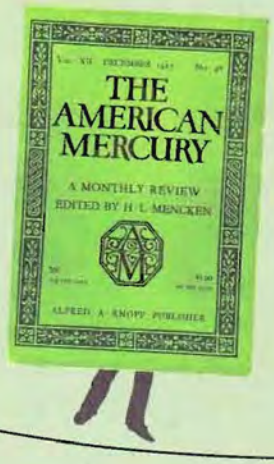
H. L. Mencken and American Magazines

A View of the Parade



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In 1899, a young Baltimore native with literary ambitions sent out his poems and stories to the magazines. He was successful; several were published. Thus did Henry Louis Mencken launch a relationship with American magazines that was to last over half a century.

H. L. Mencken (1880-1956), although he is best known in Baltimore for his long association with the *Sunpapers*, worked with and for magazines in an astonishing range of capacities. He began by contributing fiction and odd fillers, but soon came into his own as a book reviewer. By the 1910s, he was regularly writing essays and commentary that covered politics, current events and American culture. He edited two influential monthly magazines and three pulps. All the while he kept his day job as a newspaper journalist, steadily turning out columns and articles—along with books that often drew from his newspaper and magazine pieces. Eventually, as a literary celebrity, Mencken himself became the subject of magazine articles and photo spreads.

Mencken's work with magazines coincided with a remarkable transformation in the magazine industry. An explosion of new titles in the 1880s and 1890s created a vigorously competitive magazine marketplace, very different from the mid 19th-century world of genteel periodicals, which were available to a limited number of relatively wealthy and well-educated subscribers. After the Civil War, American manufacturing expanded—and needed nationwide advertising for its new, nationally-distributed, brand-name products. Magazines emerged as the perfect vehicles for these ads, so magazine publishers started selling more ad space. A drop in postal rates for second-class mail in 1885 permitted low-cost magazine delivery. Improvements in press technology and illustration processes throughout the 1880s and 1890s made printing cheaper, increased print runs and allowed for the printing of photographic images.

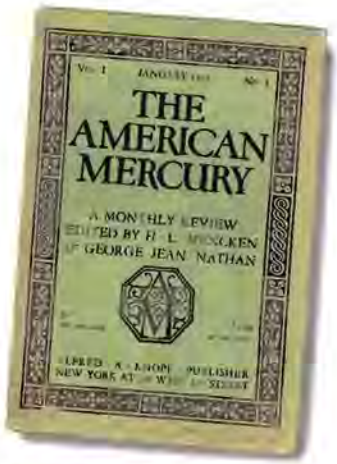
In response to these opportunities, monthly magazine publishers lowered prices from thirty-five cents a copy to fifteen or even ten cents in the 1890s; five-cent weeklies flourished. Magazines were suddenly affordable for many more readers with various tastes, interests and experiences. To reach them, general magazines circulated in greater numbers, while new popular and professional journals were founded to cater to particular audiences: men, women and children who wanted stories, reviews and news about science, sports, gardening, business and fashion. Advertisers, vying for customers, experimented with more graphically appealing ads; magazines followed suit, incorporating more sophisticated lay-outs, more pictures and more color. These changes in magazine readership, editorial scope and appearance offered Americans a bigger and better view of their own culture—of the diverse and boisterous American parade.

When Mencken's first magazine story came out in *The Bookman*, December 1899, this new era of magazine publishing was underway. Mencken's timing was auspicious; the magazines needed a new breed of writer who could address different sectors of the American public, just as the prolific Mencken needed venues. But there was another reason why the relationship was so mutually advantageous. Mencken's style of writing, especially as he cultivated his own brand of criticism, was bold, vivid and opinionated. It made for lively reading, whether you agreed with him or not. Mencken attracted both followers and detractors; either way, the magazines benefited because readers were hooked. Thus Mencken had something in common with the investigative journalists of the early 20th century, the so-called "muckrakers," who pulled in readers with their serialized social and political exposés. Unlike the socially progressive muckrakers, Mencken's political allegiances were conservative. But he shared with them an acute distaste for certain forms of injustice and an astute sense of how to rouse his readers.

Mencken's involvement in various controversial issues of the day helped make his a household name in the 1920s and 1930s, in part because he understood the publishing industry and the connections between newspapers, magazines and books. As the co-editor of the *The Smart Set*, he encouraged new writers who challenged old-fashioned proprieties, clearing the way for some of them to get book contracts. He used his position at the Baltimore *Evening Sun* to skewer the prosecution in the Scopes "monkey" trial in the summer of 1925; several articles were reprinted in magazines, including *The American Mercury* and *The Nation*. As the *Mercury*'s editor, Mencken confounded convention again in 1926—the

April issue was banned in Boston because of the article "Hatrack" by Herbert Asbury, which openly portrayed small-town prostitution. Mencken, determined to violate the ban, arranged for a newsworthy performance of his defiance by selling a copy of the *Mercury* on the Boston Common; the incident was reported widely in the press.

The "Hatrack" episode exemplified Mencken's ambitions for the *Mercury*. He wanted it to provide a "comprehensive picture, critically presented, of the entire American scene" and thereby to "introduce Americans to each other." Moreover, he insisted that the Americans thus



introduced include African-American poets, sociologists, journalists and political activists—a policy very unlike that of most other white editors of the time. The *Mercury* became a unique platform for the discussion of race and ethnicity, along with many other concerns central to American life. In the words of one scholar, it was "the first American Studies journal."

While Mencken's vision as an editor resonates with contemporary values, his convictions seem contradictory. He made comments that were racist, anti-Semitic, sexist, anti-Southern, elitist—and completely at odds with some of his other statements and actions. The man who freely used derogatory terms for African Americans also praised African-American writers in reviews, wrote for African-American periodicals and worked with the NAACP on a national anti-lynching bill. He made scathing attacks on "professional Jews" and failed to take Hitler's threats seriously, but was deeply troubled by accusations that he was anti-Semitic. He pilloried white Southern culture, and then generously supported new Southern literary journals.

These baffling inconsistencies are more intelligible in light of Mencken's sense of responsibility to his reader. It was not enough to reveal, explain and interpret. "You must give a good show to get a crowd, and a good show means one with slaughter in it," he wrote in "Newspaper Morals" for *The Atlantic Monthly* of March 1914. Mencken could be funny, sharp, brainy and brutal in order to win his reader's attention—and the reader's attention was essential in the dynamic, competitive world of American magazines.

Ironically, the very sort of showmanship that was his specialty was also a favorite target of his scorn. He called the presidential contest of 1920 a "carnival of buncombe" and democracy itself a "parade of obvious imbecilities"; in general, he derided the American enthusiasm for pomp

and pageantry. A further irony is that Mencken, through his appearances in magazines, actually helped advance the culture of the spectacle that he claimed to detest. By the mid 1920s, he was a literary celebrity, photographed and caricatured so often that he was identifiable by the severe part of his hair, his scowl and his signature cigar. Even after his popularity waned in the late 1940s and 1950s, pictures of Mencken were still instantly recognizable because of those trademark attributes. His image, like his name, could sell.

Paradoxical though it is, this image of Mencken does represent the writerly role he invented: the keen and clever observer. Mencken himself understood this role to be his main contribution to American literature, so like any good story-teller, he made sure his protagonist appeared in the very beginning of the narrative. *Happy Days*, his autobiography of childhood (much of which was first published in *The New Yorker*), starts with an account of his earliest memory: gazing in wonder at fireworks. "All I was aware of," he wrote, "was the fact that the world I had just burst into seemed to be very brilliant..." Mencken the spectator had arrived; so had Mencken the master of ceremonies. Through his symbiotic relationship with American magazines, Mencken put the critic-as-eyewitness on center stage.

The magazines in "A View of the Parade" come from the George H. Thompson Collection of Henry Louis Mencken, housed in the George Peabody Library of the Sheridan Libraries. Part purchase and part gift from Mr. Thompson's wife Betty and son Bradford G. Thompson, the collection reflects a "completist" philosophy with nearly 5,000 items by or about Mencken. In assembling this rich set of works, Mr. Thompson made it possible to understand Mencken's broader context—and to glimpse the complex history of American magazine publishing in the 20th century.

George Thompson's collection will provide an unequalled resource for Mencken scholars, for students of 20th-century American literature and for the researchers of the future. We welcome them to the Peabody Library where Mr. Thompson's legacy is on display for all to enjoy.

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Special Thanks

Robert J. Brugger, *Johns Hopkins University Press*
Emily Dean, *Vinalhaven Historical Society*
David Farris, *George Peabody Library*
Vincent Fitzpatrick, *H. L. Mencken Room, Enoch Pratt Free Library*
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