

and, a half-century before him, music critic E. T. A. Hoffmann had in mind something much more specific when they described Beethoven's music as sublime: namely, both certain musical features (e.g., the extreme length and insistent dissonances of the compositions) and "the spiritual effect that the music is supposed to produce in listeners." But the Wagner-Hoffmann view, Tymoczko contends, is little more than a watered-down version of an aesthetic principle propounded in the previous century by the philosopher Immanuel Kant.

Favoring "a kind of artistic self-abnegation," says Tymoczko, Kant suggested "that the arts might present the sublime *negatively*, by expressing their own inadequacy. . . . By portraying human limitations, and [implying] that there is some-

thing beyond them, these works inspire a kind of religious awe."

In Beethoven's works, Tymoczko finds "a number of curious passages where [his] music seems to question itself, as if challenging the demands placed upon it." The composer was prone, especially in his later works, to write music that was difficult, if not impossible, to play. But in the *Tempest* Sonata, op. 1, no. 2, he wrote music "in conflict with itself," dramatically emphasizing, at one point, the inability of his five-octave piano to reach the B-flat required, and producing "a jarringly beautiful sequence of dissonant seventh chords." At such brief, paradoxical moments, Tymoczko believes, Beethoven seems to reveal "something like a Kantian sense of art's ultimate inadequacy"--and his music reaches the truly sublime.

Mencken's Masterwork

"Babylonian Frolics: H. L. Mencken and *The American Language*" by Raymond Nelson, in *American Literary History* (Winter 1999), Oxford Univ. Press, 2001 Evans Rd., Cary, N.C. 27513-2009.

"A gaudy piece of buncombe, rather neatly done." So H. L. Mencken once described his monumental tome *The American Language* (1919). Written as America was drawn into, then engaged in, the Great War against his beloved Germany, the work was a declaration of America's linguistic independence from England. It also was "the first attempt since Noah Webster's at an overview of the national language," writes Nelson, a professor of American literature and literary history at the University of Virginia.

American and British English, argued Mencken (1880-1956), were on the verge of becoming separate languages, thanks mainly to the vigorous, vulgar expressions that America's "yokelry" kept turning out. By Mencken's account, Nelson says, the American vocabulary had begun to evolve in colonial times, "when the awakening language brought to the New World by English settlers and adventurers was redefined by the first Americanisms and expanded by loanwords from Indian, French, Dutch, Spanish, and African residents. Mencken then traces the lexicon through alternate cycles of growth and stasis," concluding in the 20th century's early

decades, "with vulgar impulses once again unleashed," to produce such welcome neologisms as *joy-ride*, *high-brow*, and *sob-sister*.

In Mencken's history of the development of American English, Nelson writes, there is ceaseless comic conflict between the demotic schoolboy, "doomed to the quality of the vulgate to which he is born," and the eternal schoolmarm, who, thanks to her own birth and upbringing, "is cursed to recite her rules and declensions through thousands of drowsy afternoons, never to any discernible effect." Mencken scorned the yokels as well as the schoolmarm, but he identified "linguistic energy with American loutish ingenuity while assigning linguistic form to the British and their ill-fitting Latin grammars." The hardly profound implication was: energy good, form bad. Not for Mencken, says Nelson, the more subtle "dialectical interplay of description and prescription, usage and sanction."

The American Language, first published in an edition of only 1,500 copies, played little role in the literary and cultural upheavals of the 1920s, Nelson says. But it did have an impact on academics and students of lan-

guage. "The truth is," Mencken wrote to a friend, "that the academic idiots are all taking it very seriously, greatly to my joy."

He thrice revised and expanded the work, in editions published in 1921, '23, and '36 (and also produced two massive supplements in 1945 and '48). *The American Language* in its 1936 edition was widely hailed as Mencken's masterwork, and it was a great popular success.

The Sage of Baltimore's influence on linguistics "has been primarily literary and inspirational," Nelson observes. Mencken was essentially an artist, not a rigorous thinker.

Yet his masterwork has "the ambition as well as the messiness and inconsistency of many classic American books," Nelson points out. And on *its* future, he believes, heavily rests Mencken's own.

OTHER NATIONS

Africa's New Slave Trade

"My Career Redeeming Slaves" by John Eibner, in *Middle East Quarterly* (Dec. 1999), 1500 Walnut St., Ste. 1050, Philadelphia, Pa. 19102-3523; and "The False Promise of Slave Redemption" by Richard Minitier, in *The Atlantic Monthly* (July 1999), 77 N. Washington St., Boston, Mass. 02114.

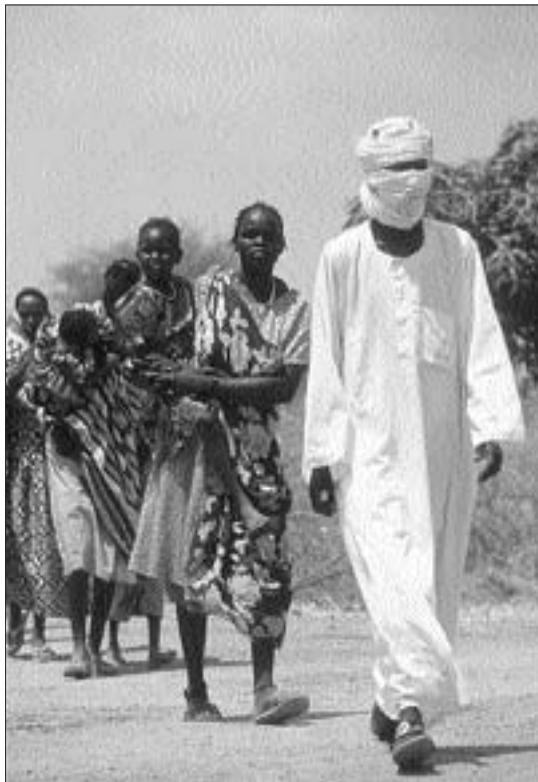
Slavery survives today in Mauritania (see WQ, Winter '98, p. 140) and Sudan, Africa's largest country. Indeed, chattel slavery, which had been suppressed in Sudan by the British, has been "experiencing a great revival" there, writes Eibner, an official with the Zurich-based Christian Solidarity International (CSI).

Islamic fundamentalists "gain[ed] the upper-hand in Khartoum" in the mid-1980s, he says, and set about subduing mostly Christian and animist southern Sudan. Slavery returned, as armed Baqqara Arab tribesmen raided the villages of black Dinkas, killing men and enslaving many women and children. After the radical National Islamic Front seized full power in Khartoum in 1989, Eibner says, slavery became "an instrument of a state-sponsored jihad." Today, he estimates, there are about 100,000 chattel slaves in Sudan—while many other Sudanese are in "concentration camps . . . and in militant Qur'anic schools, where boys train to become *mujahidun* (warriors of jihad)."

What is to be done? In late 1995, Eibner's organization began "redeeming" Sudanese slaves, that is, buying their freedom through Muslim Arab intermediaries who usually pose as slave owners. By last October, CSI, paying \$50 or more per slave, had freed 15,447

to return to their homes. But the slave raids in Sudan continue.

CSI has run into criticism, not only from Khartoum (which denies there is any slavery in Sudan and charges CSI with kidnapping), but from the United Nations Children's



Western Christians are rescuing enslaved Dinkas like these from bondage—but is the price too high?