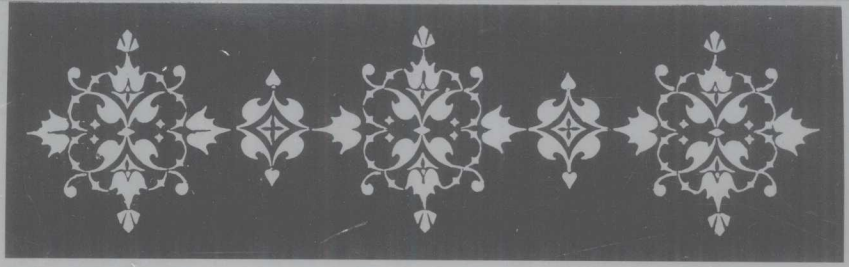

A HISTORY OF MODERN CRITICISM 1750-1950

Volume 6: American Criticism, 1900-1950

RENÉ WELLEK

LITERARY CRITICISM

A History of Modern Criticism, 1750–1950

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René Wellek

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BY RENÉ WELLEK

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IN SEVEN VOLUMES

1. *The Later Eighteenth Century*
2. *The Romantic Age*
3. *The Age of Transition*
4. *The Later Nineteenth Century*
5. *English Criticism, 1900–1950*
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The Attack on Literature & Other Essays

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1: CRITICISM BEFORE THE NEW CRITICISM

NATURALISTS, SYMBOLISTS, AND IMPRESSIONISTS

IN THE fourth volume of this *History* Henry James and William Dean Howells were the last American critics discussed as proponents of a theory of a realism. Both James and Howells lived well into the twentieth century. The prefaces to James's New York edition of his novels (1907–17) were, however, hardly noticed in their time. James and Howells were far from dominating the critical scene even in the eighties and nineties of the century. Then, in general, the United States was still ruled by what, in 1911, Santayana labeled the "Genteel Tradition," a variant of Victorianism, of vapid, derivative idealism. The representative figure was Edmund Clarence Stedman (1833–1908), a poet, anthologist, editor of poets, author of *The New York Stock Exchange: Its History* (1905), and a prolific reviewer and critic. In 1891 he delivered a series of lectures on *The Nature and Elements of Poetry* in which poetry is defined romantically as "rhythmical, imaginative language, expressing the invention, taste, thought, passion, and insight, of the human soul" (44). In practice, Stedman praises melancholia (Dürer's woodcut is the frontispiece), rejects "art for art's sake" and exalts both truth, ethical insight and imagination, "the faculty divine." "Poetic expression is that of light from a star, our straightest message from the inaccessible human soul" (259). It is all high-minded, tolerant (even Whitman is praised), vague, eclectic, uncritical, and untheoretical.

The reaction was already under way by that time. It came in several different forms, mostly due to the influx of new ideas and styles from France. Naturalism in the wake of Zola found adherents and imitators. They were novelists and storytellers, hardly critics, though they stated their creed eloquently. Hamlin Garland (1860–1940) invented or borrowed the label "veritist" (similar to Italian *verismo,* possibly suggested by Eugène Véron's use) to describe his kind of naturalism in *The Crumbling Idols* (1908). He hoped to redeem American literature with it. "The pres-

ent is the vital theme: the past is dead; and the future can be trusted to look after itself" (Brown, 471). The most prominent novelist, Frank Norris (1870–1902), in *Responsibilities of a Novelist* (1903), defended the novel with a purpose recognizing, however, that the novel "preached by telling things and showing things" (Brown, 522) rather than proclaiming a thesis as Zola did in *Fécondité.*

Symbolism came also from France: or rather all the newest French authors and trends found their propagandists in America. There were sympathetic reports on the French movement in magazines very early. T. S. Perry wrote on "The Latest Literary Fashion in France," symbolism, in *The Cosmopolitan* (1892) and Aline Gorren on "The French Symbolists" in *Scribner's* (1893). Vance Thompson (1863–1925), fresh from Paris, edited the oddly named review *M'lle New York* for which he wrote essays collected in a sumptuous illustrated volume *French Portraits* (1900). The essay on Mallarmé (originally 1895) conveys some information on his theories and attempts even an explication of some of his more accessible poems. But the frontispiece is a large photograph of Catulle Mendès, the last of the Parnassians. Thompson preferred Mendès, Jean Moréas, and Albert Mockel to the poets of whom we think most highly today. The book is dedicated to James Huneker (1857–1921), who became the main expounder and importer of recent Continental literature. In 1896 he had defended the symbolist poets against the slurs of Max Nordau's *Entartung* and began to write the long series of articles on Maeterlinck, Laforgue, and many others—not bothering to conceal his dependence on Remy de Gourmont (who was also the model of Vance Thompson). Huneker dedicated his later book of essays, *Visionaries* (1905), to Gourmont and was rewarded by praise for being "one of the best informed of foreign critics, one of those who judge us [French] with the most sympathy and also with the most freedom" (Schwab, 194). This is a true description of Huneker, who must be seen as a reporter, an enthusiastic and uncritical middleman who spread the knowledge of almost any then-current European author, musician, and painter. Huneker is not ideological or exclusive. Almost everybody one can think of in England, France, Germany, Scandinavia, Italy, and even Russia is included and all the arts are combined and confused. In retrospect Huneker himself smiled at his obsession with synaesthesia. "I muddled the Seven Arts in a grand old stew. I saw music, heard color, tasted architecture, smelt sculpture, and fingered perfumes."[1] Though his methods were impressionistic, the style metaphorical and often hectic, the taste indiscriminate, ranging in American literature from *Huckleberry Finn* to *The Wings of the Dove* (Schwab, 129–30), in French from Maeterlinck to Stendhal, in Ger-

man from Sudermann to Nietzsche, Huneker was free in judging and rating his authors and getting in all kinds of trouble over it. He had praised Shaw lavishly very early. A laudatory review of *Arms and the Man* dates from 1894 but a critical essay in *Iconoclasts* (1905) provoked an insulting letter from Shaw, calling Huneker a "horribly inaccurate ruffian." He berated him: "Your head is full of romantic idolatries and you never observe anything" (Schwab, 168). After that Shaw became Huneker's special *bête noire*. *Promenades of an Impressionist* (1910), the title of one of his books, thus does not describe him fully: he was often a combative, doctrinaire critic freely venting his prejudices. But this belongs to the history of the quarrels of authors rather than to criticism. Still, Huneker fulfilled an important function in his time. Edmund Wilson thought that "it was simply the matter of communicating to the United States, then backward to what seems an incredible degree in its assimilation of cultural movements abroad, the musical and literary happenings of the preceding half-century in Europe" and testified that Huneker "chaotic and careless though he was, made you ravenous to devour his favorite writers."[2]

H. L. MENCKEN (1880–1956)

Vance Thompson, Huneker, and Percival Pollard, who wrote on *Masks and Minstrels of the New Germany* (1911), had all a Bohemian resentment against the commercial and philistine civilization around them, but their remedies were an appeal to so many diverse foreign writers that they could not make a deeper impression: they aroused only curiosity and uneasiness. Only the much younger Henry Louis Mencken was able to give the revolt against the genteel tradition a powerful voice. He was at the height of his influence only after the First World War: in 1927 his *American Mercury* sold 70,000 copies a month. But he had started to write criticism long before. In 1905 he published a small book on *George Bernard Shaw* which was largely a discussion of Shaw's themes much in the manner of Shaw's own *Quintessence of Ibsenism*. Then in 1908, a much larger book on *The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche* followed, a descriptive, summarizing, rather plodding account which puts all the emphasis on Nietzsche's attack on Christianity and its "slave morality" and sees him as a kind of social Darwinist, a propounder of the "survival of the fittest" and of a new aristocracy of amoral "supermen." Mencken also sympathized with his misogyny and his contempt for government and democracy, but the motifs in Nietzsche's thought which would attract us today escaped him entirely. Nietzsche is assimilated to Thomas Henry Huxley,

whom Mencken called "the greatest Englishman of all time."[1] These early, sober books were completely overshadowed by Mencken's enormous, indefatigable journalistic activity, since 1908 in *The Smart Set* and since 1923 in *The American Mercury.* Collections of essays, *A Book of Prefaces* (1917), and the six volumes of *Prejudices* (1919–27) established claims to permanence and with the diligently collected, witty, and thorough *The American Language* (1919) Mencken made pretensions to linguistic scholarship in his plea for the independence and vitality of the American variant of English that he insisted on considering a special language. Mencken's influence, briefly interrupted by his pro-German sympathies during the First World War, diminished rather suddenly with the Depression, as Mencken considered politics a farce and thought the poor should remain so. Edmund Wilson, a good judge in such matters, could say that "Mencken was the civilized consciousness of modern America, its learning, its intelligence and taste, realizing the grossness of its manners and mind and crying out in horror and chagrin" (quoted by Stenerson, 219). But "horror and chagrin" seem wrongly chosen terms. Mencken was rather a cheerful, genial satirist who had his fun in ridiculing the American "boob" who had imposed Prohibition, Comstockery, and the Mann Act on a gullible people. Mencken, as Wilson recognized later, "asks for nothing but his Brahms, his beer and his books, and the hilarious spectacle of his neighbors,"[2] the look at the "zoo" of American democracy (a sight he would not have exchanged for that of any other country). Still, below the gay exterior, the high jinks and the bravado, there runs a stream of melancholy, a sense of the "meaningless of life," destroyed by death, a feeling which colors Mencken's literary preferences.

Literary criticism is only a small part of Mencken's activity but it had a strong impact on the change of taste occurring in the country just before and after the First World War, which freed it from the constraints—polite, moral, and upperclass—of the preceding time. Mencken made no pretensions to theory. "Criticism itself," he declares bluntly, "at bottom, is no more than prejudice made plausible" ("A Soul's Adventures," *Smart Set* 48, 1916, 153). In a discussion of J. E. Spingarn, whose Crocean rejection of all classifications and moralizing Mencken welcomed also for its anti-academic tone, he doubted that beauty is "the apparition *in vacuo* that Dr. Spingarn seems to see. It has its social, its political, even its moral implication." "The really competent critic must be an empiricist. He must conduct his exploration with whatever means lie within the bounds of his personal limitation. He must produce his effects with whatever tools will work." Mencken would substitute for Spingarn's "creative criticism" the term "catalytic," explaining it in terms very similar to T. S.

Eliot's chemical metaphor of the poet's impersonal role. The business of the critic is "to provoke the reaction between the work of art and the spectator" ("Criticism of Criticism of Criticism," *PES*, 18–20). The assumption, though not fully pursued, would reduce the critic to a middleman, a catalyzer who at end should discreetly get out of the way. But on a later occasion Mencken rejected the assumption that "the primary motive of the critic" is pedagogical rather than the motive of the artist, "the simple desire to function freely and beautifully, to give outward and objective form to ideas that bubble inwardly and have a fascinating lure in them, to get rid of them dramatically and make an articulate noise in the world." The critic who "lacks the intellectual agility and enterprise needed to make the leap from the work of art to the vast and mysterious complex of phenomena behind it remains no more than a fugleman or policeman to his betters." "But if a genuine artist is concealed within him . . . then he moves inevitably from the work of art to life itself" ("A Footnote on Criticism," *PTS*, 84–86). The critic is swallowed up by the creative artist: "What starts out as a review of a book, becomes a fresh work of art, only indirectly related to the one that suggested it." No critic can stick to his task. He will abandon the criticism of specific works of art and set up shop as "a general merchant in general ideas, i.e. an artist working in the materials of life itself." Mencken believes in "creative criticism." The critic is "first and last, simply trying to express himself"(91). Goethe, Carlyle, Macaulay, Arnold, and Sainte-Beuve are invoked as first-rate artists. "Let us forget all the heavy effort to make a science of Criticism: it is a fine art, or nothing." Truth ceases to matter. "Is Carlyle's Frederick true? Who cares?" (95). Now Mencken also rejects the demand that criticism be "constructive" and doubts whether it ever had an effect on the writer criticized. Nor does the audience apparently matter. "The true aim of a critic is certainly not to make converts" (92). There are no immutable truths in the arts. "Criticism, at bottom, is indistinguishable from skepticism" (97). These extreme positions in the two best-known papers on criticism do not, however, define Mencken's actual practice: he is neither an impersonal catalyst nor an artist oblivious of the truth of his characterizations and judgments, even though he did express a personality and a style of thinking.

In practice, Mencken was a propagandist of the new realistic novel, which sets forth, he hopes, "not what might be true, or what ought to be true, but what actually is true" (*PTS*, 205). Mencken contrasts it with poetry, which he denounces, in a flippant article, as "beautiful balderdash" (154). It consists of denials of either objective or subjective facts. Mencken quotes Browning or rather Pippa saying, "God's in His heaven,

All's right with the world," and Henley saying, "I am the master of my fate: I am the captain of my soul," as examples of poetic untruth and acknowledges only the music of poetry. "Shakespeare ought to be ranked among the musicians, along with Beethoven. As a philosopher he was a ninth-rater" (165). He employed Hamlet "as a convenient spout for some of the finest music ever got into words" (165).

Mencken cared only for the novel and the drama of ideas. Two novelists were his central concern: Joseph Conrad and Theodore Dreiser. The praise heaped on Conrad is hyperbolical. He is "the greatest artist writing in English today" (*Smart Set* 44, 1912, 231), and even "incomparably the greatest artist who ever wrote a novel" (preface to *A Conrad Argosy,* 1942). *The Heart of Darkness* is probably "the best book of imaginative writing that the English literature of the twentieth century can yet show" (*Smart Set,* 241) and "Youth" is "perhaps the best short story ever written in English" (ibid., 96). *Lord Jim* is "the greatest novel in the language" (Nolte, 71). Though Mencken did not discover Dreiser, he became his main champion and originator of his fame. He called *Jenny Gerhardt* "the best American novel," *Sister Carrie* a momentous event in the history of American fiction. These two somewhat incongruous writers share in Mencken's mind a common outlook on life which is also his. "Like Dreiser, Conrad is forever fascinated by the 'immense difference' of things, the tragic vanity of the blind groping that we call aspiration, the profound meaninglessness of life—fascinated and left wondering" (*BP,* 11). In an elaborate comparison Mencken asserts, "Substitute the name of Dreiser for that of Conrad, and you will have to change scarcely a word" (89) in their common creed. "The struggle of man is more than impotent: it is gratuitous and purposeless." "Both novelists see human existence as a seeking without finding; both reject the prevailing interpretations of its meaning and mechanism; both take refuge in 'I do not know' " (88). Still, Mencken sees the difference: "Conrad is far more resolute, and it is easy to see why. He is, by birth and training, an aristocrat." "He has the gift of emotional detachment" (92) while Dreiser "sometimes vacillates perilously between a moral sentimentalism and a somewhat extravagant revolt" (93). The obvious motive force for this dual admiration is a feeling of kinship for the agnosticism and pessimism of the two. But Mencken does, besides, criticize and discriminate among the novels on artistic grounds. The essay on Dreiser is full of harsh judgments on some of the later novels. *The Genius,* for instance, is called "flaccid, elephantine, doltish, coarse, dismal, flatulent, ignorant, unconvincing, wearisome" (107). Later Mencken reviewed *An American Tragedy* unfavorably.[3] The novel is "a shapeless and forbidding monster—a heap-

ing cartload of raw materials for a novel, with rubbish of all sorts intermixed—a vast, sloppy, chaotic thing of 385,000 words—at least 250,000 of them unnecessary." Mencken only grants that the book "improves as it nears its shocking climax." Also Conrad, though much more unreservedly admired, was criticized in some detail. *Victory* is a melodramatic thriller, *Under Western Eyes* is a contrived study of the Russian character, *Chance* is unnecessarily labored. Mencken felt that Conrad needed promotion in America while Dreiser had to be defended against the attempts to censor or suppress him. Mencken argued against Stuart Sherman's allegation that Dreiser "imposes his own materialistic philosophy" upon his characters by perversely denying Dreiser's naturalism. "Dreiser's attitude of mind stems directly not from Zola, Flaubert, Augier and the younger Dumas, but from the Greeks" (Bode, *The Young Mencken,* 555). Mencken also promoted Sinclair Lewis, particularly *Babbitt,* for giving an accurate account of the American hinterland. But he rejected Upton Sinclair very early: In 1908 he accused him of confusing the function of the novelist with those of a crusader. *The Money-Changers* is "a somewhat florid treatise in sociology" (ibid., 103). Mencken had no sympathy with socialism.

Mencken's championship of the new American naturalism is accompanied by his unabashed admiration of quite different writers: James Branch Cabell is the topic of a highly laudatory booklet (1917) and he praised Max Beerbohm's romp, *Zuleika Dobson,* extravagantly (*Smart Set,* 1912, 134–42). Mencken managed to reconcile the admiration for the fantastic utopia of Cabell by arguing that "*Jurgen* is as realistic in manner as Zola's *La Terre,* despite its grotesque fable." Cabell's stature as an artist "depends almost wholly upon his capacity for accurate observation and realistic representation" (*PTS,* 206).

Among the English novelists, Arnold Bennett, admired for his "freedom from messianic delusion," is seen as being "left empty of passion unable to feel with his characters," paralyzed by his skepticism and irony (*PFS,* 36–37). H. G. Wells, whom Mencken had praised early for *Tono Bungay* and *The New Machiavelli,* disappointed him with his later work. "It shows the absorption of the artist in the tin-pot reformer and professional wise man" (*PFS,* 290). Mencken praised also Somerset Maugham's *Moon and Sixpence,* Aldous Huxley's *Crome Yellow,* but dismissed D. H. Lawrence and Virginia Woolf. Surprisingly, considering Mencken's general contempt for poetry and feeble interest in it (possibly E. L. Masters and Carl Sandburg excepted); he could praise Ezra Pound's *Provença* for an "arresting and amazing vigor," for its "stark, heathenish music" (*Smart Set,* 1911, 77). But T. S. Eliot's poetry remained a book with seven seals.