

H.L. Mencken

A Carnival of Buncombe

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Introduction [by Malcolm Moos]

POLITICS, EVEN BEFORE THE TELEVISION CAMERA EXPOSED THE secret rites of the smoke-filled room, has long been recognized as first-class drama. Politics also involves many elements of a spectator sport, particularly at election time, when people choose sides to follow their teams and their favorite candidates from one dramatic crisis to another. Who, then, can be surprised that political reporting often assumes the forms of the entertainment world?

At this craft-political reporting as entertainment—H. L. Mencken excelled. For the "Sage of Baltimore" insisted upon regarding politics as fun. He "never giggled, seldom even chuckled; he roared with laughter."

Developing a style that combined in equal proportions the noise of a snorting volcano and the "language of the free lunch counter," Mencken shook politics and politicians for almost half a century.

In the egotistical trade of politics, of course, Mencken found highgrade ore for his very special gifts. He despised pretentiousness, bluster, and hypocrisy, and all were favorite targets. But while he could be merciless in exposing these traits in those who entered the boisterous currents of politics, he simultaneously managed to interpose a stream of belly laughs into his attacks that always made for gay copy. He delighted in using such words as "swinish" or "hoggish" and—to borrow his own phrase—in having at "the booboisie of the hinterland."

In amusing us with the antics of politicians at play he was very likely without peer.

Has the art of politics no apparent utility? Does it appear to be unqualifiedly ratty, raffish, sordid, obscene, and low down, and its salient virtuosi a gang of unmitigated scoundrels? Then let us not forget its high capacity to soothe and tickle the midriff, its incomparable services as a maker of entertainment.

Several features contributed to the unique quality of Mencken's political reporting. He loved to exaggerate, and one who took many of his statements to heart did so at extreme peril. But if, as Ortega y Gasset reminds us, "to think is to exaggerate," perhaps Mencken felt fully justified in lacing his political coverage with a tall tale here and there. In any case exaggeration was a trademark of his reporting and gave his columns much of their heady flavor.

But on another level, Mencken's workmanship tends to follow quite a different pattern than one tradition commonly found in political reporting. Polities as a spectator sport has borrowed many figures of speech from the field of sports, and the columns of political reporting are stuffed with analogies between the world of competitive sports and the interplay of partisan politics. Moreover, the number of political writers who started as sports writers before making the transition to politics may suggest more than a chance coincidence. James Reston, the late Heywood Broun and Lloyd Lewis, and Westbrook Pegler, to name but a few, all began their newspaper careers as sports reporters. Other writers' of course, who never had anything to do with sports also interlard their political reporting with many comparisons from this field.

With Mencken, the approach was different. Much of his writing is seemingly unconcerned with the shape of political institutions. and the political settings in his columns are not staged in terms of two titanic forces locked in mortal combat to win "a point after touchdown" victory, or the dark horse who gallops out of the mist to win a presidential nomination. Yet the drama lie gets across to his readers always packs a wallop.

How does he manage it? By one device at least which he himself credits to Theodore Roosevelt, in explaining the reason for TR's success: "Life fascinated him and he knew how to make his doings fascinating to others." But in addition Mencken knew where to spot the soft streaks in the individuals engaged in this most competitive of all games—the art of politics. And while he appears ruthless in his comments on the struggle that Disraeli once characterized as the "climb to the top of the greasy pole," there can be little doubt that Mencken knew how to raise a titter once lie spotted a politico stealing a base from an opponent through a particular device or tactic. In a sense it involves the exploitation of human frailties which seem far more luminous in politics simply because there is far less cover than in the comfortable security of the professions and the business world.

No one was really ever indifferent to Mencken. That a man who had few rivals as a demolition expert should arouse the ire of many who felt deeply that Mencken was a cynic totally emptied of political idealism is, of course, in no way surprising, particularly if we look at his beliefs about what life ought to be like. For Mencken's musings and observations on political ideology are certainly filled with startling pronouncements—so much so that some would call them indescribably fearsome or would question whether Mencken really believed in them himself. But our concern here is not with Mencken as the theorist—the architect of thought—but rather with Mencken the reporter with sharp insights into the behavior and motivations of the politicians and figures who ply the precincts, caucus rooms, convention halls, political rostrums, and public offices of this happy land.

Of course the way he used the bludgeon to describe these men and their activities gives us a mighty dim view of our political substructure. Yet even here Mencken holds out hope by adding the very sensible comment that our government system must be far more competent than it looks.

There are the leaders. . . . On the lower levels one encounters men so dreadful that it would be painful to describe them realistically. Nonetheless, the government goes on. There is some disorder, but not enough to be uncomfortable. A certain amount of money is wasted, but not enough to bankrupt us. The laws are dishonest and idiotic, but it is easy to imagine worse. How are we to account for this? I can conjure up but two plausible theories. One is to the effect that the country is actually under the special protection of God, as many clergymen allege every Fourth of July. The other is that the hated and reviled bureaucracy must be a great deal more competent than it looks.

Mencken was grossly irreverent in his columns, but lie was by no means a cynic, intent only on smiting the "reigning clowns." And if he was "overrated in his day as a thinker" as Alistair Cooke writes (which many will dispute), "he was vastly underrated as a humorist with one deadly sensible eye on the behavior of the human animal."

One difficulty in following Mencken's insights into politics is that his vivid violent style and his impulse for droll fakery tend to stipple the canvas—that is, they sometimes obscure or crowd an astute observation. But Mencken's judgment on the techniques of politics and politicians, as we shall examine later, were highly perceptive. These judgments, moreover, together with his ability to give us a prismatic picture of the most American of all our political institutions—the national nominating convention—have withstood the test of time. And they have done so despite attempts to pass them off as "transient journalism" by "book-writers with one foot already in obscurity."

Let no one forget that Mencken also had his serious constructive moments, particularly in his service to civic crusades at the local level of politics. In his own Baltimore bailiwick lie performed yeoman duty by arousing readers to the serious problems that menaced public health, to the need for sanitary milk, to a pure water supply, and to the necessity of controlling diphtheria and typhoid.

That those unfamiliar with Mencken the man shall not misconceive him as a dragon slayer, poised with a cutlass in one hand and a three-ton blockbuster in the other, a word is in order about his personal temperament. Mencken was a warm-hearted person with a gently courteous consideration for others. True, he was not a man to suffer fools gladly, but everyone who knew him closely or saw him in action, even from afar, attests to his kindness. He was uncommonly thoughtful about paying visits to elderly people who were hospitalized, and no friend ever felt neglected while he was convalescing. On such occasions when he went to see a sick friend, the Mencken wit really blossomed; and a long-time associate, Hamilton Owens, tells us that doctors and nurses "invariably made excuses" to rush into the room to see him perform.

Mencken was also held in high esteem by members of his own guild, both as a writer and as a fascinating companion. "Newspapermen idolized him," reports Lee McCardell. "He was never aloof. He wrapped his legs around the stool of a small-town lunch counter with the most

undistinguished reporters in the business. He had no side," and he always "shared the minutiae of good reporting with the gang, filling them in on first names and middle initials. And lie talked about everything under the sun."

Mencken was born with his motor racing. And he kept it that way for 68 active years. My own first glimpse of this frolicsome terror of the twenties was in the winter of 1946 when E. W. Kenworthy and I were huddled over typewriters in an office of the old Sun building, whose ceiling and walls were being dismantled. Mencken, about to step into an elevator, paused a moment, cigar in hand, while lie stared at the incongruous sight of two men encircled only by the wire mesh used to reinforce concrete, shivering with cold while plaster dust drifted down like snow. Then he turned to the elevator operator: "Barney," lie said, "throw those men some raw meat."

H. L. Mencken was the oldest child of a family that included three sons and a daughter. Born in Baltimore, September 12, 1880, he was the son of the owner of a tobacco business (August Mencken) whose father had left Germany in the midst of the unhinged political uprisings of 1848.

At an early age Mencken became a boy wonder, but unlike many boy wonders lie never permitted himself to rust into the status of boy wonder emeritus. Right down to the moment lie was stricken with a cerebral thrombosis lie continued to push out creative work at a furious pace.

As a boy Mencken developed a huge appetite for reading. He liked and showed some aptitude for music, and lie was valedictorian of his class at Baltimore's Polytechnic Institute. That newspaper work beckoned enticingly as a career right from the beginning seems never to have been in doubt.

The week after his father's death, in 1899, lie applied for his first post with the Baltimore *Morning Herald*. Turned down initially, lie kept returning for a month until the editor finally gave him an assignment (covering a suburb struck by a blizzard which resulted in Mencken's first published five line story about a horse-stealing rumor), and the rest is history.

From that moment the Mencken career soared. He was city editor of the *Herald* by 1903, and soon he was demonstrating the inimitable invective style that became his trademark. And in addition to his newspaper stints he began a string of other projects. His first book appeared in 1905—*George Bernard Shaw: His Plays*—and his development as a literary critic soon connected him with *Smart Set* and began his long association with Publisher Alfred A. Knopf and George Jean Nathan, both of whom joined him in founding the *American Mercury* in 1924. The announced objective of this lively magazine is revealing:

The editors are committed to nothing save this: to keep common sense as fast as they can, to belabor sham as agreeably as possible, to give civilized entertainment.

In 1906, Mencken joined the Baltimore Sun to manage the newly created Sunday edition. Thereafter he remained actively associated with the *Sunpapers* until his illness in the fall of 1948.

Long thought of as a confirmed bachelor, Mencken (then 50) surprised everyone in 1930 by his marriage to Sara Powell Haardt of Montgomery, Alabama, whom he met while lecturing at Goucher College on "How to Catch a Husband." Some years younger than Mencken, Miss Haardt, who was also a writer, died in 1935 at the age of 37. To escape from his grief, Mencken plunged into a history of the *Sunpapers*, which was published on the *Sun's* hundredth anniversary in 1937.

From 1911 to 1915 Mencken wrote his Free Lance column for the *Evening Sun* editorial page, which was widely quoted across the nation. This activity gave way to his regular Monday articles, and in this endeavor Mencken turned out the bulk of his writing for the *Sunpapers* during the twenties and thirties. (From time to time he would rewrite one of these Monday articles for republication in the *Smart Set* or the *American Mercury*, but these were not generally the political articles. Of the sixty-nine articles printed here, only two were ever published more than once.) Except for the early years before 1917, and a brief time in 1938, when he managed the editorial page of the *Evening Sun*, Mencken did not hold down any desk position on a newspaper.

Meanwhile his output burgeoned as books (nearly 20) and articles poured out on literature, language, manners, politics, women, ethics, prohibition, and religion. By his own estimate, Mencken's writings embrace some 5,000,000 words—an incredible production for a man, by the way, who never left a letter unanswered for more than twenty-four hours.

In 1919, perhaps Mencken's greatest contribution hit the book stalls—*The American Language*. This volume, subsequently followed by two supplements, one of which weighed in at twenty pounds when the typed manuscript was plumped on publisher Knopf's desk, was a monumental study on the effervescence of American speech. His preoccupation with the subtleties and changes in American speechways was no doubt of very considerable significance in carbonating his columns on political reporting. Mencken himself used to say that he was not a scholar "but a scout for scholars," but there is general agreement that his philological researches have marked an important forward step in the study of the American language.

By the end of 1943, Mencken had completed a three-volume autobiography—*Happy Days*, *Heathen Days*, and *Newspaper Days*—and still showed few signs of being winded. He continued to turn up at national presidential conventions, where now lie was photographed almost as often as front running candidates and certainly more frequently than some favorite sons. He kept up a stream of correspondence (answering even Christmas cards, which lie himself never sent) and enjoyed the steady comforts of life at home on Hollins Street, where lie lived with his brother August and where a few old friends came for an evening's drink or two and good talk.

In November, 1948, Mencken suffered a cerebral thrombosis, but after a critical period in an oxygen tent rallied sufficiently to return home. He never fully recovered his flashing

conversational repartee, and he found difficulty in organizing his thoughts and speech came slowly. For Mencken, no doubt, the shock that he was no longer able to read was even more of a blow. But he faced his affliction cheerfully, had a student from Johns Hopkins, Bob Dewar , read to him, took in the movies now and then, and seemed to enjoy many hours watching children play in the park. On Saturday evening, January 28, 1956, an old friend, Louis Cheslock of the Peabody Institute and a member of the famous Saturday Night Club, dropped in and visited awhile before the open fire. Mencken retired about 11 p.m. with the remark that he didn't feel too well. That night. lie passed away in his sleep from a coronary occlusion. He was 75.

Two features of Mencken's political writing surely stand out as we come to spread it on a broader canvas. First, his poor guesses on what would happen, and second his deep faith in the right of free expression.

In the realm of political prophecy, Mencken's judgment was anything but sure footed. (Franklin Roosevelt didn't have a Chinaman's chance of election in 1932, and Hoover's re-election was highly probable.) His classical blooper in guessing at the political future, as Mark Watson relates it, occurred at the scene of carnage at Madison Square Garden in the summer of 1924. when the Democratic Party was stalemated for 103 ballots before naming a presidential nominee.

Somewhere toward the clamorous close of this tense struggle, as the Democratic convention moved near the one-hundredth ballot, Mencken squatted down before his old portable Corona and struck off the following lead for a special piece to the Sun.

Everything is uncertain in this convention but one thing: John W. Davis will never be nominated.

Informed that Davis had been nominated for president a few seconds after filing his story, Mencken, stunned for the moment, quickly snapped back: "Why that's incredible! I've already sent off a story that it's impossible." Then as an afterthought: "I wonder if those idiots in Baltimore will know enough to strike out the negative."

Mencken the militant upholder of free speech is quite another matter. For the world has need of its Voltaires in all ages. And no one was around in the twenties who could draw a bead so unerringly on a Dixie demagogue, intolerant lawmaker, preacher, or political jackass. Whatever Mencken may have held dear or central in the way of a political philosophy, no belief had greater priority than that men should work and live unmuzzled. Here he met his opponents head on, scorching like a flame-thrower fueled with high octane.

Appropriately for a craftsman who stirred old embers every time he thought about the delights of a presidential nominating convention, the last series of articles that Mencken ever wrote dealt with this boisterous by-product of our constitutional system—that "colossal travesty of popular institutions" as an unkind critic once put it. And what a convention!

In late July, 1948, in the same Philadelphia auditorium where the Republicans nominated Tom Dewey and then the Democrats met to name Harry Truman as their candidate, the Progressive party gathered to nominate Henry Wallace and launch a third party.

Back at his old stand in the press box to watch the attempt "to heave Henry into the presidency of this great Republic," Mencken was in a carnival mood. His first piece bearing the Philadelphia dateline July 22 and the overline "Mencken and the Swami," carried the headline: *MARX, LENIN, UNCLE JOE MISSING AT CONVENTION*.

On successive days he covered familiar terrain—Women—"the ladies were chiefly bulky and unlovely, precisely like Republican and Democratic ladies but they did not run to the same gaudy and preposterous frocks and hats." And Wallace, he suspected, had acquired such a "semi-celestial character" that "if when he is nominated today he suddenly sprouts wings and begins flapping about the hall no one will be surprised."

On Sunday, July 25, Mencken rolled out two pieces for Monday's *Sun*. In one he correctly observed that "in the United States new parties do pretty well at the start, and then fade away." The other article dealt with a Wallace rally, but on the way back to his hotel from this affair, which was held in a baseball park, Mencken confided to a fellow newsman: "You know, I don't feel well. When I write. the words don't seem to come as readily as they used to." It may have been the first forewarning of the stroke that hit him three months later. It had been quite a spell of political reporting. Forty-nine years of attendance, in fact, upon what he liked to call "political, homilectical, and patrio-inspirational orgies."

Newspaper workers searching for old faces at new conventions can perhaps still see him "descending into the crypt below" the rostrum "to find a drink." Others not so fortunate will heartily agree with the *Manchester Guardian* that "in a long line that stretches from Benjamin Franklin and Mark Twain to Will Rogers. the 'Sage of Baltimore' stands high."

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The paternity of this volume owes much to The Johns Hopkins Press. In March, 1955, John Kyle, Editor of the Press asked A. D. Emmart of the Baltimore *Evening Sun* editorial staff to sample some of the famous Monday articles Mencken wrote for the *Evening Sun* during the 1920's and 1930's to see if they were still of contemporary interest. Mr. Emmart did so and came back with an affirmative and enthusiastic answer. He also suggested that Huntington Cairns sift through the articles—some 700 in all—covering a wide variety of subjects ranging from literary criticism to politics.

Mr. Cairns viewed these articles on microfilm in his summer home at Kitty Hawk in the summer of 1955 and concluded that sixty-nine of the pieces be published with appropriate introductory and background comment. Since the content of these articles centered chiefly on politics, I was asked to prepare the latter—an undertaking I joyfully accepted both because of my

belief that Mencken was a master craftsman in many aspects of political reporting and also because I came to admire him personally a great deal during the brief period I knew him while I worked for the Baltimore *Evening Sun*.

These articles run from 1920 into late 1936 and terminate there since Mencken stopped writing his Monday pieces at that time. In some of my introductory comments, however, I have quoted from other articles of Mencken covering specific campaigns and other political subjects that do not appear in this collection.

For biographical and anecdotal material on Mencken himself I am much in the debt of several of Mencken's colleagues on the *Sunpapers*: Hamilton Owens; Lee McCardell; A. D. Emmart; Mark Watson; and William Manchester; among others.

Very special thanks is due August Mencken, who probably knew his brother best, and who has been most generous in giving his time and advice to all of us engaged in bringing these articles before the public.

BALTIMORE, JULY 25, 1956

Malcolm Moos

BAYARD vs LIONHEART

July 26, 1920

One discerns in all the current discussion of MM. Harding and Cox a certain sour dismay. It seems to be quite impossible for any wholly literate man to pump up any genuine enthusiasm for either of them. Each, of course, is praised lavishly by the professional politicians of his own party, and compared to Lincoln, Jefferson and Cleveland by the surviving hacks of the party press, but in the middle ground, among men who care less for party success than for the national dignity, there is a gone feeling in the stomach, with shooting pains down the legs. The Liberals, in particular, seem to be suffering badly. They discover that Harding is simply a third-rate political wheel-horse, with the face of a moving-picture actor, the intelligence of a respectable agricultural implement dealer, and the imagination of a lodge joiner, and that Cox is no more than a provincial David Harum with a gift for bamboozling the boobs.

These verdicts, it seems to me, are substantially just. No one but an idiot would argue seriously that either candidate is a first-rate man, or even a creditable specimen of second-rate man. Any State in the Union, at least above the Potomac, could produce a thousand men quite as good, and many States could produce a thousand a great deal better. Harding, intellectually, seems to be merely a benign blank—a decent, harmless, laborious, hollow-headed mediocrity perhaps comparable to the late Harrington, of Maryland. Cox is quicker of wit, but a good deal less honest. He belongs to the cunning type; there is a touch of the shyster in him. His chicaneries in the matter of prohibition, both during the convention and since, show the kink in his mind. He is willing to do anything to cadge votes, and he includes in that anything the ready sacrifices of his good faith, of the national welfare, and of the hopes and confidence of those who honestly support him. Neither candidate reveals the slightest dignity of conviction. Neither cares a hoot for any discernible principle. Neither, in any intelligible sense, is a man of honor.

But it is one thing to yield to virtuous indignation against such individuals and quite another thing to devise any practicable scheme for booting them out of the synagogue. The weakness of those of us who take a gaudy satisfaction in our ideas, and battle for them violently, and face punishment for them willingly and even proudly, is that we forget the primary business of the man in politics, which is the snatching and safeguarding of his job. That business, it must be plain, concerns itself only occasionally with the defense and propagation of ideas, and even then it must confine itself to those that, to a reflective man, must usually appear to be insane. The first and last aim of the politician is to get votes, and the safest of all ways to get votes is to appear to the plain man to be a plain man like himself, which is to say, to appear to him to be happily free from any heretical treason to the body of accepted platitudes-to be filled to the brim with the flabby, banal, childish notions that challenge no prejudice and lay no burden of examination upon the mind.

It is not often, in these later days of the democratic enlightenment, that positive merit lands a man in elective office in the United States; much more often it is a negative merit that gets him there. That negative merit is simply disvulnerability. Of the two candidates, that one wins who least arouses the suspicions and distrusts of the great masses of simple men. Well, what are more likely to arouse those suspicions and distrusts than ideas, convictions, principles? The plain people are not hostile to shysterism, save it be gross and unsuccessful. They admire a Roosevelt for his bold stratagems and duplicities, his sacrifice of faith and principle to the main chance, his magnificent disdain of fairness and honor. But they shy instantly and inevitably from the man who comes before them with notions that they cannot immediately translate into terms of their everyday delusions; they fear the novel idea, and particularly the revolutionary idea, as they fear the devil. When Roosevelt, losing hold upon his cunning at last, embraced the vast hodgepodge of innovations, some idiotic but some sound enough, that went by the name of Progressivism, they jumped from under him in trembling, and he came down with a thump that left him on his back until death delivered him from all hope and caring.

It seems to me that this fear of ideas is a peculiarly democratic phenomenon, and that it is nowhere so horribly apparent as in the United States, perhaps the nearest approach to an actual democracy yet seen in the world. It was Americans who invented the curious doctrine that there is a body of doctrine in every department of thought that every good citizen is in duty bound to accept and cherish; it was Americans who invented the right-thinker. The fundamental concept, of course, was not original. The theologians embraced it centuries ago, and continue to embrace it to this day. It appeared on the political side in the Middle Ages, and survived in Russia into our time. But it is only in the United States that it has been extended to all departments of thought. It is only here that *any* novel idea, in any field of human relations, carries with it a burden of obnoxiousness, and is instantly challenged as mysteriously immoral by the great masses of right-thinking men. It is only here, so far as I have been able to make out, that there is a right way and a wrong way to think about the beverages one drinks with one's meals, and the way children ought to be taught in the schools, and the manner in which foreign alliances should be negotiated, and what ought to be done about the Bolsheviks.

In the face of this singular passion for conformity, this dread of novelty and originality, it is obvious that the man of vigorous mind and stout convictions is gradually shouldered out of public life. He may slide into office once or twice, but soon or late he is bound to be held up, examined and incontinently kicked out. This leaves the field to the intellectual jelly-fish and inner tubes. There is room for two sorts of them—first, the blank cartridge who has no convictions at all and is willing to accept anything to make votes, and, secondly, the mountebank who is willing to conceal and disguise what he actually believes, according as the wind blows hot or cold. Of the first sort, Harding is an excellent specimen; of the second sort, Cox.

Such tests arise inevitably out of democracy—the domination of unreflective and timorous men, moved in vast herds by mob emotions. In private life no man of sense would think of applying them. We do not estimate the integrity and ability of an acquaintance by his flabby willingness to accept our ideas; we estimate him by the honesty and effectiveness with which he

maintains his own. All of us, if we are of reflective habit, like and admire men whose fundamental beliefs differ radically from our own. But when a candidate for public office faces the voters he does not face men of sense; he faces a mob of men whose chief distinguishing mark is the fact that they are quite incapable of weighing ideas, or even of comprehending any save the most elemental—men whose whole thinking is done in terms of emotion, and whose dominant emotion is dread of what they cannot understand. So confronted, the candidate must either bark with the pack, or count himself lost. His one aim is to disarm suspicion, to arouse confidence in his orthodoxy, to avoid challenge. If he is a man of convictions, of enthusiasm, of self-respect, it is cruelly hard. But if he is, like Harding, a numskull like the idiots he faces, or, like Cox, a pliant intellectual Jenkins, it is easy.

The larger the mob, the harder the test. In small areas, before small electorates, a first-rate man occasionally fights his way through, carrying even the mob with him by the force of his personality. But when the field is nationwide, and the fight must be waged chiefly at second and third hand, and the force of personality cannot so readily make itself felt, then all the odds are on the man who is, intrinsically, the most devious and mediocre—the man who can most adeptly disperse the notion that his mind is a virtual vacuum.

The Presidency tends, year by year, to go to such men. As democracy is perfected, the office represents, more and more closely, the inner soul of the people. We move toward a lofty ideal. On some great and glorious day the plain folks of the land will reach their heart's desire at last, and the White House will be adorned by a downright moron.