Chapter Two: Mencken and “The Colored Brother”

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In 1927, while waiting to go to work, a black youth loitered in a bank lobby in Memphis. Perfunctorily, he picked up a nearby newspaper, and as he glanced through it, he suddenly fixed his attention upon a very strange article. Here in front of his bewildered eyes was a vicious attack on a man who was not a Negro, and yet the vehemence of the language was the kind that was usually reserved for Negroes. Why did the South hate this man so much, the youth wondered. His curiosity pricked, he borrowed a friend’s library card and forged a note: "Will you please let this nigger boy," it said to the librarian in charge, "have some books by H. L. Mencken." No one who has ever read Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* can forget the scene that ensued. Handed *A Book of Prefaces* and a volume of *Prejudices* (probably the Second Series, the one that contains Mencken’s notorious satire on the South, “The Sahara of the Bozart”), the nineteen-year-old Wright returned to his lonely boardinghouse room and read far into the night. It was an experience he would never forget, and it left its mark upon him. He was stirred by Mencken’s “clear, clean, sweeping sentences,” his Gargantuan rage, his Olympian ridicule of “everything American.” To Wright, Mencken was a warrior, “fighting with words . . . using them as one would use a club.” The whole experience “frightened” him at first: “What amazed me was not what he said, but how on earth anybody had the courage to say it.”1

This last sentence pinpoints one reason for Mencken’s popularity among the black intellectuals of the 1920s. He seemed to know what they knew, that beneath the smug surface of American life was a core of rottenness. Like the child in the famous fairy tale, Mencken saw Uncle Sam without any clothes on, and he did not hesitate to laugh. His satire of southern culture (at a time when the South still reveled in its romantic...
myths), his identification with the literature of realism and rebellion—
these facets of Mencken’s public and literary personality had a specific
influence on the black intellectuals, but what they liked about Mencken
generally was his personal courage. His great appeal was that he never let
the shibboleths of American society compromise his honesty. Countee
Cullen called him “the intrepid Mr. Mencken” in the Pittsburgh Courier
the same year Wright was reading his works in Memphis, but by 1927
the epithet had become almost a cliché. As early as 1918, and in another
black newspaper (the New York Age), James Weldon Johnson had de-
veloped this theme at greater length:

Those who look for cleverness in Mencken are missing the best part of
him; the best part of Mencken is truth. He gets at truth because he is de-
void of the sentimental and mawkish morality which seems to be the curse
of everyone who writes in the English language. In other words, he is free
and is therefore not afraid to write the truth. Many a writer is sincere
enough, but bound by so many conventions that he cannot write the
truth. Mencken pays no regard to traditions and conventions as such; he
has absolutely no respect for them merely on account of their age.

Two years later, writing for the same black newspaper, Johnson repeated
his praise:

Readers of “The Age” are familiar with our opinion of Mr. H. L. Mencken
as a writer. We have more than once said in these columns that he is the
brightest and cleverest of all contemporary American writers. But Mr.
Mencken is a great deal more than bright and clever. He is sincere and
honest. And he is sincere and honest because he is not afraid of anything:
not even of the truth.

In the same article, he noted Mencken’s unique relationship to the Negro:
“Several times Mr. Mencken has written on the race question, and al-
though he has no special interest in the Negro’s rights and wrongs, he
always writes on the Negro’s side, because he sees that on that side lies
the truth.”

Mencken’s truth telling became a byword among the Harlem intellec-
tuals. When in a newspaper article (17 July 1927—New York World)
Mencken gave out grades to black artists for their recent work and only
one, James Weldon Johnson, received a high mark, George Schuyler
observed in the Pittsburgh Courier that Mencken was only “telling what
God loves.” Similarly, in the same black newspaper a year earlier,
Walter White pointed to Mencken as the leader of those modern white
literati who had (using Mencken’s own language) refused “to be ensnared
by the buncombe that forms the overwhelming mental diet of the Ameri-
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cano," and he lauded Mencken in particular as having "done more than any single American to save his fellow Americans from stupidity and puritanism." He then urged his readers to buy the American Mercury: "If you want to be intelligent, you cannot afford not to read it each month."6 Even when J. A. Rogers praised an article by George Schuyler as the only "honest" piece of writing on the Negro, by a Negro, that year (1928), he could not resist the following aside: "And this is not so much a tribute to Mr. Schuyler's genius and keen wit as it is to the Mercury."7 In the same vein, when Countee Cullen sent his poem "Shroud of Color" to Mencken's magazine, he accompanied it with the following note: "I suppose it is absolutely foolhardy for me to submit such a long piece of verse to The American Mercury, but I don't know of any other magazine to which I could submit it without being afraid that it would be rejected for the obvious, but innocuous, reason that it is a poem about a Negro and by a Negro. Eric Walrond whose short stories of Negro life you have liked and one of which you published in The Smart Set urged me to send this poem to you."8

Lest all this praise be interpreted as mere flattery of a white editor, consider Claude McKay's observations about Mencken in a private letter to Arthur Schomburg in 1925. McKay was a maverick who never minced words about anybody, and often his rude candor lost him friends. If anyone can be trusted to give an unbiased opinion about Mencken, it is McKay. At the time he wrote Schomburg, he was trying to get a first novel ("Color Scheme") published and was having a hard time of it. He asked Schomburg to get some advice about the manuscript and recommended Mencken because "his standard of judgment would be entirely literary."9 In another letter to Schomburg about "Color Scheme," he said of Mencken that "if... he can do anything he will. He is absolutely free of wire pulling."10

Mencken's honesty also extended to his remarks about Negroes. At least this is what W.E.B. DuBois told his readers in the Crisis when some of them questioned Mencken's criticism of the Harlem Renaissance in a recent newspaper article.11 Although we may question his facts, said DuBois, "there can be no question of H. L. Mencken's attitude toward Negroes. It is calmly and judiciously fair. He neither loves them or hates them. He has a predilection for men."12 But Kelly Miller gave the most insightful analysis of Mencken's attitude toward the Negro, and his article on Baltimore's sage appeared in two leading black newspapers, the Baltimore Afro-American (8 October 1927) and the Amsterdam News (12 October 1927). Referring to the same article as had DuBois, Miller called his piece "Mencken Mentions Us": "From the very beginning of his literary career," Miller said, "Mr. Mencken has given much attention to the Negro question." This attention in itself is not unusual; what is unusual
is his objectivity: "He neither loves nor hates the Negro. He has no propaganda for or against him. He does not regard him as all good as the Moody and Sankey brand of religionists were once wont to do, nor yet as all bad, according to the exploded school of Tillman and Vardaman." Such detachment, Miller continued, makes Mencken a trustworthy interpreter of Negro life and art. He "undertakes to describe the Negro; not to reform him. Like Shakespeare, he does not make the original, but holds the mirror up to nature."  

In actuality, Mencken often tried to reform the Negro, and he was not above making a few judgments concerning his welfare or condition. Nevertheless, Miller is substantially right in his estimation of Mencken. Mencken did believe that an awful lot of "pish-posh" (to use one of his favorite words) had been uttered about the Negro and that the real evidence had yet to be collected, much less assessed.

Having the fastidious habits of a list maker (or a lexicographer), Mencken tried to marshal as much evidence as he could. For example, his Mercury editorial "A Coon Age" was an attempt to educate his fellow Americans by overwhelming them with the facts; and although he may have upset Jervis Anderson with his lack of civility, the article was enthusiastically received by black Americans living in the 1920s. The Pittsburgh Courier published an editorial called "Mencken Again" (the title indicates that the black newspaper kept tabs on him), which informed its readers that Mencken was to be honored for writing such an informative piece of journalism: "Here he points out what every well-informed Negro knows: that almost everything that is internationally recognized as American is derived from the dark brother. The list includes music, cooking, consumption of gin, language, the cabaret rage, dancing and religious practices. With great gusto Mr. Mencken portrays the manner in which the lowly Negro has forced his culture upon the none-too-reluctant Caucasians, and makes some highly interesting and entertaining comments thereon." The Courier went on to call Mencken's article "remarkable" because "it appears in the foremost white magazine in America." It concluded with the statement that Mencken is "performing a great service for us in banishing bigotry, prejudice and ignorance so effectively. America would unquestionably be a much more liveable place for the Aframerican if there were a lot more intelligent people like Mencken."  

The Courier was impressed with Mencken's knowledge of Negro culture, and it had every right to be. Mencken's knowledge was considerable, even formidable. When Mencken stated in The American Language that the reason he knew so much about Negro life was that he had spent "a lifetime ... in contact with Negroes of all classes," no one snickered in Harlem. Over the years Mencken had acquired a reputation
of being thorough and exact, even scholarly. More than one black intellectual was "struck," in George Schuyler’s words to him, “by your familiarity with doings in the black belt.” This familiarity, of course, extended to language. Mencken was interested in Negro slang, Negro “designations,” Negro proper names, and Negro English—all of which he discussed in great detail in *The American Language* and its two supplements. As one might expect, he delighted in these three books in debunking myths about the Negro. He thought, for instance, that “sportive” American writers had romanticized the Negro’s penchant for unusual proper names (for instance, “the Scarlet Creeper” in *Nigger Heaven*). “All the students who have investigated Aframerican onomastics in a scientific spirit,” he said, “have found such monstrosities to be few and far between.” Similarly, he deplored the falsification of Negro dialect in the novels of white Americans: The “representation of Negro speech in literature has always been imperfect, and often absurd.” In addition to language, Mencken’s encyclopedic mind even took a delight in such minor arts as Negro cooking. (He once contributed information to Walter White’s intended book on the subject.) And although his own taste in Negro music was limited, he wanted to know about all kinds, even if he did not especially care for some of them. (He tried unsuccessfully to get James Weldon Johnson to write a piece on jazz for the *Mercury*, and he painfully learned the slang that surrounded it for *The American Language*.) He also prided himself on his knowledge of Negro folkways, once surprising George Schuyler with the esoteric lore that the bite of the “blue-gummed Negro” is venomous (Schuyler was unfamiliar with this myth). And he read Negro periodicals; on one occasion, he spent an hour looking for the *Crisis*, finding it at last in a small Negro grocery store in “Baltimore Harlem.” He even claimed superior knowledge of Negro “religious practices,” but in this case his wisdom was less than he imagined.

Mencken saw himself as a kind of amateur anthropologist, and he gathered his information about the Negro from wherever he could, from friend and foe alike. His objectivity explains the diversity of articles by and about blacks in the *Mercury* and even his own linguistic practice in his article “Designations for Colored Folk,” in which he took a strictly scholarly stance in describing the opprobrious names applied to Negroes over the centuries. Mencken believed that the truth should be told no matter how unpleasant, and thus in his *New Dictionary of Quotations* he included more famous sayings unflattering to blacks than those that were flattering, because he felt obligated to print whatever passed for folk wisdom. That the racial sneers outnumbered the racial encomiums meant only that the quality of folk wisdom was none too high, a fact that would hardly have surprised Mencken. Although he was immensely interested in folkways, he rarely romanticized them.
For someone who has been accused of having a mind like a steel trap, Mencken often had a wide range of sympathies and perceptions. He wanted to understand both sides of the Negro question, even as he wished to dispel the nonsense spoken in its behalf. Although he disapproved of racial and religious prejudice in theory, he could see how it originated in fact:

What is commonly described as racial or religious prejudice is sometimes only a reasonable prudence. At the bottom of it there is nothing more wicked than a desire to prevent dominance by a strange and more or less hostile minority. This was true, certainly, of the old animosity to the Irish Catholics, and it is true again of much American anti-Semitism. In the South it is even true, at least to some extent, of the violent feeling against the Negro.\(^{23}\)

The consequences of such prejudice were absurd to him, however:

Personally, I hate to have to think of any man as of a definite race, creed or color; so few men are really worth knowing that it seems a shameful waste to let an anthropoid prejudice stand in the way of free association with one who is.\(^{24}\)

Still, he admitted to a very human response to someone who is "different":

But I confess frankly that when a given man begins to speak English to me with a strange accent, or to demand holidays on days that I work, or to refuse to eat food that I eat—I confess that such acts make me feel vaguely uneasy in his presence.

Finally, he saw no solution to the problem of prejudice in America, for if ethnic groups continued to preserve their separate identities—and he encouraged them to do so—then this tension between people would always exist.

Recently, John McCormick has accused Mencken of not attacking "racist politics" in the 1920s and of not coming "to terms with the fact that by 1924 the Ku Klux Klan had a membership of about 4,500,000."\(^{25}\) McCormick's accusation is a typical example of "liberal" literal-mindedness. The truth is, Mencken often attacked the Klan in the 1920s (and long afterwards), and yet he did not always express his contempt in an orthodox liberal manner. Perhaps the most explicit statement Mencken ever made about the Klan appeared in a *Baltimore Evening Sun* article in 1922; this article also reveals his attitude toward racist politics in the 1920s:
Personally, I dissent sharply from most of the specific enterprises of the Klan. In the combat between the emerging Negroes of the South and the ruling white trash, I sympathize greatly with the Negroes, and have done what little I could to help them. As between the Jews and general run of Americans, I am violently in favor of the Jews, if only because I have found them more civilized and more honest. As between the Americanos of pure Anglo-Saxon blood and those of other bloods, I am for those of other bloods, if only because they are apt to be more amiable and more charming. And as between Catholics and Protestants, I incline, as a Christian, toward the Catholics, especially when the Protestants, as in the case of the Ku Klux, happen to be Methodists and Baptists, whose theology seems to me to be dubious and whose ethics I deplore.26

Yet, in true Menckenian fashion, he cannot let the matter rest here. He cannot resist a satirical aside upon those liberals who say that the Klan is un-American. Why, Mencken says with a broad grin, it is as American as apple pie, “for practically everybody else in America, at one time or other, has sought to do what it is trying to do or approved the acts of others so engaged.” He then lists the red baiting of 1919 and a recent court order to break up a birth control meeting as examples of practices by so-called responsible citizens. Whatever abominations the Klan has committed, Mencken concludes, most red-blooded Americans have engaged in comparable acts with equal enthusiasm.

Mencken is a hard man to pin down because, like Van Vechten’s Durwood, he is constantly seeing “facets” in the diamond: The Klan is not a simple aberration in America but rather a manifestation of its spiritual mainstream. He is also elusive because he is primarily a pragmatist; he takes each issue as it comes. Even his support of the Costigan-Wagner antilynching bill of the 1920s was not unqualified. He agreed with it in principle (and wrote several articles for the Baltimore Evening Sun defending it),27 but he worried about its constitutionality and, more importantly, its practicality. He privately told Walter White, then executive secretary of the NAACP and major firebrand behind the bill, that he objected to it “not so much on legal grounds as on practical grounds.”28 He thought the southern states would rebel against federal intervention: “What I fear is that it would be impossible to induce any Southern jury, even in a federal court, to convict under it.” Yet in this instance, so strong was his belief in the justice of the principle, he testified for the bill before a national committee.29

Thus Mencken could be counted on to be unpredictable, but his unpredictability usually had an empirical basis. One reason Mencken denounced attempts by the Pittsburgh Courier to suppress the Amos ’n Andy radio shows was that he believed that not everything in them was a lie. “Such stuff as the Amos and Andy dialogues,” he told George Schuyler
in 1931, "seems to me personally to be dreadfully stupid, but I think it is absurd to call it libelous. I have known many such Negroes" (my italics). Even the Octavus Roy Cohen stories, he wrote to the Crisis, "always keep some sort of contact with the truth." He was afraid, too, that once Negroes got into the business of censorship, their defects would not disappear in the public's eyes but would rather reappear in a nastier light. In Minority Report, he noted that "the Negro comic character may have engendered a certain amount of amiable disdain among whites, but he certainly did not produce dislike. We do not hate people we laugh at and with. His chief effect upon white thinking, in fact, was to spread the idea that Negroes as a class are very amiable folk, with a great deal of pawky shrewdness." However, he warned that "when the last Amos 'n Andy programme is suppressed the Negro, ceasing to be a charming clown, will become a menacing stranger, and his lot will be a good deal less comfortable than it used to be." Mencken seems to be making a very subtle point here. Although white people get a distorted picture of the Negro in these caricatures, they are responding to qualities that are universally prized (shrewdness, amiability). Thus they end by liking their enemy despite their "disdain." Once there are no longer any portraits to exhibit these qualities, the white folk will fall back upon their own dark imaginations, and the Negro will then become an unreality, "a menacing stranger."

There may be a corollary to Mencken's observation. Truth is an elusive matter, and no one race has access to it—not even to the truth about itself. Even a carnival mirror, although it projects a misshapen image of the beholder, reflects an element of truth if one looks at it long enough. Once one refuses to look, however, or banishes the mirror altogether, one may become smug and intolerant. When the Crisis sent Mencken a questionnaire about Negro art in which one question clearly implied that only Negroes could accurately depict Negroes, Mencken objected: "Is it argued that a white man, looking at Negroes, must always see them as Negroes see themselves? Then what is argued is nonsense." The "nonsense" Mencken was referring to was the assumption that one angle of vision could reveal all the facets of the diamond. Mencken's view was repeated by Wallace Thurman at the peak of the Renaissance when he defended the white novelist's right to write about blacks: "No race of people is exactly what it believes itself to be." By the end of the decade, however, Thurman and the rest of the young black intellectuals would be quarreling with their elders because they felt that the Old Guard was not using Mencken's undistorted mirror to the full extent of its reflective powers. Only in one sense would their argument echo Mencken's position that the truth about a race was not the exclusive province of that race alone; they would also argue, as indeed would Mencken, that the
Mencken believed in an "aristocracy of the spirit," as George H. Douglas has nicely phrased it, and he thought that the democratic urge to push people into a common cauldron was a mistake: "I like to see people stick to their own. The dogma of the melting pot has never quite convinced me: it is preached by too many palpable frauds. My belief is that it would be a calamity to the Jews, as to any other self-respecting and clearly differentiated race, to be amalgamated with the mass of Anglo-Saxon Americans. Their tenacious differentness is a valuable thing to American civilization, and on their own side it keeps the more resolute and manly qualities alive among them, and so promotes their happiness." And, continued Mencken, "my preference among... minority peoples is for those who face the music without protesting too much." In this article, at least, Mencken believed that the Negro had passed the test. Injustice had forged him in iron, and although some of his leaders protested "too much," for the most part he had learned how to survive with dignity.

Mencken thought that the Negro's isolation in America would probably never end. Whereas the Jews, Poles, Irish, and other ethnic groups might one day merge with the general populace, the Negro would always bear the mark of his color. The solution to this problem, said Mencken, was not to try to solve it: "Great races are never satisfied with equality. What they always try to demonstrate is superiority." He observed that "some of the shrewder among the younger Negroes" have urged that "the intelligent thing for Negroes to do is not to try to edge nearer to whites, but to admit and glory in their Negroism." Mencken thought this to be the right course: "It will probably bring them far nearer to equal rights and dignities, in the long run, than the effort of other leaders to obtain for them the complete equality that they can never really get. Besides, it is more self-respecting than the other scheme, for it involves neither charity nor patronage." Mencken also noted that there is another advantage in not getting everything you want, that "lost rights, like unrequited love, have their high psychical uses." If the Negro had received complete equality in 1865, "he might have sunk into the complacency of a stupid and half-forgotten peasantry: It is oppression..."
that has brought out his best qualities, and bred his most intelligent leaders."

What are the Negro’s best qualities? Again, Mencken returns to his favorite themes: a toughminded realism, a sense of humor, and a talent for self-criticism strangely absent among other minorities, such as the Jews, Irish, Poles, and Italians. In Minority Report, he illustrated these generalizations with several concrete examples. The Negro, he said, “is an adept at hoodwinking the whites, and seems to get a great deal of fun out of the process. A large part of Negro talk consists of poking fun at white people. Save among the professional race-savers, there is even enough humor in the race to make it laugh at its own difficulties.” And this humor of the Negro, Mencken added, “is largely founded on cynicism.” Rarely is he “deceived by the white folks who profess to love him.” Furthermore,

his view of the race-leaders who prey upon him—for example, the clergy—is full of doubts and dubieties. I often wonder how many pious blackamoors really believe that they will turn into white angels post-mortem—probably no more than a few imbecile old women. The Negro spirituals, taking one with another, are anything but confident in tone, and after singing the most hopeful of them the congregation often turns to

I went down the rock to hide my face;
the rock cried out, "No hiding place,
No hiding place down here."

Clearly Mencken felt a great temptation to view Negroes as “superior,” for he certainly projected many of his own values upon them.

One value he especially prized was competence. In Minority Report, Mencken called it “the most steadily attractive of all human qualities. . . . One invariably admires a man who is good at his trade, whatever it must be—who understands its technic thoroughly, and surmounts its difficulties with ease, and gets substantial rewards for his labors, and is envied by his rivals.” One of Mencken’s favorite competent men was the Pullman porter. In 1926, he wrote an article about him for the Baltimore Evening Sun in which he eulogized him for doing “his work quietly and with dignity.” He then praised the Negro for having created “the art of Pullman portering” and for having “enriched it with a noble tradition”—two themes, it is worth noting, that are the basis of James McPherson’s wonderful contemporary short story “A Solo Song: For Doc.” Mencken was so interested in this natural aristocrat that he asked George Schuyler to find a Negro porter who would be willing to write an article for the Mercury about his craft. Mencken wanted to know, for instance, how this man manipulated people in order to get tips from them: “I don’t
want, of course, an article expressing the usual moral aversion to the practice. What I would like to get is a realistic treatise on the practical business of receiving tips. I assume that there are ways and means of encouraging the public to be liberal, and that they are put into execution by all intelligent porters." Eventually Mencken discovered a porter who was willing to reveal his secrets, a Mr. N. H. Hall, and Mencken published an article by him in the Mercury. The portrait that emerges of Hall is that of a gentleman dealing with other gentlemen. Hall deplored vulgar behavior on his train (baseball players were the worst), and he admired people whose liberality was matched by their good breeding. A man of the world, he did not make conventional moral judgments. In his eyes, Arnold Rothstein was very much a gentleman, and although "Mr. Dempsey" wanted to be "called plain Jack," he too was "a gentleman always." Hall ended his account of his eighteen years of service on this solemn note: "If it is true that any white boy has the opportunity of becoming President of the United States, it is equally true that any colored boy may become the Autocrat of the Pullman car." No doubt Mencken appreciated the touch of the mock-heroic here; in fact, in light of what we know about his editorial practices for the Mercury, he may have added it. It might be, however, that Mencken may have expected us to take Hall's conclusion as a mere statement of fact. For Mencken, the distance separating the two ambitions of porter and president was not that great, and we can surely surmise that he would have preferred the company of Hall to, let us say, Harding.

Mencken was fascinated by the subject of forgotten men in American history, and usually competence was the quality he most admired in these unsung heroes. Left Wing Gordon was the unknown composer of Negro spirituals; John Henry was the unchallenged master of the ten-pound sledge hammer; and Black Ulysses built America's cities, only to disappear without a trace into the wilderness he continued to level. In his memoirs (the Days books), Mencken recalled two black heroes from his young manhood in Baltimore:

It always amazes me how easily men of the highest talents and eminence can be forgotten in this careless world—for example, the late Abraham Lincoln Herford, manager of the incomparable Joe Gans, lightweight champion of the world. Even Joe himself, though he was probably the greatest boxer who ever lived and unquestionably one of the gamest, is mentioned only rarely by the sporting writers, and in his native Baltimore there is no memorial to him save a modest stone in an Aframerican graveyard, far off the usual lines of tourist travel. Another legendary black Baltimorean was Old Jim, the carriage washer. He was less famous than either the manager or the prizefighter but was
no less formidable a figure to Mencken the boy. As Mencken remembers
him, he was “a fellow of vast size and unparalleled amiability. He was
coil-black and built like a battleship, and when he got into his hip-high
rubber boots and put on his long rubber apron he looked like an emperor
in Hell.”

Of course, Mencken was never one to dwell on the heroic in people.
His treatment of all three men is reminiscent of the tall tale—his modus
operandi throughout the Days books—and his tone always seems to
border on the mock-heroic even when he is dealing with such a weighty
theme as “how are the mighty fallen.” His account of the epical squander­
ing of Old Jim’s “bereavement” money is one of the funniest episodes in
Happy Days, as is his description of Old Wesley’s erudition and his
enormous talent for ratiocination. Even Al Herford and Joe Gans come in
for some quiet kidding: “Al taught him [Joe] a lot, not only about the
business of boxing, but also about the carriage and conduct of a profes­
sional man, and Joe became widely known as the most gentlemanly
pugilist then on earth. His manners were those of a lieutenant of the
guards in old Vienna, and many managers sent their white boys to him to
observe and learn.” Yet despite the spoofing, Mencken has a genuine
admiration for the black heroes of his youth and—what is even more
surprising, considering Mencken’s reputed insensitivity—a real under­
standing of their relationship to him. Even the most comical situations
will sometimes draw out a response from Mencken which we least expect.
Old Wesley’s brother was a preacher, and though Wesley himself was an
unbeliever, he was quite proud of his brother’s oratorical abilities. As he
listened to his brother on the periphery of the enraptured crowd, he
would intermittently paddle the behinds of little black boys who dared to
snicker at his brother’s high-blown phrases. Says Mencken: “We white
boys, knowing that the prevailing mores forbade him to paddle us, were
bound in honor to keep quiet, and this we always did.” “Bound in
honor” is a nice touch, for it suggests Mencken’s awareness that no
matter how comical Old Wesley’s brother seemed to him (then and now),
both the preacher and Old Wesley lived in a separate world, which
Mencken was honor-bound to respect.

Occasionally, Mencken tried to see this world through the Negro’s
eyes. In Happy Days, he describes a mean Irish cop named Murphy who
delighted in banging delinquent Negroes over the head with his nightstick.
The situation has the earmarks of a Mack Sennett comedy, until the
subject turns to the University of Maryland hospital, to which some of
the battered black people are taken. All the Negroes in his neighborhood
have an aversion to the hospital, for “every Aframerican knew that it
swarmed with medical students who never had enough cadavers to supply
their hellish orgies, and were not above replenishing their stock by sticking
a knife into a patient’s back, or holding his nose and forcing a drink out of the black bottle down his throat.” Although the low comedy never quite disappears, Mencken suddenly shifts perspectives. He is willing to entertain the possibility that this myth may be true simply because the blacks so strongly believe in it. For if someone actually was “dragged” to this hospital and had subsequently returned to the land of the living, “he was one who had come unscathed from a charnel-house, and there were certainly reasonable grounds for surmising that he had escaped only by entering into some more or less diabolical pact with the doctors. No one wanted him about. He made everyone uncomfortable” (my italics). In the last two sentences, Mencken quite simply makes a metaphysical leap to the other side of the Hollins Street alley. Given the beliefs of their world, he can understand why the returned victims would make everyone feel “uncomfortable.”

But Mencken was not always so charitable in his sentiments, and if I am going to give a thorough presentation of his attitudes toward the Negro, I should begin with the worst Mencken said—or, in this case, supposedly said, for the source of these remarks is not exactly a model of veracity. Charles Angoff, whom William Nolte has called “the Prince of Liars,” was a member of the Mercury staff during the years Mencken reigned supreme, and he did a portrait of Mencken from memory the year Mencken died. Angoff thought of himself as a Boswell to an unworthy Dr. Johnson, and in order to be colorful (as well as to pay back a few grudges), he spiced his literary stew with plenty of heavy seasoning. One time he recalled his former boss making scurrilous remarks about black authors in particular and the Negro race in general: “And another thing, professor, no smoke . . . has ever written anything really first-rate. Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, this Johnson [James Weldon], even George S. Schuyler, they’re all second-raters. The coons just haven’t got it in their blood, no matter what Carl Van Vechten and all the other coon lovers say. Educate them all you want, but any teacher or professor will tell you that smokes can go only so far, then they all look at you blank. The Southerners have the right idea about them.”

A few points reveal Angoff’s hand in the pot. First, it is doubtful that Mencken would have referred to James Weldon Johnson as “this Johnson,” for Mencken and Johnson had been good friends since 1916. Second, the poem Angoff and Mencken had been discussing before Mencken uttered his crudity was Johnson’s “Go Down, Death.” Mencken had said in print that it was a first-rate poem, “genuinely eloquent and moving.”
(Mencken had also urged Knopf to publish Johnson’s “reminiscences,” adding that Johnson had “had a very remarkable career and writes very well.”)\(^54\) Third, for at least thirteen years before this conversation was “recorded” in Angoff’s memory, Mencken had been telling southerners that they did not “have the right idea about” Negroes. Finally, if Mencken truly believed that “smokes can go only so far,” why was he so angry when a black student, Donald Gaines Murray, was denied permission to enter the University of Maryland law school? (Mencken’s argument was that Murray had been properly prepared and was mentally equipped to do the job.)\(^55\)

Two other names that Angoff mentioned—George Schuyler and Countee Cullen—also indicate his unreliability as a guide to Mencken’s racial attitudes. Right before he quit the *Mercury*, Mencken told Schuyler in a letter that “no other contributor has covered a wider area or done better work,”\(^56\) and in 1947, he wrote a letter to the *Pittsburgh Courier* (where Schuyler worked as a journalist) calling Schuyler “the best columnist, of any race, now in practise in the United States.”\(^57\) In fact, Mencken was so impressed with Schuyler’s critical portrait of Franklin D. Roosevelt after the president’s death in 1945 that he reprinted it in the *Baltimore Evening Sun* with the following note: “Nothing approaching his article in intellectual acuteness and moral courage has appeared in any white journal of comparable circulation. I refrain from deducing from this the racial superiority of the colored people. But I am sorely tempted.”\(^58\)

As for Cullen, although Mencken had a low opinion of poetry generally, he did publish Cullen’s poem “The Shroud of Color” in the *Mercury.*\(^59\) He also encouraged him—as he did every other Harlem Renaissance writer—to write prose,\(^60\) for only prose, he believed, was worthy of the mature artist. Furthermore, Mencken was infuriated when, in 1926, Cullen was refused permission to read his poems at the Hotel Emerson in Baltimore. Mencken wrote Cullen to find out all the details of the outrageous affair; he felt that the *Baltimore Evening Sun* had covered the story “inadequately,” and he wanted to publish “all of the facts.”\(^61\)

Yet Angoff cannot be dismissed altogether. His “remembered” Mencken bears a resemblance, no matter how faint, to the real thing. For instance, in *The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche* (1908), Mencken did make a statement remarkably similar to Angoff’s “smokes can only go so far.” In discussing Nietzsche’s theory of the innate mental inferiority of the masses, Mencken offered “the history of the hopelessly futile and fatuous effort to improve the negroes of the Southern United States by education” as a “proof”:

It is apparent, on brief reflection, that the negro, no matter how much he is educated, must remain, as a race, in a condition of subservience; that
he must remain the inferior of the stronger and more intelligent white man so long as he retains racial differentiation. Therefore, the effort to educate him has awakened in his mind ambitions and aspirations which, in the very nature of things, must go unrealized, and so, while gaining nothing whatever materially, he has lost all his old contentment, peace of mind and happiness. Indeed, it is a commonplace of observation in the United States that the educated and refined negro is invariably a hopeless, melancholy, embittered and despairing man.\textsuperscript{62}

I wish to pass over Mencken's error in logic, that is, that his empiric proof is really only another generalization, one of those "self-evident truths" that our Founding Fathers were so fond of. (As I shall show, Mencken's tendency to travel the high a priori road was part of his character.) I also wish to point out only briefly that the unhappiness of the "educated and refined negro" might be due to his living in an unjust society—a fact that Mencken would later observe with great satiric effect. I would also note only in passing that this is a young Mencken speaking, one who had yet to live through the humiliations that he and other German-Americans would experience at home during World War I. I wish to pass over these subjects because they are less interesting at this point than another subject: Mencken's own conflicting attitudes toward the Negro. In a sense, his ambivalence is a reflection of divisions in himself which he never could bring to a reconciliation: the rationalist and the empiricist, the elitist and the commoner.

That Mencken had a simpleminded hatred of the common man is still an accepted opinion, even among people who should know better. In The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual, Harold Cruse rejects the possibility of Mencken's connection to the Harlem Renaissance on the grounds that no one with Mencken's prejudice toward the "people" could have possibly taken an interest in this literary movement.\textsuperscript{63} Yet in reality Mencken often credited the common man with a great deal of common sense. For instance, he once argued that the members of state legislatures should not be elected, but should be chosen willy-nilly from the populace, the way juries are chosen. Compared to elected officials, he said, "a House of malt-and-hop dealers, garage mechanics and trolley conductors . . . would deal with [a] question with quite as much knowledge, and with a great deal more honesty." Furthermore, he once argued that people who write books on sex ought to have the common sense of "a railroad conductor or an ice-man"—a point that is as relevant today as it was in 1926.\textsuperscript{64}

Not only does the average man have common sense, but he also is capable of common "decency," an important word in Mencken's vocabulary: "By this common decency I mean the habit, in the individual, of viewing with tolerance and charity the acts and ideas of other individuals—the habit which makes a man a reliable friend, a generous opponent,
and a good citizen." A belief in "liberty," Mencken argued, was contingent upon a belief that "decency" was indeed "common," that on the whole the common man had good intentions. For, said Mencken, "whatever its outward forms," liberty "is a simple thing": "Translated into political terms, it is the doctrine that the normal citizen of a civilized state is actually normal—that the decency which belongs naturally to Homo sapiens, as an animal above the brutes, is really in him. It holds that this normal citizen may be trusted, one day with another, to do the decent thing. It relies upon his natural impulses, and assumes them to be reasonably sound."

Yet what happens to the "normal citizen" in an uncivilized nation, such as these United States? In a democracy, where any man can claim to be the equal of any other, "envy" becomes the "philosophy of the state." Hence the rule of tolerance is replaced by the rule of malice, and the high priest of this new authority is the puritan. His first proposition is the equality of all men, but soon the primacy of the individual gives way to the will of the majority and the belief that "the opinion of the majority ... represents the highest imaginable wisdom." Such a culture naturally leads to witch hunts, and the witch hunted is anyone who is divergent. The culture that has finally established the "virtue of the majority ... now devotes itself to establishing the sinfulness of the minority." And the normal citizen, whom Mencken had previously admired, now becomes a mindless fool or an unscrupulous knave. He fears anything he cannot understand, and he hates anyone who is better than he is: "His eagerness to bring all his fellow-citizens, and especially all those who are superior to him, into accord with his own dull and docile way of thinking, and to force it upon them when they resist, leads him inevitably into acts of unfairness, oppression and dishonour which, if all men were alike guilty of them, would quickly break down that mutual trust and confidence upon which the very structure of civilized society rests." Thus, "decency" is the cornerstone of the entire edifice of civilization, for without decency, there is only barbarism—the death of all human values.

It is in light of this attitude that one must compare the following passage praising Negroes to the one denigrating them in *The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche*. In an article that Mencken wrote for the Negro journal *Opportunity*, he said,

That Negroes, in more than one way, are superior to most American whites is something that I have long believed. I pass over their gift for music (which is largely imaginary) and their greater dignity (which Dr. Eleanor R. Wembridge has described more eloquently than I could do it), and point to their better behavior as members of our common society. Are
they, on the lower levels, somewhat turbulent and inclined to petty crime? Perhaps. But that crime is seldom anti-social. It gets a lot of advertising when it is, but that is not often. Professional criminals are rare among Negroes, and, what is more important, professional reformers are still rarer. The horrible appetite of the low-caste Anglo-Saxon to police and harass his fellow-men is practically non-existent among them. No one ever hears of Negro wowsers inventing new categories of crime, and proposing to jail thousands of their own people for committing them. Negro Prohibitionists are almost as rare as Catholic Prohibitionists. No Negro has ever got a name by pretending to be more virtuous than the rest of us. In brief, the race is marked by extraordinary decency.

Seen from this angle, Negroes are Mencken’s normal citizens—the decent human beings who make liberty possible in a republic. Furthermore, since they happen to live in an uncivilized world (made up of puritans and “low-caste Anglo-Saxons”), they have Mencken’s sympathy and respect because they symbolize a sane minority living in a society that sometimes borders on madness. (Compare Mencken’s own Minority Report.)

However, seen from another angle, Negroes could easily be lumped by Mencken with the lumpen proletariat whose collective hectoring threatens common decency. Such a position invariably leads Mencken to make a statement like this: “The great problem ahead of the United States is that of reducing the high differential birthrate of the inferior orders, for example, the hillbillies of Appalachia, the gimme farmers of the Middle West, the lintheads of the South, and the Negroes.” These “inferior orders” are the folk, and Mencken was never able to resolve his conflicting attitudes toward it. For example, in one context of democracy (majority rule), the common man lacks decency, but in another context of democracy (liberty), he has it. Mencken tried to solve this problem by saying that under democracy as it is actually practiced, the decent man becomes a minority—the “Forgotten Man,” as he was to call him, “the normal, well-behaved, decent citizen.” Yet this does not solve the problem, for how can the Forgotten Man be normal and yet a minority?

Mencken was once asked by a hopeful biographer, “Whom do you particularly dislike?” His unpublished answer reveals the basis of his ambivalence toward the common man: “I have no active dislike of anyone. Here my cynicism protects me. I never expect much of human beings, and so what they do do never shocks or outrages me. My belief is that the level of decency in the world is pretty high, but that the level of intelligence is horribly low. The most offensive things that human beings do are usually inspired by stupidity rather than by malice.” Mencken’s low opinion of mankind is less interesting than his belief that the world holds more fools than knaves. Unlike Swift, to whom he is often com-
pared, Mencken did not share an Augustinian view of man's fallen nature: "The good which I would do, I do not; the evil I would avoid, I do." For Swift and Augustine, even if the level of intelligence were high, the level of human decency would always be low. Envy and malice are so rooted in the human heart that the light of reason can only acknowledge but never expunge them. Mencken, on the other hand, sets up an opposition between "decency" and "intelligence," suggesting that if there were more intelligent people in America, the natural tendency for people to be decent to one another would not so easily be overwhelmed.

Yet despite Mencken's confident assertion that the "level of intelligence" of human beings "is horribly low," he sometimes modified this idea when it came to the folk. As W.H.A. Williams has noted, Mencken never confronted a question that was implicit in his criticism of American culture: How could the same America that produced a corrupt civilization also create a vital, energetic language? The natural answer would be that the folk create this lively language, but Mencken's elitism made him stop short of giving full credit to the folk. When new words enter our language, said Mencken, specific individuals are responsible for this rejuvenation, not the folk. Pursuing the subject of Negro slang, he told George Schuyler that it always originates with individual wits: "The idea that common people invent it is sheer lunacy. They never invent anything, not even the imbecilities that entertain them so charmingly." Yet he sometimes qualified this statement: "All slang, of course, is invented by individuals, not by groups," he wrote to James T. Farrell, "but nevertheless it must accord with the speechways of the group or it is bound to fail." From the folk's "speechways" to the folk's linguistic common sense was not such a far leap, and Mencken occasionally took it. In his introduction to Cooper's American Democrat, he praised the folk's intelligence when it came to the pronunciation of words: "Here, as in other philological cases, the instinct of the folk has triumphed over the imbecility of pedagogues, and democracy, perhaps, has earned some praise." Yet, to borrow a phrase from Mencken's favorite American novel, Huckleberry Finn, he would never go whole hog. He would never relinquish his position that superior people, not the folk, make for a superior language. It takes only a moment's reflection to see that this theory leads him into a contradiction. In his indictments of American civilization, he argued that democracy makes it impossible for superior people to have a voice. There is no responsible aristocracy in America, only an avaricious plutocracy, an impotent intelligentsia, and a brainless mob. But if the superior people cannot be heard by the brainless mob, how then can their language be recognized and accepted? That their language is recognized and accepted by the common man would seem to indicate an intelligence commensurate with that of the superior people. The next step, of course, is to conclude that the common man has shared in the creation of a
superior language.

Mencken took a similar position regarding Negro folk songs. In his review of James Weldon Johnson's *Book of American Negro Spirituals*, Mencken argued that "there is no such thing as a folk song. Folk songs are written like all other songs by individuals. All the folk have to do with them is to choose the ones that are to survive." What is sad is that the names of these unknown bards are lost forever:

Ah, that we could discover the authors of some of them. What genius went to waste among the pre-confederate fundamentalists. But did it go to waste? Perhaps not. Only its possessors were lost. The black unknown who wrote *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot, Deep River, and Roll, Jordan, Roll*—for I suspect that one bard wrote all three—left a heritage to his country that few white men have ever surpassed. He was one of the greatest poets we have ever produced, and he came so near to being our greatest musician that I hesitate to look for a match for him.80

Again the problem: How can a people innately inferior produce geniuses; and, since in fact they did produce geniuses, can we differentiate these geniuses from the folk world from which they came? In truth, Mencken was of two minds about the Negro folk. On the one hand, he wanted to know about Negro folkways, but on the other hand, he generalized about them in the same ways he generalized about the weaknesses of the average American citizen.

There are, of course, two Menckens: one a rationalist, and one an empiricist. He once said that if he had had a choice, he would have preferred to live in the eighteenth century. Although it is hard to imagine Mencken in any other setting than early twentieth-century America, there is a side to him that belongs to the French Enlightenment—as James T. Farrell has observed.81 This is the Mencken who wishes to conceptualize experience as soon as possible. However, when Mencken the skeptic or Mencken the scientific observer holds forth, we get a Mencken who is willing to suspend belief until all the evidence is in. This is the Mencken who read Charles Darwin, Thomas Huxley, and the other heirs of eighteenth-century British empiricism. Often the two Menckens don't mesh—for example, when the student of Darwin becomes a social Darwinist. In this instance, he prejudices observation from the abstract principle of "natural selection." Thus, Mencken's eighteenth-century antipathy to the "mob," as well as his belief in Nietzsche's *Übermensch* and Darwin's "fittest," is hardly consistent with his wish to judge individuals as they really are.

Mencken the rationalist is a man who usually speaks on a very high level of abstraction: Democracy is corrupt, Slavs are melancholy (he used this one on Joseph Conrad, much to Conrad's distress), farmers are
avaricious, and the mob is "anthropoid." As a rationalist, Mencken often has the reformer's zeal to correct the follies of mankind (a nice irony this, since Mencken spent much of his time attacking zealots who held "messianic delusions"). Hence Mencken chastized the Negro several times for the backwardness of his religious beliefs. Placing himself in the anticlerical tradition of the French Enlightenment, Mencken lamented that the whole South seemed to be under the spell of Methodist and Baptist shamans. Their primitive religious practices reduced people to sniveling idiots, so that any and all "theological" notions were treated with respect: "If the men of past ages had cherished that delusion we'd still be sweating under the Inquisition—nay we'd be consulting oracles and trembling before sorcerers. In other words, the whole human race would still be on the level of the Haitian voodoo-worshippers and the Georgia Baptists."82

Mencken was especially angry with the Negro because his homage to "ecclesiastical racketeers"83 was at odds with his decency, dignity, and innate common sense. In "The Burden of Credulity," he accused the Negro of being kept in "a bondage to credulity and fear that is ten times as degrading as any political bondage could ever be." Such Christianity as is practiced among lower-class blacks is not "worthy of a self-respecting people": "It is extraordinarily stupid, ignorant, barbaric, and preposterous. Almost I am tempted to add that it is downright simian." Black people inherited this religion from poor white trash, and it has been so further debased by moron Negro theologians that, on its nether levels, it is now a disgrace to the human race. These theologians constitute a body of bold and insatiable parasites, and getting rid of them is a problem that will daunt all save the bravest of the future leaders of black America. They fill their victims with ideas fit only for the jungle, and for that office they take a toll that is cruel and debilitating. What it amounts to annually I don't know, but it undoubtedly makes up the heaviest expenditure of the Negro people. All they get for it is continued subjugation to the superstitions of the slave quarters.84

Mencken once said of "the colored pastor on the lower levels" that he "retains something of the character of the savage medicine-man. He is completely ignorant, and he is often more than a bit dishonest. He has no hand in the progress his race is making. He is violently against it, and he is the enemy of every leader responsible for it. When he harangues his customer, the chief butts of his invectives are the colored intelligentsia, clerical and lay. He is a Fundamentalist."85 That the Negro folksongs might be products of a "Fundamentalist" environment (and not exceptions to it), that the same folkways that produced the Negro's art also produced his religion, that the clergy "on the lower levels" might have a positive effect on the intellectual and moral life of black people—these possibilities escaped Mencken. Instead, he saw the religion of the Negro common man
as a main reason for his arrested development as a human being. Again, that this religion might have sustained the common man in a time of need—a time, perhaps, when a more “rational” religion would have been as useful as a new tuxedo to a starving man—this Mencken did not want to consider. Yet for all his blindness in this one respect, a fault that Mencken cannot be accused of is cowardice. He expressed his opinions in Negro periodicals, and what is even more startling, the editors of these magazines asked for them.

Mencken kept hoping that blacks would see the light at the end of the theological tunnel. He continued to exhort the race “to reorganize its religious ideas, to get rid of its lingering childishness and, above all, to deliver itself from the exploitation of frauds and mountebanks.” He wrote one piece in which he noticed signs of rebellion against “the hog­-wallow theology” that had entrapped blacks, and he encouraged George Schuyler to write an article for the *Mercury* in which these signs had become an accomplished fact. In “Black America Begins To Doubt”—a title that Mencken gave Schuyler for his article—Schuyler’s main thesis was that the black church was losing its hold on black people as they came of age intellectually. Both Mencken and Schuyler saw themselves as modern Voltaireans who were trying to sweep away the mental rubbish that cluttered the Negro’s brain so that he might take one long leap from the Dark Ages into the twentieth century.

It is not surprising that from Schuyler’s first *Mercury* article in 1927 to Mencken’s stroke in 1948, the two men were good friends, for they were very much alike. They were both rationalists (believing that the clear light of reason made civilization possible); they were both fiercely independent (especially in their dealings with their own); and they were both deeply ambivalent about the value of Negro folkways. Mencken admired Schuyler’s frankness, and Schuyler repaid the compliment by imitating Mencken’s vigorous, colloquial style. (He was called the “black Mencken” in the 1920s.) When in 1930 Mencken wrote a letter of recommendation for Schuyler to the Harmon Foundation, he found himself using language that he would have approved of on his own gravestone: “The Negroes are used to a more romantic approach to their problems. Schuyler has told them the truth. . . . I think he has done far more to set up honest self-criticism among the Negroes than any other writer, or, indeed, than all other Negro writers taken together.”

A good example of Mencken’s and Schuyler’s rationalism can be seen in the controversy over the capitalization of “Negro.” In *The American Language: Supplement I*, Mencken noted that the campaign against “negro” in the black press took on all the earmarks of a religious crusade. Only Schuyler, said Mencken, was brave enough to resist the onslaught. He quoted Schuyler as follows: “It really doesn’t matter a tinker’s damn whether Negro is spelled with a small or large N, so far as
the Negro's economic, political and cultural status is concerned."91 (Schuyler actually thought that capitalization was worse, since it called attention to the Negro's special status.) Having inherited a view of language from the Enlightenment, both men believed that words alone could not change reality, that the symbol has no necessary connection to the thing for which it stands. Such a view may make an appeal to common sense, but people have other needs than common sense—the need, for instance, of the semblance of dignity—even though nothing is in fact changed. With King Lear, there are those who would say, "Reason not the need."

Another example of the rational outlook that the two men shared is an article called "Black Art," which Schuyler published in the Mercury.92 It presented a portrait of Schuyler's grandmother, for the title does not refer to what the Harlem Renaissance was trying to create, but rather to "black magic," or "conjure." Schuyler's grandmother claimed to be a conjurer, and as a child Schuyler took her occult knowledge quite seriously. At times, Schuyler's grandmother reminds the reader of Charles Chesnutt's Aunt Sue in The Conjure Woman, but by the end of the article, the difference between Schuyler's sensibility and Chesnutt's is clear. Although Chesnutt treats the subject of conjure with a certain skeptical humor, he can see the poetical value in the subject of magic. In The Conjure Woman, the reader feels that the world the slaves made is always more complicated and less rational than the perception of the northern narrator who frames the stories. Schuyler's attitude, however, is ultimately that of Mencken, when they are both in their Voltairean frame of mind. What Schuyler the child takes for mystery is in reality an elaborate hoax. For example, after hearing from his grandmother that a person who wanted to be an expert fiddler had to make a pact with the devil, young Schuyler runs to a swamp in the dead of night hoping to make a deal that will take him to Carnegie Hall. Unfortunately, the devil never makes his appearance, and the boy returns home half dead from the cold. The next day, when Schuyler confesses to his grandmother what he has done, she hugs him tenderly, laughs uproariously, and calls him a "damned little fool." The grandmother's last words are Schuyler's, almost as if he were saying that folklore and folk superstitions are wonderful things to amuse children with, but if we are to be a mature people, we should by no means take them for guides to living in the real world.

Although I have dwelled upon Mencken's contradictory attitudes, a thread of consistency in his ideas cannot be ignored, and to isolate any one
remark about the Negro without taking into account the total context of his thought is to be unjust to him. The importance of contexts is especially crucial when one considers his use of scurrilous terms such as “coon” and “niggero.” Furthermore, despite his often astringent criticism of the Negro race, his interest in it never flagged. And finally, perhaps most importantly, whenever Mencken left his Olympian mountaintop and stooped to particulars, all contradictions ceased. Like Jonathan Swift, all his love was “towards individuals” (to quote Swift’s famous letter to Pope). With Swift, Mencken sometimes hated and detested that peculiar animal called the American (or the Negro), but he heartily loved “John, Peter, Thomas, and so forth.”

Mencken’s attitude toward the farmer is a good example of his bifurcated perspective. In “The Husbandman” (*Prejudices, Fourth Series*), he mercilessly satirized the farmer as a generic type, and yet this satiric portrait had no bearing upon his advice to young novelists. He complained that the individual farmer was hidden behind stereotypes: “We either slobber over him or laugh at him.” Someone needs to do “the American La Terre,” he insisted: “Who will get the American farmer and his wife in a solid and respectable book?” Mencken’s defense of the real farmer is illuminating: This individual, said Mencken, is a “child of God like the rest of us, and full of trials and tribulations” (my italics). In a similar situation, he told Dreiser that his greatest strength as a novelist was his “capacity for seeing the world from a sort of proletarian standpoint”; and yet when he categorized proletarians as a type, he lost the compassion he had for them as individuals: “The proletarian is by definition an incompetent and ignominious fellow.”

Mencken the empiricist judged people on their own merits, but Mencken the rationalist was quick to make general judgments. Hence, he could complain, “It will be time enough to invite Pullman porters, colored preachers, and witch doctors to dinner when white Turkish bath rubbers, orthodox rabbis, and chiropractors are invited.” Here Mencken is the defender of civilization against the “lower orders” (black and white) who threaten to level it; yet, as I have shown, his admiration for individual Pullman porters was very real. Whether he thought actual Negro preachers and witch doctors suitable companions at the dinner table is perhaps a moot point, but he never let Kelly Miller’s Christianity stand in the way of their friendship, and he continually invited a former dishwasher, George Schuyler, to test the reputation of his wine cellar. Mencken’s assumed haughtiness was only theory-deep; he never stood on ceremony with a friend he seriously liked and admired, and he advised the American novelist to treat his characters with both irony and pity.

A typical Menckenian dualism is revealed in an article about Negroes moving into white neighborhoods, which he wrote for the *Baltimore
*Evening Sun* in 1925. Mencken's major theme is the greed of unconscionable men who wish to transform Baltimore into a boom town, the result of which is that lowlifers of all colors have infested the city like rats: "The worst of these newcomers, I believe, are the brethren of the darker race. Thousands of them, come up from the South during the boom, are but little removed from gorillas. Their scale of living is that of the beasts of the field. . . . They swarm in all our back alleys, driving out the more respectable people of their own race. The latter find life among them impossible; they are filthy, turbulent, and without even the most elemental decencies."

Mencken, however, warns his fellow white Baltimorians not to judge a man by his color. Many of the individuals who move into our neighborhoods, he states, deserve better treatment from us than they have been receiving. They are good citizens, and their motives are very much like ours: "They desire, first of all, to live in cleaner, roomier and more healthful surroundings than they have enjoyed in the past and to bring up their children in greater comfort and decency. They desire, secondly, to get away from the low riffraff of their own race. Both motives are sound, natural and laudable. Both make for good citizenship—in Madison Avenue quite as well as Guilford." Although the citizen versus the savage was a battle that Mencken saw acted out in a larger arena than Baltimore, here the conflict involves not pagan versus puritan, but rather unregenerate nature versus civitas. The colored "riffraff" have descended the evolutionary ladder (they "swarm" like fruit flies), whereas the black citizens retain their humanity and their individuality.

The word "gorillas" is part of the Swiftian nomenclature (a way of categorizing the beasts of the field), and it is worth noting that Mencken would use the term to refer to troglodites of a Caucasian stripe as well as to those of a darker hue. During World War II, Mencken complained to George Schuyler that "two hordes of gorillas" (white and black) had invaded Baltimore and had beset "the decent colored people" of the city. On one occasion, Mencken went so far as to say (to Schuyler again) that the Southern "cracker" occupied the lowest rung of the evolutionary ladder: "I find it completely impossible to believe anything good about him. He seems to me to be hardly human, and if it were proposed seriously to proceed against him with machine guns I'd certainly not object. There has never been a more miserable white man on this earth, nor black man, nor yellow man." The extremity of this statement can be explained by the occasion itself: One says things in letters that one would never say in print. (Besides, Schuyler and Mencken had been tossing this subject back and forth for weeks, and their passions had reached the boiling point.) Yet subjecting the poor cracker to machine
guns says something about Mencken when he was smitten with the desire to categorize people. He often forgot about the individual when he was concerned about the health of the polis.

If Mencken was a defender of individual rights and freedoms, he could also fly to the camp of Edmund Burke when he felt society to be threatened. In fact, his prejudices were often the same as Burke's: He defended the polis against those who would tear it down, because the polis was a life giver; its well-being determined the well-being of each citizen, and when it was sick (as was American civilization most of the time), so was each citizen. What prevented Mencken from openly condoning the extermination of the crackers was the other philosophical pull upon him: the belief in human decency (tolerance) and the rights of each individual to travel his own separate road.

Mencken's use of language deserves a note. He once commented that critics had often overlooked the chief virtue of his style: "It is that I write with almost scientific precision."102 This precision, it might be added, was often that of the ironist. For instance, in his Smart Set article "Si Mutare Potest Aethiops Pellum Suam" (Can the Ethiop change his skin?), Mencken begins with a sprinkling of words guaranteed to offend blacks and to please illiberal whites: "niggero," "coon," and "darkey." His language, in fact, indicates that he has already answered the question he has asked in his title—a title that alludes not only to a common proverb but also to Thomas Dixon's popular racist novel The Leopard's Spots (1902). And just to make sure that we all understand that he is on the side of the southerner, he asks the question again: "What, ladies and gentleman, in hell or out of it, are we to do with the Ethiop?"103 He further substantiates his moral position on this issue by insisting that he hates "everyone born North of the Mason and Dixon line" and that he "would rather be chained by the leg in the common jail of Yazoo City, Miss., fed only upon hoecake and coca-cola, than smothered in violets by all the gals of Boston." Yet like Swift in "A Modest Proposal," he has trapped the reader into believing that the author holds the same attitude as that of his persona. The reader does not take long to discover that this attitude is not the one that Mencken actually holds. Mencken's real theme is that the southerners to a man have "botched" the Negro problem. The wretched "coon" is actually their superior, "simply because the niggero has been making fast and secure progress, not in mere education, but in competence, in self-confidence, in wealth—because he has begun to find out that he can make his way, Southerners or no Southerners—because, in all that is essential and lasting, he has shown better progress than the Southern whites." Not only has the leopard changed his spots, but he is now outrunning his pursuers, who are bogged down in the aftermath of the Civil War.
W.E.B. DuBois saw what Mencken was doing. He called "Si Mutare . . ." a "delicious" piece of journalism: "To prove himself a Southern 'Gentleman' he [Mencken] intersperses his article prodigally with 'nigger,' 'darkey,' and 'coon.' But he had undoubtedly seen a vision." The vision, of course, was the one that Mencken would later describe in "A Coon Age": that the "niggero" had enslaved his enslaver. Even the title of this piece, Jervis Anderson to the contrary, is a journalist's trick rather than an expression of Mencken's vulgarity. Isn't its title more likely to catch the eye of the reader than would, let us say, "The Age of the Colored Person"? The imaginary reader may not like the title, but he will read the editorial. There is, too, the obvious matter of Mencken's love of the American language: its energy, its color, its boldness, its salty humor. That he was insensitive in some respects may mean that he was more sensitive than most of us in others. Words like "smoke," "dinge," "spade," "zigaboo," and so forth caught other eyes and ears than Mencken's. More than one black writer of the 1920s (Zora Neale Hurston and Rudolph Fisher come to mind) were fascinated by the punch to these words.

Mencken made, in fact, some rather subtle distinctions in his use of designations for Negroes. In contrast to the "Si Mutare . . ." essay, whenever he talked seriously about the Negro's virtues and vices, Mencken would address him as "the colored brother" or "the darker brother." In a sense, this kind of verbal address belongs to an older mode of discourse. As Joseph Wood Krutch notes in his biography of Samuel Johnson, the prefatory "sir" that Dr. Johnson would use to address his opponent mitigated the insults that sometimes followed. The "sir" was a signal understood by gentlemen that all conversation, no matter how testy it became, was to a degree impersonal, for they were civilized men behaving in a civilized manner. Beasts, after all, did not talk to one another. Mencken, I think, employed the same device. In "The Burden of Credulity" (in which he attacked the Negro's religion) and in "Hiring a Hall" (in which he pointed to the failings of the Harlem Renaissance), he begins with a generous appreciation of "the colored brother's" merits, and only after that prelude does he lay on with a birchen rod.

A final word about Mencken's interest in the Negro: Long after he had lost his general popularity (as did the Negro writers), his curiosity about black life remained sharp. He followed Schuyler's column in the Pittsburgh Courier ("it gives me many a pleasant lift") and pestered him with questions about Negro slang and the Negro people. In 1943, he wanted to know the cause of the race riots in Harlem: "Is it a fact . . . that an anti-Semitic element appeared in the late struggle for the Atlantic Charter in Harlem?" When Schuyler sent him a long list of Negro grievances against Jewish landlords, Mencken was sympathetic. He noted that the Jews owned most of the Negro housing in Baltimore and that
“the landlords . . . never make any repairs unless the police or the health department orders them. The result is that even respectable people are forced to live in surroundings that are extremely unpleasant.”

Certainly, the myth of Mencken’s blindness to economic issues should be revised. Because he hated the New Deal and because he often denigrated the common man, it has been assumed that he stood on the right side of the political fence. In truth, he sided with the Negro in most matters (as James Weldon Johnson had so acutely observed) because the Negro was an underdog in American society. Although Mencken did not always express his allegiance in terms that were flattering to Negroes, to call him a racist (as Charles Angoff has done) is not only wrong but irrelevant. Mencken in fact did believe that races were different from one another. Yet what mattered in the long run was not what Mencken said about Negroes but what he did for them, and what he did for them was more than any other white man of his generation had done—and that includes Van Vechten.