

*'The Libido for the Ugly': H. L. Mencken Versus Western Pennsylvania.* By John W. Larner.

LATE on a grim and rainy February night, Amtrak's "Broadway Limited" unobtrusively eased through Pitcairn, Wilmerding, North Braddock, Rankin, and Swissvale en route to its Chicago morning destination. Aboard the snug "Heritage Fleet" lounge car, University of Minnesota drama students were returning to Minneapolis from a New York theatre tour. They turned from animated conversation to somber contemplation of the passing bleak mid-winter scene. "No wonder they call this place *Pittsburgh*," one exclaimed. Chuckles and some laughter punctuated the remark.

Generations of Americans, not unlike those Minnesota students, have railed at unlovely landscapes that often enfold railway approaches to urban areas. Progenitors of industrialization, the railroads drew to their right-of-ways factories, mills, refineries, warehouses, and other fixtures of America's industrial strength. And, among these were sandwiched the modest yet ruggedly sturdy homes, churches, and social halls of the nation's industrial labor force. Even a noted exception such as the former Pennsylvania Railroad's gentle descent into Philadelphia through the verdant back yards of Main Line suburban opulence required several miles of cluttered hump yards and clustered row houses before Thirtieth Street Station could be entered.

Baltimore's "bad boy" of American letters, Henry Louis Mencken (1880-1956), ever one to "stir up the animals," could not resist enlivening discussions about America's railside urban-industrial prospect. An occasional traveler between Baltimore and Pittsburgh, Mencken seemed to favor the somewhat more expeditious Pennsylvania system over his beloved hometown's Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. Sojourns with brother Charles Mencken and his family in Crafton drew H. L. Mencken to "these wilds"; and the view from the Pennsylvania between East Liberty and Greensburg inspired one of American literature's most pungent little treatises about industrial landscapes, H. L. Mencken's 1927 "The Libido for the Ugly."

The essay knew several incarnations. Originally "The Black Country," his January 23, 1927, column for the *Chicago Sunday Times*,

---

John W. Larner, who received his doctorate in history from West Virginia University, is an Assistant Professor of History at the Altoona campus of Pennsylvania State University. Quotation marks around choice phrases with a Menckonian ring to them are intended to give him credit, not to imply unusual or ironic usage by the author.

Mencken re-worked the essay for inclusion among "Five Little Excursions" in *Prejudices: Sixth Series*, published by Alfred A. Knopf in late October 1927. Toward the end of his day, Mencken resurrected "The Libido for the Ugly" and, with slight modifications, encased it in his 1949 anthology, *A Chresthomathy*. Since then, "The Libido for the Ugly" has appeared in several popular anthologies, including Alistair Cooke's 1955 *The Vintage Mencken*. Though "Libido" invariably is attributed to *Prejudices: Sixth Series*, editors — including Cooke — usually replicate the *Chresthomathy* version.<sup>1</sup> Here "unexpurgated" and "in the altogether" is "The Libido for the Ugly" as published in H. L. Mencken's 1927 *Prejudices: Sixth Series*.<sup>2</sup>

### *The Libido for the Ugly*

On a Winter day, not long ago, coming out of Pittsburgh on one of the swift, luxurious expresses of the eminent Pennsylvania Railroad, I rolled eastward for an hour through the coal and steel towns of Westmoreland county. It was familiar ground; boy and man, I had been through it often before. But somehow I had never quite sensed its appalling desolation. Here was the very heart of industrial America, the center of its most lucrative and characteristic activity, the boast and pride of the richest and grandest nation ever seen on earth — and here was a scene so dreadfully hideous, so intolerably bleak and forlorn that it reduced the whole aspiration of man to a macabre and depressing joke. Here was wealth beyond computation, almost beyond imagination — and here were human habitations so abominable that they would have disgraced a race of alley cats.

I am not speaking of mere filth. One expects steel towns to be dirty. What I allude to is the unbroken and agonizing ugliness, the sheer revolting monstrosity, of every house in sight. From East Liberty to Greensburg, a distance of twenty-five miles, there was not one in sight from the train that did not insult and lacerate the eye. Some were so bad, and they were among the most pretentious — churches, stores, warehouses, and the like — that they were downright startling: one blinked before them as one blinks before a man with his face shot away. It was as if all the more advanced Expressionist architects of

1 H. L. Mencken, *Prejudices: Sixth Series* (New York, 1927); H. L. Mencken, *A Mencken Chresthomathy* (New York, 1949); Alistair Cooke, ed., *The Vintage Mencken* (New York, 1955).

2 H. L. Mencken, "The Libido for the Ugly," *Prejudices: Sixth Series*, 187-93, appears with the permission of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

Berlin had been got drunk on *Schnapps*, and put to matching aberrations. A few masterpieces linger in memory, horrible even there: a crazy little church just west of Jeannette, set like a dormer-window on the side of a bare, leprous hill; the headquarters of the Veterans of Foreign Wars at Irwin; a steel stadium like a huge rat-trap somewhere further down the line. But most of all I recall the general effect — of hideousness without a break. There was not a single decent house within eye-range from the Pittsburgh suburbs to the Greensburg yards. There was not one that was not misshapen, and there was not one that was not shabby.

The country itself is not uncomely, despite the grime of the endless mills. It is, in form, a narrow river valley, with deep gullies running up into the hills. It is thickly settled, but not noticeably overcrowded. There is still plenty of room for building, even in the larger towns, and there are very few solid blocks. Nearly every house, big and little, has space on all four sides. Obviously, if there were architects of any professional sense or dignity in the region, they would have perfected a chalet to hug the hillsides — a chalet with a high-pitched roof, to throw off the heavy Winter snows, but still essentially a low and clinging building, wider than it was tall. But what have they done? They have taken as their model a brick set on end. This they have converted into a thing of dingy clapboards, with a narrow, low-pitched roof. And the whole they have set upon thin, preposterous brick piers. What could be more appalling? By the hundreds and thousands these abominable houses cover the bare hillsides, like gravestones in some gigantic and decaying cemetery. On their deep sides they are three, four and even five stories high; on their low sides they bury themselves swinishly in the mud. Not a fifth of them are perpendicular. They lean this way and that, hanging on to their bases precariously. And one and all they are streaked in grime, with dead and eczematous patches of paint peeping through the streaks.

Now and then there is a house of brick. But what brick! When it was new it is the color of a fried egg. When it has taken on the patina of the mills it is the color of an egg long past all hope or caring. Was it necessary to adopt that shocking color? No more than it was necessary to set all of the houses on end. Red brick, even in a steel town, ages with some dignity. Let it become downright black, and it is still slightly, especially if its trimmings are of white stone, with soot in the depths and the high spots washed by the rain. But in Westmoreland they prefer that uremic yellow, and so they have the most loathsome towns and villages ever seen by mortal eye.

I award this championship only after laborious research and incessant prayer. I have seen, I believe, all of the most unlovely towns of the world; they are all to be found in the United States. I have seen the mill towns of decomposing New England and the desert towns of Utah, Arizona and Texas. I am familiar with the back streets of Newark, Brooklyn, Chicago and Pittsburgh, and have made bold scientific explorations to Camden, N.J. and Newport News, Va. Safe in a Pullman, I have whirled through the gloomy, Godforsaken villages of Iowa and Kansas, and the malarious tide-water hamlets of Georgia. I have been to Bridgeport, Conn., and to Los Angeles. But nowhere on this earth, at home or abroad, have I seen anything to compare to the villages that huddle along the line of the Pennsylvania from the Pittsburgh yards to Greensburg. They are incomparable in color, and they are incomparable in design. It is as if some titanic and aberrant genius, uncompromisingly inimical to man, had devoted all the ingenuity of Hell to the making of them. They show grotesqueries of ugliness that, in retrospect, become almost diabolical. One cannot imagine mere human beings concocting such dreadful things, and one can scarcely imagine human beings bearing life in them.

Are they so frightful because the valley is full of foreigners — dull, insensate brutes, with no love of beauty in them? Then why didn't these foreigners set up similar abominations in the countries that they came from? You will, in fact, find nothing of the sort in Europe — save perhaps in a few putrefying parts of England. There is scarcely an ugly village on the whole Continent. The peasants, however poor, somehow manage to make themselves graceful and charming habitations, even in Italy and Spain. But in the American village and small town the pull is always toward ugliness, and in that Westmoreland valley it has been yielded to with an eagerness bordering upon passion. It is incredible that mere ignorance should have achieved such masterpieces of horror. There is a voluptuous quality in them — the same quality that one finds in a Methodist sermon or an editorial in the *New York Herald-Tribune*. They look deliberate.

On certain levels of the human race, indeed, there seems to be a positive libido for the ugly, as on other and less Christian levels there is a libido for the beautiful. It is impossible to put down the wallpaper that defaces the average American home of the lower middle class to mere inadvertence, or to the obscene humor of the manufacturers. Such ghastly designs, it must be obvious, give a genuine delight to a certain type of mind. They meet, in some unfathomable way, its obscure and unintelligible demands. They caress it as "The Palms"



*North Braddock housing: "gravestones in some gigantic and decaying cemetery?" (Photo by author, 1987)*

caresses it, or the art of Landseer, or the ecclesiastical architecture of the United Brethren. The taste for them is as enigmatical and yet as common as the taste for vaudeville, dogmatic theology, sentimental movies, and the poetry of Edgar A. Guest. Or for the metaphysical speculations of Arthur Brisbane. Thus I suspect (though confessedly without knowing) that the vast majority of the honest folk of Westmoreland county, and especially the 100% Americans among them, actually admire the houses they live in, and are proud of them. For the same money they could get vastly better ones, but they prefer what they have got. Certainly there was no pressure upon the Veterans

of Foreign Wars at Irwin to choose the dreadful edifice that bears their banner, for there are plenty of vacant buildings along the trackside, and some of them are appreciably better. They might, indeed, have built a better one of their own. But they chose that clapboarded horror with their eyes open, and having chosen it, they let it mellow into its present shocking depravity. They like it as it is: beside it, the Parthenon would no doubt offend them. In precisely the same way the authors of the rat-trap stadium that I have mentioned made a deliberate choice. After painfully designing and erecting it, they made it perfect in their own sight by putting a completely impossible penthouse, painted a staring yellow, on top of it. The effect is truly appalling. It is that of a fat woman with a black eye. It is that of a Presbyterian grinning. But they like it.

Here is something that the psychologists have so far neglected: the love of ugliness for its own sake, the lust to make the world intolerable. Its habitat is the United States. Out of the melting pot emerges a race which hates beauty as it hates truth. The etiology of this madness deserves a great deal more study than it has got. There must be causes behind it; it arises and flourishes in obedience to biological laws, and not as a mere act of God. What, precisely are the terms of those laws? And why do they run stronger in America than elsewhere? Let some honest *Privat Dozent* apply himself to the problem.

---

Neither Mencken's first nor final foray into the world of aesthetics, "Libido" epitomizes his aversion to "unlovely" deficiencies of American life. Many locales around the nation were targets of Mencken's ire and wit; his acerbic assault on Western Pennsylvania was rather typical, hardly the exception. Philadelphia was "an intellectual slum."<sup>3</sup> New York City was "... the greatest city of the modern world, with more money in it than all Europe and more clowns and harlots than all Asia, and yet it has no more charm than a circus lot or a second-rate hotel."<sup>4</sup> The South was the "Sahara of the Bozart"; and Hollywood, "Moronia."<sup>5</sup> Following one probe of America's southern and mid-western innards, Mencken deployed terms not altogether unlike those found in "Libido": "... [N]o where in those ten States did I see a

---

<sup>3</sup> H. L. Mencken, "The (Baltimore) *Evening Sun*, July 21, 1920.

<sup>4</sup> H. L. Mencken, "On Living in Baltimore," from *Prejudices: Fifth Series* (New York, 1926), 237.

<sup>5</sup> H. L. Mencken, "The Sahara of the Bozart," in *A Mencken Chrestomathy*; "Appendix from Moronia" in *Prejudices: Sixth Series*.

beautiful town. One and all, they were hideous." Targeting churches: "They seemed to have been designed by the devil himself, and as a practical joke upon the Christians frequenting them. Half of them were raised idiotically on stilts. . . . Not one in fifty showed decent surroundings suitable to a house of worship. . . . One reason why the churches are so bad, of course, is that there are too many of them."<sup>6</sup> In this, as in other pieces, Mencken insisted on the superior appearance of European cities and villages, owing to their age and stability. But *The Houston Post* tackled Mencken on that one: "A new form of bustling town beauty, along with a new race, is being molded from the American melting pot, which most Americans, no doubt, consider far more pleasing to the eye than the dour, classic lines of Old World architecture."<sup>7</sup>

It was exactly "Old World architecture" that Mencken relished; Gothic and Georgian were his favorite styles.<sup>8</sup> Though Mencken was acquainted with architects, he and the pages of his *American Mercury* were open to traditionalists and excluded modernists. Ralph Adams Cram, an agent of Gothic revival, sustained a somewhat fawning correspondence with Mencken: "I always find myself stimulated and vastly entertained by what you write, whether I agree with it or not, and mostly I do agree. . . ."<sup>9</sup> But Frank Lloyd Wright, the noted exponent of modernism, failed to win even a brief meeting with Mencken, his persistence notwithstanding. "You have successfully avoided me, several times," Wright protested, "evidently I am not one of the men you are anxious to meet. . . . I thought I would like to see you and talk a few moments with you — but it is something I can forgo. . . ."<sup>10</sup> Alfred V. duPont, a Wilmington architect who applied traditionalist stylizing to boxlike structures best suited for art-deco design, seems to have been a steadfast Mencken associate. Their correspondence once verged on aesthetics, but it was couched in jest: "Some of these days," Mencken wrote duPont, "you must design a new front for Hollins Street [Mencken's Baltimore home]. I am thinking of making it of blue glass, something like a chain shoe-store, with a radio over the door. . . . Give this idea your prayers."<sup>11</sup> That was

---

6 H. L. Mencken, *Churchman* (Milwaukee, Wisc.), Sept. 14, 1927.

7 *Houston Post*, Sept. 17, 1927.

8 H. L. Mencken, "The New Architecture," in *The Vintage Mencken*, Alistair Cooke, ed., 201-4.

9 Ralph Adams Cram-H. L. Mencken, Feb. 9, 1933, Enoch Pratt Free Library, H. L. Mencken Collection (EPFL/HLM).

10 Frank Lloyd Wright-H. L. Mencken, Feb. 16, 1927, EPFL/HLM.

11 H. L. Mencken-Alfred V. duPont, Jan. 23, 1941, EPFL/HLM.

1941, but in 1927 there were no blue glass shoe stores, much less Gothic or Georgian structures adorning the Pennsylvania line from East Liberty to Greensburg. Mencken's architectural preferences were hardly indulged by his train window vistas of "the Black Country."

Taking umbrage with Mencken had become a minor pastime for 1920s reviewers and newspaper writers — to say nothing of clergy, Rotarians, and a good many professors. Mencken's clipping service and his widely dispersed acquaintances plied him with press and other reactions of "the animals." Relishing criticism, Mencken once wrote to Theodore Dreiser, ". . . I have learned more from attacks than from praise, in even the most vicious of them there is a touch or two of plausibility." Praise, Mencken insisted, caused him to "lose respect for the victim."<sup>12</sup> Mencken even celebrated his critics with the 1928 publication of *Menckenia: A Schimpflixicon*, a handy anthology of some of the testiest remarks thus far aimed at him. Anti-Mencken blasts from the Western Pennsylvania press included aphorisms and epithets from *The Franklin Herald*, *The Johnstown Ledger*, *The Pittsburgh Post*, and *The Venango News-Herald*.<sup>13</sup> But all of these snippets were highly generalized counter-attacks. Mencken's direct and potentially excruciating attack on the region, "The Libido for the Ugly," raised not a specific whimper from the Western Pennsylvania book reviewers or press pundits!

"Laborious research and incessant prayer" failed to reveal a single mention of Mencken's assessment of Western Pennsylvania in the region's newspapers or within Mencken's press clipping scrapbooks and correspondence. Nor did its prior incarnation, the January 1923 *Chicago Sunday Tribune* column "The Black Country," find publication in Western Pennsylvania or arouse the region's individual or collective adrenalin or bile. Only Jeanette Jena, a *Pittsburgh Press* reviewer, assayed *Prejudices: Sixth Series*; she made no mention of any single piece in the collection. Nonetheless, it hardly "tweaks the nose of reason" to suspect that her overall restlessness about Mencken possibly was induced, at least in part, by "Libido." Declaring that she had "definitely outgrown Mencken along with other enthusiasms of my college period," Jena charged that his *American Mercury* coterie embraced little more than a clutch of "idol-breakers . . . only one de-

<sup>12</sup> H. L. Mencken-Theodore Dreiser, Oct. 11, 1920, University of Pennsylvania, Theodore Dreiser Collection, cited in Douglas C. Stenerson, "A Genetic History of the Prejudices of H. L. Mencken, 1880-1926" (unpublished dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1961), 557.

<sup>13</sup> H. L. Mencken, *Menckenia: A Schimpflixicon* (New York, 1928).



gree less wearisome than an organization of Babbits. It's the club spirit that does it!" Further, she pronounced, "That, while his ideas are often fresh and vivid, emotionally he 'dates.'" Jena granted the possibility that "an abundant humor has saved Mencken from the bombast of many of his contemporaries. . . ." <sup>14</sup>

Philadelphia, New York, Boston, and London critics, on the other hand, generally favored Mencken's *Prejudices: Sixth Series*, though only one cited "The Libido for the Ugly" for special mention. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* was almost effusive, slinging such laudatory phrases as "superb craftsmanship," "integrity," and "intellectual strength." <sup>15</sup> The *New York Times Book Review* found *Prejudices* "shrewish in admonition." <sup>16</sup> And the *Boston Evening Transcript* declared "This volume is Mencken at his best — which is just plain Mencken visiting the zoo." <sup>17</sup> But *The (London) Times Literary Supplement* hedged: "[T]here is much . . . in this volume, in which, alike in his brilliance and his limitations, Mr. Mencken runs true to form." <sup>18</sup> The *New Republic* reviewer, greatly enthused about *Prejudices: Sixth Series*, proclaimed Mencken's "Libido" as one of "two pieces of writing at his top level." <sup>19</sup> However, no rationale was provided to gird this kind assertion.

Lewis Mumford's prescient review of *Prejudices: Sixth Series* in the *New York Herald Tribune*, though not focusing on "Libido," offered views echoed by more recent Mencken scholars and suggested possible explanations for Western Pennsylvania's seeming silence in the wake of "Libido." "Mr. Mencken is not essentially a thinker"; declared Mumford, "he is a man with his fingers on the popular pulse, sharing many of the superstitions and a good part of the confusion of the time under the impression that his platitudes are singular, that he belongs to a civilized minority, and that his thoughts are a hard, empirical reaction to the facts." One must wonder if Western Pennsylvanians

---

14 Jeanette Jena, review of *Prejudices: Sixth Series*, by H. L. Mencken, in *The Pittsburgh Press*, Nov. 26, 1927.

15 "Henry Mencken's Latest Exercise on the Springboard," review of *Prejudices: Sixth Series*, by H. L. Mencken, in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Dec. 31, 1927.

16 Review of *Prejudices: Sixth Series*, by H. L. Mencken, in *The New York Times Book Review*, Dec. 4, 1927.

17 Review of *Prejudices: Sixth Series*, by H. L. Mencken, in the *Boston Evening Transcript*, Nov. 19, 1927.

18 Review of *Prejudices: Sixth Series*, by H. L. Mencken, in *The (London) Times Literary Supplement*, Mar. 29, 1928.

19 "Cabell and Colloids," review of *Prejudices: Sixth Series*, by H. L. Mencken, in *The New Republic*, Dec. 7, 1927.

shared Mumford's view that "Mr. Mencken is a Mencken-intoxicated man."<sup>20</sup>

On the other hand, Western Pennsylvanians of the late 1920s reading "Libido" may have acquiesced in Walter Lippman's verdict of H. L. Mencken: ". . . [T]his holy terror from Baltimore is splendidly and exultantly and contagiously alive. He calls you swine and an imbecile, and he increases your will to live."<sup>21</sup> Maybe, too, they recognized that in attacking the drabness of their industrial region Mencken was underscoring his belief that ". . . the first aim of civilization is to augment and safeguard the dignity of man — that it is worth nothing to be a citizen of a commonwealth which holds the humblest citizen cheaply and uses him ill."<sup>22</sup> Perhaps they sensed that Mencken essentially was powered by his short but telling axiom: "The true humorist loves as he snickers."<sup>23</sup>

And maybe Mencken was not as informed as he seemed, not only about the view from the Pennsylvania Railroad between East Liberty to Greensburg, but more weighty matters as well. His cousin, Rear Admiral William C. Abhau, once revealed a Mencken confession. Recalling the torrid days of the 1924 Dayton, Tennessee, Scopes trial, Mencken confided to Abhau: ". . . William Jennings Bryan thundered . . . , 'What are you going to say when you meet Saint Peter and the Angel Gabriel at the Pearly Gates?' " Mencken's reply: "I will say, 'Gentlemen, I was mistaken.' " <sup>24</sup> Indeed, was Mencken's "The Libido for the Ugly" an accurate indictment of Western Pennsylvania from East Liberty to Greensburg? Was it a true bill?

The precision of his scholarship and reporting, as well as his consistency of views, have been questioned by his *American Mercury* editorial associate, scholars, and even by Mencken himself.<sup>25</sup> While doubtless valid enough "in the altogether," Mencken's "Libido"

20 Lewis Mumford, "The Serious Function of Criticism," review of *Prejudices: Sixth Series*, by H. L. Mencken, *New York Herald Tribune*, Nov. 27, 1927.

21 Walter Lippman, "H. L. Mencken," in *Men of Destiny* (New York, 1927), 70.

22 H. L. Mencken, *Prejudices: Sixth Series*, 77.

23 H. L. Mencken, "The Literary Olio," *Smart Set*, Feb. 1909, 156.

24 William J. Sabo, "An Interview with Rear Admiral William C. Abhau, U.S.N. (Ret.), cousin of H. L. Mencken," *Menckenia*, Summer, 1962, 11-12.

25 See, for example: Charles Angoff, *H. L. Mencken: A Portrait from Memory* (New York, 1956), chapter 12, "Scholarship"; Dickran Tashjian, *Skyscraper Primitives: Dada and the American Avant-Garde* (Middletown, Conn., 1975), 142; Douglas C. Stenerson, "A Genetic History of the Prejudices of H. L. Mencken, 1880-1926" (unpublished dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1961); B. R. Kimes, "The *American Mercury* Days of H. L. Mencken" (unpublished thesis, Pennsylvania State University, 1963); and H. L. Mencken, *Newspaper Days* (New York, 1941), chapter 18, "The Synthesis of News."

falls somewhat short when details are scrutinized. The Pennsylvania Railroad's "luxurious expresses" of the late 1920s hardly required an hour to pass "through the coal and steel towns of Westmoreland county." Period photographs reveal that the "crazy little church just west of Jeannette" and the Irwin VFW hall, "that clapboarded horror," were, in fact, nicely maintained structures replete with neat plantings. Mencken failed to note the locale of "the rat-trap stadium." Was it the steel stadium built by the Pennsylvania Railroad at Pitcairn or Point Stadium in Johnstown? If the latter, it most certainly was "somewhere further down the line" and well beyond the domain assaulted in "The Libido for the Ugly." "The country itself" was not a single "narrow river valley," but, in fact, three of them: the Monongahela, visible from Swissvale to East Pittsburgh, the Turtle Creek valley from East Pittsburgh to Trafford, and the broad valley of Brush Creek from Trafford to the outskirts of Jeannette. While there was "still plenty of room for buildings" between urban areas, few houses in the towns from East Liberty to Greensburg had "space on all four sides." In the main, houses with "narrow, low-pitched" rooves and "set upon thin preposterous brick piers" were rarities; virtually all sported relatively steep rooves and rested firmly on solid block foundations. And very few houses in the region traversed by Mencken rose to three to five stories "on their deep sides" — a pattern far more evident within the city of Pittsburgh itself. "That uremic yellow" brick, too, was not much in evidence from Pennsylvania trains passing through Westmoreland County, hardly enough to "insult and lacerate the eye." Brother Charles Mencken's house in Crafton, on the other hand, was virtually surrounded by yellow brick buildings and streets.

Inaccuracies, even minor ones, usually invite rebuttal — all the more reason to wonder why Western Pennsylvanians did not bestir themselves when confronted by Mencken's "Libido." Were they perversely proud to see their region ranked among those targeted for Menckonian assault? Maybe they were just weary of Mencken by 1927, wise to his ways. After all, the book was called *Prejudices*! ■