer published once in the *Mercury*. He is not listed in the reference works.

Cain, James M.—Six short plays and three stories by Cain were printed in the *Mercury*. He gained some fame through his novel, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, and is hence cited by the references.

Caldwell, Erskine—A writer who published once in the periodical and whose popularity as a novelist makes comment unnecessary, Caldwell is mentioned by all the references.

Cautela, Giuseppe—The references do not list this man, who printed one story in the periodical.

Chew, Samuel C.—The *Encyclopedia* refers to Chew, although the other two reference works do not. He wrote one play for the *Mercury*.

Clarage, Eleanor—Not mentioned by the references, this writer printed one work in the magazine.

Clark, Emily—Three stories by this writer appeared in the magazine. She is not listed in the reference works.

Conroy, Jack—Although neglected by the other two references, Conroy is cited by the *Oxford Companion*. His novel, *The Disinherited*, is worth mention. He published five times in the *Mercury*.

Crowell, Chester T.—Two works of fiction by Crowell were printed in the magazine. He is not listed in the references.

Davidson, H. Carter—No recognition is given to Davidson by any of the references. He published once in the *Mercury*.

Davis, H. L.—This writer's novel, *Honey in the Horn*, won for him a Pulitzer prize. His works appeared seven times in the magazine, and he is listed in all three references.

DeCasseres, Benjamin—Listed in all three references, DeCasseres published two times in the *Mercury*.

Dickinson, May Freud—This writer published once in the magazine. She is not mentioned by the references.

Dobie, J. Frank—This writer's fame as folklorist-novelist is relatively well established. Mencken printed one of Dobie's stories in the magazine, and he is mentioned by both the *Encyclopedia* and the *Oxford Companion*.

Douglas, W. A. S.—One of the magazine's most frequent contributors, Douglas appeared nine times during the ten years. However, he receives no space in the references.

Dreiser, Theodore—Since he has been recognized as one of America's best novelists in the naturalistic vein, Dreiser's name naturally appears in all three references. It is somewhat surprising that only one story by Dreiser appeared in the *Mercury*, because he was another of Mencken's favorites.

Eaton, Walter Prichard—Listed in the *Encyclopedia* and *Authors*, Eaton published one story in the *Mercury*.

Fante, John—Five stories by Fante appeared in the magazine, and he is cited by the *Oxford Companion* and *Authors*.

Farrell, James T.—This writer's stories about the character, Studs Lonigan, as well as several others, have earned him a high place in American letters. He is mentioned by all the references. He published three times in the *Mercury*.

Faulkner, William—A giant among American novelists, Faulkner is recognized as one of the best novelists in the United States. His many novels dealing with the deep South are all well known. Four of his works appeared in the *Mercury*, and he is listed in all three references.

Fergusson, Harvey—An author of several novels of secondary importance, Fergusson printed once in the magazine. He is mentioned by all three references.

Fitzgerald, F. Scott—This writer's novels, and particularly *This Side of Paradise* and *The Great Gatsby*, went far towards capturing the mood of the Twenties, and he is today regarded as a sort of symbol of the cynicism and disillusionment of that era. He published two stories in the *Mercury*, and is listed in all three reference works.

Forsling, Elizabeth Paxton—Not mentioned by the references, this writer had one story in the magazine.

Francis, Owen—One work by Francis appeared in the *Mercury*. The references do not list him.

Gale, Zona—A short story writer of some distinction, this writer published twice in the magazine. She is listed by all the references.

Garey, Robert B.—Not listed in the references, Garey had one article in the periodical.

George, W. L.—Listed in the *Encyclopedia* and *Authors*, George had one story in the *Mercury*.

Gilman, Mildred Evans—This author is represented in the magazine by one story. She is not listed in the references.

Gold, Louis—This writer, who is not mentioned by the reference works, printed one story in the magazine.

Gold, Michael—A writer of minor importance who published twice in the *Mercury*, Gold is listed in all three reference works.

Grafton, Samuel—Not listed in the references, Grafton wrote two stories for the periodical.

Greene, Ward—Listed only in *Authors*, Greene appeared three times in the magazine.

Haardt, Sarah—Not mentioned in the references, this writer printed four pieces in the *Mercury*. She was Mencken's wife.

Hackett, Francis—One-time editor of *The New Republic*, Hackett is referred to in all three works. He printed one story in the magazine.

Hale, Nancy—This writer published two stories in the *Mercury*. She is listed in the *Encyclopedia*.

Hall, Leonard—Never mentioned by the references, Hall wrote two pieces for the magazine.

Halper, Albert—This writer has a few novels to his credit, all of which are of minor importance. Five of his stories were bought by Mencken, and his name appears in all three references.

Hanko, Arthur—Represented by one story in the magazine, Hanko is not listed in the reference works.

Hanley, Hugh—This writer also had one story in the *Mercury*. He is not mentioned by the references.

Hartswick, F. Gregory—Another writer with a single entry in the magazine, Hartswick is not listed in the references.

Hecht, Ben—An author of many novels and plays, Hecht appeared in the magazine once. He is listed in all of the three reference works.

Herbst, Josephine—A minor novelist, this author is mentioned by all the references. Four stories by her appeared in the *Mercury*.

Herrmann, John—Not cited by the references, Herrmann had two stories in the magazine.

Hess, Leonard—This writer printed one piece in the magazine. He receives no mention by the references.

Heth, Edward Harris—The references do not list this author, whose writings appeared once in the *Mercury*.

Holbrook, Stewart H.—Not mentioned by the references, Holbrook had two stories in the *Mercury*.

Hughes, Langston—A Negro writer, Hughes is mentioned by all the references. Two of his stories found their way into the *Mercury*.

Hussey, L. M.—This author published three pieces in the magazine. He does not appear in the reference works.

Huston, John—Represented in the *Mercury* by two stories, Huston is not listed by the references.

Jeans, Robert—Also not included in the references, Jeans published three stories in the magazine.

Joffe, Eugene—A single work by this author went into the periodical. He is not listed in the references.

Jones, Carter Brooke—Although four stories by Jones appeared in the magazine, he is not mentioned by the references.

Jones, Idwal—Another writer who published often in the *Mercury*—six times in all—Jones is not listed in the references.

Kelm, Karlton—The references neglect Kelm. He printed two stories in the magazine.

Lanke, J. J.—Mentioned only by the *Encyclopedia*, Lanke is represented in the magazine by one story.

Lea, M. S.—This writer published one story in the *Mercury*, and is not listed in the reference works.

Lee, B. Virginia—One story by this author went into the magazine, and she is neglected by the references.

Leenhouts, Grant—This writer, with one story in the *Mercury*, is not cited by the references.

LeSuer, Meridel—This writer's name is absent from the references. She had one story in the periodical.

Levitt, Saul—Another writer of no particular merit, Levitt published one piece in the *Mercury*. The references do not list him.

Lewis, Sinclair—As will be seen in a later chapter, Mencken championed Lewis's works. This writer's *Main Street* and *Babbitt*, both first-rate

novels, secured for him a high place in the nation's letters. He is listed by all three references, and he printed one story in the *Mercury*.

Lindsay, Malvina—One story by this writer appeared in the magazine. None of the references lists her.

McClure, John—Listed only in the *Encyclopedia*, McClure published seven stories in the *Mercury*.

McIntosh, K. C.—Represented in the magazine by one story, McIntosh's name is not included in the reference works.

Manlapaz, Ignacio—Ignored by the references, Manlapaz printed one piece in the magazine.

Mason, Gregory—Published once in the magazine, Mason is mentioned only by the *Encyclopedia*.

Maynard, Lawrence M.—Not listed in the reference works, Maynard had one story in the *Mercury*.

Meyer, Ernest L.—A writer who published once in the magazine, Meyer receives no mention in the reference works.

Milburn, George—With thirteen stories to his credit, Milburn was the most frequent contributor to the *Mercury*. His reputation today is of no consequence, and none of the references includes him.

Miller, Harlan—Also not cited in the references, Miller wrote one story for the magazine.

Moore, Muriel—This writer contributed one story to the *Mercury*. She is not listed in the references.

Mulhern, Alice—One article by this writer appeared in the magazine, and she is not mentioned by the reference works.

Mullen, Kate—A single story by this author appeared in the magazine. None of the references lists her.

Newman, Frances—A novelist with little reputation today, this author sold one story to the *Mercury*. She is listed in the *Encyclopedia* and *Authors*.

Nuhn, Ferner—Not mentioned by the references, Nuhn had three stories in the magazine.

Odum, Howard W.—Two stories by Odum were printed in the *Mercury*. He receives no mention in the references.

O'Mara, Patrick—This author sold two stories to the *Mercury*. He is not cited in the reference works.

O'Neale, Albert Lindsay Jr.—Mencken purchased one story by O'Neale. He is not listed in the references.

O'Neill, Eugene—One of America's most famous playwrights, O'Neill is represented in the *Mercury* by one play. As a writer considered by many critics as the nation's greatest dramatist, O'Neill naturally receives attention in all the references.

Parker, Dorothy—This writer's reputation as a satirist is fairly well

established, particularly through her verse. She published one story in the magazine, and is listed in all three references.

Peterkin, Julia—This writer, who has won some fame as a novelist and was once awarded a Pulitzer prize, sold one story to the magazine, and is included in all three references.

Peters, Paul—Author of one story that appeared in the *Mercury*, Peters is not listed in the references.

Purdy, Nina—This writer also sold one story to the magazine. None of the reference works lists her.

Purroy, David—Mencken bought one of Purroy's stories. He is not listed in the references.

Roberts, Elizabeth Maddox—This novelist has a minor reputation in the United States. She is represented in the magazine by one story, and she is mentioned by all three references.

Rosenfeld, Louis Zara—Another writer who published one story in the *Mercury*, Rosenfeld receives no mention in the references.

Sampson, Charles—Three stories by Sampson appeared in the magazine. He is not listed in the reference works.

Sanford, Winifred—This writer's works appeared frequently in the periodical—eight times in all, but is seldom mentioned today, and is not cited in the references.

Sawyer, Ruth—Listed in the *Encyclopedia* and *Authors*, this writer has only a slight reputation. She published one story in the periodical.

Sayre, Joel—Although five stories by Sayre were purchased by Mencken, none of the references mentions him.

Schuyler, George S.—Two stories by Schuyler found their way into the *Mercury*. He is not included in any of the references.

Sherwin, Louis—Ignored by the references, Sherwin published one play in the magazine.

Snider, Charles Lee—Also neglected by the references, Snider had one play in the periodical.

Sonnichsen, Erich—Two stories by this writer were in the magazine. He is not cited in the references.

Stevens, James—A writer of folk tales, Stevens is noticed by all three references. He published five stories in the *Mercury*.

Strong-Wolfe, Elela—This writer, who sold one story to the magazine, is not listed in the references.

Stuart, James—Not mentioned in the references, Stuart had one story in the *Mercury*.

Suckow, Ruth—This writer's fiction has earned for her a fair distinction among American authors. Mencken printed nine of her stories, and she is recognized by all three reference works.

Sullivan, Maurice S.—Two of Sullivan's stories appeared in the magazine. None of the references lists him.

Tanaquil, Paul—This writer sold one article to the *Mercury*. He is not listed in the references.

Tanner, Myron T.—Another writer not mentioned in the reference works, Tanner had one story in the *Mercury*.

Tasker, Robert Joyce—None of the references lists this writer, who contributed one story to the magazine.

Thomas, Dorothy—One of the most frequent contributors to the *Mercury*, this writer had eight stories in the magazine. She is not noticed in the references.

Toogood, Granville—One story by this writer went into the magazine. He receives no mention in the references.

Tully, Jim—At one time a popular novelist, Tully, whose reputation is based on such books as *Circus Parade* and *Shanty Irish*, holds only a minor position among the nation's writers. He was one of Mencken's favorites, as is shown by the fact that seven of his stories were printed in the *Mercury*. He is listed in all three references.

Walker, Stanley—This writer had two stories in the magazine. None of the references lists him.

Weisberg, Goldie—Represented in the periodical by one story, this writer receives no mention in the reference works.

Wembridge, Eleanor Rowland—One story by this writer appeared in the magazine. She is not listed in the references.

Whitman, Stephen French—Another writer who had one story in the magazine, Whitman is not cited in the references.

Whitney, Parkhurst—One story by Whitney was printed in the *Mercury*. None of the references lists him.

Wilson, Charles Morrow—This writer is mentioned in the *Encyclopedia*. One of Wilson's stories was printed in the *Mercury*.

Wimberly, Lowry Charles—Five stories by Wimberly were printed in the magazine, but he is neglected by the reference works.

Wimberly, Merritt—Also disregarded by the references, this writer had three stories in the periodical.

Winslow, Thyra Samter—Mentioned in both the *Encyclopedia* and the *Oxford Companion*, this writer has gained some recognition for her short stories. Three of her stories appeared in the *Mercury*.

Zugsmith, Leane—One story by this writer, whose novels have earned her a minor position in the world of letters, was printed in the *Mercury*. She is cited by all three references.

The writers of verse:

Aiken, Conrad—One poem by Aiken appeared in the magazine. He is a well-known poet, and is listed in all three reference works.

Anderson, Sherwood—Although Anderson is more widely recognized as a prose writer than as a poet, one of his works in verse appeared in the *Mercury*. The three references list him.

Auslander, Joseph—A top-notch poet, Auslander published one piece in the magazine. He is recognized by all of the references.

Bodenheim, Maxwell—One poem by this author, whose reputation among American poets is fairly well established, was printed in the magazine, and he is listed in all three references.

Brown, Bob—One of Brown's poems went into the *Mercury*. None of the references lists him.

Cooksley, S. Bert—Three poems by this writer, who receives no attention in the references, were sold to the magazine.

Cullen, Countee P.—This Negro poet, who is included in both the *Encyclopedia* and the *Oxford Companion*, had one work in the *Mercury*.

Davidson, Eugene—Another writer who had one poem in the magazine, Davidson is not listed in the references.

Davis, H. L.—Primarily a prose artist, Davis, who is cited by all three references, published one poem in the periodical.

Dreiser, Theodore—One poem by Dreiser found its way into the *Mercury*. His position among American writers has been noted. All three references lists him.

Dunne, Edith Hart—Not mentioned in the references, this writer contributed one verse item to the magazine.

Elmendorf, Mary J.—Two poems by this author were printed in the magazine. None of the references mentions her.

Ferril, Thomas Hornsby—Mencken obviously liked Ferril's work, since five of his poems appeared in the magazine. None of the references lists him.

Frost, Frances M.—Only the *Encyclopedia* includes information about this writer, who published four poems in the magazine.

Hackett, Francis—This writer's position on *The New Republic* has been referred to. He contributed one poem to the *Mercury*, and is listed by all three reference works.

Heyward, DuBose—One poem by Heyward appeared in the periodical. The author of the novel, *Porgy*, which was the basis of the famous drama, *Porgy and Bess*, Heyward is listed in all three references.

Hoffenstein, Samuel—A writer of only slight reputation, Hoffenstein sold two poems to the *Mercury*. The *Encyclopedia* and *Authors* list him.

Hubbell, Lindley Williams—Not included in the reference works, Hubbell had one poem in the magazine.

Jeffers, Robinson—One of America's foremost craftsmen in verse, Jeffers printed one poem in the *Mercury*. It goes without saying that all the references devote considerable space to this poet.

Jenkin, Oliver—No mention of this writer is given in any of the reference works. One of his poems was published in the magazine.

Johns, Orrick—Listed in the *Encyclopedia* and *Authors*, Johns's place

among the nation's poets is a minor one at best. A single poem by him appeared in the *Mercury*.

Johnson, James Weldon—A writer who has attained some recognition through his poetry and who is cited in all three reference works, Johnson also had one poem in the periodical.

Kenyon, Bernice—Unnoticed by the references, this writer published three poems in the *Mercury*.

Kimball, Alice Mary—The magazine contains two poems by this writer, who is neglected by the references.

Lechlitner, Ruth—One poem by this writer appeared in the magazine. She receives no mention in the references.

Lee, Lawrence—Also represented in the *Mercury* by one work, Lee is not discussed in the references.

Lee, Muna—The *Mercury* contains four poems by this writer. None of the reference works lists her.

Lindsay, Elizabeth—This writer had one poem in the periodical. She is not noticed by the references.

Lindsay, Vachel—In view of Lindsay's eminence as a poet, it is to Mencken's credit that he bought two of his poems. Lindsay is, of course, discussed in all the references.

Lundbergh, Holger—One poem by this writer, who is ignored by the reference works, appeared in the magazine.

McClure, John—Referred to in the *Encyclopedia*, McClure had one poem in the magazine.

Masters, Edgar Lee—No student of literature is not familiar with this writer's *Spoon River Anthology*, and he is generally considered as one of America's best poets. He is listed in all three reference works, and three of his works were printed in the *Mercury*.

Moore, Virginia—Not listed in the references, this writer sold one poem to the magazine.

Morton, David—The author of several books of poems, Morton's reputation is a minor one. Only the *Encyclopedia* lists him. One of his poems was published in the *Mercury*.

Prosper, Joan Dareth—Also the author of one poem printed in the magazine, this writer receives no mention in the references.

Rorty, James—Three poems by Rorty appeared in the magazine. He is neglected by the references.

Sandburg, Carl—Another titan of American letters, Sandburg published three works in the magazine. He once won a Pulitzer prize for his verse, and is naturally listed in the reference works.

Speyer, Leonora—A famous American poet and winner of a Pulitzer prize for her poetry, this writer appeared twice in the *Mercury*. She is discussed in all three references.

Sterling, George—A relatively well-known poet, Sterling had three poems in the magazine. He is recognized by all three references.

Stuart, Jesse—A writer of some merit, Stuart published two poems in the magazine. He is noticed by all three reference works.

Untermeyer, Louis—Three poems by this widely known artist were included in the *Mercury*. He is mentioned by all three references.

Walton, Eda Lou—Listed in the *Encyclopedia*, this writer published two poems in the magazine. Her work as a poet is of minor significance.

Widdemer, Margaret—Winner of a Pulitzer prize, this writer's poetry deserves attention. One poem by her was printed in the *Mercury*, and she is listed in all three references.

Wood, Clement—A minor poet, Wood published one piece in the magazine. He is discussed in the *Encyclopedia* and *Authors*.

Wylie, Lou—Not mentioned in the reference works, this writer is represented in the *Mercury* by four poems.

Although no concrete conclusions pertaining to Mencken's editorial skills and prejudices can be drawn from the foregoing, the investigation provides a basis for several general observations. The first is that Mencken gave relatively little space to *belles lettres* in the *Mercury*; the second, that many of the most frequent contributors to the magazine have, since that time, either stopped producing or have been totally neglected by the nation's readers and critics. Of the writers who published in the *Mercury*, only forty-five percent are recognized by the *Encyclopedia*, and even less—thirty-one percent—by the *Oxford Companion* and *Authors*. The large number of contributors who have failed to make the ranks in the world of letters is an indication that Mencken often printed works by authors with little or no reputation.

Angoff's statement that "Mencken's abiding heroes as fiction writers were Joseph Hergesheimer, James Branch Cabell, Ambrose Bierce, Ring Lardner, and George Ade"⁴ seems out of place in relation to this study: of these writers, only Cabell's fiction appeared in the *Mercury*.

CHAPTER III

The Book Reviews in the Mercury

Peter White will ne'er go right:
 Would you know the reason why?
 He follows his nose wherever he goes,
 And that stands all awry.

—Anonymous

Angoff, who was possibly Mencken's closest professional associate during his days on the *Mercury*, has since brought forth the charge that

Mencken's ambitions and envy eventually landed him into the writing of literary criticism and scholarly works. Heaven knows he tried hard enough, but it became apparent to the discerning at once, as it has become clear to nearly everyone now, that he didn't have the necessary gifts.¹

The charge went even further when Angoff declared that Mencken "was in the main, for or against an author depending upon the agreement of the author's general outlook on life with his own."² These are, of course, devastating assaults on Mencken's critical acumen, and they suggest that, as critic, he merely followed his nose. But whether they are totally accurate, only partially correct, or completely false and prejudiced appraisals of Mencken's abilities is still a matter for dispute. Writing as late as 1956, Henry Hazlitt recalled that Mencken "was the outstanding American literary critic of his generation, its most influential stylist, its most prominent iconoclast."³ Evidently, then, the feud over Mencken's critical talents continues unabated.

To form a basis for evaluating Mencken's work as literary critic on *The American Mercury*, pertinent comments from his book reviews have been taken from the magazine. The works he reviewed which could be classified as pure fiction have, of course, been ignored, for they shed no light on his critical alertness.

Only two groups of books of verse were reviewed during the decade, and the reflections Mencken recorded about them indicate that he was not interested in the form. In October, 1925, he examined twenty-nine volumes of poetry,⁴ and concluded the following:

What I get from them is mainly the impression that we are passing into an era of flabby stuff—that the fine frenzy which seized the poets fifteen years ago has spent itself, and they are laid up for repairs. It was something of an adventure in those days—or even so lately as five years ago—to review the current verse. There was an immense earnestness in it, and a great deal of originality, some of it almost hair-raising.

And in the rubbish there were some pearls. But I can find none in the volumes now under review. There is a great deal of respectable writing in them, but the old glow is gone.⁵

Included in those twenty-nine volumes were one each of the works of Ed-

gar Lee Masters, Edwin Arlington Robinson, and William Butler Yeats, to name a few. Thus it is evident that Mencken's interest in poetry had expired by that time, and he was ready to turn his back on it. However, in June, 1926, he presented the last poetry review to appear in "The Library" while he was with the magazine.⁶ He devoted less than three pages to a review of sixty-one volumes, and summarized his opinion of them by remarking:

I offer this appalling list as proof beyond cavil that the art and mystery of the poet still flourishes among us, despite Coolidgism and Rotary, despite even the collapse of the New Poetry Movement. The general average of the current poetry is very high.⁷

The contradictory nature of his two reviews is immediately apparent, and this, considering the fact that he wrote the second only eight months after the first, is an indication that he was, perhaps, either confused in his decisions or eager to disregard verse altogether. The meager quantity of poetry examined in the *Mercury* certainly tends to support Angoff's recollection that Mencken's

attitude toward poetry was a strange combination of shame over his own youthful verses . . . and of a peculiar theory he had developed, namely, that poetry was almost entirely an occupation of the young and was not worth the serious attention of mature people.⁸

The fact also upholds Manchester's comments about Mencken's feelings toward the medium:

Mencken was at his funniest and least discriminating in the field of poetry. Distrust of the emotions without which poetry cannot live killed his own poetical urge . . . and his concept of verse—that it should sing a song pleasantly and never attempt an idea—was downright medieval . . . He found little worth supporting in contemporary poetry. Poets were treated as children and their poems subjected to the sharpest gibes. Free verse was scorned.⁹

At any rate, the inconsistency of Mencken's judgments does anything but lend credit to his criticism. The main point, though, is that he obviously was not interested in the writers of poetry, and consequently, failed to give them a hearing in the *Mercury*.

The field of prose got a better hearing, however, and a total of eighty-nine works by fifty-eight different authors was reviewed by Mencken during the ten years. A look at these reviews should provide ample evidence for an appraisal of Mencken's work as literary critic. The following list was arranged alphabetically, by the author's last names, rather than by any system of chronology. Included under each name are the author's works, or work, and Mencken's appraisal of each.

Anderson, Sherwood—Reviewing *Horses and Men*, a volume of short stories, the critic thought Anderson owed a big debt to Theodore Dreiser, and that the tales were "of the very first rank. They are simple, moving, and brilliantly vivid." About the lead story, Mencken declared, "There is a vast shrewdness in it; there is sound design; there is understanding;

above all, there is feeling."¹⁰ When *Dark Laughter* was published, Mencken shouted that Anderson "has at last found his method, and achieved his first wholly satisfying book." He thought the book had defects, but that Anderson made his characters "breathe and move."¹¹

Atherton, Gertrude—Mencken ventured the opinion that parts of *The Crystal Cup* were very sensational, and probably "sugar for the movie lads." A quote on the cover of the book which praised the author in glowing terms brought this comment from Mencken: "God save the Republic!"¹²

Benefield, Barry—A review of Benefield's volume of short stories, *Short Turns*, concluded that the "stories are essentially well-made and situation is more important in them than character . . . but after all, Maupassant said most of it long ago."¹³

Bodenheim, Maxwell—*Replenishing Jessica* smacked too much of Greenwich Village to please Mencken, and the author was "completely devoid of humor." Employing a dash of invective, Mencken called the work "a show of marionettes, and the philosophizing that goes with that show is simply the doctrinaire tch that passes for profound in the Village."¹⁴

Burke, Kenneth—This author's *The White Oxen and Other Stories* also incited a flow of harsh criticism. He said the "early pieces are . . . simply bad. His later ones are such muddy, indignant stuff as thrills the bold minds of the Cafe Rotonde."¹⁵

Cabell, James Branch—Five books by Cabell were reviewed during the period, and, except for the last one, Mencken gave all of them his highest praise. *The High Place* had minor defects, but, overall, was done "in the manner of the celebrated *Jurgen*," and was, "in brief, the melancholy story of a dream come true."¹⁶ *The Silver Stallion: A Comedy of Redemption* had, he believed, "its lacks, but as a piece of writing it is Cabell at his best." All in all, the book was packed with "sly and devastating jocosities, lovely rows of musical words, turns of phrase and thought that bring one up with a gasp."¹⁷ As for *Something About Eve*, Mencken surveyed it and posed the question, "Who can match him at his diabolical best?" and gave Cabell a stirring ovation: "As year chases year the position of Cabell gradually solidifies, and it becomes manifest that his place among the American writers of his time, seen in retrospect, will be at the first table."¹⁸ *The White Robe*, too, drew resounding acclaim, and Mencken mused that Cabell "has never done a better piece of work." This judgment was followed by a statement about Cabell's position as a writer: "No man writing in America today has a more strongly individualized, or, on the whole, a more charming style."¹⁹ The final book by Cabell that was examined, *The Way of Ecben*, left Mencken "discontented" because "things that get into it have no place in it." But even this work, he thought, had its merits. "It might have been much better, but the worst of Cabell is surely not bad."²⁰

Cather, Willa—In his reviews of three of this author's novels, Menck-

en consistently applauded her skillful writing, but regretted her lack of form. The first, *A Lost Lady*, was "excellent stuff, but it remains a bit light." Nevertheless, he believed that the story had "an arch and lyrical air; there is more genuine romance in it than in half a dozen romances in the grand manner."²¹ "A somewhat uncertain grasp of form" was discovered in *The Professor's House*, but the surface was "so fine and velvety in texture that one half forgets the ungraceful structure beneath." All in all, it was "an ingratiating piece of work."²² The narrative of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* occasionally fell "to the level of a pious tale. But . . . not often. If there is a devotée in her, there is also an immensely skillful storyteller." Miss Cather had done stories "far richer in content, but . . . never exceeded *Death Comes for the Archbishop* as a piece of writing."²³

Clark, Emily—Mencken declared, in a discussion about *Stuffed Peacocks*, that the author displayed "plain signs of a fine talent." The sketches of characters had "brilliant color, fine insight, and a sort of hard, scientific mercilessness."²⁴

Cohen, Lester—*Sweepings*, wrote Mencken, seemed "dull It bears the air of an enterprise a bit beyond the author's skill." Mencken felt that the reason for this was that Cohen had not collected enough observations for a full-length book. "Before he has gone fifty pages his characters begin to stiffen, and after that the thing is less a chronicle of human beings than an elaborate and somewhat improbable fable."²⁵

Conrad, Joseph—Two of Conrad's books were held up to the critical light. *The Rover* was a tale with "a beginning, a middle and an end; it moves smoothly and logically; it is nowhere discursive or obscure; in truth, it is almost well-made." And, overall, a "capital tale, done by a great master."²⁶ Mencken did not judge *Suspense* to be an equivalent of Conrad's top work. "It begins clumsily, but after the first chapter it is a truly superb piece of writing." But, despite the awkward opening, the book was "well-nigh perfect. Sheer virtuosity could go no further."²⁷

Crawford, Nelson Antrim—The only book by Crawford reviewed during the decade, *A Man of Learning*, aroused loud guffaws from the critic, but he gave it only brief notice. He thought Crawford's well-drawn picture of an American college president was a "superb piece of cruel buffoonery."²⁸

Croy, Homer—This writer's *R.F.D. No. 3* was a "dreadful drop" from Croy's earlier one, *West of the Water Tower*. "The novel proceeds, not from cause and effect, but by leaps. No step, true enough, is overlooked, but no step is made quite plausible." The writer's best qualities were in his character sketches, which were "by no means without a grim, compelling realism." A characteristic Menckenism slipped out when he described one character as a "sort of third-rate Promeseus chained to a manure pile."²⁹

Dennis, Geoffrey—A "story-teller of unusual talent, with a great deal of originality" was Mencken's summation of Dennis, and his *Harvest in*

Poland was an "impossible story told in terms of the most meticulous realism." And the author invested this combination with "new life by widening the spread between its two parts." Lavish praise for Dennis's style followed: "His prose has a Carlylean thunder in it; he knows how to roll up gorgeous sentences. And he has humor."³⁰

Dixon, Thomas—Discussing Dixon's *The Love Complex*, Mencken was astounded to discover in the author a "Baptist who can dream." After this remark, Mencken neither blasted nor praised the book; but he recommended "this lush and thoughtful work to all students of American *Kultur*."³¹

Dos Passos, John—The two books by Dos Passos examined during the period were both viciously attacked. The plot of *Streets of Night* was "simply a series of puerile and often improbable episodes in the lives of two silly boys and an even sillier girl." The author had not explained his characters enough to "make their conduct intelligible and plausible," and the book was thus "depressingly disappointing." The work caused Mencken to offer the thought that the United States needed someone to understand and depict the Young Intellectual. He believed Dos Passos was obviously not equipped for the task, and concluded that "if Sinclair Lewis could only lay eggs and hatch young of his own kind there would be hope."³² As for *Manhattan Transfer*, Mencken judged it "incoherent, and not infrequently very dull," and doubted that any human being would "ever be able to read it—that is, honestly, thoroughly, from end to end." Mencken surmised that the extremely favorable reception of Dos Passos's first book, *Three Soldiers*, had ruined him: "His first book was far too successful: a very unfortunate thing for a young novelist. His later volumes have shown him hard at it, but making extremely heavy weather."³³

Dreiser, Theodore—This writer, whom Mencken had long supported, was the subject of two reviews, wherein Mencken flogged him for his wordiness, but, in general, lauded his books. The two-volume *An American Tragedy* was seen as a "vast double-header, . . . a shapeless and forbidding monster—a heaping cartload of raw materials for a novel, with rubbish of all sorts intermixed—a vast, sloppy, chaotic thing." Parts of the novel were overwritten, filled with "dreadful bilge." However, Mencken thought the overall effect of the book was extremely satisfying, and that the latter portions were very well done. His advice: "Hire your pastor to read the first volume for you. But don't miss the second."³⁴ Dreiser's book of twelve character sketches, *A Gallery of Women*, also received mixed comment. He thought the author was "full of pretty phrases and arch turns of thought . . . [that] seldom come off." But, despite Dreiser's shortcomings, Mencken mused that his books were the best in modern American fiction.³⁵

Eaton, G. D.—Mencken decided that the protagonist in Eaton's first book, *Backfarrow*, was well drawn. As a whole, the work elicited mild praise. "There is not much finesse in the story, but it is moving. Few first

novels show so much seriousness or so much skill."³⁶

Elser, Frank B.—*The Keen Desire* was "immensely better than any of its predecessors," although Mencken found that Elser over-worked the "device of projecting his hero's acts against a background of his hero's thoughts." But the author had a "sensitive feeling for character" and his main character was "depicted with great insight and unflinching skill."³⁷

Ferber, Edna—The critic ventured a guess that Miss Ferber's virtues had been marred by her popularity, and that, in portions of *Show Boat*, she seemed to be writing only for her huge audience. Mencken lauded her for having a "sharp eye for character," and was impressed that she could "evoke genuine feeling."³⁸

Fergusson, Harvey—The first of Fergusson's two books discussed during the period, *Women and Wives*, was moderately acclaimed. Mencken thought his competence lifted the "familiar story of the novel out of the commonplace," and that the method was "unhackneyed and effective." The author, he thought, had "very solid talent."³⁹ The other book, *Wolf Song*, was an "extraordinarily brilliant and charming story," and better than anything Fergusson had ever done. "Full of acidulous humors," the novel's descriptions were very life-like: "The Old Southwest is made to palpitate with such light and heat that they are felt almost physically, and the people that gallop across the scene are full of the juices of life."⁴⁰

Fitzgerald, F. Scott—Although Mencken was not impressed by the story in *The Great Gatsby*, he declared that it was "full of evidences of hard, sober toil," and that it was an indication that Fitzgerald was making "quick and excellent progress" in his writing. With the novel, the critic believed Fitzgerald had changed from a "brilliant improvisateur to . . . a painstaking and conscious author." His final decision: "As a piece of writing it is sound and laudable work."⁴¹

Glasgow, Ellen—This author's works were met with a blend of applause and abuse. *Barren Ground* left Mencken "rather in doubt" because the author exhibited "no sign of an intimate knowledge of the poor, flea-bitten yokels she sets before us." Altogether, it was "a novel somehow weak in its legs. There is, in detail, excellent work in it. It is boldly imagined and competently planned. But it is not moving."⁴² Her next book, *They Stoop-ed to Folly*, drew plaudits for its satirical approach in a story about the South, for Mencken thought satire was the "immemorial refuge of the skeptic who has abandoned hope." The story was meritable because it had a "local vestiture and a local significance." The author, he decided, wrote "very skillfully. She knows how to manage situations and she has an eye for the trivialities which differentiate one man or woman from another."⁴³

Gold, Michael—This writer's *Jews Without Money* was highly praised, and Gold's writing reminded Mencken of Jim Tully's, although there were "important differences." Gold's tale was "one of the most eloquent stories that the American press has disgorged in many a moon."⁴⁴

Greene, Ward—Greene's first novel, *Cora Potts*, went a "good deal beyond mere promise." It was a "gorgeous panorama of the New South," and "full of a hearty gusto . . . despite the fact that now and then it edges over the borders of the probable."⁴⁵

Hackett, Francis—"A novel that misses its goal by an inch" was Mencken's summation of *That Nice Young Couple*. He thought Hackett was a better essayist than story-teller, but that the essays were "unfailingly exhilarating. They are full of novel phrases . . . and . . . shrewd observation and penetrating wit." Mencken decided Hackett was a "beginning novelist who has seen something of life in this world, . . . and acquired a genuinely resilient and charming English style."⁴⁶

Harrison, Henry Sydnor—Acid comments followed the publication of *Andrew, Bride of Paris*. It contained "only a pathetic hollowness" and was "childishly transparent—a moral tale that even schoolboys—nay, schoolmasters, must laugh at."⁴⁷

Hecht, Ben—*Count Bruga* impressed Mencken as somewhat of a paradox because, although the story was "deliberately artificial," Hecht "gets so much gusto into the writing of it, and adorns it with so many flashes of insight into motive and character, that the impossible . . . takes on a sort of possibility." His writing was often "careless, but . . . never banal."⁴⁸

Hemingway, Ernest—A book of short stories, *Men Without Women*, led Mencken to write that the author was "somewhat uncertain about . . . characters." He thought the praise Hemingway had been receiving stemmed from his "technical virtuosity," and that "hard and fundamental thinking . . . must get [him] on if [he is] to make good [his] high promise." The book's lead story, "The Killers," was a "thing to be sincerely thankful for."⁴⁹ The merit of *A Farewell to Arms* was in its "brilliant evocation of the horrible squalor and confusion of war." Mencken decided that toward the end of the book the main characters "fade into mere wraiths, and in the last scenes they scarcely seem human at all." Hemingway's dialogue was lauded for being "fresh and vivid," but, "otherwise, his tricks begin to wear thin. The mounting incoherence of a drunken scene is effective once, but not three or four times."⁵⁰ *Death in the Afternoon* was seen as an "extraordinarily fine piece of expository writing, but . . . it often descends to a gross and irritating cheapness." He thought Hemingway's observations and style were excellent: "The narrative is full of the vividness of something really seen, felt, experienced, . . . done in English that is often bald and graceless, but . . . with great skill." The primary objection to the book had to do with Hemingway's obscene language. Mencken shouted that the "four-letter words are as idiotically incongruous as so many boosters' slogans or college yells" and that they would probably "give the Oak Park W.C.T.U. another conniption fit." Hemingway digressed too often in the book to "prove fatuously that he is a naughty fellow." Mencken's departing words: "The Hemingway boy is really a case."⁵¹

Hergesheimer, Joseph—The critic found little lacking in *Tampico*, and the book's appearance occasioned Mencken to remark that it was Hergesheimer's "business to evoke . . . the hideous, and he does it with easy skill and vast effect." The novel was "full of the glow that he knows how to get into a narrative. It is carefully designed. There is color in every line."⁵²

Hoyt, Nancy—Roundabout was deemed charming despite its "load of somewhat naive melodrama," and Mencken liked it. "It is a tale of calf love—not done with superior snickers, but seriously and even a bit tragically."⁵³

Huxley, Aldous—The critic had little to say about *Antic Hay* other than that it was "full of a fine gusto." But he rendered an opinion that Huxley "suffers from the fact that the buresque modern novel is very hard to write—that the slightest letting down reduces it to mere whimsicality and tediousness."⁵⁴ He was considerably more elated over *Two or Three Graces*: "All his sure and delicate skill gets into the telling of it. It is rich with searching and frolicsome humors. It is a capital piece of writing."⁵⁵

Kennedy, Margaret—A pat on the back was awarded for *The Constant Nymph's* "excellent workmanship," but Mencken said the author had "by no means penetrated to the secrets of the harmonic soul; she has simply done us a set of amusing Bohemians."⁵⁶

Komroff, Manuel—A book of short stories, *The Grace of Lambs* was testily dismissed. Mencken found "nothing in the pieces save a vague desire to be poetical and profound. They have no direction, and only too often they have no sense."⁵⁷

Lardner, Ring W.—Lardner's *How to Write Short Stories*, mainly a volume of his own works, evoked lofty acclaim. The stories were "superbly adroit and amusing; no other contemporary American, sober or gay, writes better." But Mencken feared that they would not endure, because "our grandchildren will wonder what they are about." Mencken also made another prediction: "The professors will shy at him until he is dead at least fifty years. He is doomed to stay outside where the gang is."⁵⁸ *The Love Nest, and Other Stories* was "satire of the most acid and appalling sort—satire wholly removed, like Swift's, . . . from the least weakness of amiability, or even pity," and the characters were "unmistakably real." Mencken reckoned that "few American novelists, great or small, have character more firmly in hand," and championed Lardner for "trying to get the low-down Americano between covers."⁵⁹ Reviewing *Lose With a Smile*, Mencken recalled his earlier prediction, and maintained that the "professors continue to look straight through him, just as they looked through Mark Twain in 1900 and Walt Whitman in 1875." He decided the professors did not like Lardner because he denied the "doctrine that the purpose of literature is to spread sweetness and light." The book, itself, was "vastly amusing, but there is a great deal more in it than a series of laughs."⁶⁰

Lewis, Sinclair—Six books by Lewis were reviewed during the decade,

and Mencken's evaluations of them fluctuated between lofty accolades and spicy denunciations. *Arrowsmith* was "five hundred pages of riotous and often barbarous humor, yet always with a sharp undertone of irony in it, always with a bitter flavor," and it was "well thought out and executed with great skill." In the book, Mencken found no "uncertainty of design. There is never any wavering in theme or purpose."⁶¹ The characters in *Mantrap* were "only a herd of stuffed dummies. They are never real for an instant." After guessing that "perhaps the book is a mere pot-boiler, done with the left hand," Mencken wrote, "I have presented *Mantrap* to my pastor, and return joyfully to a re-reading of *Babbitt*."⁶² *Elmer Gantry* evoked a different tune: "For the third time Lewis knocks one clear over the fence." Mencken suggested that it would go higher than *Babbitt* or *Main Street*. The book was "American from the first low cackle of the prologue to the last gigantic obscenity," and Mencken opined that it would "consolidate and improve his position in his craft." Lewis was, he thought, "within his bounds, an artist of the first calibre."⁶³ *The Man Who Knew Coolidge* spurred the comment that Lewis had "created characters of genuine flesh and blood, and not merely two or three of them, or half a dozen, but whole companies." The protagonist in this book was excellent, but not as good as Babbitt: "The wistful earnestness of Babbitt is not in him; he is the First Gravedigger rather than Hamlet." Babbitt, he decided, would "haunt historians of the Ford Age long after Ford himself sinks into a footnote."⁶⁴ *Dodsworth* was a "somewhat sombre work," mainly because the characters' actions were not accounted for rationally, and some of the dialogue between the two principal characters was "simply impossible." Here Mencken noted that Lewis's work was "uneven. From the best scenes of *Babbitt* to the worst of *Mantrap* there is a drop as dizzy as that from a string quartette to a movie."⁶⁵ *Ann Vickers* was, primarily, "flubdub." Mencken thought the main character "simply gets away from him." It was a "kind of patchwork, partly very good, but mainly bad."⁶⁶

Lewisohn, Ludwig—"Soberly composed, devoid of the usual novelists' tricks, and full of excellent writing" was Mencken's judgment of *The Case of Mr. Crump*. He decided the author's future would be a bright one: "Lewisohn is a man of fine talents, and I believe that his best books are ahead of him. He has learning . . . and a sense of beauty, a rather rare combination."⁶⁷

Loos, Anita—*Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* filled Mencken with "uproarious and salubrious mirth." The laughter came from a "farce full of shrewd observation and devastating irony," and from her dashes of "fresh humor, not too formal and refined."⁶⁸

Masters, Edgar Lee—This author presented a paradox to Mencken, because his verse ranged from the eloquent and profound *Spoon River Anthology* to a "great mass of feeble and preposterous doggerel." The same was true for Masters's novel, *Mirage*. It was "one of the most idiotic and yet

one of the most interesting American novels that I have ever read." He admitted that the book's "fascination lies in its very deficiencies as . . . a work of art—in its naive lack of humor, its elaborate laboring of the obvious, its incredible stiltedness and triteness."⁶⁶

McFee, William—Mencken was not impressed by *Race*, which he thought was "a challenge to all the dull English practitioners of stewed tea realism." McFee was "unable to come to grips with his characters; they never got beyond a feeble whimsicality."⁶⁷

Millin, Sarah Gertrude—Three works by Miss Millin were reviewed in the *Mercury*. Discussing *God's Stepchildren*, Mencken asserted that the author had a "truly astonishing capacity for narrative," and that the book was a "searching and mordant treatise, often brilliant, upon the effects of racial mixtures." All in all, it was an "extremely artful, knowing and moving piece of work."⁷¹ The story in *Mary Glenn* was "achieved with great plausibility and effect," and was "a splendid thing, indeed—vivid, highly dramatic, and full of a poignant eloquence."⁷² As for *An Artist in the Family*, Mencken thought she had "done better work," but, though not the best of her books, it offered "something very delicate and fine."⁷³

Montague, C. E.—A reprint of this English writer's book, *A Hind Let Loose*, was met with high approval. Mencken declared it "satire in the grand manner," satire managed "superbly." The work was a "charming and uproarious piece of buffoonery, carried on with the utmost dexterity from start to finish."⁷⁴

Muilenburg, Walter J.—The critic was not "moved" by the author's "peasants" in *Prairie*, and the characters bore the brunt of his criticism: . . . they never seem real to me for an instant. I can't get rid of a feeling that they are set up in front of me, not by one who has lived among them and sweated with them, but by a spectator from . . . some agricultural experiment station.⁷⁵

Norris, Charles G.—*Pig Iron* was read "with immense interest, and enjoyed . . . unflaggingly," and Mencken insisted that Norris's novels "have received a great deal less critical attention than they deserve." His books, Mencken thought, had "solid substance in them, and a fine dignity."⁷⁶

Odum, Howard W.—The author's *Rainbow Round My Shoulder* was a "work of art that lives and glows," a "story of extraordinary fascination," and one "managed with the utmost skill." Mencken did not spare his praise. "Walt Whitman would have wallowed in it, and I suspect that Mark Twain would have been deeply stirred by it too."⁷⁷

Parrish, Anne—"Written with quite unusual skill," *The Perennial Bachelor* was a "work of sound virtues." Mencken thought this new novelist's talent was "unmistakable," and that the "narrative moves without a hitch; there is not a false note; the final effect is achieved surely, and even brilliantly."⁷⁸

Remarque, Erich Maria—All Quiet on the Western Front received thunderous applause as a "brilliantly vivid and poignant story of man in war—unquestionably the best story of the World War so far published." Somewhat tartly, Mencken hoped the book would teach the leaders of the American Legion the "difference between falling safely upon a starved and exhausted foe and fighting against great odds for four long years."⁷⁹

Scott, C. Kay—Siren displayed a "great deal of genuine novelty," and the critic thought the author's "effort to enter into the very minds of his characters" was ingenious. Mencken judged this technique as a "novelty that lifts itself above the general run of such things. Mr. Scott is intelligent, and has something to say."⁸⁰

*Sergel, Roger L.—*This author was dismissed as a second-rate Dreiser and *Arlie Gelston* was acidly abused. The main character was "stupid and dull without being pathetic; her story has the impersonal emptiness of a series of fractions," and the book was called a "respectable, but entirely undistinguished work."⁸¹

Smits, Lee J.—The Spring Flight summoned forth the highest approbation. Mencken wrote that he could not "recall a first novel of more workmanlike dignity. There is absolutely no touch of amateurishness in it . . . It would be absurd to say that it shows merely promise." The writer had handled his "machinery . . . in an extremely dexterous manner" in producing "an extraordinarily sound and competent piece of work."⁸²

*Stevens, James—*The book on folklore, *Paul Bunyan*, received exceedingly high acclaim, and the author was lauded both for his style and for recording the material. "He is a skillful writer of English, with a simple, ingratiating style. He is full of a rich, wholly masculine humor, and hence thoroughly in rapport with the extravagant Rabelaisian humor of Bunyan himself."⁸³

Stribling, T. S.—Teeftallow, Mencken declared, approached "perilously near to the border of moral indignation. But . . . in no other volume known to me is there a more truthful picture of life among the Tennessee hillbillies." The work accomplished the mammoth task of rendering the Scopes trial "comprehensive to the bewildered unbeliever."⁸⁴

*Suckow, Ruth—*Mencken reviewed Miss Suckow's first book, *Country People*, and found it "quite bare of the usual obviousness and irresolution of the novice." He evaluated the work as "curiously impressive" and thought she had a "profound understanding of simple and stupid people." Miss Suckow's future was seen as "unquestionably secure."⁸⁵ His praise flowed again when *The Odyssey of a Nice Girl* appeared, and he wrote that she "can discern and evoke the eternal tragedy in the life of man." The work was "genuinely moving, . . . never banal."⁸⁶ The book of short stories, *Iowa Interiors*, too, elicited lofty approval. "Who . . . has ever published a better first book of short stories than this one? Of its sixteen . . ., not one is bad—and among the best there are at least five masterpieces."

The characters were "overwhelmingly real, and not a word can be spared."⁸⁷ However, Mencken's zeal diminished somewhat when *The Bonney Family* was published, and, in a scanty review, he wrote that she had "done better work."⁸⁸ His customary praise returned when *Cora* appeared, but he still harbored a "feeling that this is not her best." The main character was "a sort of case history in a thesis: one has an uneasy sense that she is being used to prove something." Nevertheless, the story was "very deftly put together; with each successive book, indeed, Miss Suckow writes with greater skill."⁸⁹

Tully, Jim—Jarnegan was given a relatively unfavorable reception because Tully had managed the story badly "by succumbing to the charms of a moving-picture ending." But Mencken was convinced that the work showed improvement over Tully's earlier efforts. The story was "immensely interesting—a bravura piece done at high pressure. There is a great deal more than a picturesque part in Tully; he has begun to learn his trade."⁹⁰

Van Vechten, Carl—Three works by this author were examined during the period. Only brief comments were made about *The Blind Bow-Boy*. Mencken was not impressed by it, but he conceded that it never "grows dull, even when it grows thin."⁹¹ Much the same was true for *Fire-Crackers*, and Mencken concluded that it "does not lift me." Perhaps, the critic thought, his own "mounting troubles" had put him "out of the mood" for Van Vechten's type of story.⁹² *Nigger Heaven* evoked mild praise. "The scenes of revelry in the book, to borrow a Confederatism, are genuinely niggerish. And the people, in the main, are very real."⁹³

Wells, H. G.—Two books by Wells were criticized during the decade, and the appraisals of them struck opposite poles. *Christina Alberta's Father* was "dreadful stuff," a "thoroughly bad piece of work—muddled in plan, carelessly written, and full of characters that creak in every joint." He declared that Wells had resorted to "all sorts of fly-blown devices—the omniscient scientist, the long-lost father, and so on." Mencken refrained from describing the book, and gave this advice: "Go read it yourself—if you have the endurance."⁹⁴ But Wells regained Mencken's favor with *The World of William Clissold*, and the critic gushed with praise. He thought it was "extraordinarily meritorious. It is not only a good book; it is an amazing book." Mencken decided he could recollect "no more penetrating discussion of sex in general, or of its social implications, including marriage," and concluded that there were "weak spots in it, as there are in Holy Writ, but taken as a whole it is unquestionably a sound and brilliant performance."⁹⁵

Wilder, Thornton—A short notice followed publication of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. Mencken decided that after reading the "most surprising bravura passages" he still had some "doubt as to what it is all about." The book often seemed "fragmentary: it charms without leaving any very deep impression. But that is a defect that the years ought to cure."⁹⁶

Winslow, *Thyra Samter*—Mencken bestowed moderate praise upon *Show Business*, and found the author to be “an ironist both subtle and merciless.” He was pleased that the “stage is neither a region of romance to her nor a hell of sin. It simply amuses her, and she gets her own sardonic delight in it into her book.”⁷⁷

Young, *Francis Brett*—The critic’s perusal of *Sea Horses* led him to believe that Young was a “disciple of Joseph Conrad, and . . . he surely does no discredit to his master.” The tale was “very deftly managed. It is the work of a man whose talent is obvious.”⁷⁸

The inferences to be drawn from the preceding mass of reviews are, in number, several; in significance, highly important; and, in respect to Mencken’s interest in literature while pilot of the *Mercury*, devastating. One fact about the reviews presents itself with resounding force. It is the fact that an overwhelming percentage of them are, overall, extremely favorable, which makes it appear that Mencken was trying to appease rather than criticize. Evidently, he judiciously selected the books he reviewed, and, in the main, chose only works by writers he liked. Some support for this judgment is gained from disclosing the number of books of fiction that were criticised each year; in 1924, fourteen works were reviewed; in 1925, twenty-four; in 1926, twenty-five; in 1927, five; in 1928, eight; in 1929, five; in 1930, five; in 1931, none; in 1932, one; and in 1933, two. Surely, this information indicates that Mencken’s interest in literature declined steadily throughout the ten years. In fact, since he discussed only thirteen books during the last half of his stay on the magazine, it seems foolish to regard him as an active literary critic during those years. Furthermore, only three works were reviewed during the last three years: *Death in the Afternoon*, *Lose With a Smile*, and *Ann Vickers*—all three by writers who had been prominent and popular for several years. Therefore, it seems likely that, while on the *Mercury*, Mencken lost touch with America’s swirling flow of fiction, and merely coasted on his reputation from *The Smart Set*. Angoff has pointed out that, “In spite of Mencken’s reputation as a discoverer of new writers, during the *Mercury* days he read very few of the new novels, generally only those by established authors.”⁷⁹ All the evidence certainly bolsters this statement.

What Mencken *did* primarily choose to review in “The Library” was far removed from pure literature. Most of his examinations were of books about such subjects as religion, politics, and sociology. A general idea as to the types of books he discussed may be derived from a list of titles which were lifted, at random, from the pages of the *Mercury*. All of the following books were reviewed in the magazine between February, 1929, and August, 1933: *Protestantism in the United States*¹⁰⁰; *The Nature of the Physical World*¹⁰¹; *Washington Merry-Go-Round*¹⁰²; *The Beliefs of 700 Ministers*¹⁰³; *What Is Life*¹⁰⁴; *Liberalism in the South*¹⁰⁵; *Genetic Studies of Geni-*

*us*¹⁰⁶; *The Prohibition Experiment in Finland*¹⁰⁷; *England's Crisis*¹⁰⁸; *Arctic Village*¹⁰⁹; and *Life in Lesu*.¹¹⁰

The very titles of these books—typical examples of the majority of works reviewed by Mencken—almost preclude the necessity for pointing out the obvious fact that Mencken's main interests during the period were not in things literary.

CHAPTER IV

Conclusion

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,
 Humpty Dumpty had a great fall;
 All the king's horses
 And all the king's men
 Couldn't put Humpty Dumpty
 Together again.

—Anonymous

H. L. Mencken's years on *The American Mercury* were exciting ones, for his sparkling treatment of the American scene was thoroughly in tune with the times. His audience, throughout most of the Twenties, was both large and appreciative; his writings were read widely; he was quoted and revered by the nation's young intellectuals; he was regarded as somewhat of a literary dictator; and, in brief, he was the darling of the Jazz Age. The green-backed *Mercury* was his mouthpiece, and through it he trumpeted and hooted—and was heard. But he was, like Humpty Dumpty, doomed for a fall, and, when he fell, the *Mercury* began to collapse, too. The post-war spirit had ushered him into power, but when the tenor of the times changed, he was swept back out again. As Angoff has pointed out, Mencken's descent was caused by the depression: "In the years 1918-1928 Mencken's name seemed to be on the tongue of every literate man and woman. His decline was almost coincidental with the beginning of the depression in the United States."¹ Somehow, Mencken's antics were no longer appreciated after bread became precious, and, by December, 1933, his audience had dwindled away, and he left the *Mercury* with that month's issue. The announcement that he was quitting his post stimulated the following editorial, which appeared in the October, 1933, edition of *The Christian Century*. It aptly sums up the reasons why Mencken's brand of leadership suddenly went out of fashion.

The retirement of Mr. Mencken from the editorship of the *American Mercury* may not mark an epoch in American literature but it has significance as one of the signs of the passing of a type of criticism which during the past decade has had a vogue disproportionate to its value. Mr. Mencken's scorn of the 'booboisie' and his Rabelaisian laughter at the queer antics of the 'Bible Belt' have been his conspicuous contributions to the interpretation of American culture One had already begun to sense a disquieting untimeliness in these keen cynicisms which professed to be so absolutely timely. Their subject matter was of today, but their spirit was of yesterday. We are fed up with cynicism. 'Oh yeah' has lost its charm. Criticism must pass into a somewhat more sober and disciplined mood to get a favorable hearing. We no longer relish being told that we are fools. We have heard it often enough, and have admitted it Mencken's abandonment of his post as the mentor of American mores is symptomatic of a change in the American mood.²

Upton Sinclair, a long-time adversary of Mencken's, had predicted the fall as early as 1927:

Mencken has 'made his school,' as the French say; he has raised up a host of young persons as clever as their master, and able to write with the same shillelah swing. For the present that is all that is required; that is the mood of the time. But some day the time spirit will change; America will realize that its problems really have to be solved.³

The prediction was fulfilled, and Mencken retreated because, just as he had been unable to change his views and was hence forced to become silent during World War I, "the entire world had shifted key, and C Major, the only tone he knew, was suddenly discordant and out of tune."⁴ The *Mercury* rapidly lost circulation as the depression became more and more severe, and, as Manchester remarked, it could not be saved.

An affidavit filed by Joseph C. Lesser, comptroller at Knopf's . . . summed up the predicament of the magazine when it contended that the depression had struck it especially hard because it was dependent entirely on 'the activity, ingenuity, and popularity' of Mencken. Class magazines, Lesser pointed out, must be revamped and reorganized if they were to survive, but that could not be expected of the *Mercury* since it was a 'one-man magazine catering to a very selective class of readers who are followers of its editor.'⁵

At any rate, Mencken was jilted. His reign as literary dictator had ended before his last edition appeared in late 1933, and he never regained the power and influence that was his for so many years.

However, Mencken's work on the *Mercury*, both as editor and literary critic, has never been forgotten, although the various critics differ broadly in their evaluations of the man and his writings. No one denies his one-time influence, though, not even the critic Louis Kronenberger, who had no praise for Mencken's literary abilities. He once stated that "the editorials and book reviews in *The Smart Set* and the earlier issues of *The American Mercury* proved formidable instruments—probably the most formidable of their day—in creating literary trends and reputations,"⁶ and this judgment is supported by practically everyone who has ever written about Mencken. But, as mentioned previously, opinion concerning Mencken's abilities and contributions is more divided. One observer, L. B. Hessler, writing in 1935, accused Mencken of founding a school of "bad boy" criticism; namely, meaningless, ill-founded criticism

No attempt is made by practitioners of this spiteful school of criticism to give an unbiased and honest appraisal of the work under observation or to concern themselves with the reader at all. Since it is much easier and vastly more interesting to throw brickbats, mud, and rotten eggs . . . at others, the bad boy does so.⁸

To be sure, Mencken threw many "brickbats" and "rotten eggs" in his reviews, but they were not always aimed in the wrong direction. For this reason, Hessler's attack on Mencken's critical acumen seems a bit too general. More truth is to be found in Kronenberger's assertion that Mencken lacked

. . . an esthetic judgment to match his common sense. A very good pamphleteer, he turned out to be a very bad critic. Once he got into the temple of art, he seemed no better than an adventurer. He drummed up bad novelists and talked good ones down."

Nevertheless, when Mencken reviewed a book by someone who has since been awarded a high place among the nation's writers, he was usually correct in his decisions. He was completely wrong about Dos Passos, of course, and his judgment of Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* now seems a bit cruel, but these are exceptions to the rule. The statement that Mencken "drummed up bad novelists" is a true one. Surely, he wasted many superlatives on such writers as Cabell and Hergesheimer, writers who have now faded into literary oblivion.

However, not all of the criticism about Mencken has been adverse. Burton Rascoe, for one, thought that Mencken, along with Nathan and Cabell, had

taken part in all of the important socio-literary affairs of their day— . . . each of them having done in his time mightier and more successful battles against Philistinism and Pharisaism, against the stultifying and repressive forces of ignorance, censorship, prejudice and other enemies of liberty and freedom of conscience than all the Hickses, Forsythes, Cowleys and fellow-travellers put together.

Mencken has not only honored Twain's memory; he has carried on the Mark Twain tradition in the American language and literature.¹⁰

The truth is that Mencken was not altogether a bad critic and editor while on the *Mercury*, and he made some worthwhile contributions. He was always eager to give a hearing to young and inexperienced writers, and he published much of their work in the magazine. Angoff recorded that

Mencken was always eager to print authors for the first time, and to that end he carried on a huge correspondence with young men and women in all parts of the country in the hope that they would come through with a printable piece No wonder he was called the managing editor of all the young hopeful writers all over the nation. There has been no one like him in this respect ever since he gave up *The Mercury* . . . , and the life of all beginning writers has been so much the harder and so much the lonelier.¹¹

However, it is not to Mencken's credit that the vast majority of the beginning writers he championed so lustily failed to gratify the promise he evidently saw in them. In brief, his attitude toward new writers is estimable, although his critical judgment was seldom sound.

The most stirring indictment to be made about Mencken's treatment of *belles lettres*, and one that the evidence renders irrefutable, is that he tended to give increasingly less attention to literature in the *Mercury* as time went by. Little by little, whatever literary erudition he possessed, whatever interest he had in the ebb and flow of the nation's fiction, and whatever grasp and understanding of *belles lettres* he owned were supplanted by an attachment for the more superficial movements of the day. The energy he had devoted to fiction while critic for *The Smart Set* and during the early years of the *Mercury* was eventually burned up in his writings about the

political carnival, and he apparently had little left for the arts. Mencken made only a feeble effort in his book-review department to cover the literature that was published during the Twenties, and, if the small number of works he examined in "The Library" is any indication of the amount he read, it is likely that by the time the *Mercury* lost its popularity he was merely floundering somewhere in the murky backwaters of American literature; the main stream had passed him by. And not only did Mencken fail to listen to the writers who were, at that time, literary nonentities, but he also ignored the authors who were receiving thunderous applause from every corner of the country—people who were molding and transforming the nation's literature. His failure to review books by such writers as William Faulkner, Thomas Wolfe, and John Steinbeck, to list but a few, presents conclusive testimony to the fact that he had relinquished his grasp on American literature. Granted, Mencken tooted his horn for several writers who have since been awarded a select niche in the ranks of America's top-flight novelists, but his support of, and contribution to, *belles lettres* while editor of the *Mercury* was in no way commensurate to that which has often been accorded him by many of the country's leading critics.

Manchester's assertion that Mencken had, by the time the depression struck,

. . . not only lost touch with the older writers he had championed, i.e., Dreiser, Boyd, Anderson, Cabel, *et al.*; he had lost that very contact with boring fiction upon which his reputation as a literary critic was predicated. He had become completely the magazine editor and social philosopher and had, in so doing, defaulted a role for which, intrinsically, he was far better suited.¹²

is, perhaps, slightly exaggerated, although it misses the mark only by an inch; Mencken had kept a finger in the nation's literary pie, but it was the little one.

Another thing that is inferred by an examination of Mencken's *Mercury* is his distrust of innovators. His highly unfavorable reviews of Dos Passos's works definitely attests to the assumption. And, according to Angoff, Mencken was never impressed by Faulkner and his experiments with the stream-of-consciousness technique, a literary device that he manipulated that it figured prominently in securing for him the fame he now has.

Mencken could not see him at all. He claimed that 'there is no more sense in him [Faulkner] than in the wop boob, Dante,' and 'he has no more to say than do Hawthorne and all those other New England female writers. My God, the man hasn't the slightest idea of sentence structure or paragraphing.'¹³

Angoff also recorded that Mencken was opposed to printing Faulkner's short story, "That Evening Sun Go Down," which appeared as the lead story in one issue.¹⁴ And, wrote Angoff, during the argument between him and Mencken, the latter said, "It is gibberish, Angoff, I tell you it is gibberish."¹⁵ This reluctance to embrace the new trends which were then being developed in the short story and the novel is another facet of Menck-

en's relations with *belles lettres* which makes him appear out of tune with the flow of literature that was passing across his desk.

A note of confusion about literature and a strong indication of a declining zeal for it was sounded by Mencken, himself, in his writings in the *Mercury*. Apparently, when he assumed the editorship in January, 1924, his old fire was still burning, for, in June of that year he urged a novelist to write a book about a marriage that succeeds,¹⁶ and the reasons he presented indicate that his campaign for realism was still in motion. "The more novels get away from what is typical," he maintained, "the less substance and vitality they have. The odd, the strange, the fantastic—these things belong to the romance, not to the novel."¹⁷ As the years passed, however, such comments became less and less frequent, and, in September, 1927, he ventured the following:

The new novels show a vast facility, but one must be romantic, indeed, to argue that they show anything else. The thing vaguely called creative passion is simply not in them; they are plausible and workmanlike, but they are never moving. The best fiction of today is being written by authors who were already beginning to oxidize ten years ago; the youngsters, debauched by the experiments of such men as James Joyce, wander into glittering futilities. One hears every day that a new genius has been unearthed, but it always turns out, on investigation, that he is no more than a clever sophomore. No first book as solid and memorable as *McTeague* or *Sister Carrie* has come out since the annunciation of Coolidge.¹⁸

Today it seems somewhat unbelievable that Mencken wrote this at a time when Hemingway, Wolfe, Faulkner, Fitzgerald, and Dos Passos were publishing fairly regularly. And, according to a piece he wrote less than a year later, he did not believe it himself. In "The Library" for May, 1928, he reviewed a group of six new books—three novels and three volumes of short stories. The novels were by Sarah Gertrude Millin, Ruth Suckow, and Nelson Antrim Crawford, and the short stories by Emily Clark, Ernest Hemingway, and Thornton Wilder. The review began with an overwhelming ovation:

The amazing thing about the current fiction is how good it is. Is the novel, as certain croakers allege, an outworn form, with no more juice of life in it? Then let them read such things as these . . .

And is the short story, squeezed between the O. Henry curse and the *True Confessions* curse—I assume that a curse can squeeze, as it can undoubtedly hiss—is the short story, as one hears, empty, artificial and passe? Then let whoever believes it give attention to these pieces . . .¹⁹

The appalling inconsistency of these diatribes requires no elaboration; they shout for themselves.

A few months later, in December, 1928, the pendulum had swung back the other way, and Mencken penned yet another contradiction when he explained his attitude toward letters in an editorial which summed up the first five years of the magazine's existence:

The American Mercury has not neglected *belles lettres*, but it makes no apology for devoting relatively little space to mere writing. Its fundamental purpose is to depict and interpret the America that is in being; not to speculate moonily about Americas that might be, or ought to be. It would print more short stories if more good ones could be found. But not many are being written in the United States today.²⁰

At the same time, Mencken speculated that few short stories were then being produced because the form, itself, was in decay and the market for inferior stories was too good; money, he thought, was contaminating the writers' artistic standards.²¹ And this at a time when such notables as Lardner, Katherine Anne Porter, Willa Cather, Faulkner, John O'Hara, Steinbeck, and Hemingway were turning out some of the most admirable stories that the country has ever produced!

The state of poetry was also a sad one: "In the field of poetry there are similar doldrums. An immense mass of verse is being written, but not one percent of it has any merit whatsoever."²² Here, again, Mencken's views seem extremely shallow, for these top-flight poets were producing at the time: E. E. Cummings, Robert Frost, William Carlos Williams, John Crowe Ransom, Roy Campbell, Stephen Spender, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren—the list is long and mighty, and it goes on and on. Mencken's inconsistency in evaluating verse has already been mentioned, and it would be pure repetition to belabor the point further.

The reason why Mencken's opinions were so jumbled and confounding seems obvious: he simply was not giving *belles lettres* its just due. Instead of keeping only a little finger in the literary pie, he should have either removed it entirely or shoved his whole fist in, for a glance at his *Mercury* reveals two things: Mencken was not always walking with the *avant garde* of American letters during his ten-year stay on the magazine, and, when he was, he was often out of step.

The final conclusion can only be that, despite whatever weight Mencken's literary efforts may have carried during the Twenties, he was neither a profound literary critic nor an astute judge of America's beginning writers during his years on the *Mercury*. Anyone who thinks that he was either of these things while editor of the magazine is mistaken, because, in the light of this study, it appears certain that he virtually neglected *belles lettres* throughout the decade. It is likely that Mencken's reputation will dwindle in the future, and, if he is revered at all fifty years from now, it will be for his humorous iconoclasm and for his inimitable writing style, which was, perhaps, the best of its type that America has ever seen.

FOOTNOTES

CHAPTER I

1. William R. Manchester, *Disturber of the Peace, The Life of H. L. Mencken* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951), pp. 150-51.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 151.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 148.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*, p. 149.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 150.
8. H. L. Mencken, "Editorial," *The American Mercury*, 1:23, January, 1924.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
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12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Manchester, *Disturber of the Peace, The Life of H. L. Mencken*, *op. cit.*, p. 149.
17. H. L. Mencken, "Americana," *The American Mercury*, 4:45, January, 1926.
18. H. L. Mencken, "Americana," *The American Mercury*, 5:37, May, 1925.
19. H. L. Mencken, "Clinical Notes," *The American Mercury*, 1:77, January, 1924.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 75.
21. Manchester, *Disturber of the Peace, The Life of H. L. Mencken*, *op. cit.*, p. 155.
22. Charles Angoff, *H. L. Mencken, A Portrait from Memory* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, Inc., 1956), p. 192.
23. *Ibid.*
24. William R. Manchester, *A Critical Study of the Work of H. L. Mencken as Literary Critic for the Smart Set Magazine, 1908-1914* (A thesis presented to the graduate school of the University of Missouri, August, 1947), p. 213.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 215.
26. Manchester, *Disturber of the Peace, The Life of H. L. Mencken*, *op. cit.*, p. 105.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 116.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 115.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 134.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 125.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 133.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 134.
33. Carl Van Doren, "H. L. Mencken: A Gadfly for Democracy," *The Century Magazine*, 105:796, March, 1923.
34. Angoff, *H. L. Mencken, A Portrait from Memory*, *op. cit.*, p. 19.
35. Van Doren, *op. cit.*, p. 791.

CHAPTER II

1. Manchester, *Disturber of the Peace, The Life of H. L. Mencken*, *op. cit.*, p. 150.
2. When referring to one of these works in this chapter, the author has used, for the sake of brevity, the following abbreviations: *Encyclopedia for The Reader's Encyclopedia*; *Oxford Companion for The Oxford Companion to American Literature*; and *Authors for Twentieth Century Authors*.
3. The names of authors listed in this section were taken from *The American Mercury* for the ten years, January, 1924, to December, 1933. Anyone interested in knowing what fiction was contributed by the writers in this compilation should consult the magazine for those years.
4. Angoff, *H. L. Mencken, A Portrait from Memory*, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

CHAPTER III

1. Charles Angoff, "Mencken Twilight," *North American Review*, 246:218, Winter, 1938-39.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 221.
3. Henry Hazlitt, "Mencken: A Retrospect," *Newsweek*, 47:90, February 20, 1956.
4. H. L. Mencken, "Poetry," *The American Mercury*, 6:251, October, 1925.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 252.
6. H. L. Mencken, "Books of Verse," *The American Mercury*, 8:252, June, 1926.
7. *Ibid.*

8. Angoff, *H. L. Mencken, A Portrait from Memory*, *op. cit.*, p. 83.
9. Manchester, *Disturber of the Peace, The Life of H. L. Mencken*, *op. cit.*, p. 46.
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14. H. L. Mencken, "Novels Good and Bad," *The American Mercury*, 5:507, August, 1925.
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19. H. L. Mencken, "The Story of a Saint," *The American Mercury*, 16:508, April, 1929.
20. H. L. Mencken, "Fiction by Adept Hands," *The American Mercury*, 19:126, January, 1930.
21. H. L. Mencken, "Three Volumes of Fiction," *op. cit.*, p. 252.
22. H. L. Mencken, "Fiction Good and Bad," *The American Mercury*, 6:379, November, 1925.
23. H. L. Mencken, "The Desert Epic," *The American Mercury*, 12:508, December, 1927.
24. H. L. Mencken, "Fiction," *The American Mercury*, 14:127, May, 1928.
25. H. L. Mencken, "Certain Works of Fiction," *op. cit.*, p. 381.
26. H. L. Mencken, "Three Volumes of Fiction," *op. cit.*, p. 252.
27. H. L. Mencken, "Fiction Good and Bad," *The American Mercury*, 6:379, November, 1925.
28. H. L. Mencken, "Fiction," *The American Mercury*, 14:127, May, 1928.
29. H. L. Mencken, "Fiction," *The American Mercury*, 5:124, May, 1925.
30. H. L. Mencken, "Novels Good and Bad," *op. cit.*, p. 507.
31. H. L. Mencken, "A Reverend Novelist," *The American Mercury*, 6:122, September, 1925.
32. H. L. Mencken, "Rambles in Fiction," *The American Mercury*, 2:380, July, 1924.
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34. H. L. Mencken, "Dreiser in 840 Pages," *The American Mercury*, 7:379, March, 1926.
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38. H. L. Mencken, "Three Novels," *The American Mercury*, 9:127, September, 1926.
39. H. L. Mencken, "Rambles in Fiction," *op. cit.*, p. 380.
40. H. L. Mencken, "The Desert Epic," *op. cit.*, p. 508.
41. H. L. Mencken, "New Fiction," *The American Mercury*, 5:382, July, 1925.
42. H. L. Mencken, "New Fiction," *op. cit.*, p. 382.
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48. H. L. Mencken, "Fiction," *The American Mercury*, 8:509, August, 1926.
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50. H. L. Mencken, "Fiction by Adept Hands," *op. cit.*, p. 126.
51. H. L. Mencken, "The Spanish Idea of a Good Time," *The American Mercury*, 27:506, December, 1932.
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54. H. L. Mencken, "Three Gay Stories," *op. cit.*, p. 380.
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56. H. L. Mencken, "New Fiction," *op. cit.*, p. 382.
57. H. L. Mencken, "Fiction Good and Bad," *The American Mercury*, 6:379, November, 1925.
58. H. L. Mencken, "Ring W. Lardner," *The American Mercury*, 2:376, July, 1924.
59. H. L. Mencken, "A Humorist Shows His Teeth," *The American Mercury*, 8:254, June, 1926.

60. H. L. Mencken, "Pongo Americanus," *The American Mercury*, 29:254, June, 1933.
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75. H. L. Mencken, "Fiction Good and Bad," *The American Mercury*, 6:379, November, 1925.
76. H. L. Mencken, "Fiction Good and Bad," *The American Mercury*, 7:506, April, 1926.
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80. H. L. Mencken, "Fiction Good and Bad," *The American Mercury*, 7:506, April, 1926.
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83. H. L. Mencken, "An American Saga," *The American Mercury*, 5:254, June, 1925.
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91. H. L. Mencken, "Three Gay Stories," *op. cit.*, p. 380.
92. H. L. Mencken, "Fiction Good and Bad," *The American Mercury*, 6:379, November, 1925.
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CHAPTER IV

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3. Upton Sinclair, "Mr. Mencken Calls on Me," *The Bookman*, 66:255, November, 1927.
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5. *Ibid.*, p. 266.
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7. L. B. Hessler, *op. cit.*, p. 215.
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9. Kronenberger, *op. cit.*, p. 245.
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