2021 MENCKEN MEMORIAL LECTURE

The *Babelobabuli*: Notes on Mencken and Today's Muddled Topography of Literary Journals

BY MICHAEL DOWNS

I once wrote for the dailies. And though it has been decades since then, I feel the newsroom still: loud, raucous, rude, brilliant, always on the edge of disaster and yet somehow always delivering. Such experiences stay. As Dan Fesperman, once a reporter for the *Sunpaper*, wrote in a novel featuring a foreign correspondent, "Leaving the newspaper business could be as hard as leaving a cult."[1]

But leave it I did, and for that other Kingdom of the Written Word in which H.L. Mencken lived: literary work, what we now call creative writing. And it's of that kingdom that I'd like to speak today. It seems quieter there, where people mostly lie under leafy trees and read poetry, or sit up high in cold-water flats they can't afford, typing a few words they then erase, then typing a few more. In a previous Mencken Day lecture, published in the Spring 1967 edition of *Menckeniana*, Dr. Carl Richard Dolmetsch suggested that the noise surrounding "Mencken the linguist, Mencken the journalist, Mencken the pundit and stylist, even Mencken the literary critic" drowned out the work Mencken did for nearly twenty years as an editor of literary journals.[2] Perhaps Mencken scholars still agree that the Sage of Baltimore remains best known and understood as a journalist and cultural critic. Yet it is Mencken as avatar of that quieter place, as a literary editor at *The Smart Set* and *The American Mercury*, to whom I turn this afternoon. Because as dramatic as have been the shifts in the news industry thanks to digital publishing, so, too, are the shifts in the curious, vital, and less known world of literary journals. Moreover, as one editor recently told me, the Kingdom of Literary Journals is only these days beginning to reckon with the digital-publishing changes newsrooms faced years ago.

Two decades ago, that literary landscape was easy to navigate. A writer needed only a copy of *The Writer's Market*, which annually provided notes about each listed journal: an editor's name, a mailing address, awards won, a description of the content, and a note about pay–if there was any beyond the oh-so-common "two contributor's copies."

The system could be understood as hierarchical, much like baseball and its farm teams. You had your Major League operations: *The New Yorker*, *Paris Review*, etc. Triple-A publications followed, often housed at major universities and led by salaried editors, then down and down again until you reached the rookie leagues: the journals edited by undergraduates or the zines, those counter-culture and avant-garde publications stapled together in someone's basement.

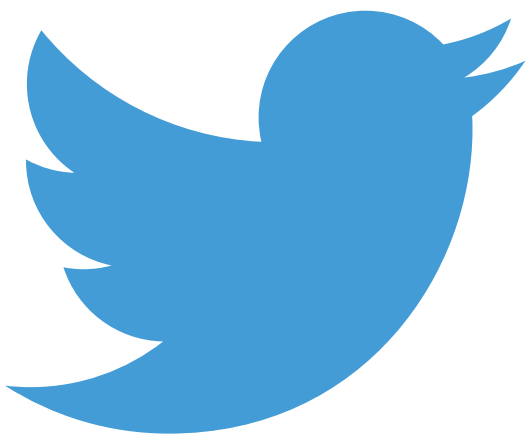
That system is akin to what Mencken knew and worked within as an editor between 1914 and 1933. We could call *The Smart Set,* where he first edited literary

The *Babelobabuli*

MICHAEL DOWNS

work, a Triple-A franchise. Later, he served as one of the two founding editors at *The American Mercury*, a Major League operation as much as *The Saturday Evening Post* or *Atlantic Monthly,* though it didn't last so long as those.

In contrast, today's landscape of literary journals is one of mystery and wonder. *The Writer's Market* can't keep up. The new topography is a place where Twitter–among other social medias–has an outsized influence. Digital literary journals proliferate. Every few weeks (if not days), it seems–there is some new journal announcing itself on social media via hashtags and memes. This happens, in part, because we have in these United States close to 300 institutions delivering advanced degrees in or involving creative writing. And the thousand-plus annual graduates from these programs often want to stay connected to other writers (see the popularity of the Twitter hashtag, #writingcommunity). Creating a journal – digitally – is an easier and mostly affordable way to stay in the game. Certainly, it's cheaper than it was in Mencken's time, when journals required ink, paper, postage, and some wealthy patron. These days, it seems *everyone* publishes: quarterly issues filled with a plethora of poems, short stories, creative nonfiction essays–traditional length or flash, or the shortest of prose works: micros at 300 words or fewer. It's all out there, accessible to readers with a click or three, overwhelming in its content, some of which is beautiful and of consequence and some of which is dreck.



Twitter's logo. Image courtesy of Twitter.

How do I know this? I teach at one of those institutions that creates young writers, and my students regularly publish their literary efforts online in journals I've never heard of. The students then announce their success on Twitter. Of course they do. A new poem here, a flash nonfiction there, at online journals called *Battery Pack*, *Harlequin Creature*, *Rabid Oak,* and such, often created by other recent graduates of programs such as mine. It's possible that right now, as I speak, some young literary champion is pressing a button to start her new journal, which she'll call – fittingly – *Bibliobibuli* after Mencken's coined word for avid readers.

So, yes, the landscape shifts much faster than it did in Mencken's day. Editors of venerable, esteemed journals–those Major League and Triple-A publications that still pay for ink and paper and even offer writers a small stipend – scramble to understand how to deliver poems, stories and essays in print *and* online. Upstart editors push to be noticed without advertising budgets, relying on tweets and Instagram posts. Older writers don't know anymore where their work might be valued. Younger ones choose journals run by inexperienced hands, leading to typos or mistakes such as one I recently read, citing the existence of a "steel mine" rather than a steel mill. I don't fault that writer; the error falls on the inexperienced or rushed editor. Mencken would have made that fix.

But here we are, tantalized by the thrill of instantaneous publishing and its resulting question: If everyone is an editor and every writer gets published, what's the value in writing or editing except as a personal exercise? If the literary community is vast and uncountable and mutating by the moment, what community do we actually have? How does it work?

Do so many literary towers of confusion constitute a *Babelobabuli?*

Perhaps H.L. can help us understand.

Last spring, a writer friend posted this tweet: "If an article publishes in the world and no one is around to tweet it, does the article exist?"

Like much on Twitter, like much of what Mencken is remembered for, the question was both tongue-in-cheek and serious. Mencken himself might have tweeted such a question had he happened to find an iPhone in his pants pocket. Imagine it. What writer could be better suited for a form that rewards pith and bombast?

Yes, a tweet allows for only 280 characters, but we know how Mencken excelled at the distilled observation. His famous line about Puritanism ("The haunting fear that someone, somewhere may be happy") comes in at only sixty-eight characters. And his observation about news reporting being the life of kings comes in at 178.

That Mencken would excel at Twitter is amusing and paradoxical, given what he wrote back in 1914 about the attention span of the American reader. To be fair, he wasn't talking about the educated reader – Mencken's infamous elitism coming into play – but the person on the street, picking up the day's newspaper. In his *Atlantic Monthly* article titled "Newspaper Morals," Mencken, in 165 characters, wrote of that reader: "Six thousand words, I should say, is the extreme limit of his appetite. And the nearer he is pushed to that limit, the greater the strain upon his psychic digestion."[3]

> "One civilized reader is worth a thousand boneheads."

This talk, by the way, has not yet reached 1300 words. Given that cultural critics tell us our attention span has diminished since Mencken's time, I hope you're staying with me.

Mencken began "Newspaper Morals" by recalling a conversation he'd had with a much more experienced theater critic. "The main idea," Mencken reports being advised, "is to be interesting ... Unless you can make people *read* your criticisms, you may as well shut up your shop. And the only way to make them read you is to give them something exciting."

Mencken replied, "You suggest, then .... a certain – ferocity?"

"I do," replied his elder. "(M)ake it hearty; make it hot! ... You must give a good show to get a good crowd, and a good show means one with slaughter in it."

A good show with slaughter in it? That seemed to be advice Mencken followed in most everything he wrote, be it editorial, column, criticism, or short story.

An important point, though, from the elder critic to Mencken and from Mencken to his readers and to us today is this: Writers want their work read. Editors want to publish work that will be read. "All else," as the older critic noted, "is dross."

Mencken wrote that article from which I just quoted in the same year he became co-editor, with George Jean Nathan, of *The Smart Set*, Mencken's first job as a literary editor.

They were kids, really: Mencken, 33; Nathan, 32. Smart, precocious, wicked kids, happy to engage in the small slaughters available to editors of a literary journal. As Dr. Dolmetsch noted in his talk about Mencken as editor, the cover motto on Mencken and Nathan's first issue read, "one civilized reader is worth a thousand boneheads."

It's a neat trick. Who wouldn't want to read *The Smart Set* and be considered among the civilized readers?

But this is creative writing, not journalism. And what if there really is only one in a thousand–or one in a hundred thousand–readers to pick up your magazine? Or to click on a link to *Battery Pack* or *Rabid Oak*?

Which brings us back to that contemporary literary existential question, asked in a tweet by the Baltimore writer Elizabeth Evitts Dickinson: "If an article publishes in the world and no one is around to tweet it, does the article exist?"[4] Witty and a bit despairing, that question nevertheless raises important concerns for writers and editors. An online publication of a story or poem that one can tweet about, with a link, means that one will have readers. Yet there remain journals that do not print all their content digitally. If a writer publishes with those journals and can't say, "Look! Look!" on social media–thereby depending for recognition only on subscribers to read and talk about the work–does it count? Does the article exist?

Dickinson's tweet led to a Twitter conversation among four writers or editors with Baltimore ties. We swapped ideas about what's more important for today's writers and journal editors: social media's likes and hearts or something longer lasting. The problem is that the answer isn't so dualistic: some important and talented writers also seem able to work social media.

Included in the conversation was Michael Tager, a founding editor of a small and award-winning book publisher called Mason Jar Press, headquartered in Baltimore. Tager reported that he is often asked by inexperienced writers what path to follow toward publication. To be successful, he tells them, emulate writers who have been successful. Go for the Major League and Triple-A journals: *Kenyon Review. Ploughshares. Paris Review*. That's what agents read to hunt for talent. Those are the publications that win you grants or fellowships.

But it can take a year for the reviews of Paris, Kenyon, Georgia, etc., to even reject a writer's work. And if acceptance comes, it will likely require another year before publication. So, Tager tells young writers, if you want to be read, get yourself published online ASAP with the likes of *Battery Pack* or *Rabid Oak*. Enjoy the hashtagging thrill, the instant gratification, the dopamine high generated by "likes". Your writing will be read, even if only by a dozen or so people, be they civilized or boneheads.

Most important, though, is that young people interested in literary careers – whether editing or writing – ought to volunteer with journals, scrolling through what we derisively and affectionately call "the slush pile." These are the hundreds of poems, essays, and stories that journals receive annually – even monthly – from writers seeking publication. Someone must comb through these, looking for the best work to forward to the top editors.

Reading through so many essays, stories, and poems will guide an inexperienced writer or aspiring editor, Tager says. Conversations with fellow readers and the journal's editors will help shape an understanding of the literary landscape. Reading the slush pile will make plain what is the quality and content of work that's finding publication – and perhaps more importantly what are the qualities that lead to rejection. All this knowledge will help direct aspiring writers and editors toward a literary vision.

What that last bit of advice makes clear is that while quick online publication may bring "likes" and dopamine rushes for writers and editors, there remains no instant gratification path toward a literary career, though it may look so on Twitter. This is a truth long established. Mencken himself, despite his intellect and talent, spent years writing book reviews before he won that first job as a literary editor with *The Smart Set*.

Recently, a graduate student in my writing program volunteered for several months to read the slush pile at a good Baltimore-area literary review, a solid Double-A publication. For those slush pile poems and stories the graduate student decided against, she told me, "I noticed how many submissions had potential for publication but were not yet ready for it."

What the rejected work needed, she came to understand, was more time. The writer had rushed toward publication. Instead, the writer needed to put the work aside and return to it later–perhaps after several months–before sending the work for consideration.

This rush is symptomatic of our time and situation. It is tempting now, in this digital literary journal world, for everyone to move quickly: graduate with a degree and start a literary journal; finish a draft and send it to one of the myriad start-up journals where it is bound to be accepted and published. Then the writer links to the journal, the journal links to the writer, everyone gets those little red hearts.

Yet if one wants lasting success?

Ars longa, vita brevis. Or as Chaucer put it, "The lyf so short, the craft so long to lerne."

Notably, both those aphorisms would fit nicely in a tweet.

The Smart Set had a tiny budget, so Mencken and Nathan didn't publish the country's best-known writers, seeking instead up-and-comers who would take less pay, writers that Dr. Dolmetsch called "the untried, the unknown, and the scorned." Over time, this included such hardly known writers as James Joyce, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and F. Scott Fitzgerald.

To seek the untried, unknown and scorned seems also to be a goal of our young editors of new online journals. Take *Ligeia*, an online journal founded in 2019 here in Baltimore and named for the Poe short story. Like the 33-year-old Mencken at *The Smart Set, Ligeia's* editors are young-ish and having fun. Aged thirty, twenty-nine, and twenty-two when they started their journal, they enjoy

trafficking in irony, though theirs is kinder than Mencken and Nathan's. Recently, in an interview, the oldest of the three – Sean Sam is his name – made this Menckenian observation about their work: "Publishing is about connecting with people who have secret egos but also nervous conditions and pitiful upper body strength."[5]

These editors say they want that which is "eccentric, gritty, gothic." Recent issues of *Ligeia* have included writers you've likely never heard of, but who have nevertheless published novels and volumes of poetry with legitimate, quality presses, placed shorter work with prestigious literary reviews such as the now-defunct Triple-A *Tin House*, and written for such valuable venues of criticism as the *Los Angeles Review of Books*. These contributing writers to *Ligeia* aren't the A-listers of the literary world, but they aren't shabby, either. *Ligeia* has already in its first two years published work that won a Pushcart Prize – awards given to the best work from smaller presses. Other winners of Pushcart Prizes include, yes, *The Paris Review*.

> *Today, we publish, as Mencken did, to be read. We want our work to be part of a conversation. This is the whole idea behind publishing: To make work public.*

Note the historic echo: it was easier in 1916 for an aspiring writer to get published in Mencken's *Smart Set* than in his later journal, *The American Mercury*, which came on the scene in 1923 funded by Alfred Knopf's publishing company. At that point, Mencken and Nathan were no longer upstarts. They were now in charge of a what we might call a "prestige journal." Indeed, per Dr. Dolmetsch's talk, *The American Mercury* "did not even accept unsolicited contributions unless they were extraordinary in some way." Dolmetsch then disparaged the *Mercury,* calling it "an institution, not a magazine."

That's a harsh insult to Mencken's editing work. It suggests dullness, inflexibility. Think of the magazine version of Bank of America or Comcast or Anheuser Busch, rather than an exciting, even ferocious, upstart like *The Smart Set*. Given this observation, *Battery Pack*, *Rabid Oak*, and yes, *Ligeia*, suddenly have much more appeal.

Another literary lifer drawn into that Twitter conversation was Nate Brown, managing editor for *American Short Fiction,* which in my baseball analogy is easily Triple-A, if not Major League. He argued that, yes, the prestige of the venerable, esteemed print journals "is eroding" because print is more difficult to access. In other words, esteemed journals that hold fast to print are inflexible and dull, institutional in the worst way, relying on reputation. That, Brown predicted, will fail them.

Yet, Brown noted, there are smart editors at some prestige journals – such as *Ploughshares* and *The Common* – who work within the new digital landscape to stay vital. They publish their print editions in e-formats to make them less expensive and more convenient to read and, yes, to re-tweet. And though they might not give away their content like some fresh-faced journals do, their prestige combined with a less expensive digital option does draw readers.

All of this might seem to be less about content and more about transmission: how editors open the gates of the kingdom and welcome readers in. But transmission and the quality of writing work are inextricably linked. In Mencken's time, it meant a good show with some slaughter in it. Today, we publish, as Mencken did, to be read. We want our work to be part of a conversation. This is the whole idea behind publishing: To make work public. So is it true? If a poem or story or essay publishes and "no one is around to tweet about it," does the work exist?

Of course it does. Though it is better, these days, if the work is tweetable. Because the operative words, I think, are "no one is around." As long as there are some someones, some anyones – whether people at a cocktail party discussing a *New Yorker* story or a group online praising a poem in *Battery Pack* – then the work exists. What we have now, I think, in our digital literary landscape, are several someones – perhaps more than any time in literary history – who are around to write and talk about literature. That can't be a bad thing. As *Ligeia's*

youngest editor, Ashley Wagner, put it in an interview, "We are part of a tight community of small literary magazines that promote each other and uplift their writers' successes. Readers really do seem to enjoy the content we are creating and hosting. It's incredible."

That sentiment approaches one Mencken and Nathan espoused when they began *The Smart Set.* Their first stated goal, per Dr. Dolmetsch, was "[t]o discover new American authors as they emerge, and to give them their first chance to reach an intelligent and sophisticated audience." The pair's other goals included popularizing other unread writers–those who held minority opinions, those who wrote from outside the United States. And Mencken and Nathan pledged to do their work with wit and humor–all laudable goals. And, I'll add, they stated those goals succinctly.

But by the time they founded *The American Mercury,* Dr. Dolmetsch's "institution," the goals Mencken and Nathan offered for that publication ran four ponderous pages, divided into three Roman-numbered Aristotelian parts. Hidden inside all that self-importance, though, are some useful nuggets, sentiments less institutional and more worthy of a dynamic and vital literary magazine. I'd like to end by quoting one such sentiment.[6]

It is this**:** "Good work is always done in the middle ground, between the theories. That middle ground now lies wide open: the young American artist is quite as free as he needs to be."

Here, Mencken gives me heart. Because he seems to describe no less his time than ours. Perhaps we are not meant to make sense of a landscape that includes a *New Yorker* and a *Battery Pack* and a *Ligeia*. But thanks to digital publishing and the likes of Twitter, the middle ground now lies even more wide open than it did in Mencken's time. The young writer–and the young editor–are more free than ever to make of literature and creative writing a new and exciting kingdom, shaping what is digital and haphazard with their own ideas about significance and beauty. Because what else are literary artists meant to do?

Endnotes

1. Fesperman, Dan. *The Warlord's Son* (New York: Knopf, 2004), 51.
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