

## Current Books

gion. No candidate for the Templeton Prize, he.

Defenders of the faiths will be tempted to dismiss these columns as rants, but they can fairly be called critiques, however brief and scathing. Mencken's wit and sense of rhythm made him a master of the epigram as well as the short essay. He didn't condescend to readers with pedagogy, by summarizing or underlining his points. He didn't pander. (Today's harshest critics, by contrast, attack the safest targets—peaceniks and lefties.) He didn't flatter politicians or assist them with polemics. His prose was conversational but composed, and his conclusions swift and graceful.

Mencken was a social critic, not a crusader: "I have never consciously tried to convert anyone to anything." His anger at religious belief was tempered by resignation to its tenacious appeal and appreciation of its vaudevilles. Religious mountebanks, he wrote, help us "get through life with a maximum of entertainment and a minimum of pain." But he was not merely an amused observer of the spectacle. He was engaged as well as detached, impassioned as well as ironic. He seemed genuinely worried that the rise of fundamentalism might reverse the process by which America had managed to

"get rid of religion as a serious scourge" by "reducing it to a petty nuisance."

Mencken revealed his own passions in the coda to a 1930 article, "What I Believe." An uncharacteristic lapse into didacticism, it was also redundant: His beliefs informed his essays. He was a libertarian, committed to your right to voice stupidities and his right to mock them. He had no patience for the "curious social convention" that demands respect for religious belief, and no use for the impulse to prohibit unpopular beliefs. If he regarded Christian Science (among other faiths) as dangerous nonsense, he saw greater danger in efforts to outlaw it.

Mencken flourished in early-20th-century America, during and shortly after a period of harsh political repression, when free speech was a radical idea. He was alert to thought policing: "Men are being denounced and hounded in the United States today, not because they are doing what is admitted to be wrong, but because they are thinking what is thought to be wrong. Error is converted into a felony." If we resurrected him today, he no doubt would be astonished by the miracle, but otherwise, I suspect, he would feel at home.

—WENDY KAMINER

## ARTS & LETTERS

### *IN RUINS.*

By Christopher Woodward.  
Pantheon Books. 280 pp. \$24

In this charming, delightfully illustrated book, British historian Christopher Woodward indulges what he admits is "a perverse pleasure" in ruins. Drawing on literature, art, landscape design, and other fields, he examines the inspiration that people both famous and obscure have found in rubble—everything from classical ruins to haunted houses, from the devastation of the London Blitz to the elaborate fake ruins constructed in 18th-century gardens. Although most of his examples are European, Woodward's range is immense. On a single page, he veers from an 1873 Gustave Doré engraving of an imaginary ruined London to the toppled Statue of Liberty in *Planet of the Apes*.

All ruins are not created equal, however: To

be deliciously evocative, a ruin must be a bit rough around the edges. Woodward can't stand ruins that get, well, ruined by excessive tidying and the addition of such desecrations as Keep Off signs, tea rooms, and gift shops. Archeologists are another pet peeve. Their excavations, he charges, have sucked the strange magic from Rome's Colosseum and rendered it "extinct."

Left to crumble poetically, ruins can summon a variety of responses. "A ruin is a dialogue between an incomplete reality and the imagination of the spectator," Woodward writes. Tracing the fixation back to the fall of Rome, he builds a case for ruins as metaphors. Whether real, imagined, or fake, they can serve as memento mori, warn of the perils of decadence, or call into question the inevitability of human progress. They can link a current civi-

lization to a past one's glory, or to its decline and fall. They can serve as war monuments that evoke an enemy's barbarity, or as picturesque garden ornaments that hint at ancient lineages. "Ruins do not speak," Woodward observes. "We speak for them."

The author is especially eloquent as he charts classical Rome's rapid transformation from Eternal City to nearly abandoned wasteland, with the Forum collapsing into cow pasture and the Colosseum converted to a quarry. "If such a colossus as Rome can crumble—its ruins ask—why not London or New York?" That's a disconcerting question, with Ground Zero still fresh in memory. Although Woodward completed his book before the September 11 attacks, what happened afterward only reinforces his point about the potency of ruins. Lest the shattered World Trade Center stand as a portent of empire lost, it was quickly transmogrified into what looks like any other neat-edged construction site.

Some may quibble with Woodward's tendency to jump from one thing to the next, and it's true that his transitions often seem arbitrary. But this merely signals his enthusiasm. Like a giddy dinner-party companion, he can't stop sharing his eccentric obsession in a breathless rush of conversation, skipping from history to travel to memoir (he recounts his boyhood fascination with a decaying manor amid "bright new Lego-like houses"). You just have to sit back and enjoy the ride.

—REBECCA A. CLAY

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**IRVING HOWE:**

***A Life of Passionate Dissent.***

By Gerald Sorin. New York Univ. Press. 386 pp. \$32.95

Even after *World of Our Fathers* (1976), a popular elegy to Jewish immigrant culture, made him rich, Irving Howe (1920–93) never abandoned his radical ideals. The cofounder of *Dissent* devoted much of his life to bril-

liant commentary on the meaning of socialism in America. His range and power of discrimination as a critic, essayist, and autobiographer won respect from opponents and reverence from allies. Among the latter is Gerald Sorin, whose biography shines with admiration even as it records the personal flaws that shadowed Howe's "passionate dissent."

According to Sorin, a history professor at



**A Preacher in the Ancient Ruins (c. 1750), by Giovanni Pannini**

the State University of New York at New Paltz, loneliness drew 14-year-old Howe to the Young People's Socialist League in 1934. Principle kept him there. Socialism, Howe found, reflected the "ethic of solidarity" pervading the Yiddish neighborhoods of his East Bronx boyhood. At the City College of New York in the late 1930s, he led Trotskyists against Stalinists and distinguished himself by "overblown rhetoric, heavy-handed sarcasm, and a seemingly unbreakable attachment to intellectual agility rather than reflection, to dialectic rather than investigation and analysis." The proletarian revolution allowed no room for nuance.

As revolution passed America by, Howe's hot-blooded socialism cooled. He stopped talking of class analysis and began calling himself a humanist rather than a Marxist. By the end of the 1950s, he was counseling radicals to vote for liberal Democrats. Lacking manifest political content, his socialism became what he termed "the name of our desire." And so it remained, unsatisfied, until his death in 1993.