

Conclusions: Kostî's Menck & Nat

by Richard Kostelanetz (January 2015)

In memory of the great American writer Benjamin de Casseres (1873-1945), who authored *Mencken and Shaw* (1930)

Long interested in rewriting classic American literary works, beginning with Herman Melville's "Bartleby" and continuing with Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" (both of mine published by Bartleby & Co. in Brussels), I discovered a fugative text produced before 1920 by my critical hero H. L. Mencken in collaboration with his sometime co-conspirator (and co-editor) George Jean Nathan. Published as *The American Credo* (1920), it has two parts. The first, curiously mistitled "Preface," is longer than the second part. If the former offers a critique of American society, the latter is meant to represent Americans' ideas. The few critics thoughtfully commenting on this book judge its first part as superior to its second. Even so, the second was more inspiring to me.

Essentially a series of extended one-liners, perhaps in the tradition of Gustave Flaubert's legendary *Dictionary of Received Ideas* written in the late 1870s, *The American Credo* (1920) contains miscellaneous remarks that I find are sometime satirical and other times penetratingly true. This dichotomy also characterizes the Flaubert text for me.

Much as I prefer Mencken and Nathan's aphoristic project, I found myself rewriting their sentences by shifting phrases and adding clarifiers, sometimes to be more self-satirical but more often to make them more true. My overall aim in *Kostî's Menck and Nat* was to make them better, at least to me. Though I couldn't divide the individual remarks into encompassing categories, I added individual titles, in the tradition of Gertrude Stein, and then set these titles (of mine) in alphabetical order, in part to frame but also to offer an indexing device.

I'm not aware of anyone else (re)working prose aphorisms similarly, certainly not with these, though perhaps someone unknown to me has. One charm perhaps in reading these is deciding which should stand as satirical and which true. My collective title, *Conclusions*, represents my definition of the tone of these aphorisms, in contrast to those written by others. May I venture that others might rewrite the Mencken-Nathan texts differently; and were either Menck or Nat still around a century later, each would have (re)written them differently, albeit without collaboration, as they later ceased collaborating.

—Richard Kostelanetz, FarEast BushWick, NY 11385-5751, 1 January 2015

A.D. Every writer's posthumously printed stories have been written by hacks hired by magazine editors and publishers.

ABSTEMIOUS Surrounded by alcoholic beverages and believing the temptation would be irresistible once he began, a former bartender never took a drink.

ADORATION A minor actress in a theatrical company always regards the leading man as an exemplary creature, loving him at a distance.

ADORED So many women are in love with a matador that he doesn't know who to accept.

ADVICE If a child is given all the alcohol he wants at home he or she will not drink when he goes away.

ALCOHOL German babies are raised on beer in place of milk.

AMBITION A man who realized a great entrepreneurial success could have easily become as great a composer as Bach or Mozart, had he been minded thus to devote his talents.

ARTIFYING Any sepia photograph of the Coliseum, once framed, is a work of art.

ASHORE Though all sailors are gifted with an extraordinary propensity for amour, on their first night on shore leave they hang around waterfront saloons, succumbing to knock-out drops.

BAD ADVICE Champagne will prevent seasickness.

BAD GIFT When a girl gives a man a pen-knife for a present, their friendship will come to an unhappy end unless he wards off bad luck by also giving her a penny.

BAD KARMA Wearing opal can be very unlucky.

BAD MOVE Unlucky it is for you to put your hat on a bed.

BADGE Recognize gamblers by their preference for wearing large diamonds.

BANANAS A fruitseller with bananas on his pushcart always takes the bananas home at night and sleeps with them securely under his bed.

BANKROLLING When a libertine millionaire kept no less than twenty girls, each had a Fifth Avenue mansion and a yearly income of fifty grand.

BARBERED Prizefighters and baseball players have their hair cut round in the back.

BARGAIN Only in France can one get an excellent bottle of wine for a franc.

BESTOWALS Certain women are so extraordinarily seductive that at least 40 bank cashiers are annually guilty of tapping the till in order to buy them diamonds and mink coats.

BEWARE On the first day of the summer season in a pleasure park, many people, owing to insufficiently tested apparatus, are regularly killed on the rollercoasters.

BOMBED In Paris a play without a bed never makes any money.

BOOTLEGGERS All Congressmen who voted for Prohibition are secret lushers who keep heavy stocks of all sorts of liquors for sale and for themselves in their cellars.

BOURGEOIS All workmen in Henry Ford's factory owns a pretty house in the suburbs with a rose garden in his backyard.

BROKEN Every circus clown's heart is breaking for one reason or another.

BULLETPROOFING Bibles carried in their breast pockets have saved many soldiers' lives in battle.

BUTTERMILK A man drinking three glasses of buttermilk every day will never be ill.

CAREFUL All immigrants come to America in search of liberty that, whenever they attempt to exercise, are immediately sent back.

CAVEAT EMPTOR Department store sales are always fakes, as a few things are marked down to attract the women and then swindle them with higher prices on things they actually want.

CHARISMA A Sunday School superintendent often sleeps with one of the choir girls.

CHEAP PREDITOR Special is the woman who likes to go to a bargain sale, fight her way to the counter, and have not only pins stuck into her but her feet mashed by other women.

CHEAPER Anyone can buy a fine suit of clothes in London for less dollars.

CHILL A sudden chill is a sign that somebody is walking over one's grave.

CHILL Any man taking a cold bath every morning of his life will never be ill.

CHINKS Behind the kitchen of a Chinese restaurant something mysterious transpires.

CHOICE Stop and go is a more agreeable command than go and stop, stop.

CHUMMY An American diplomat with the French, German, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Russian and Japanese languages at his finger tips is chummy with royalty.

CIGAR The first time a boy smokes a cigar he always becomes deathly sick.

CITY BOYS Country girls falling before marriage have been seduced by city boys.

CLAP Nine out of every ten Frenchmen have syphilis.

CLASS A soft speaking voice marks a well-bred man.

CLOSED HOLE It is impossible for a man to learn how to thread a needle.

CODE Catholic priests conduct their private conversations in Latin.

CODES When a Chinese laundryman hands you a slip for your laundry, the Chinese letters on the slip have nothing to do with the laundry but are in reality a derogatory description of the customer.

COLD Scandinavian theatregoers care only for Ibsen and Strindberg.

COLORING All the wine formerly served in Italian restaurants was made in cellars and then artificially colored with some sort of dye.

COMBAT Only in vulgar sports is the object for the players to gouge out one another's eyes and pull off one another's ears.

COMPETENCE When singing J. S. Bach even German peasants reveal a profound musicality.

CONCOCTING Invent sentences with an equal inclination of being true or false.

CONFISCATING In Central America every morning before breakfast is the revolution whose sole object is enabling the revolutionary chiefs to seize moneys in the public treasury before retiring to Paris.

CONJOINED The Siamese Twins were joined together by gutta-percha molded and painted to look like a human shoulder blade.

CONTRACEPTION Anyone eating an apple every night before retiring will never be ill.

CONTRACEPTIVE A string of amber beads will prevent a woman from getting a sore throat.

CONTRACEPTIVES Rubbers in wet weather prevent colds.

CONTRARY CONCLUSIONS While proving fraud may be possible in every individual case of spiritualist communication with the dead, the accumulated effect of such communications is demonstrating the immortality of souls.

COOKED TOES Anyone getting his feet wet is sure to catch cold.

CORPORATE INTELLIGENCE In America business men make better public officers than politicians.

COUNTER-RELIABLE When the weather man predicts rain it always turns out fair, and when he predicts fair it always rains.

COUNTING CURE Hiccoughs may be stopped by counting slowly up to one hundred.

CROSSED In many provincial hotels, the tap marked "hot water" always gives cold water while the tap marked "cold" always spews hot.

CUD CONCENTRATION Though the Justices of the Supreme Court of the United States all chew tobacco while hearing cases, they are very serious men otherwise, never laughing, looking at a pretty girl, or getting tight.

CULTURE VULTURES Easy prey for traveling booksellers, farmers are the largest purchasers of cheap sets of Guy de Maupassant, Rudyard Kipling and O. Henry.

DANGER As a German civilian, before WWI, had to get off the sidewalk whenever an army lieutenant approached him on the street, failure to do so instantly could entitle the lieutenant to run him through with his sword.

DAYTIME WORK Blessed with an easy and lazy life, a clergyman spends most of his time visiting women parishioners while their husbands are at work.

DE-ITCH If you ignore scratching a mosquito bite, it will stop itching.

DEBATING If a bat flies into a woman's hair, the hair must be cut off to get it out.

DECAMPING Whenever a crowd of boys goes camping in summer two or three of them drown, while the rest come home suffering from poison ivy.

DEDRUNKING Drop a crust of bread into one's glass of champagne and you can drink indefinitely without getting drunk.

DELAY Whenever one goes to a railroad station to meet some one, never is the train on time.

DELUMINATION Candle light flatters a woman forty-five years old to appear fifteen years younger.

DETWINED Whenever one twin dies, the other twin becomes exceedingly melancholy and soon also passes away.

DEVASTATING A summer cold is twice as recalcitrant as a winter cold.

DEVASTATION Whenever any prohibition is enforced in a region populated by outlaws, they take to morphine, heroin and other powerful drugs after murdering all of the law-abiding inhabitants.

DIAGNOSIS Fully one half the repertoire of physical ailments is due to uric acid.

DIGITAL All the great writers of the world now use word-processors.

DIGITAL George M. Cohan and Irving Berlin can only play the piano with one finger.

DISAPPOINTMENTS All marriages with actresses turn out badly.

DISCRIMINATION When a woman buys cigars for a man she always judges the quality of the cigars by the magnificence of the cigars' bands.

DISELABORATION Henry James never wrote a simple sentence.

DISINHERIT If the sort of woman walking her Pomeranian dog should ever have a child unexpectedly, she would give the midwife \$500 to make away with it.

DISSIDENT RELATIVES Whenever a young Frenchman comes home unexpectedly, some friend of the family quickly sneak out of the back door.

DO NOT The doughnut is exceptionally indigestible.

DON'T Counting the carriages in a funeral brings bad luck.

DOUBT No one can predict accurately what the public might want.

DOWNDRESSING A woman purchasing a cravat for a man always picks out one that is green and purple with red polka-dots.

DOWNPSYCHING Men high in public affairs always read detective stories for diversion.

DRAFT In the days when there were breweries, the men driving beer-wagons drank 65 glasses of beer a day; so much didn't hurt them because it came direct from the wood.

DRY OUT The best way to stop nosebleed is to drop a doorkey down the patient's back.

DUMB A college freshman is always an embarrassing ignoramus.

DUTIES Only a Polish woman can have a baby at 8 A.M. and cook her husband's dinner at noon.

EFEMINENCE All men named Clarence, Claude or Percy are sissies.

ELEPHANTINE A circus elephant never forgets a person who gives him a chew of tobacco or a rotten peanut, but will single him or her out from a crowd years afterward, bashing in his head with one colossal blow.

ENTER? Any saloon with a sign reading "Family Entrance" on its side door invariably has a bawdy house upstairs.

EXPLOITATION Whenever a rich American girl marries a foreign nobleman, he seizes her money and then beats her before running away with an actress.

EXTRACTING Catholic priests never solicit money from their parishioners, merely assessing them so much a head and making them pay up instantly.

EYEROT Whiskey sold without familiar labels contains wood alcohol, causing whoever drinks it to go blind.

EYEVICIE To get successfully a cinder out of the eye, don't touch the eye but roll it in an outward direction while simultaneously blowing your nose.

FAÇADE In private life all celebrated professional humorists are heavy and witless fellows.

FAINT STARS People prominent in every smart society are all very dull elsewhere.

FAIT ATTENTION When a dog whines in the middle of the night, know that it is a sure sign that some one is going to die.

FAKE DEATH If encountering a savage beast in the jungle, fall upon the ground, and lie still; and if you pretends that you are dead, the savage beast will promptly make off, hurting no one.

FAKES Magnificently embossed stock certificates characterize gold mine swindles.

FARE-RIGGING Taxicab meters are covertly manipulated by means of wires hidden under the drivers' seats.

FARM FINGERS Demanding a special talent possessed only by yokels, cow milking is impossible for a person born in a large city.

FATHERHOOD When a bachelor who has hated children gets married and discovers he is about to become a father, he is, to his friends' surprise, delighted.

FEARLESS A drunken man falling never hurts himself.

FEED Every hired family cook has an unemployed lover whom she feeds by stealing the better part of every dish she cooks.

FEETLESS No man of first-rate mental attainments ever goes in for dancing.

FEMALE FEAR When foes beheld Joan of Arc leading the French army against them, a look of terror froze their features; and, throwing their arms aside, they broke into a frenzied and precipitate flight.

FETID The tenement districts are the unhealthy places because the dwellers hang their bedding out on the fire-escapes.

FEUDING RELATIVES Whenever there is a funeral in certain dysfunctional families the mourners all get drunk and proceed to assault one another with clubs.

FILCHERS On every trans-Atlantic steamer are two slick gamblers who, once the ship docks, sneak ashore with large sums of money they have won from the passengers.

FILCHING All bank cashiers, sooner or later, tap the till.

FILLED After Thanksgiving dinner everybody suffers a stomach-ache.

FINEST Champagne is the best of all wines.

FISH SENSE A country boy armed with a bent pin can catch more fish than a city angler with

the latest and most expensive tackle.

FLOPS Jokes in *Punch* or *The New Yorker* are never funny.

FLY Standing close to the edge of a dizzy altitude, one is seized peculiarly with an impulse to jump off.

FOCUSSING To gather a large crowd in New York, stand on the curb and gaze intently at the sky.

FOOT(A)WARE During the summer, tan shoes are much cooler on the feet than black shoes.

FORAGING A country newspaper editor receives so many presents of potatoes, corn, rutabagas, asparagus, country ham, carrots, turnips, etc., that he never has to buy any food for himself.

FORBODING Athiests end up in hell; they really do.

FOREKNOWLEDGE Whoever eats cucumbers before swimming will be seized with a cramp.

FORTUITOUS A business house stenographer in is always coveted by her employer, who invites her to luncheon frequently, gradually worms his way into her confidence, keeps her after office hours one day, ruins her, and then sets her up in a magnificently furnished apartment in Riverside Drive further appeasing her old mother by paying the latter's expenses for a summer holiday with her daughter at the seashore.

FREE STRINGS Paderewski can get all the pianos he wants for nothing.

FRIDGID Englishwomen are very cold.

FUNEREAL When an ocean vessel collides with another vessel or hits an iceberg and, in each case, starts to sink, the ship's band knows promptly to rushes up to the top deck and begin playing "Nearer, My God, to Thee."

FURTIVE Members of the most fashionable church choirs often, during the sermon, engage in kissing and hugging behind the pipeorgan.

GEORGE When Washington crossed the Delaware, he stood up in the bow of the boat holding aloft a large American flag.

GLUED As ready-made mail order blue serge suits for men are put together with mucilage, they turn green if put in sunlight for a day or two.

GLUTTONS In addition to eating six regular meals a day, Germans between times stave off their appetite with numerous Schweitzer cheese sandwiches, blutwurst, and beer.

GOSSIP Chorus girls spend their time during intermissions sitting around naked in their dressing rooms while telling naughty stories.

GOSSIP Old ladies seated on summer hotel verandas devote themselves entirely to the discussion of scandals.

GRAY Sudden shock may cause the hair to turn grey overnight.

GREEK All the Boston schoolboys have bulging eyebrows, wear large spectacles, and, wonder of wonders, can read ancient Greek.

HAIR-ROT Water rots the hair thus causing baldness.

HAIRLOSS Since American Indians are never bald, hair loss in white people must come from wearing tight hats.

HALTS All Russians have unpronounceable names; so do all Dutch.

HARD CURRENCY The accumulation of money makes a man hard, robbing him of all his finer qualities.

HAUGHY Theater box-office clerks are routinely impolite, hating to sell a ticket to a prospective patron.

HAZARD All glass blowers soon or late die of consumption.

HEX COWS Horsethieves will put a spell upon the cattle of any farmer who has them arrested for stealing his mare.

HIDE Curtains are meant to be hid behind.

HIDES A collar-button that drops to the floor when one is dressing invariably rolls into an obscure and inaccessible spot and eludes its owner's searching.

HIGH END When an Odd Fellow dies, his lodge always gives him a magnificent funeral, including a band and a parade.

HOOKING A young woman finding a piece of tea leaf floating around the top of her tea cup will be married before the end of the year.

HOTDOGS The frankfurters sold at circuses and pleasure parks are made of dog meat.

HOUDINI Were Houdini locked up in Sing Sing, he would manage to escape in less than half an hour without the guards' knowing.

HOUSEWORK DIVISION All the best cooks are men and best housewives women.

IDENTIFYING Unlikely it is that a man and woman entering a hotel without baggage after 10 P.M. are man and wife.

IGNITION If a spark hits a celluloid collar, the collar will explode.

ILLEGIBLE An illegible signature marks a great man.

IMMATURITY A frivolous woman is always fifteen or twenty years older than she looks.

IMMIGRANTS All provincial millionaires are very loud fellows who raise merry hell with chorus girls whenever they go to New York.

IMMUNITY The principal reason the British authorities didn't lock up Bernard Shaw during WWI was because they were afraid of his mind.

IMPREGNABLE The Swiss army, though small, is so strong that even the ferocious German army would have been defeated by citizens with guns hiding among mountains.

INBREEDING When cousins marry, their children are born blind, deformed, or imbecile.

INCENTIVE A theatrical matinée performance is always inferior to an evening performance as the star is always eager to hurry up the show in order to get a longer rest before the night performance.

INEBRIATED Back in the days of freedom all ironmolders and steamfitters would get drunk every Saturday night.

INEBRIATED Drinking three whiskeys a day will prevent pneumonia.

INEBRIATED SPEECH A drunk always pronounces every "s" as "sh."

INLAY Whenever a biker gets eight dollars, he goes to a dentist who fills one of his front teeth with gold.

INNOCENCE A pretty woman a jury never convicts.

INSATIATING Whoever begins eating peanuts cannot stop.

INSIDE DOPE Receiving many hot tips on the stock-market, American politicians are too honourable to play them, and so turn them over to their wives who make fortunes.

INTENSIVE CULTIVATION A German farmer can raise more produce on one acre of land than an American can raise on a hundred.

INVESTING An Italian who earns and saves \$1,000 in America can take the money home, invest it in land, and thereafter live like a rich man.

JUICERS So easily do retired athletes take to booze that they end their days either as panhandlers, as night watchmen, or as janitors at the YMCA.

KILLING LOVE In the Dead Letter Office are hundreds of letters whose failure to arrive at their intended destinations caused many lovers' separating.

KING The real President of the United States around 1920 was J. P. Morgan.

KLUTZ No real man can ever learn to thread a needle or darn a sock.

KRAUTFEET Sauerkraut is made by men pressing it into barrels by jumping with their bare feet.

LADIES MAN A certain Exalted Personage in Washington is a gay dog with the ladies and used to cut up with a stock company actress.

LASTIN LONGESTOUT A girl taking the last cake off a plate will die an old maid.

LAZYNESS The man who doesn't hop promptly to his feet when the orchestra plays "The Star Spangled Banner" as an overture to Hurtig and Seamon's "Hurly-Burly Girlies" must have either rheumatism or pro-German sympathies.

LICENSED CROOKS Whenever a will case gets contested in the courts, the lawyers gobble all the money, while the heirs come out penniless.

LISTEN One's itching ear becomes a sign that someone wants to talk to you and only you.

LITERACY Only farmers read only government documents and patent-medicine almanacs.

LIZZIE The editor of a woman's magazine is always a lizzie.

LONG AFLOAT Excursion boats must be old if a drifting beer-keg can sink them.

LOOSE All girls educated in convents turn out to be hell-raisers in later life.

LOUD A drunken man is invariably more bellicose than a sober man.

LOVE Any married man remaining loyal to his wife must love her.

LOVELORN A young woman accidentally putting her lingerie on wrong side out is signifying that she will be married before the end of the year.

LOW DOGS Surprised all might be to learn that all dachshunds come from Germany.

LOW ODDS When a man embarks with a girl in a canoe, the chances are two to one that the girl will move around when the boat is in midstream and upset it.

LOWERCLASS JOYS The second-class passengers on a trans-Atlantic passenger steamship always have more fun than the first-class passengers.