

**H. L. MENCKEN AND GERMAN KULTUR**

by

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## I

In the year 1713, the Rector of the University of Leipzig, Johann Burkhard Mencke, aroused the anger of his contemporaries by delivering a lecture on the "Charlatanry of the Learned."<sup>1</sup> Two centuries later, Henry Louis Mencken,<sup>2</sup> the American reincarnation of the Leipzig professor, made it his life's vocation to arouse the anger of many of his contemporaries by revealing and ridiculing their charlatanry.<sup>3</sup>

H. L. Mencken was "fetched into sentience" by Dr. Buddenböhn in Baltimore, on September 12, 1880.<sup>4</sup> From 1886 to 1892 he attended a private school, the Knapp Institute, and from 1892 to 1896 the Baltimore Polytechnic Institute. His father offered him a choice between an undergraduate course at Johns Hopkins and a law course at the University of Maryland. Mencken wanted neither and went to work in his father's cigar business. After the death of his father, in 1899, Mencken was free to pursue the career of his own choice: he became a newspaper man. He started as a reporter for the Baltimore *Morning Herald*, and within six years rose to the position of managing editor. In 1906 the *Herald* ceased to exist and Mencken went to the Sunpapers, with which he remained connected until 1948. In 1908 he started his career as a literary critic by joining the *Smart Set*, a literary magazine whose co-editor he became in 1914. Ten years later, he founded the *American Mercury* which he edited until it ceased publication in 1933. During these years at the *Mercury*, Mencken reached the height of his fame and influence.<sup>5</sup> Between 1933 and 1948, the year he suffered a cerebral thrombosis from which he never fully recovered, he wrote a

number of books, as well as articles and editorials for many different publications. Mencken died in Baltimore on January 29, 1956.

## II

H. L. Mencken, as indicated in the opening remarks, was of German ancestry. He was interested in the background of his German ancestors to such a degree, that for a period of two years he employed the services of a firm specializing in tracing ancestry.<sup>6</sup> His private library, parts of which are now in the Mencken Room of the Pratt Library, contains over 230 volumes of family documents. Mencken outlines his family tree in the introduction to the English version of the *Charlatanry of the Learned*, which he edited and published in 1937. The first known members of the Mencken family lived in Oldenburg in the 16th century. In 1662, one of the ancestors, Otto Mencke, entered the University of Leipzig, and later became the first of a long line of scholars and professors in this city. While at Leipzig, he founded the *Acta Eruditorum* (1682), the first scholarly journal in Germany. The complete edition of this journal can be found in H. L. Mencken's library. Otto's son, Johann Burkhard, author of the famous *Charlatanry*, founded the Teutschübende Poetische Gesellschaft (1717) at Leipzig, and wrote poetry under the pseudonym of Philander von der Linde. Upon discovering this ancestor's discourse on charlatanry, H. L. Mencken was later to remark: "...it astonished me, and no little delighted me, to find that a man of my name, nearly 200 years in his grave, had devoted himself so heartily to an enterprise that had engaged me day in and day out in a far country—the tracking down of quacks of all sorts, and the appreciative exhibition of their multifarious tricks."<sup>7</sup> Another member of the Mencken family held a high office under Frederick the Great, and his daughter became the mother of Bismarck.<sup>8</sup>

It was H. L. Mencken's grandfather, Burkhardt Ludwig, who emigrated to Baltimore in 1848. He was not, however, one of the liberal refugees, the so-called forty-eighters; as

H. L. Mencken relates: "In his later life he used to hint that he had left Germany, not to embrace the boons of democracy in the great Republic, but to escape a threatened overdose at home."<sup>9</sup> Burkhardt Ludwig established himself in the tobacco trade and married a woman of Scottish descent. He maintained little contact with his fellow countrymen in Baltimore and remained aloof from the numerous German societies. "Their singing he regarded as a public disturbance, and their *Turnerei* as insane."<sup>10</sup> H. L. Mencken's father, August, married a German girl, Anna Margarete Abhau, whose family had also come to America in 1848. At the time of H. L. Mencken's birth, his parents were living on West Lexington Street, at that time a predominantly German neighborhood.<sup>11</sup> Mencken's father did not have a good command of the German language, and thus, all conversation in the home was conducted in English. The mother, however, spoke German fluently, and used it when conversing with German maids, shopkeepers, and workers. Whenever her father came to visit, he would speak to her in German, and she would reply in English. Mencken recalls, how he and his brother tried to deduce what the grandfather had said, on the basis of the mother's answers, and thinks that he learned some of his earliest German this way.<sup>12</sup> Mencken's first serious contact with German came at Professor Friedrich Knapp's Institute. Knapp, a Swabian who had come to Baltimore in 1850, was later remembered by Mencken for wearing, even forty years after his arrival, "the classical uniform of a German schoolmaster—a longtailed coat of black alpaca, a boiled shirt with somewhat fringey cuffs, and a white lawn necktie."<sup>13</sup> The schoolday began with songs, usually German folk songs, such as "Goldene Abendsonne," "Winter, Adieu!" or "Fuchs, du hast die Gans gestohlen." The instruction was generally in English, but courses were also offered in German, the latter being one of Mencken's weaker subjects. Although he wrote German excellently, he lacked proficiency in speaking the language. In his memoirs, Mencken gives an amusing account of this encounter with the German language, and an estimation of the result:

...I always get the curious feeling, hearing German spoken, that it is not really a foreign language, for all its sounds seem quite natural to me, including even the *ch* of *ich*. But the Professor and his goons certainly never taught me to speak German, or ever read it with any ease. They tried to ram it into their pupils as they rammed in the multiplication table—by endless repetition, usually in chorus. To this day I know the conjugation *haben* down to *Sie würden gehabt haben*, though I couldn't write even a brief note in Hoch Deutsch without resort to a grammar and a dictionary. What little of the language I actually acquired in my youth I picked up mainly from the German hired girls.<sup>14</sup>

At the Polytechnic Institute, Mencken continued to take German courses. Of a somewhat different nature was the German culture Mencken absorbed during the family outings to the Schützen Park and the old fashioned German beer-gardens in West Baltimore. It may have been here that he developed the fondness for German *Gemütlichkeit* which remained with him throughout his life.<sup>15</sup>

One of the first books Mencken read as a child was an English translation of *Grimm's Fairy Tales*. But, as he did not have any "natural taste for fairy-tales," he never finished the work. Oddly enough, it was a book by Mark Twain, one of his favorite authors, that awakened an interest in him to Germany and German culture: "It was *A Tramp Abroad* that made me German-conscious, and I still believe that it is the best guide-book to Germany ever written."<sup>16</sup>

It may therefore be concluded, that certain aspects of German culture, or *Kultur* as he persistently called it, had permeated Mencken's early life and, as will be seen, were to continue penetrating it for many years to come. During his early days as a newspaper man, he used to frequent the saloon of Frank Junker, a quiet German, who rarely said more than "Wie geht's" to a customer.<sup>17</sup> There he would meet with his colleagues from other papers, among

them the German reporters of the two German dailies, *Der Deutsche Correspondent* and the *Journal*. Some of these German journalists were, according to Mencken, among the most eminent and popular reporters of the city.<sup>18</sup> They were somewhat envied by their American colleagues, since their main task was to cover the numerous social events, the picnics, weddings, and *Sängerfeste*, events which, according to German tradition, were accompanied by much feasting and drinking.<sup>19</sup> John Gfeller, a Swiss, would lead the club of journalists at Junker's in their singing. One of his favorite songs was Victor von Scheffel's "Als die Römer frech geworden" which Mencken describes as "whooping up the victory of the primeval Nazis over the Romans under P. Q. Varus in the year 9 A. D."<sup>20</sup>

Although it cannot be said that Mencken kept in very close contact with the German element in Baltimore, he did become a member of the Germania Männerchor and several other German-American societies. Unlike his grandfather and father, who had shown little interest in cultural activities of any sort, Mencken's love of German music and his great admiration for German culture *per se* kept him in touch with educated Germans and German-Americans.<sup>21</sup> For the average uneducated German-American he had as much contempt as for his American counterpart, the *boobus Americanus*: "The Germans [in America] . . . are on the cultural level of green-grocers. I have come into contact with a great many of them since 1914, some of them of considerable wealth and even fashionable pretensions. In the whole lot I can think of but a score or two who could name offhand the principle works of Thomas Mann, Otto Julius Bierbaum, Ludwig Thoma or Hugo von Hofmannsthal. They know more about Mutt and Jeff than they know about Goethe."<sup>22</sup> A more precise evaluation of the position of the German-Americans is presented by Mencken in "Die Deutschamerikaner," published in 1928 in German at Berlin.<sup>23</sup> In this article Mencken notes that being German-American is not so much a question of pure German ancestry, as it is a question of racial consciousness. He points

out that the children of German immigrants are often so thoroughly Americanized that they are hardly aware of their German heritage, while on the other hand, persons with only one German grandfather may consider themselves to be German. It is one of the tendencies in American life, Mencken continues, to make people forget their origin, and only immigrants of strong character succeed in maintaining their distinction. Their endeavors will find no sympathy, however, from either Americans or fellow countrymen. As a result, only a few of the educated and prosperous German-Americans preserve their cultural heritage. Mencken finds the racial consciousness of the German rural population of the West, and of the German communities of major cities to be of little cultural significance, since these groups have yet to play an important role in the intellectual life of their motherland. In conclusion, Mencken states that from a cultural point of view the majority of the Germans in America belong to the backward and lower classes, and consequently exert little influence upon American life.

In an explanation of this devastating evaluation of the German-Americans, Dieter Cunz points out that the racial consciousness of the German-Americans had been constantly diminishing since 1917, reaching its historical ebb at the time this article was written.<sup>24</sup> Another possible explanation might be Mencken's disappointment over the outcome of World War I, which dealt a shattering blow to his hopes of invigorating American cultural life with an injection of German *Kultur*. That this had actually been Mencken's intention, is indicated by Henry Lüdeke: "Es ging [Mencken] um 'culture with a K,' wie der sarkastische Ausdruck lautete, und Mencken sah im deutschen Charakter und in der deutschen Erziehung Züge, die der wachsenden Flut der amerikanischen 'Mobokratie' eine heilsame Korrektur sein könnten."<sup>25</sup> Even during the early years of the war, H. L. Mencken continued to be outspokenly pro-German, and at times his partisanship was more than just cultural.<sup>26</sup> In December of 1916, Mencken set out for Germany as a war correspondent for the *Baltimore Sun*.

After a brief stay in Berlin and on the eastern front, the break of diplomatic relations between America and Germany forced him to leave. "The Battle of the Wilhelmstrasse," a book on his experiences in Germany, was never published.<sup>27</sup> Upon returning to the United States, Mencken began to conduct himself in a more restrained manner. As he once remarked, "I do not want to appear a spokesman for Germany, for I am an American by birth and the son of native-born Americans."<sup>28</sup> But his true sentiments were well known and he was looked upon with great suspicion. He was even accused of being an intimate friend of "the German monster Nitzsky" (Nietzsche), and of carrying on radio communications with a German submarine, whose captain he had entertained while the vessel was docked in Baltimore, in 1916.<sup>29</sup>

The most vicious attack launched against Mencken followed his strong protest against the organized "effort to depict Dreiser as a secret agent of the Wilhelmstrasse, told off to inject subtle doses of *Kultur* into a naif and pious people."<sup>30</sup> The attacker, Professor Stuart P. Sherman, a literary foe of Mencken, exploited the political sentiments of the public and accused Mencken of German *Kultur*-propaganda. His arguments were anything but scholarly, as the following excerpts illustrate:

He [Mencken] does indeed rather ostentatiously litter his pages with Germans words and phrases—*unglaublich, Stammvater, Sklavenmoral, Kultur, Bier-tische, Kaffeeklatsch, die ewige Wiederkunft, Wille zur Macht*.... He is a member of the Germania Männerchor.... His favorite philosopher happens to be Nietzsche.... He perhaps a little flauntingly dangles before us the seductive names of Wedekind, Schnitzler, Bierbaum... So that presently one begins to suspect that his quarrel with American criticism is not so much in behalf of beauty as in behalf of a *Kultur* which has been too inhospitably received by such of his fellow-citizens as look to another *Stammvater* than his.<sup>31</sup>

To the credit of Professor Sherman, it must be said that he was largely adhering to the truth. Mencken did indeed resort frequently to German words and expressions in his writings, he did belong to the Männerchor, he did admire Nietzsche, he did recommend the works of German authors during his days as a literary critic for the *Smart Set*, and he did attempt to introduce his readers to German *Kultur*. The objectionable parts of the article are the innuendoes and insinuations of its author.

For the present purpose, however, Professor Sherman's enumeration of H. L. Mencken's associations with German *Kultur* will serve as an outline for the following chapters.

### III

Mencken's essays are, in the words of Henry A. Pochmann, "from a *Schimpflexikon* that bristles with German terms and allusions."<sup>32</sup> A brief sampling, in addition to that given by Professor Sherman, is a sufficient indication of Mencken's eclectic usage of German words. In his *Book of Prefaces* one finds *Weltschmerz*, *Schnorrer*, *Ja-sager*, and *Herrenmoral*; in the *Prejudices*, *Sturm und Drang*, *Kriegslieferant*, and *Nietzschefresser*; *Newspaper Days* contains *Tonkünstler*, *Polizeistunde*, *Totsäufer* (a brewery's customer's man), and *Doppelschraubenschnellpostdampfer*; and *In Defense of Women*, appropriately, *Schafskopf*, *Schrecklichkeit*, *Hausfrau*, and *Kirche, Küche und Kinder*.<sup>33</sup> Occasionally, complete phrases or quotations appear, such as: "Still wie die Nacht, tief wie das Meer," "Ach, München, wie bist du so schön!" "Erinnerungen aus dem fröhlichen Bubenleben," "Es ist nichts fürchterlicher als Einbildungskraft ohne Geschmack," or Jean Paul Richter's "...weil Verschiedenheit des Nichts/mehr ergötzt als Einerleiheit des Etwas."<sup>34</sup> Mencken also wrote three essays with German titles: "Totentanz," which is a somewhat apocalyptic description of the hectic way of life in New York City; "Bilder aus schöner Zeit," consisting of nostalgic reminiscences of the pre-Prohibition era; and "Dichtung und Wahrheit," in which Mencken summarizes his preferences in



poetry with the rather un-Goethean statement, "I dislike poetry of intellectual content as much as I dislike women of intellectual content—and for the same reason."<sup>35</sup>

Mencken's choice and application of German words shows that he does not employ them to express himself more precisely, but to enrich and color his style. Nietzsche and James Huneker have been identified as the predecessors of Mencken's "advanced" individualism,<sup>36</sup> but they were also the predecessors of his "advanced" literary style. Mencken was fond of Nietzsche's multilingual puns and felt that the philosopher's greatest service to his own country was as a teacher of writing who "taught the Germans that their language had a snap in it as well as sighs and gargles;" in describing Huneker's style as staccato, ironical, witty, galloping, playful, polyglot, and allusive, Mencken could have referred to his own manner of writing.<sup>37</sup>

Mencken's serious and scholarly approach to the subject of language is confirmed by his great philological work, *The American Language: An Inquiry into the Development of English in the United States*. Most critics consider it to be Mencken's most lasting contribution to posterity,<sup>38</sup> but Professor Sherman thought it was "overambitiously designed as a wedge to split asunder the two great English-speaking peoples."<sup>39</sup> In addition to other topics, this comprehensive work is devoted to the study of the German language in America. Mencken draws upon hundreds of sources to support his statements, and even quotes Jacob Grimm in explaining why English has become the world's leading language: "In riches, good sense and terse convenience (Reichtum, Vernunft und gedrängter Fuge) no other of the living languages may be put beside it."<sup>40</sup> The Germans, Mencken asserts, have always constituted the largest body of people of non-British stock in this country, but almost all the German words in the American vocabulary seem to have appeared after the War of 1812.<sup>41</sup> This is explained by the lack of contact between the early Germans and Americans, "for the Germans had a numerous colony only in Pennsylvania, and there they kept

to themselves."<sup>42</sup> Mencken also deals with a story, still believed by many German-Americans, that a proposal before Congress, to make German the official language of the United States, was rejected only after the Speaker of the House, Muhlenberg, had cast the deciding vote against it. In 1931, it was discovered that this proposal was simply to provide for the publication of some laws in German translation, for the benefit of immigrants who had not yet learned English.<sup>43</sup> Discussing loan-words in American, Mencken mentions that the Germans "left indelible marks upon American, and particularly upon the spoken American of the common people. The everyday vocabulary shows many German words and turns of phrase," for example: *pumpernickel*, *lager-beer*, *wiener*, *frankfurter*, *schnitzel*, *schweizer* (cheese), *hamburger*, *kindergarten*, and *katzenjammer*.<sup>44</sup> A footnote points out that the majority of these terms apply to eating and drinking. "They mirror the profound effect of German immigration upon American drinking habits and the American cuisine."<sup>45</sup> It is the purpose of the work as a whole to demonstrate that the American language has emerged as a language quite different from English. Mencken maintains that an awareness of the growing differences between English and American is illustrated by the fact that some of the popular German *Sprachführer* now appear in separate editions, *Amerikanisch* and *Englisch*.<sup>46</sup> He frequently refers to German sources, since the peculiarities of the American language have attracted the particular attention of German philologists from the very first. The third edition of *The American Language* was translated into German by Dr. Heinrich Spies, who also lectured on the subject in Berlin.

A further example of Mencken's close acquaintance with German is his translation of Nietzsche's *Der Antichrist*. Mencken said that he did not begin the translation with any hope of supplanting earlier English editions, but simply for his own pleasure.<sup>47</sup> As the work on the translation advanced, he began to see new ways "of putting some flavour of Nietzsche's peculiar style into the English." The result has

been considered to be "in keeping with the finest of literary workmanship."<sup>48</sup>

#### IV

Early in his career, while preparing a book on George Bernard Shaw, Mencken was introduced to the writings of Nietzsche. Immediately, the German philosopher captured his interest, and Mencken proceeded to read all of his works, most of them in the original German, since only five had been translated into English at the time.<sup>49</sup> In 1908, Mencken published *The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche*, in which he summarized and interpreted the principal ideas of the philosopher. This was the first formal exposition of Nietzsche in America, and from this time on, Mencken considered himself both a journalist and a critic.<sup>50</sup> Probably no other single man left as deep an impression on Mencken's mind as Nietzsche. "Rid the world of Nietzsche," declared Mencken, "and the year of grace 1909 could show no living philosophy."<sup>51</sup> His interpretation of Nietzsche's philosophy is an effort to make Nietzsche comprehensible to the general reader.<sup>52</sup> He was praised by some critics, who thought that his effort was brilliant, comprehensive, and most illuminating,<sup>53</sup> and accused by others of having created Nietzsche in his own image.<sup>54</sup> According to Mencken, the Nietzschean creed, if reduced to a single phrase, "may be called a counterblast to sentimentality—and it is precisely by breaking down sentimentality with its fondness for moribund gods, that human progress is made."<sup>55</sup> The name Nietzsche and echoes of Nietzsche's philosophy are prevalent throughout the works of Mencken. Therefore, it is not surprising that Mencken was labelled a Nietzschean. "You are in the main a disciple of Nietzsche," La Monte writes, "or, in other words, you are an individualist whose ideal is a splendid aristocratic oligarchy of Beyond Man ruling over a hopelessly submerged rabble."<sup>56</sup> Mencken did not deny that this was the case, though Nietzsche is not the only German philosopher to appear in his writings. In

*Treatise on Right and Wrong*, he also refers to Leibniz, Lichtenberg, Kant, Fichte, Schleiermacher, Schelling, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Feuerbach, and Spengler.<sup>57</sup>

## V

If it may be inferred that Nietzsche directly influenced Mencken's philosophy of life, then it may also be implied that Goethe indirectly influenced his literary criticism.

At the time Mencken joined the *Smart Set* as a literary critic, a fierce battle was in progress between two schools of American literary criticism. On one side was a group known as "The New Humanists," under the leadership of Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More, whose criticism was based upon strict adherence to "decorum, harmony, and standards referable to the inner and moral man."<sup>58</sup> For some time, Professor Sherman was their most aggressive spokesman. Opposing this group, were the representatives of the "New Criticism," among them James Huneker, Percival Pollard, and in a more indirect way, Professor Spingarn. This group rejected the Puritan ethics of the "Humanists" and fought for the acceptance of new criteria of criticism which would do justice to the literary efforts of the younger writers, such as Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, and Stephen Crane. When H. L. Mencken published his *Book of Prefaces* in 1917, he became the most active spokesman of this group. In the four essays contained in this work, he attacks the Victorian Puritanism and the Comstockery of "Humanists," who had condemned Dreiser's novels on moral grounds. Mencken singles out Professor Sherman, "not because his pompous syllogisms have any plausibility in fact or logic, but simply he may well stand as archetype of the booming, indignant corrupter of criteria, the moralist turned critic."<sup>59</sup> In his preface to the book, Mencken briefly considers the function of literary criticism: "to find out what an author is trying to do and to beat a drum for him when it is worth doing and he does it well."<sup>60</sup>

In the same year in which Mencken's *Prefaces* appeared, Professor Spingarn's *Creative Criticism*, the theory of "New Criticism," was published. Spingarn finds that "critics everywhere except in America have ceased to test literature by the standards of ethics, and recognise in art an inevitable expression of a side of man's nature that can find no other realisation except in it."<sup>61</sup> Accepting this concept, that art is expression, Professor Spingarn elaborates on it and traces its origin: "The first to give philosophic precision to the theory of expression, and to found a method of Criticism based upon it, were the Germans of the age that stretches from Herder to Hegel. . . . It was they who first realised that art has performed its function when it has expressed itself; it was they who first conceived of Criticism as the study of expression." Referring to Goethe's views on criticism, Spingarn arrives at the fundamental questions of creative criticism: "What has the writer proposed to himself to do? and how far has he succeeded in carrying out his own plan?" Carlyle, in his essay on Goethe, practically uses Goethe's own words to define the first duty of the critic.<sup>62</sup>

The parallels between this concept of the function of criticism and that of Mencken, as stated in his preface to the *Prefaces*, are quite obvious. In any case, they were apparent to Mencken, who in 1918, in his essay "Criticism of Criticism of Criticism," enthusiastically endorsed most of Spingarn's theories. "In a nation of evangelists," Mencken writes, it is difficult to shake the authority of the moral *Privatdozenten* who "judge a work of art, not by its clarity and sincerity, not by the force and charm of its ideas, not by the technical virtuosity of the artist, not by his originality and artistic courage, but simply and solely by his orthodoxy." Genuine criticism, continues Mencken, is impossible to such men, for the critic, to interpret his artist, must be able to "feel and comprehend the vast pressure of the creative passion. . . . This is why all the best criticism of the world has been written by men who have had within them, not only the reflective and analytical faculty of critics, but also the gusto

of artists—Goethe, Carlyle, Lessing, Schlegel," a.o. The Spingarn-Carlyle-Goethe theory<sup>63</sup> places a heavy burden upon the writer, but it is sound and stimulating, and expresses the true function of criticism.<sup>64</sup>

In summing up Mencken's position as a literary critic, one might once more turn to Professor Sherman, whose remarks, though somewhat exaggerated, are quite to the point: "He [Mencken] leaps from the saddle with sabre flashing, stables his horse in the church, shoots the priests, hangs the professors, exiles the Academy, burns the library and the university, and, amid the smoking ashes, erects a new school of criticism on modern German principles, which he traces through Spingarn to Goethe."<sup>65</sup> It may now be of interest to examine the extent of H. L. Mencken's acquaintance with German literature, and the critical opinions he held of it.

It is impossible, of course, to determine all of the German authors and works Mencken may have read. One clue to his reading may be found in that portion of his library which he donated to the Pratt Library, and which contains over sixty German books. Among the better known authors represented are: Hermann Bahr, Otto Julius Bierbaum (5 vols.), Wilhelm Busch (sämtliche Werke), Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Walter Hasenclever (3), Heinrich Heine, Walter von Molo, Roda-Roda (13), Johannes Schlaf, Arthur Schnitzler (3), Ludwig Thoma (6), and Frank Wedekind. Many of these books contain personal dedications of their authors to Percival Pollard, the author of *Masks and Minstrels of New Germany* (Boston, 1911), and probably came into Mencken's possession after Pollard's death. Mencken had become a close friend and admirer of Pollard, who seems to have introduced him to many of the younger German writers, and H. L. Mencken discloses that he "had affection for him as well as respect, for he was a capital companion at the *Biertisch* and was never too busy to waste a lecture on my lone ear—say on Otto Julius Bierbaum (one of his friends)."<sup>66</sup> Evidence for the incompleteness of the Pratt collection is the absence of Sudermann and Hauptmann, the two writers that Mencken

discussed at great length, and whose works, at one time, were on his shelves.<sup>67</sup>

In order to establish a more conclusive picture of H. L. Mencken's relationship to German literature, his writings as a literary critic for the *Smart Set* must be examined. From the following comment, it seems that he was not overly impressed by contemporary German literature: "You will find no Goethes and Schillers, nor even Lessings, Klopstocks, Herders and Heines in Germany today, for the Germans are too busy in their factories and shipyards to be producing great literature."<sup>68</sup> In his opinion, Clara Viebig, Gustav Frenssen, Arthur Schnitzler, or Thomas Mann, were not comparable to novelists such as Joseph Conrad.<sup>69</sup> There is little in German fiction, he declares in an essay on Dreiser, which may be favorably compared with some of Dreiser's works, "either as a study of man or as a work of art."<sup>70</sup> Mencken attributes this unfortunate situation to the fact that "the naturalistic movement of the eighties was launched by men whose eyes were upon the theatre." Mencken felt that only a few of the novels produced by this movement were "respectable," including Gustav Frenssen's *Jörn Uhl*, Clara Viebig's *Das tägliche Brot*, and Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*. These are the exceptions, however, and cannot be considered evidence of a "national quality." Mencken concludes that "all of these German naturalists—and they are the only German novelists worth considering—share the weakness of Zola, their *Stammvater*. They, too, fall into the morass that engulfed *Fécondité*, and make sentimental propaganda." This, to the disciple of Nietzsche, was an unpardonable sin.

There is little evidence that Mencken was familiar with any German writers other than his contemporaries, save Goethe and Heine. In reviewing Heine's *Atta Troll*, Mencken maintains that the poem, if understood as a satire on democracy and feudalism, "resolves itself into a pre-Nietzschean travesty in the best Nietzschean manner, a riotous attack upon all the pet ideal of the Philistine."<sup>71</sup> The references to Goethe, which are found frequently in Mencken's works, indicate that

he did not admire Goethe so much as a poet, but as a great historical personality. In disagreeing with the "theory that inferior stocks often produce superior individuals" he points out that they have never produced a Goethe: "The Goethes all come from superior stocks." On another occasion Mencken claims that "all of the more successful religious leaders have been notoriously fools . . . and in the whole history of the world there is no record of one even remotely comparable to a man as Newton or Goethe."<sup>72</sup> In his longest commentary on Goethe, Mencken describes him as "one of those rare and massive geniuses who defy all labelling." Mencken sees in Goethe "the final flower and perfect epitome of that most glorious of centuries, the Eighteenth." In conclusion, Mencken adds that the name of Goethe may remain vague to the world at large, "but to the minority whose concern is with ideas he is perhaps the most precious possession that the last three centuries have vouchsafed humanity."<sup>73</sup> Whether Mencken actually had read any of Goethe's works or was merely acquainted with them through secondary sources is not evident from his writings.

It is quite clear, though, that Mencken had read many of the works of contemporary German writers, as can be seen in his book reviews in the *Smart Set*. One of the first German authors Mencken mentions is Frank Wedekind, whose *Awakening of Spring* he considered to be a remarkable drama, "marked chiefly by a delicate vein of melancholy poetry." He feels that the author is not merely a "literary anatomist," for he often penetrates the very souls of his characters, so that the tragedy of the drama is seen through their childish eyes. Mencken regrets that the play is "impossible of performance before chemically pure Americans."<sup>74</sup> Of the play *Such is Life*. Mencken says, "it is a delicious reductio ad absurdum of the whole pompous piffle of royalty, and when it was first presented in Germany . . . it set the whiskers of the empire to wagging furiously."<sup>75</sup>

Mencken once remarked that among his intellectual gods were Hermann Sudermann and Gerhart Hauptmann.<sup>76</sup> He



thought that Sudermann was one of the foremost of living German authors, and with the exception of Hauptmann, there was no one to compare with him. He considered the drama *Magda (Heimat)* to be the best play to come out of Germany since Ibsen's days in Munich. Later, when the play was viewed as a failure by most critics, he revised his opinion. Mencken felt that there was only one thing which prevented Sudermann from crossing "the shadowy line separating the merely respectable from the incomparable. That one thing is an individual, comprehensible and credible philosophy of life," which every "amaginative writer of true genius" must possess. But Sudermann, it seemed to Mencken, was "eternally flabbergasted by life."<sup>77</sup> In later years, Mencken's praise of Sudermann was much more reserved. In 1923, a reference to Sudermann as "the greatest living German dramatist and novelist," caused Mencken to reply, "this is nonsense. Gerhart Hauptmann is a far better dramatist, and Thomas Mann a far better novelist."<sup>78</sup> Mencken did, however, declare Sudermann to be the absolute master of the short story. Concerning two stories in the *Indian Lily* he said that "nothing better has been done in our time, even in English, the language of the short story."<sup>79</sup>

The first work of Hauptmann which Mencken reviewed was the *Weavers*, which he found to be very impressive and one of the most striking and influential of modern German plays.<sup>80</sup> He received the novel, *The Fool in Christ*, with mixed feelings. Mencken conceded it was a careful, incisive, and captivating work, but disliked "its accentuation of the disputative side," and considered it to be too long for American tastes.<sup>81</sup> In a later review he called the novel "big in plan but wobbly in execution," and regarded Hauptmann's second novel, *Atlantis*, as "psychologically incredible" and "almost unreadable." In his estimation, Sudermann was still "vastly superior as writer of prose fiction."<sup>82</sup> He did not hesitate, though, to admit that Hauptmann was "a master dramatist of a very high order, and perhaps the greatest now living in the world." H. L. Mencken was particularly impressed by

Hauptmann's astonishing versatility, and granted that one would have to return to Goethe, to find "a scrivener with more hands."<sup>83</sup>

Mencken reviewed three more German authors in the *Smart Set*: Gustav Frenssen, Arthur Schnitzler, and Ludwig Thoma. He was unimpressed by Frenssen's novel, *Klaus Hinrich Baas*, but thought it would probably help the author to gain a following in America.<sup>84</sup> Schnitzler's *Professor Bernhardt*, Mencken suggested, was not very suitable for American audiences.<sup>85</sup> His enthusiasm was aroused by Ludwig Thoma, whom Mencken held to be more a man of the world than the American comic writers who, "almost without exception, show a naif and somewhat provincial character." He praised Thoma's work as editor of *Simplicissimus*, "the greatest of all comic papers," found his play *Moral* to be a masterpiece of irony, and credited Thoma with a "Rabelaisian capacity for burlesque," "an air of sophistication" and "a keen critical sense."<sup>86</sup>

With the founding of the *American Mercury* in 1924, H. L. Mencken began to focus his attention on the political developments in America, and to lose all interest in literature and literary criticism.<sup>87</sup> As a result, Mencken published only two brief book reviews on the works of German authors in the *Mercury*. The first one deals with Roda-Roda's collection of anecdotes on America, *Ein Frühling in Amerika*, which Mencken found amusing and burlesque, yet fundamentally true.<sup>88</sup> The second is a review of Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, "unquestionably the best story of the World War so far published" and "a powerful tract for peace."<sup>89</sup> Another comment on German literature is found in an essay on female authors, in which Mencken contends that "it would be difficult to think of a contemporary German novelist of sounder dignity than Clara Viebig, Helene Böhlau or Ricarda Huch."<sup>90</sup>

The claim that H. L. Mencken "came to be as much at home in German letters as in the literature of his own land"<sup>91</sup> seems only partly justified. It appears that Mencken had

little knowledge about the German literature which preceded his own age, for it is difficult to imagine that he would never have mentioned it. Furthermore, it is apparent that even among his contemporaries only one group attracted his attention: the writers he classified as naturalists.<sup>92</sup> Mencken's attitude toward the works of Thomas Mann substantiates this. He praised *Buddenbrooks* as a naturalistic novel, but had little regard for Mann's later works: "The case of Mann reveals a tendency that is visible in nearly all of his contemporaries. Starting out as an agnostic realist . . . he has gradually taken on a hesitating sort of romanticism, and in one of his later books, *Königliche Hoheit* . . . he ends upon a note of sentimentalism borrowed from Wagner's 'Ring'."<sup>93</sup> Mencken's essays and book reviews suggest that he was well acquainted with the writings of only a relatively small group of contemporary German authors.

H. L. Mencken once said that he is a critic of ideas. The ideas he criticized most consistently and fervently were those he associated with the English traditions in America. Like many of the young Americans of his day, he resented the Anglo-Saxon ascendancy. His German background brought H. L. Mencken into early contact with German culture, and there he found what he had longed for: an antithesis to English-American culture. The more significant connections of Mencken with German *Kultur* are revealed, it is hoped, in this paper. In addition, there are many minor ones, such as his great love of German music—Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, and Brahms were his favorites—or his frequent travels to Germany.<sup>95</sup> Whenever he was unable to enjoy *Gemütlichkeit* in its native setting, he tried to find it in the German restaurants of Baltimore and New York. Among the many elements of German culture, the following seem to have attracted H. L. Mencken most strongly: the anti-sentimentalism of Nietzschean philosophy and naturalistic literature, German music, and bourgeois *Gemütlichkeit*.

NOTES

A slightly different version of the final part (V) of this paper was published earlier under the title "A Dose of **Kultur**" in **Menckenia** (Fall, 1966). It is reprinted here with the permission of the editor of **Menckenia**.

1. Published in Leipzig, 1715, under the title **De Charlataneria Eruditorum**.

2. "The second **n** in the name was a sediment from the Latin form, **Menckenius**." (Johann Burkhard Mencken, **The Charlatanry of the Learned**, trans. F. E. Litz, notes and introd. H. L. Mencken [New York, 1937], footnote, pp. 7-8).

3. Gustave L. Roosbroeck, in his pamphlet **The Reincarnation of H. L. Mencken** (New York, 1925), p. 10, states that "Mencken is a reincarnation of that learned and daring ancestor of his."

4. H. L. Mencken, **Happy Days** (New York, 1940), p. 6.

5. Dieter Cunz, **The Maryland Germans** (Princeton, 1948), p. 412.

6. William Manchester, **Disturber of the Peace** (New York, 1951), p. 139.

7. **Charlatanry**, p. 44.

8. F. Schönemann, "H. L. Mencken: Ein amerikanischer Kritiker und Satirier," **Die Grenzboten** (n.p., 1921), 179.

9. **Happy Days**, p. 92.

10. **Ibid.** p. 99.

11. Isaac Goldberg, **The Man Mencken** (New York, 1925), p. 62.

12. **Happy Days**, p. 28.

13. **Ibid.**, p. 22.

14. **Ibid.**, p. 27.

15. Cf.: "Munich," **Europe after 8:15** (New York, 1914), pp. 71-106.

16. **Happy Days**, p. 170.

17. **Newspaper Days** (New York, 1941), p. 221.

18. **Ibid.**, p. 249.

19. Cunz, p. 366, gives 80,000 as the number of Germans in Baltimore around 1900.

20. **Newspaper Days**, p. 251.

21. E. G.: his friends of the Saturday Night Club, Theodore Dreiser, Louis Untermeyer.

22. **Prejudices: Third Series** (New York, 1922), pp. 35-36.

23. Trans. Sophie Kellner, **Die Neue Rundschau**, xxxix, ii, 489-495.

24. Cunz, p. 414.

25. "Henry Lewis Mencken," **Zürcher Zeitung** (April 1, 1956), p. 4.

26. See: Goldberg, pp. 208-210; Manchester, pp. 88-94; Edgar Kemler, **The Irreverent Mr. Mencken** (Boston, 1950), pp. 85-96.

27. Manchester, pp. 94-105.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 89.
29. Kemler, p. 96.
30. **A Book of Prefaces** (New York, 1917), p. 78.
31. "Beautifying American Literature," **Nation** (New York, 1917), CV, 593-594.
32. **German Culture in America** (Madison, 1957), p. 491.
33. Pp. 97, 173, 208, 236; III, 23, 45, 144; 218, 252, 253, 85; (New York, 1918), pp. 7, 54, 120.
34. **Europe**, p. 7; **The Artist** (Boston, 1912), p. 32, and **Europe**, p. 88; **Heathen Days** (New York, 1943), p. vii; **Prefaces**, p. 140; **A Little Book in C Major** (New York, 1916), p. 71.
35. **Prejudices: Fourth Series** (New York, 1924), pp. 145, 297; **Damn! A Book of Calumny** (New York, 1918), p. 70.
36. Louis Kronenberger, "H. L. Mencken," **After the Genteel Tradition** (New York, 1936), p. 102.
37. **Prefaces**, pp. 179-181.
38. Kronenberger, p. 110.
39. **Americans** (New York, 1922), p. 10.
40. **Language**, p. 599.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 619.
42. **Language: Supplement I**, p. 198.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 139.
44. **Language**, p. 155.
45. *Ibid.*, p. 488.
46. *Ibid.*, p. 85.
47. **The Antichrist** (New York, 1920), p. 35.
48. Edward Stone, "Henry Louis Mencken's Debt to Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche," (diss. Austin, 1937), p. iv.
49. Ernest Boyd, **H. L. Mencken** (New York, 1927), p. 27.
50. Donald M. Goodfellow, "H. L. Mencken: Scourge of the Philistines," **Six Satirists** (Pittsburgh, 1965), p. 89.
51. "What about Nietzsche," **Smart Set**, XXIX (Nov., 1909), 153-157.
52. **The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche**, 3rd ed. (Boston, 1913), p. vii.
53. Fred L. Pattee, **Side-Lights on American Literature** (New York, 1922), p. 72; Goldberg, p. 159.
54. Boyd, p. 29; Manchester, p. 35.
55. **Nietzsche**, p. x.
56. **Men versus the Man** (New York, 1910), p. 1.
57. (New York, 1934), pp. 75, 76, 208, 312.
58. Goodfellow, p. 91.
59. **Prefaces**, p. 138.

60. **Prefaces**, n. p.
61. **Creative Criticism**, new ed. (New York, 1931), p. 29.
62. **Ibid.**, pp. 14-17.
63. Actually, "Spingarn-Croce-Carlyle-Goethe," but Croce is irrelevant for the present discussion.
64. All quotes from: "Criticism of Criticism of Criticism," **Prejudices: I**, pp. 9-21.
65. **Americans**, p. 5.
66. **Prejudices: I**, p. 131.
67. See: **Book of Calumny**, p. 54.
68. **Smart Set**, XXX (1910), 153.
69. **Prefaces**, p. 62.
70. And all further quotes in this par.: **Prefaces**, pp. 77-78.
71. **Smart Set**, XLII (Feb., 1914), 156.
72. Both quotes: **Minority Report** (New York, 1956), pp. 189, 255.
73. "Goethe as Viewed by American Writers and Scholars; A Symposium," **Monatshefte**, XXIV (March-April, 1932), 88-89.
74. **Smart Set**, XXX (March, 1910), 158.
75. **Ibid.**, XXXVIII (Oct., 1912), 152.
76. Kemler, p. 89.
77. **Smart Set**, XXX (April, 1910), 153-154.
78. **Evening Sun** (June 30, 1923), n.p.
79. **Smart Set**, LXXII (Sept., 1923), 144.
80. **Ibid.**, XXXIV (Aug., 1911), 152.
81. **Ibid.**, XXXIX (March, 1913), 153.
82. **Ibid.**, XXXIX (March, 1913), 155.
83. **Ibid.**, XXXIX (March, 1913), 153-154.
84. **Ibid.**, XXXIV (June, 1911), 154.
85. **Ibid.**, XLI (Dec., 1913), 157.
86. **Ibid.**, LII (May, 1917), 398-399.
87. See: Charles Angoff, **H. L. Mencken: A Portrait from Memory** (New York, 1956), p. 253; Manchester, pp. 219-223; Kemler, pp. 163-171.
88. **Mercury**, I (April, 1924), 507-508.
89. **Ibid.**, XVII (Aug., 1929), 510.
90. **Prejudices: III**, p. 203.
91. Pochmann, p. 491.
92. See his statement, p. 23.
93. **Prefaces**, p. 78.
94. **Newspaper Days**, p. 74.
95. Mencken visited Germany at least six times (his biographies contain contradictory information on this).