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The Hope of American English

*And Some Alarming Characteristics of
our Current Magazine Literature*

AT last a man has arrived who knows something about English prose style under American conditions. *The American Language*, by Mr. H. L. Mencken, not only deserves all the praise it has received as the best American word-book ever published; it deserves even higher praise for its criticism, expressed or implied, of American literary standards.

It may be that I read into it things that Mr. Mencken had not in mind and that he would not agree with me when it came to an application, but I find encouragement in what he says for my own hope that the day is approaching when the bamboo English now written in our best magazines and taught in our leading universities will be as obsolete for literary purposes as the phrase habits of Samuel Johnson.

I suppose it will have to be a gradual change. Mr. Mencken holds out no hope for the sudden blasting from the face of the earth of "Boston's best essayists since Emerson"—such as one would like to see. Ten years from now, perhaps, they will still be printing what he calls "the typical literary product of the country—a refined essay in the *Atlantic Monthly*, perhaps gently jocose but never rough—by Emerson, so to speak, out of Charles Lamb—the sort of thing one might look to be done by a somewhat advanced English curate."

Ten years from now perhaps that dear, good lady authoress, with the three names, who so largely fills the literary pages of our older magazines, will still be sweetly wondering what the May-flower thinks in June.

Now of course I do not mean, and I do not suppose Mr. Mencken means, that there is anything necessarily calamitous in our encounter with the advanced-curate kind of thing, or with the dear lady's wonderings, no matter how often it occurs. He probably does not object to an advanced curate's having his say, and I certainly do not object to a lady's wondering about May-flowers. On the contrary, a May-flower is a good enough excuse for wonder and wonder is a good enough excuse for the most exciting kind of imaginative exercise. There is no reason why the intimations of immortality conveyed to ladies by May-flowers should not be a permanent part of every thirty-five cent magazine on earth.

I do not object to the situation. I object only to one appalling circumstance. It is always the same dear lady and she is always saying exactly the same sweet things, and the language she says them in is not a living human language.

And I suppose that is Mr. Mencken's objection to his advanced-curate sort of essay—the awful iterativeness of its sub-human literary propriety.

Mimetic Gentilities

AND it is the same way with all those other things expressive of literary refinement, expressive of nothing else, but recurring with a deadly certainty, weekly, monthly, perennial, and I had feared ever-

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lasting, till I read Mr. Mencken's book. Those pious papers on the comic spirit, by American professors of English; happy thoughts on the pleasure of reading good books rather than bad; on the imperishable charm of that which is imperishably charming; on the superiority of the "things of the spirit" over other things not mentioned but presumably gross, such as things on the dinner table; humorous apologues of Dame Experience conceived as a school-mistress; tender souvenirs of quaint great-uncles; peeps at a sparrow, nesting—it would be a sin to blame them from any other point of view than that of the future of the English language, for the subjects are irreproachable and the motives that actuate the writers on them are as pure as the driven snow. But they are the mimetic gentilities of what may be called our upper middle literary class and they are not expressed in any living language. Indeed they tend to rob a language of any hope to live. They cannot long survive the kind of scrutiny that Mr. Mencken gives them and if his example is followed at all generally their doom is clearly assured. I am hoping that the publication of *The American Language* is the beginning of the end of them.

The "Green" Language

NOT, of course, that English style is a mere matter of vocabulary or that the most rollicking use of the American vernacular in utter Shakespearean defiance of propriety would bring Shakespearean results. But good writing does after all derive from an immense catholicity and a freedom of choice, not only from among words that are read but from among words that are lived with. It cannot possibly dispense with what the French call the "green" language—least of all in this country where the "green" language has already acquired a vigor and variety that is not to be found in the books. That is the main point which Mr. Mencken's volume brings out. There is more of literary quality in a bare list of his Americanisms than in a book-shelf of magazine essays, however literary their aim.

Take for example a passage from almost any serious article in an American magazine, say in regard to the reconstruction of American education after the war, for nobody has the slightest notion what he is writing about when he is writing on that subject, and there is never any idea in the article that might distract attention from the words.

"It can scarcely be denied that the vital needs of the hour call for something more than the disparate and unco-ordinated efforts which were unhappily often the mark of educational endeavor in the past. That looms large in the lesson of the war. If it has taught us nothing else the war has at least taught us the necessity of a synthetic direction of educational agencies toward a definite and realized goal, humanistic in the broad and permanent sense of the term, humanistic, that is to say, with due reference to the changing conditions of Society. The policy of drift must be abandoned once and for all and for it must be substituted a policy of steadfast, watchful — etc."

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A Comparison

NOT that I have seen this particular passage in an article on the reconstruction of education, but it might be found in any of them. It is exactly in the vein of all that I have happened to read; and in the best American magazines you will sometimes find four pages of eight hundred words apiece all made up of just such sentences.

Compare it for imaginative energy, ingenuity, humor, any literary quality you like, with the following selections from Mr. Mencken's volume:

"See the elephant, crack up, make a kick, buck the tiger, jump on with both feet, go the whole hog, know the ropes, get solid plank down, make the fur fly, put a bug in the ear, haloo, halloa, hello, and sometimes holler get the dead-wood on, die with your boots on, hornswoggle, ker-flap, ker-splash, beat it, butt in, give a show-down, cut-up, kick-in, start-off, run-in, and jump off, put it over, put it across, don't be a high-brow, road-louse, sob-sister, lounge-lizard, rube, boob, kike, has-been".

The style of this paragraph is by no means so good as would have resulted from a more careful selection from Mr. Mencken's lists, for the words are taken at random and many of them are old, but even as it is, it is immeasurably better than my educational extract and it is just as pertinent to the subject of education—probably more so. The substitution of Mr. Mencken's lists for the usual university president's magazine contribution on educational reconstruction problems would help just as much, if not more, to the solution of the problems, besides being pleasant to read. Mr. Mencken's lists might, I think, replace with advantage much of what is called "inspirational literature." "New Thought," for example, might spare itself thousands upon thousands of its pages by simple quotations from his lists.

There were many barkeepers—in better days, of course—who, if they could have learned the literary language without losing grip on their own, might have made good writers. There are no professors of English literature who could learn to write well even if you gave them all the advantages of barkeepers. They lack the barkeeper's fine, reckless imagination in the use of words. They cannot appropriate a word, or stretch it, or make it do something it had not done before, or still less create it out of nothing.

They could not even interest themselves in the "green" language; their interest arises only when it is dry. Never, like a washwoman, or a poet, could they add to the capacities of human speech. Their lives are spent in reducing them. Language would never grow if ruled by the American upper middle literary class. It would stiffen and die.

Our college chairs of English and our magazines for "cultured" persons probably do more to prevent the adequate use of our common speech than any other influences.

The Bad English of Our Literary Magazines

GOOD English sometimes may be found in an American newspaper;

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it is never found in an American literary magazine. In some corner of a newspaper you will find a man writing with freedom and a sort of natural tact, choosing the words he really needs without regard to what is vulgar or what is polite. People are apt to read it aloud to you without knowing why; they like the sound of it. That never happens in a literary magazine. Nobody in a literary magazine fits words to thought; he fits his thoughts to a borrowed diction.

Nobody in a literary magazine cares a hang about the right word for the expression of his thought but he is worried to death about diction. All the best contemporary literary essays are written in *diction* and there is no more telling the writers apart, so far as their style is concerned, than if they were all buried in equally good taste by the same undertaker.

Diction is the great funereal American literary substitute for style. Indeed that is what they mean when they praise an author's style. They do not mean that he has his own style of writing; they mean that he is *in the* style of writing. Measured by the vitality of masterpieces newspaper English is sometimes good; literary magazine English is never good. Bad English is English about to die, such as you see in the magazines; the worst English is English that has never lived—and our literary essayists are full of it.