

Julien Benda and H.L.Mencken : a parallel

A Patrizia, qui m'a appris les différences, et dont je chéris les similitudes

Comparative history of ideas, like comparative literature, is a difficult exercise, because ideas always come within specific contexts and are expressed in idiosyncratic styles. On the one hand, everything can be compared with everything – teapots with rifles, Corneille with Tarantino, the last of the Mohicans with the last of the Valerii. On the other hand very often one does not see anything to be compared, in spite of superficial similarities. I want to compare briefly the doctrines and the characters of two intellectuals of the same generation, one French, the other American, Julien Benda and Henry Louis Mencken. Each of them has incarnated, in his own country, a certain “style of idea”, to borrow the title of one of Benda’s books (*le style d’idées*), which I shall try to describe as a form of angry rationalism or as a cold satire of their times.

Julien Benda and H.L. Mencken were near contemporaries: the first was born in 1867, the second in 1880, and they both died in 1956. Both were famous in their respective countries between the two wars; both are today mostly forgotten, apart for some slogans, such as Benda’s famous title “ the betrayal of intellectuals”, and Mencken’s coinage of terms like “*booboisie*” and his numerous witticisms¹. Both were great polemicists, who adopted the tone of rogues and curmudgeons, and they both achieved the status of the most hated intellectuals of their days. Both seemed to be always angry at their compatriots and at the whole world. Both liked the posture of *enfants terribles*. Apart from that, they seem to have little in common. The one is probably the last representative of Franco-judeism, a defender of classicism and of intellectual values, who became during the 1930 one the best spokesmen of democracy in France, but who ended his political career as a communist. The other is an American, known for his distrust of democracy and his individualism, his scorn for European classicism and his apology of popular American culture, and some of his racist comments on blacks and jews have not been unnoticed.

In spite of the huge difference in their contexts, Benda and Mencken have a similar mindset. I shall first give separately their portraits, in the style of Plutarch, then compare and contrast.

Let us start with Julien Benda. As he tells us in his autobiography, *La jeunesse d’un clerc* (1936), he was born, like Proust, his near contemporary, in a well-

¹ Recently his prophecy about American democracy has been much quoted: “As democracy is perfected, the office of president represents, more and more closely, the inner soul of the people. On some great and glorious day the plain folks of the land will reach their heart's desire at last and the White House will be adorned by a downright moron.”, in *H.L. Mencken, On Politics: A Carnival of Buncombe*, 1920

integrated family of the Jewish bourgeoisie, fully republican and patriotic, and went to Lycée Charlemagne. There he studied mathematics and tried to enter the Ecole polytechnique, failed and went to Ecole Centrale, from which he quickly resigned, because he could not stand the practical orientation of teaching. He then studied history at the Sorbonne, psychology with Ribot at the Collège de France, and self-trained himself in scientific matters. The first great momentum of his life was the Dreyfus affair, which he calls a *palladium* of history. He fully embraced the cause of the *dreyfusards*, although he distanced himself from the “*dreyfusisme larmoyant*” (*whimpering dreyfusism*) and wrote in *Revue blanche*, the most progressive journal of the time in France, articles which he will in 1900 bring out in a book *Dialogues à Byzance*. During this period, he befriended with Charles Péguy, and became a regular contributor of the *Cahiers de la Quinzaine*, but soon expressed strong dissent from Péguy’s admiration of Bergson, whom he took to be an “Alexandrian Jew”, hostile to reason and logic (in contrast with Hebrews, supposed to be lovers of reason and logic). In the *Cahiers*, in 1910, he published *Mon premier testament*, a rather Nietzschean book, and in 1912 a polemic against Bergson, *Une philosophie pathétique*, soon followed by two other books against a philosopher whom he took to be the main purveyor of irrationalism. Bergson was to be his *bête noire* throughout his life. In the wake of his first essays, he wrote in 1918 his first successful book, *Belphégor*, where he derides the leisure class society (the very one which Thorstein Veblen had described a few years before, although there is no evidence that he knew Veblen’s work) and the aestheticism of his age. His defense of a classical aesthetics in this book and others that he published during the first world war gave him a reputation of being a kind of reactionary classicist, on par with the kind of rejection of romanticism that was then both pervasive in French culture from different corners : from Charles Maurras and Action française on the one hand, and from the *NRF* of Gide, Rivière and Paulhan on the other. Benda, however, never expressed any attraction for Action française. On the contrary, he was to become, during the 1920, one of the main opponents to what Zev Sternhell has called the French branch of fascism. His conversion to left wing politics was slow. During the first-world war, he started writing in *Le Figaro*, and published a series of articles defending *Union sacrée*. He opposed strongly pacifists such as Romain Rolland, arguing that German literature, history and philosophy was directly responsible for the advent of the war. He would later express his anti-German attitude during the thirties, and because of it, become one of the very early attackers of Nazism in France. His evolving reflections on nationalism, on Nietzsche, and on Action française prompted him to write both against intellectuals of the French right and of the French left, in a book which was an instant best seller in 1927, *La trahison des clercs*. In this book he accused all “clerics” – a category embracing all kinds of “intellectuals” - to have abandoned their traditional ideals of truth, justice and freedom of thought, to embrace timely politics and flatter the passions of the crowds. At the same moment, Ortega y Gasset was warning his compatriots

against the rebellion of the masses, and Kraus was fighting the populists in Austria. But Benda's style was different. He sided for a form of renewed universalism which borrowed elements from French rationalism, from Christianity and from the French revolution. This conservative stance opened to him the gates of the *NRF*, and he became, during the 1930s one of the main pillars of the journal directed by Jean Paulhan, opposing the right wings represented by Drieu la Rochelle and the "social fascists", such as Ramon Fernandez. He also wrote for many newspapers, signed a lot of petitions, went to demonstrations, although he was already in his old age. It can be said that during this period, he became, even more than Zola or Lucien Herr, one of the paradigms of what was later to be called the "*intellectuel engagé*". He fought both right (Action française and fascists) and Marxists (such as Paul Nizan and Jean Guéhenno). He was everywhere where democracy was to be defended, and in consequence, was hated both as a Jew and as a maverick leftist. In 1933, he advocated with enthusiasm the idea of a European Nation, and at the same time prefaced the very first book on Hitler, by Konrad Haiden. When the war broke out, in 1940, André Gide expelled him from the *Nouvelle revue française*, and he fled to the South of France, escaping shortly from the Gestapo, who destroyed his flat and burnt all his papers. He spent the war in Carcassonne and in Toulouse, hidden by the resistance and the communists. In his autobiography *Exercice d'un enterré vif*, he tells us that it was the best moments of his life, since he was alone in his hotel room as in cell, with no other occupation than to write. At the Libération he reappeared with four manuscripts, and especially with *La France byzantine*, a charge against what he called "literaturism" or the French cult of literature, which he saw incarnated by Mallarmé, Valéry, Proust, Gide and Paulhan among others. However, he could never find the place that he occupied in the intellectual scene. His positions about the *épuration* led him to be closer to the communists, and his post war career was that of a fellow traveller of the communist party. His attitude during the Rajk trial in 1948 showed that he had lost his pre-war lucidity. He died in 1956, and had predicted his own epitaph, which he took from Lamartine's life of Saint Just : « *Son cœur absent ne reprochait rien à sa conscience abstraite, et il mourut odieux et maudit sans se sentir coupable.* » ("His absent heart had nothing to reproach to his abstract conscience, and he died hated and damned without feeling the slightest guilt").

Let us now cross the Atlantic. H.L. Mencken was a rather different type. He was born in Baltimore in 1880, and was to remain in this city throughout his life. The son of a German immigrant whose father had established a prosperous cigar factory, he smoked cigars from morning till night. After working three years in his father's factory, he was hired as reporter at the *Baltimore Herald*, where he stayed seven years, to become editor, reporting on the Republican and the Democratic national conventions. From 1906 he became editor of the *Baltimore Sun*, where he became famous for his shockingly flippant and satirical editorials

and where he found his tone, in particular against the institution of marriage and against puritanism. In 1908, he began his long career as a book reviewer, being hired by George Nathan in the most classy literary journal of the time, *the Smart Set*, and cooperated to a number of other newspapers. At the outbreak of the war, at the very time when Benda was attacking Germany in the Figaro, Mencken expressed his sympathy for Germany, which led him to travel to Berlin and meet the Kaiser. In 1920 that he began his golden age as a journalist, epitomised by his famous coverage of the Scopes or “Monkey trial”, which opposed the Christian fundamentalist William Jennings Bryan to the liberal Clarence Darrow, the first lines of which I cannot resist to quote:

“Such obscenities as the forthcoming trial of the Tennessee evolutionist, if they serve no other purpose, at least call attention dramatically to the fact that enlightenment, among mankind, is very narrowly dispersed. It is common to assume that human progress affects everyone -- that even the dullest man, in these bright days, knows more than any man of, say, the Eighteenth Century, and is far more civilized. This assumption is quite erroneous. The men of the educated minority, no doubt, know more than their predecessors, and of some of them, perhaps, it may be said that they are more civilized -- though I should not like to be put to giving names -- but the great masses of men, even in this inspired republic, are precisely where the mob was at the dawn of history. They are ignorant, they are dishonest, they are cowardly, they are ignoble. They know little if anything that is worth knowing, and there is not the slightest sign of a natural desire among them to increase their knowledge.”²

His “Monday articles” in the Sun and his chronicles in the *American Mercury* were widely syndicated and established both him and his paper as a national institution. Although he was famous for despising democracy, Mencken was a lifelong Democrat, but his libertarian stance in regard to both civil liberties and economic principles soon caused him to consider Franklin D. Roosevelt as tyrant whose “planned economy” was nothing more than disguised socialism—and inefficient socialism. To the surprise of his friends and to all those who read his cynical comments on marriage and his book *A defense of women*, which defends women just as much as Bloy defends jews in *Le salut par les juifs*, Mencken in 1930, at the age of fifty, married Sara Haardt, a southern writer whom he had known since 1923, but she died in 1935. He was politically relatively silent during the 40, although this time he expressed disdain for Hitler. He suffered from a stroke in 1948, after having supported Truman, ceased to write and died in 1956.

There are indeed strong differences between Benda and Mencken. Benda was a republican jew coming from the bourgeoisie, Mencken was an ordinary middle class American. Their attitudes towards language and classical culture differed. Benda speaks an elegant French and defended a classical aesthetics. His literary

² Baltimore Sun, 1925, The full text can be found at : <https://archive.org/stream/CoverageOfTheScopesTrialByH.I.Mencken/ScopesTrialMencken.txt>

horizon stops at Chateaubriand and Hugo. He has no admiration for romanticism, Flaubert or Proust, and he seems to have never opened a book by Céline or Joyce, in spite of the fact that the first insulted copiously him in *Bagatelles pour un massacre*. Mencken on the contrary praised the American language, and wrote a classical book on it (*The American Language*, 1919), which is still authoritative. Mencken was in literature a son of Mark Twain, and he defended and admired Theodor Dreiser and Sinclair Lewis. He was a truly committed intellectual, probably the most committed of his generation, although he always adopted the posture of the sceptic. Benda, in contrast, incarnated in France for at least two decades the paradigm of the “cleric”, who speaks up in the name of reason and universal values, which he heralded in his *Treason of the intellectuals*. His views have often been misunderstood as a defense on non-commitment and of the ivory tower, and in this respect taken by one of his most faithful readers in the English speaking world, T.S. Eliot as close to those of the American Humanist Irving Babbit³. But actually Benda’s view was that intellectuals should go to politics when the eternal values of truth and justice are threatened, and by no means preached retirement from the public scene. This attitude is indeed the same as that of Gide, Sartre and other *engagés* French intellectuals like Foucault, except that the latter never pretended to serve eternal intellectual values or truth. On the contrary, many of them take these values to be relative, time bound, and mostly social. Mencken, was, at least officially, a conservative libertarian, who hated Woodrow Wilson, and was admired by Ayn Rand. His attitude towards intellectuals and academics, in particular Thorstein Veblen and even the pragmatists Peirce, James, and Dewey, was of scorn and of contempt.⁴

There are, however, strong similarities between the two writers. Both were autodidacts. Mencken spent very little time at school, Benda spent more time in the academic system, but left it rather soon, and he did not have an *Alma mater*. Both found their ways as publicists, as journalists and as writers outside literary circles of their times. Benda published more than 2000 newspapers articles in his life⁵. Both started from Nietzsche. Benda’s early book, *Mon premier testament*, published in 1910, is a Nietzschean analysis of political passions, defending the view that people (in particular anti-Semites) have a basic passion, which they then cover with ideas. On the very same year, Mencken, who spoke an excellent

³ see Dominic Rowland, “T. S. Eliot and the French Intelligence: Reading Julien Benda” ANQ: *A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes and Reviews* Vol. 13, Iss. 4, 2000, and an interesting comparison between Mencken and Babbit in James Seaton, *Cultural Conservatism, Political Liberalism: From Criticism to Cultural Studies*, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1996.

⁴ For his hate of academics, see e.g. what he says on Veblen’s “pretentious verbiage”, H. L. Mencken, *Prejudices: First Series* (New York, 1919), pp. 67-68, quoted by M. Black, “The prevalence of Humbug” Cornell University Press, 1983, and on Peirce (to his friends Charles Angloff) : “So you believe in that garbage, too—theories of knowledge, infinity, laws of probability. I can make no sense of it, and I don’t believe you can either, and I don’t think your god Peirce knew what he was talking about.”

⁵ The best pieces of his journalism in the Thirties have been collected in *Précision*, Gallimard 1937.

German, published his *Philosophy of Nietzsche*, the first book on Nietzsche on the American scene, published a translation of *The Antichrist*, and he took most of his debunking style from Nietzsche. In their early comments on women, democracy, in their elitism and nihilism of their first period, Benda and Mencken have a lot in common. One of the main objection of Benda against Bergson was that he pleased women. Benda, however, soon rejected Nietzsche's nihilism for a form of Platonism, and he became a true democrat. Mencken *pretended* to hate democracy, and his numerous quotes (in particular his *Notes on Democracy* of 1906) are grist to the libertarian mill, but he was, in practice a true democrat too, and a progressist, a defender of free speech, a secularist who fought against religion, fundamentalism, the Southerners (although he married one!). There is little in common between Benda's militant rationalist intellectualism and Mencken's sceptical thoughts about human values, and between the former's passion for metaphysics, and the rejection of theory, theology and any other science than empirical by the latter. Nevertheless, they both praise, against the sophistication of their contemporaries, the stance of common sense and enlightened reason, of what George Orwell later called "decency". They are both devoted to truth. If they had lived in our century they would have been utterly unable to understand the notion of *post-truth*, or would have taken it as a surrogate for religion opening the door to tyranny.⁶

Perhaps the heart of what they have in common is their attitude of irony, humour, even of sarcasm, towards their contemporaries but also towards life in general. Their basic passion is anger⁷. Both are anti-modern, in Antoine Compagnon's sense: they vituperate passionately. They are both satirists, but in very different styles. Benda's style is coldly ironical, almost icy, and expresses anger in a sanctimonious way, close, as Albert Thibaudet once remarked, to the style of the Prophets of Israel, Jonas and Ezechiel. Mencken's style in contrast is lampooning, offending, infuriated and infuriating. Mencken's satire is fully Swifitean, as witnessed by his famous hoax where he studies the history of the bathtub, written in the style of Swift's *modest proposal* and of Kraus *Grunbenhund* hoaxes⁸. Satire is often understood as expressing scepticism

⁶ Perhaps the Benda of today is Timothy Snyder, *On tyranny*, 2016

⁷ cf C. Rawson, *Swift's angers*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. The same could be said of Flannery O'Connor. Anger indeed is compatible with many kinds of values. There are angry catholics (Bloy, Flannery O'Connor), angry jews (Kraus, Benda), angry Anglicans (Swift), and angry atheists (Mencken).

⁸ An excerpt: "Bathtubs are so common today that it is almost impossible to imagine a world without them. They are familiar to nearly everyone in all incorporated towns; in most of the large cities it is unlawful to build a dwelling house without putting them in; even on the farm they have begun to come into use. And yet the first American bathtub was installed and dedicated so recently as December 20, 1842, and, for all I know to the contrary, it may still be in existence and in use.

Curiously enough, the scene of its setting up was Cincinnati, then a squalid frontier town, and even today surely no leader in culture. But Cincinnati, in those days as in these, contained many enterprising merchants, and one of them was a man named Adam Thompson, a dealer in cotton and grain. Thompson shipped his grain by steamboat down the Ohio and Mississippi to New Orleans, and from there sent it to England in sailing vessels. This trade frequently took him to England, and in that country, during the '30s, he acquired the habit of bathing." ("A Neglected Anniversary" New York Evening Mail, dec 28, 1917. Later Mencken wrote about this episode:

towards reason and values, as if the satirist were mocking these. But it is a gross mistake. The satirist is a moralist and a rationalist, who contemplates the evils of his times and refers to standards and norms which he takes to be real. He is a puritan, not in Mencken's sense – who said that puritanism is “the fear that someone, somewhere, might have a good time” – but in the sense of a worshipper of reason and truth.

Pascal Engel

“The success of this idle hoax, done in time of war, when more serious writing was impossible, vastly astonished me. It was taken gravely by a great many other newspapers, and presently made its way into medical literature and into standard reference books. It had, of course, no truth in it whatsoever, and I more than once confessed publicly that it was only a jocosity ... Scarcely a month goes by that I do not find the substance of it reprinted, not as foolishness but as fact, and not only in newspapers but in official documents and other works of the highest pretensions.” (Mencken, H L (1982). *A Mencken Chrestomathy*. Vintage Books. p. 592).