

Book Review of George H. Douglas' *H. L. Mencken: Critic of American Life*. Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1978, pp. 248

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It is amusing to wonder what Henry Mencken, who thought that "a horselaugh is worth a thousand syllogisms," would remark about scholarly studies of his ideas. Regardless, such works are in ready recent supply with Charles A. Fecher's *Mencken: A Study of His Thought* (Knopf, 1978) followed fast by George H. Douglas' contribution.

Essentially this latest study has two conceptual faults. First, by failing to recognize that the essay, Mencken's chief medium, is only the light cavalry of literary types, Douglas imputes to it siege gun power in HLM's war on the booboisie. Second, and more importantly, by mistaking Mencken's opinions for ideas, Douglas implies an intellectual system that Mencken lacked. Indeed, Mencken himself called his "ideas" *prejudices*.

Professor Douglas' five chapters focus mainly on HLM in the 1920s, the years of the *American Mercury*, *Notes on Democracy*, and five of the six *Prejudices* series. This is a sensible limitation, for it was in the 'Twenties when he hit his stride as the critic of Americana. But when the first chapter, "H. L. Mencken: The Man and His Work," attempts an overview, it presents a highly questionable portrayal of Mencken as a warm-hearted and genial "corrective" critic. In fact, Douglas reads Mencken's satire as harsh but never cruel (p. 37). Clearly, in the face of HLM's lampoons of Comstock, Bryan, Harding, and Stuart Pratt Sherman, to recall but a few, Douglas' distinction between harshness and cruelty proves to be without substance. And when we remember Mencken's racial and ethnic barbs along with his asides and onslaughts on farmers, actors, realtors, bartenders, lawyers, fundamentalists, professors, dentists, and chiropractors, *inter alia*, he emerges as anything but the Jazz Age Chaucer that Douglas would have him. (Presumably, anyway, some of HLM's vitriol finally filters through to Douglas, for at p. 52 he revises himself to allow that Mencken "could be cruel and unfair.") Douglas' further suggestion that Mencken was a dealer in ideas and not in personalities for their own sake reduces a vigorous, fun-loving, *ad hoc* satirist to a quixotic penman jousting against a *Weltanschauung*. Mencken is, after all, nearer in spirit and purpose to the chic Tom Wolfe than to the solemn Samuel Johnson.

"The Soul of Man under Democracy," "The Leitmotiv of American Politics," and "The Psychopathology of Everyday Life," the next chapters, locate the root of Mencken's criticism in his abhorrence of egalitarian democracy. Seeing it as a form of government that promotes not liberty but false opportunity, he concluded that it rendered people selfish, envious, distrustful, and joyless in their rage to surpass one another. Jealously they attempt to deny others the joys they cannot have. Thus the farmer, envious of the city slicker's comfortable cocktail lounges and hotels, hatches the Volstead and Mann Act while trying hard to enjoy himself in his dismal kitchen and haystack. Douglas reproduces many examples of Mencken in this humor, so what we get finally is a catalogue of symptoms of this democratic disease, not a study of ideas. Using the same tactic, the last chapter, "The Anemia of the Higher Culture," reviews Mencken's observations on the genteel tradition and education in America.

With few judgments and little analysis, this book is an apt and brisk description of HLM's reactions, but not, as Douglas promises, "a book preeminently about Mencken's ideas" (p. 25). There are other lapses. Douglas misses the chance of drawing on the valuable insights of Mencken's contemporaries, especially

Gerald Johnson and Louis Cheslock. He fails to consider the possible influences on Mencken of Shaw, Dewey, Whitehead, and Bergson, an odd omission in a study of Mencken's ideas. Bothersome too is Douglas' tendency to speculate about what Mencken would now think about Joseph McCarthy, Richard Nixon, activist students, liberal professors, "black power," and "women's lib." An amusing game, but hardly matter for a scholarly study.

Still, this book does nothing to eradicate any of the vintage Henry Mencken. A sane man who recognized that for most people appearance is reality, he was drawn to surfaces. He laughed hard at presidents because they appeared pompous, at educators because they appeared boring, and at Ku Kluxers because they appeared ridiculous. As he said, he enjoyed America because it was a circus high in entertainment value.

Ideas? Perhaps Walter Lippmann had it right in 1925: Mencken is effective "just because his appeal is not from mind to mind, but from viscera to viscera."