

H. L. Mencken

(1880-1956)

“Puritanism as a Literary Force” (1917)

reprinted in *A Book of Prefaces* (Garden City 1927)

## INTRODUCTION

In the early 20th century, H. L. Mencken succeeded the genteel William Dean Howells as the dominant critical voice in American literary culture, moving beyond inhibited “Realism” and embodying the revolt against Victorianism. Hence he championed Sinclair Lewis and Theodore Dreiser, and some mediocre writers. He also appreciated the more sophisticated British Modernist Joseph Conrad. Nevertheless, his taste is very limited, as is evident in his attack on “Puritanism as a Literary Force.” In descending order of importance, this essay is most significant for:

The parallel between the repressive Victorian puritanism that Mencken laments and Feminism later in the 20th century. Victorianism was 19th century Feminism. Mencken is complaining that moral pressure from women had feminized American literature, making it timid and trite: “mawkish and dishwatery” (225) with a “maiden-like reserve” (205)—“no more than a romantic restatement of all the old platitudes and formulae.” (219) He is describing what came to be called in literary history “The Genteel Tradition.” Mencken is confirmed by the objective feminist scholar Ann Douglas in her study *The Feminization of American Culture* (1977). His criticism also applies to political correctness during the Feminist Period (1970-present): “A novel or a play is judged among us, not by its dignity of conception, its artistic honesty, its perfection of workmanship, but almost entirely by its orthodoxy of doctrine, its platitudinousness, its usefulness as a moral tract.” (202)

2. The evidence that “puritanism” is psychological (archetypal), transcending specific cases, a moralistic vertical consciousness prone to “purify” and hence inevitably to suppress the liberty of others, given the power. Mencken: “Books are still judged among us, not by their form and organization as works of art, their accuracy and vividness as representations of life, their validity and perspicacity as interpretations of it, but by their conformity to the national prejudices, their accordance with set standards of niceness and propriety.” (225)
3. The major canonical writers missing from Mencken’s survey of literary history: Anne Bradstreet, Edward Taylor, Emily Dickinson and Kate Chopin were undiscovered, unpublished or unavailable to him. He would not have liked them anyway--too metaphysical, complex and moral. Mencken does not mention two of the greatest American writers, Thoreau and Melville, evidence of their eclipse.
4. The argument against Puritanism as a literary force: Mencken was a great champion of free speech. However, unlike Hawthorne, he is unaware of the psychological nature of puritanism and one-sided (puritan) about historical Puritanism. As recognized by Thorstein Veblen and many others, Calvinism and its Puritan legacy have been an immensely positive influence upon American literature, economics and culture, informing--pro and later con--most classics of American literature through *Huckleberry Finn* (1884), inducing for example an allegorical perception of Nature in Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville and Dickinson. With respect to the economy, Calvinism is why North America is different from South America.
5. The way in attacking the puritanism of others Mencken displays his own puritanism.

His knowledge of literary history is extensive but sketchy and his aesthetic judgments are severely restricted by his own taste as a rationalist and atheist. He is especially limited by his aversion to transcendental modes, religion, moral content and complexity. Consequently he belittles Emerson and Hawthorne. He appreciates *Huckleberry Finn* but dislikes Twain's Calvinistic moralism. He grossly undervalues Henry James and Stephen Crane, even overlooking works that seem consistent with his taste, such as *Maggie* and *The Red Badge of Courage* and stories by Ambrose Bierce: "the great war has left no more mark upon American letters than if it had never been fought." (216)

On the contrary, for an inclusive appreciation of Civil War literature broadly defined, see *Patriotic Gore* (1966) by Edmund Wilson. Mencken appreciates Poe (which James called the mark of a "decidedly primitive stage of reflection"), Whitman, Dreiser and Lewis--none of them difficult to understand. Ironically, in his attack on Philistinism, he exposes his own Philistinism. No matter. Mencken was honest, intelligent, courageous, informative, useful and entertaining.

Over half his essay is a compelling attack on censorship by crusading moralists, in particular Anthony Comstock (1844-1915), a Victorian crusader who imposed his taste upon American culture from 1873 to 1933, years after his death. During his service in the Civil War, Comstock objected to the use of profanity by other troops. He later became a U.S. postal inspector with police powers and the right to carry a weapon. In 1873 he founded the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, the first of many such organizations he inspired, and in the same year he persuaded the Congress to pass the Comstock Law prohibiting obscenity and birth control information from the U.S. mail. Some anatomy books could not be mailed to medical students. Comstock also had clashes with free love advocates and with radicals including Margaret Sanger and Emma Goldman.

When Comstock attacked a play by George Bernard Shaw, the dramatist responded by coining the term "comstockery." In return, Comstock called Shaw "an Irish smut dealer." His successors in the censorship movement succeeded in banning by law such works as Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, Harold Frederick's *The Damnation of Theron Ware*, Theodore Dreiser's "*The Genius*," Sherwood Anderson's *Dark Laughter*, Upton Sinclair's *Oil!*, Bertrand Russell's *What I Believe*, Lenin's *State and Revolution*, the works of Trotsky and many works by Boccaccio, Voltaire, Rabelais, Balzac and Zola. In 1934 writers won free speech under federal law, though not from the opinions of editors, with a judge's landmark decision that *Ulysses* (1922) by James Joyce was not obscene. Ernest Hemingway had smuggled copies into the country from Canada by hiding them under his overcoat.

Comstock boasted that he had destroyed 15 tons of literature and nearly 4 million pictures and had driven 15 people to suicide, including a woman convicted of mailing sexually explicit marriage manuals: "In the 41 years I have been here I have convicted persons enough to fill a passenger train of 61 coaches." Among his righteous campaigns was one directed at sporting goods dealers for openly displaying jock straps. The only theatrical production he ever attended was at P. T. Barnum's in New York, provoking him to declare, "It seems as though we are living in an age of lust. Every play nowadays cannot succeed, or does succeed in proportion to the extent to which they cater to the passions and lusts."

Michael Hollister (2015)

from "Puritanism as a Literary Force" (1917)

#### AMERICAN LITERARY HISTORY

"The literature of the nation, even the literature of the enlightened minority, has been under harsh Puritan restraints from the beginning. (199) On the ethical side...Calvinism is dying a much harder death, and we are still a long way from the enlightenment...the prevailing American view of the world and its mysteries is still a moral one, and no other human concern gets half the attention that is endlessly lavished upon the problem of conduct, particularly of the other fellow.... (198)

One quickly discerns two main streams of influence. On the one hand, there is the influence of the original Puritans--whether of New England or of the South--, who came to the New World with a ready-made philosophy of the utmost clarity, positiveness and inclusiveness of scope, and who attained to such a position of political and intellectual leadership that they were able to force it almost unchanged upon the whole population, and to endow it with such vitality that it successfully resisted alien opposition later on...against the rise of that dionysian spirit, that joyful acquiescence in life...[contending forces dramatized by Hawthorne in "The Maypole of Merry Mount"]. (207-08)

The frank theocracy of the New England colonies had scarcely succumbed to the libertarianism of a godless Crown before there came the Great Awakening of 1734, with its orgies of homiletics...(227) The great celebrity of Emerson in New England was not the celebrity of a literary artist, but that of a theologian and metaphysician; he was esteemed in much the same way that Jonathan Edwards had been esteemed. Even down to our own time, indeed, his vague and empty philosophizing has been put above his undeniable capacity for graceful utterance... (215)

The American of the days since the Revolution has had Puritanism diligently pressed upon him...One thing is an established fact: up to the close of the eighteenth century America had no belletristic literature... (207, 209) There was a gradual letting down of Calvinism to the softness of Unitarianism, and that change was presently to flower in the vague temporizing of Transcendentalism...The American...was not so much hostile to beauty as devoid of any consciousness of it; he stood as unmoved before its phenomena as a savage before a table of logarithms. (209-10)

In those days, indeed, politics and religion coalesced in a manner not seen in the world since the Middle Ages, and the combined pull of the two was so powerful that none could quite resist it. All men of any ability and ambition turned to political activity for self-expression....Drawing the best imaginative talent into its service--Jefferson and Lincoln may well stand as examples--it left the cultivation of belles lettres, and of all other arts no less, to women and admittedly second-rate men. And when...some first-rate man gave himself over to purely aesthetic expression, his reward was not only neglect, but even a sort of ignominy, as if such enterprises were not fitting for males with hair on their chests. (213)

I need not point to Poe and Whitman, both disdained as dreamers and wasters, and both proceeded against with the utmost rigours of outraged Philistinism. (213-14) Poe sensed the Philistine pull of a Puritan civilization, as none had before him, and combated it with his whole artillery of rhetoric....(221) Its only genuine poet was permitted to die up an alley like a stray dog....(207) [Actually, Poe died in a hospital after being picked up unconscious in an alley in Baltimore.]

Cooper filled his romances, not with the people about him, but with the Indians beyond the sky-line, and made them half-fabulous to boot. Irving told fairy tales about the forgotten Knickerbockers; Hawthorne turned backward to the Puritans of Plymouth Rock; Longfellow to the Arcadians and the prehistoric Indians; Emerson took flight from earth altogether; even Poe sought refuge in a land of fantasy....(214-15) The best proofs of the Puritan influence in American letters [are] in the harsh Calvinistic fables of Hawthorne [imprecise: Hawthorne hated Calvinism as much as Mencken], and the pious gurglings of Longfellow, but also in the poetry of Bryant, the tea-party niceness of Howells... (205)

Whitman, whose career straddled, so to speak, the four years of the war, was the leader--and for a long while, the only trooper--of a double revolt. On the one hand he offered a courageous challenge to the intolerable prudishness and dirty-mindedness of Puritanism, and on the other hand he boldly sought the themes and even the modes of expression of his poetry in the arduous, contentions and highly melodramatic life that lay all about him. Whitman, however, was clearly before his time. (215-16)

In the seventies and eighties, with the appearance of such men as Henry James, William Dean Howells, Mark Twain and Bret Harte, a better day seemed to be dawning. Here, after a full century of infantile romanticizing, were four writers who at least deserved respectful consideration as literary artists...But this promise of better things was soon found to be no more than a promise. Mark Twain, after *The Gilded Age*, slipped back into Romanticism tempered by Philistinism and was presently in the era before the Civil War, and finally in the Middle Ages, and even beyond. Harte, a brilliant technician, had displayed his whole

stock when he had displayed his technique: his stories were not even superficially true to the life they presumed to depict; one searched them in vain for an interpretation of it; they were simply idle tales.

As for Howells and James, both quickly showed that timorousness and reticence which are the distinguishing marks of the Puritan, even in his most intellectual incarnations. The American scene that they depicted with such meticulous care was chiefly peopled with marionettes....(217-18) The action of all the novels of the Howells school goes on within four walls of painted canvas; they begin to shock once they describe an attack of asthma or a steak burning below stairs; they never penetrate beneath the flow of social concealments and urbanities to the passions that actually move men and women to their acts, and the great forces that circumscribe and condition personality. (275-6)

It was only the frank second-raters--e.g., Whittier and Lowell--who ventured to turn to the life around them, and the banality of the result is a sufficient indication of the crudeness of the current taste, and the mean position assigned to the art of letters...The literature of that whole period...was almost completely disassociated from life as men were then living it. Save one counts in such crude politico-puritan tracts as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, it is difficult to find a single contemporaneous work that interprets the culture of the time, or even accurately represents it...The Civil War brought that era of sterility to an end... (214-15)

Frank Norris shook up...the time with *McTeague*. Since then there have been assaults timorous and assaults head-long--by Bierce, by Dreiser...and by Upton Sinclair... (224) The American Puritan, by now, was not content with the rescue of his own soul; he felt an irresistible impulse to hand salvation on, to disperse and multiply it, to ram it down reluctant throats, to make it free, universal and compulsory. (237)

#### PHILISTINISM

American literature is set off sharply from all other literatures. In none other will you find so wholesale and ecstatic a sacrifice of aesthetic ideas, of all the fine gusto of passion and beauty, to notions of what is meet, proper and nice....(199) One observes no relaxation of the moral pressure....(202) It is in our country alone that banality in letters takes on the proportions of a national movement; it is only here that a work of the imagination is habitually judged by its sheer emptiness of ideas, its fundamental platitudinousness, its correspondence with the imbecility of mob thinking...(220) Most of our critics of experience and reputation, seem quite unable to estimate a piece of writing as a piece of writing, a work of art as a work of art; they almost inevitably drag in irrelevant gabble as to whether this or that personage in it is respectable... (200)

Fully nine-tenths of the reviews of Dreiser's *The Titan*, without question the best American novel of its year, were devoted chiefly to indignant denunciations of the morals of Frank Cowperwood, its central character. That the man was superbly imagined and magnificently depicted, that he stood out from the book in all the flashing vigour of life, that his creation was an artistic achievement of a very high order--these facts seem to have made no impression upon the reviewers whatever....(201)

We have produced so far but one genuine wit--Ambrose Bierce--and, save to a small circle, he remains unknown today. Our great humourists, including even Mark Twain, have had to take protective colouration, whether willingly or unwillingly, from the prevailing ethnical foliage, and so one finds them leveling their darts, not at the stupidities of the Puritan majority, but at the evidence of lessening stupidity in the anti-Puritan minority. In other words, they have done battle, not against, but for Philistinism--and Philistinism is no more than another name for Puritanism. Both wage a ceaseless warfare upon beauty in its every form... (202-03)

#### COMSTOCKERY

Comstock and his followers were very greatly aided by the vagueness of the law. It prohibited the use of the mails for transporting all matter of an "obscene, lewd, lascivious...or filthy" character, but conveniently failed to define these adjectives. As a result, of course, it was possible to bring an accusation against practically any publication that aroused the comstockian blood-lust, however innocently, and to subject the persons responsible for it to costly, embarrassing and often dangerous persecution....(262) Almost any

printed allusion to sex may be argued against as unbecoming in a moral republic, and once it is unbecoming it is also obscene. (264-5)

#### INTIMIDATION

The Puritan's utter lack of aesthetic sense, his distrust of all romantic emotion, his unmatchable intolerance of opposition, his unbreakable belief in his own bleak and narrow views, his savage cruelty of attack, his lust for relentless and barbarous persecution--these things have put an almost unbearable burden upon the exchange of ideas in the United States. (201-02)

No other nation has laws which oppress the arts so ignorantly and so abominably as ours do, nor has any other nation handed over the enforcement of the statutes which exist to agencies so openly pledged to reduce all aesthetic expression to the service of a stupid and unworkable scheme of rectitude. (253)

Not a few publishers, knowing the constant possibility of sudden and arbitrary attack, insert a clause in their contracts whereby an author must secure them against damage from any "immoral" matter in his book....(270) So beset, it is no wonder that the typical American maker of books becomes a timorous and ineffective fellow, whose work tends invariably toward a feeble superficiality.... (274)

In all this dread of free inquiry, this childish skittishness in both writers and public, this dearth of courage and even of curiosity, the influence of comstockery is undoubtedly to be detected. It constitutes a sinister and ever-present menace to all men of ideas; it affrights the publisher and paralyzes the author... (276)

Not a week passes that I do not decline some sound and honest piece of work for no other reason [than censorious pressure]. I have a long list of such things by American authors, well-devised, well-imagined, well-executed, respectable as human documents and as works of art--but never to be printed in mine or any other American magazine. It includes four or five short stories of the very first rank, and the best one-act play yet done, to my knowledge, by an American. All of these pieces would go into type at once on the Continent; no sane man would think of objecting to them; they are no more obscene, to a normal adult, than his own bare legs. But they simply cannot be printed in the United States, with the law what it is and the courts what they are." (277)

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