Chapter Three: The Age of Satire: The Teacher and His Pupils

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CHAPTER THREE
The Age of Satire: The Teacher and His Pupils

If I ridicule the Follies and Corruptions of a Court, a Ministry, or a Senate, are they not amply paid by Pensions, Titles, and Power; while I expect and desire no other Reward, than that of laughing with a few Friends in a Corner?

—Jonathan Swift

In 1917, Mencken woke up and discovered himself to be a Negro. The transformation was figurative, of course, but it was very real and very sudden—as sudden as the overnight metamorphosis in Kafka’s famous short novel. Having skirmished with the New Humanists (as they called themselves) since 1908, Mencken found to his dismay that the Great War had given them a new weapon: patriotism. Up to 1917, he had laughed at their notion of “culture,” had ridiculed their equation of art with morality, and had even questioned the accuracy of their scholarship. Unlike the contestants in the Great War, who were bogged down in their trenches, Mencken had carried the fight to the foe, and the foe did not know how to deal with his satirical tactics. One of these Humanists, Stuart Sherman, found patriotism a great refuge, and under its guise he revealed himself to be somewhat of a scoundrel. In 1917, he wrote several articles about Mencken as America went to war, and these all implied that Mencken’s attack on American “kultur” was connected with his German ancestry. Given the hostile atmosphere, Mencken could not retaliate. He soon found himself writing under a pseudonym in the Smart Set and barred from all magazines and newspapers except the New York Evening Mail and the Seven Arts. But that was not the worst of it. The government thought him a spy and harrassed him. Friends he had counted on suddenly grew frightened and deserted him.¹
Mencken never forgot his wartime pariah-hood. Even thirteen years after the armistice, he could speak of himself "as a member of a race lately in worse odor among 100% Americans than either Jews or Negroes." Certainly the war sharpened his tongue when he was once again free to speak. If he had satirized American civilization with a certain detached amusement before 1917, he now had a gleam in his eye and fire in his breath. "The results [of the war] are now before us," he said in 1922; and what were they? They were "government by usurpation and tyranny, a complete collapse of national decency . . . the bitter and senseless persecutions of minorities, Know-Nothings, Ku Kluxism, terrorism and espionage." He complained that the old American virtues had disappeared: "free discussion, general tolerance, and a fair fight"; and he noted that the new American was simply "an ignominious goose-stepper." Moreover, if during the war our conduct at home was bad, our conduct abroad was worse: We "fought when it was safe, not in the manner of soldiers but in the manner of witch-burners and lynchers." In a *Smart Set* article ironically titled "The Land of the Free" (May 1921), he listed the "complete record of tyrannies that went on during the war," and concluded that "in no other country . . . on either side, was there anything ever approaching the complete abandonment of sense and justice that went on in the United States."

Mencken's language in the immediate postwar period fairly bristled with fighting metaphors. Always a gadfly, after 1917 he showed a new pugnacity, a new unwillingness to ask quarter from a society that was so suspicious of, and hostile to, new ideas, and so ungenerous and cowardly in its opposition to them. Even *A Book of Prefaces*—the publication of which in 1917 Stuart Sherman had used as the occasion to attack Mencken—tended to define American culture in military terms. In "Puritanism As a Literary Force," perhaps the most famous essay in his book, he described the domination of ethical ideas in American culture as just that, a "force." Puritanism, Mencken argued, feels called upon to do battle with anything that it doesn't understand, and thus it wages "a ceaseless warfare upon beauty in its every form, from painting to religious ritual, from drama to dance." For Mencken, "Philistinism is no more than another name for Puritanism," for both hate beauty with a passion usually credited to psychopaths—"the first because it holds beauty to be a mean and stupid thing, and the second because it holds beauty to be distracting and corrupting."

In reaction to such mindless malignity, Mencken claimed that he fought with equal fierceness. In 1922, he talked about his literary criticism as though it had always been a kind of guerrilla campaign against a large but vulnerable colonial power. He said that for most of his adult life, his critical energies had been
devoted to attacking and trying to break down the formal ideas, most of
them wholly devoid of logical content, which formerly oppressed the art
of letters in the United States very severely and still hangs about its flanks.
. . . I am constantly accused, and sometimes quite honestly, of tearing
down without building up, of murdering a theory without offering in its
place a new and better theory. But it must be plain enough that the ob­
jection, however earnestly made, is quite without merit. My business, con­
sidering the state of society in which I find myself, has been principally to
clear the ground of mouldering rubbish, to chase away old ghosts, to help
set the artist free. 6

Three years before Mencken wrote this passage, a young black
Jamaican poet named Claude McKay expressed the anger and frustra­
tion of a whole generation of black Americans in a poem called “If We
Must Die.” In it, McKay employed the same metaphors of warfare as did
Mencken, but they were used in a political context, not a literary one.
Having returned from the Great War and found that America was still
the same—that the world may have been made safe for democracy but
not for them—the black soldiers, some having received the French croix
de guerre, keenly felt the sting of President Wilson’s big lie. They and
their generation rallied to McKay’s poem as though it were a new banner:

If we must die, let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
Making mock of our accursed lot.
If we must die, O let us nobly die,
So that our precious blood may not be shed
In vain; then even the monsters we defy
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!
Oh kinsmen! we must meet the common foe!
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,
And for their thousand blows deal one deathblow!
What though before us lies the open grave?
Like men we’ll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
Press’d to the wall, dying, but fighting back!

When these young men (and women) began to look for ways of fighting
back, it is not surprising that they read Mencken, a man who not only
shared their anger but who told them, and showed them, that they could
control it in order to conquer the world in a new way.

The Negro intellectuals and Mencken did not take long to find one
another. In 1917, Mencken had read an open letter written by Kelly
Miller, a professor at Howard University, to President Wilson, and he
was so impressed with its eloquence that he devoted a whole column to it in the New York Evening Mail. Mencken called it “the ablest document the war has yet produced in the United States” and an “unusual work of art in words.” What was so unusual about this letter, said Mencken, was the simplicity and sanity of Miller’s argument at a time when Americans generally were swept away by wartime bombast. Miller did not resort to weeping and wailing for the wrongs done to his race. Rather, he simply petitioned the president for justice. “You ask us to be patriots,” paraphrased Mencken, “to die for our country, to protect it against aggression. Well, first show us that it is our country. First protect us. First, prove to us that we will get the same return from patriotism that other patriots get.”

Mencken apologized for this “crude” outline of Miller’s thesis; the actual style, he said, was much more “courtly.” It then occurred to him—as it would many times after 1917—that such a document by an intelligent black man put the South to shame. No southerner, Mencken continued, could have written this document: “Whatever his graces otherwise,” he “is almost destitute of the faculty of sober reflection. He is a sentimentalist, a romanticist, a weeper and an arm-waver, and as full of superstition as the Zulu at his gates.” This was a distinction that Mencken was to repeat many times. The “superior” southern Anglo-Saxon was in reality a barbarian and a bully, whereas men like Walter White and James Weldon Johnson were “polite, intelligent, calm, well-informed, dignified, self-respecting.” In short, these were civilized men of the world.

Like Mencken, the Negro intellectuals and the Negro press around 1917 seemed preoccupied with the subject of civilization, especially since those favoring America’s entry into the war loudly proclaimed that civilization was the issue at stake. At first, almost everyone (except the Messenger crowd) had agreed with DuBois that the Negro people should “close ranks” to support the war effort. The story of their disillusionment has been well told by Nathan Huggins and David Levering Lewis, but what is interesting for our purposes is the rhetoric of that disillusionment. Even during the war, we find a questioning of American civilization by the black newspapers, although they still basically supported the cause. On 2 March 1918, the editor of the Chicago Defender presented his readers with the etymology of an important word: “Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary defines civilization as ‘the state of being refined in manners from the grossness of savage life, and improved in arts and learning.’ Who knows but there may be such a thing as a refined mob, composed of ‘colonels,’ ‘Southern aristocracy’ and the ever present ‘best citizens’? Who doubts, after seeing their work, that they have improved on the art of torture practiced in savage life and made it more fiendish?” Why do the lynchings continue, the black newspapers asked, if we are all supposed
to be pulling together? If southerners are as barbarous as the enemy, why are we fighting for them?

After the war, the opposition between civilization and savagery became more pronounced in the black press. In one Chicago Defender cartoon, a "Blue-law Reformer" (dressed as Uncle Sam) is lecturing "J. Q. Public" on the need for abstinence. "Here's a list of the horrible, uncivilized things you must not do," he says, and what follows is a petty version of the Ten Commandments—"don't smoke, don't drink, etc." However, the reformer is quick to compensate the citizen for his small losses. There is a list of things he may do, and these include "lynching" and "mob-law," and of course the citizen is left smiling because he is willing to behave himself in a "civilized" manner if he can play the beast under cover. In another Defender cartoon, a "heathen" visits America and is introduced to "civilization" by a typical American citizen. After he discovers, however, that peonage and lynching are the staples of the New World, we see him in the last frame heading for the jungle where "there isn't any civilization."

These cartoons are simplified versions of an irony that was occasionally subtle and quite Swiftian. In a Defender editorial, the American people are praised for their generosity to the unfortunate ones all over the world. As the congratulations continue, however, the author quietly notes that there is a "virgin field" for missionaries to plow close to home—in fact, right in our own backyard. There is a class of men in America, concludes the author, "far more barbarous and uncivilized than those to whom they have administered in the past." The praise then is ironic: Doing good is simply a means by which the American can remain blind to his own barbaric behavior.

In light of this satiric attitude in the black newspapers (which admittedly had been present before the war as well), it is not surprising that James Weldon Johnson, then a journalist for the New York Age, sought out Mencken around 1916. Soon the two men began to exchange letters, their mutual interest in black music forming the basis of a friendship that would last until Johnson's death in 1938. (In 1942, Johnson's widow, Grace Johnson, thanked Mencken for his generous "estimate of 'Go Down Death' on publication . . . as absolute as your present conclusion which I cherish.") Mencken found that he could learn a great deal about black music from Johnson, and he was not shy about confessing his ignorance. Johnson had told him about some recent songs written by his brother, Rosamond, and Mencken replied that although he knew Rosamond's early work, he had not followed his later career. "I . . . shall go into the matter at length," he told Johnson.

In the later teens and early 1920s, the two men benefited from their friendship, Mencken helping Johnson to revise his preface to The Book of
Negro Poetry (he wanted Johnson to put more emphasis on the younger poets), and Johnson helping Mencken to stay informed of the activities, thoughts, and feelings of the Negro intelligentsia. Around 1917 and 1918, both men started to mention each other in their essays—Mencken indirectly, Johnson directly. On 20 July 1918, Johnson devoted a whole column to Mencken in the New York Age. It began with the following words of praise:

We have often referred to the writings of H. L. Mencken. His English is a mental cocktail, an intellectual electric shock. Anybody who habitually dozes over conventional English ought to take Mencken at least once or twice a week in order to keep the moss and cobwebs out of their brains. Mr. Mencken writes excellently on a wider range of subjects than any other one writer in the United States, and whatever his topic may be, he is always interesting. But he is at his best when he is talking about the theatre or literature or music or philosophy or feminism or criticism. On these subjects, he is an authority.

The chief charm of Mencken is that he always has a fresh point of view on even the oldest subject. If the subject is one that does not admit of a fresh point of view, Mencken does not touch it; he considers it as already finished, exhausted; as a subject to be left in the embalmed state of the tomb of literature. It is into this very pit that Mencken always avoids that so many writers fall; they do not even know when a subject is exhausted.

Mencken’s style is all his own; nobody in the country writes like him. Sometimes we know that he is laughing at his readers, and sometimes we suspect he is laughing at himself. We might call him a humorous cynic; and when he is most cynical, he is most enjoyable. He is the cleverest writer in America today.

Johnson’s purpose here was to encourage the black public to read Mencken, but he also wanted black writers to learn from him.

Two years later, Johnson was more specific about what they might learn. On 21 February 1920, he noted that

Mr. Mencken’s favorite method of showing people the truth is to attack falsehood with ridicule. He shatters the walls of foolish pride and prejudice and hypocrisy merely by laughing at them; and he is more effective against them than most writers are who hurl heavily loaded shells of protest and imprecation.

What could be more disconcerting and overwhelming to a man posing as everybody’s superior than to find that everybody was laughing at his pretensions? Protest would only swell up his self importance.

There is a lesson in Mr. Mencken’s method for Negro writers. Take the subject of lynching, for example; when the average Negro writer tackles the subject he loudly and solemnly protests in the name of justice and
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righteousness. By this method he may reach every one, except the lyncher. As far as this method reaches the lyncher at all, it makes him take himself more seriously. Instead of allowing the lyncher to feel that he is the one to whom appeals for justice should be addressed, he should be made to feel that he is just what he is—a low-browed, under-civilized, degenerate criminal.\textsuperscript{18}

Thus, satire should replace preaching. To humiliate your enemy is the best way of getting even. Johnson was to return to this theme again and again, and he always noted Mencken as the major source of inspiration for this strategy. On 14 October 1922, Johnson devoted a section of his newspaper column to "Satire As a Weapon." In it he said that

there are a number of phases of the race question which are so absurd that they cannot be effectively treated except in a satirical manner. What is the use of arguing with, or even denouncing an ignorant, bigoted, Negro-burning, low white of Texas, who believes more firmly than he does in his religion that he is innately superior, not only to all colored men but even to all such foreign whites as Frenchmen and Dagoes, etc. The only thing to do is to make him feel that you laugh at his pretensions to superiority and that so far as you individually are concerned, he is a low-browed, un-cultivated, un-Christian savage, in fact, a cruel joke on civilization.

Such phases of the race question offer a great field for some colored writer who could employ the methods used by H. L. Mencken in attacking various foibles of civilization in general and of the American people in particular.\textsuperscript{18}

Here again is the antithesis of civilization versus savagery. The truly cultivated man does not stoop to the level of his enemy; a lofty disdain is the only appropriate attitude to take toward a barbarian. Similarly, art should rise above politics; the aesthetic distance created by the artist and his personal attitude toward his enemy should be one.

Johnson correctly assessed the tremendous appeal that Mencken and his method would have for black writers. Prose works such as J. A. Rogers's From "Superman" to Man (1917), Walter White's Flight (1926), Claude McKay's Banjo (1929), Countee Cullen's One Way to Heaven (1932), Rudolph Fisher's Walls of Jericho (1928), George Schuyler's Black No More (1931)—all more or less employed satire against the master race, although sometimes the satire turned inward, as in Wallace Thurman's The Blacker the Berry (1929) and Infants of Spring (1932), or became double-edged, as in Schuyler's Black No More. The poetry of the period also occasionally turned playful (for example, Johnson's "St. Peter on the Judgment Day" and Cullen's "For a Lady I Know"), but the obvious evidence of Mencken's influence lay in the often brilliant satirical
When James Weldon Johnson told his readers to read Mencken and learn from him, he had in mind not only Mencken's satiric methods but his satiric themes. As early as 1913, Mencken had produced a series of portraits of "The American" for the *Smart Set.* Borrowing a device used by Swift in Book Two of *Gulliver's Travels,* Mencken chose a virtue that his countrymen prided themselves upon, and then proceeded to show that real American morality was exactly the opposite of that mythical, imagined one. Did Americans claim to be a "brave" people? They were in fact frightened of their own shadows, and their politicians knew it. Did they claim to be "fair"? They had in fact the morals of a pack of jackals pursuing a wounded deer. Did the country claim to be the leader among democracies? It was in fact "the last civilized country to abolish slavery." Did they pride themselves on their love of the beautiful? Why, even the lowliest Navajo weaver had more real appreciation of art. Did they boast of their "freedom"? No other country was more "doglike" in its obedience to mob opinion; no other country was more intolerant of dissident views, eccentric behavior, or difference of any kind.

Mencken would not even allow the American to claim the dubious honor of being the world's most egregious materialist. He has no real respect for "things"; he prefers factory junk to real craftsmanship: "No man is more swindled by useless middlemen and criers of gewgaws." Yet it is possible to sum up the American in a brief phrase: "Say that he is the master sentimentalist, and you come close to giving him his authentic label." Here the flattering portrait of the shrewd Yankee is erased with a single brush stroke. The *real* American thinks with his liver, not his brains; his whole life is one long emotional binge,

with his sudden sobs and rages, his brummagem Puritanism, his childish braggadocio, his chronic waste of motion, his elemental humor, his great dislike of arts and artists, his fondness for the grotesque and melodramatic, his pious faith in quacks and panaceas, his curious ignorance of foreigners, his bad sportsmanship, his primitive feeding, his eternal self-medication, his weakness for tin pot display and strutting, his jealous distrust of all genuine distinction, his abounding optimism, his agile pursuit of the dollar.

The tragic tenor of this list of faults is mitigated, as it is in *Gulliver's Travels,* by the list itself. We are overwhelmed by the seemingly endless catalogue of folly, and our only response is, finally, laughter.
These articles, brilliant as they are, were merely preliminary runs for Mencken's tour de force, "On Being an American," which was published in *Prejudices, Third Series* (1922). In this amusing essay, the Swiftian device of satiric reversal is again foremost. Why does Mencken stand on the dock, "wrapped in the flag," waving good-bye to the Young Intellectuals who have set sail for Europe? Is it because he has more faith in American civilization than they do? No, he shares their complaints about its worth, but he doesn't share their bitterness. And why? Because "mirth is necessary to . . . happiness," and nowhere is that mirth more readily available than in these United States where nonsense reigns supreme. Here every abomination and folly conceivable to man passes before the eye, delights of infinite variety but all springing from the same source: the smug complacency of *boobus Americanus*, "a bird that knows no closed season." Hence, "pluribus" has a new meaning in Mencken's Republic, and his "defense" of it was not exactly the kind to bring joy to humorless patriots.

It did, however, bring joy to James Weldon Johnson and other black writers who realized that *boobus Americanus* was a bird that they too might bring down. A bird of that species lived year round in the South, and Mencken on more than one occasion had set his sights on him. In fact, the Menckenian satire to which Johnson had referred his readers in the *New York Age* was a series of articles on the South, which had begun as early as 1907 and which culminated in his noisy salvo—the shot heard round the South—"The Sahara of the Bozart" (1920).

In these essays, Mencken is at his wittiest. Delightfully turning the minstrel tradition upside down in "Si Mutare Potest Aethiops Pellum Suam," Mencken prays that on the day that *Homo noir* throws off his shackles, "I shall be safe in the Alps, and not below the Potomac River, hurriedly disguised with burnt cork and trying to get out on the high gear." Although Mencken only touches upon the theme of southern intellectual sterility in this essay, he had, as Fred C. Hobson observes, discussed it often in the thirteen years before "The Sahara of the Bozart" appeared. In all these pre-1920 essays (as well as several written in 1920) Mencken would ask the same question: Why are so few books written in the South? And always the answer would be the same: When the old civilization died during the Civil War, the poor whites replaced the ancient aristocracy as the dominant force in southern life. The culture they brought with them was puritanism, and the arts do not flourish in a moralistic environment.

Johnson followed these essays closely and commented upon them in the *New York Age*. He warned his readers not to take Mencken's persona seriously: "Mr. Mencken frequently refers to himself as a Southerner. Of course, he is no more a Southerner because he was born in a Southern
state than this writer is a Hottentot because some of his ancestors were Africans." 27 (Understandably, Johnson played down Mencken's real ties to the South. Besides, Mencken had depicted himself in "Si Mutare . . ." as a southerner of a certain stripe: "I have the hookworm . . . and believe in infant damnation.") Johnson also, as we have seen, told his readers to pay attention to Mencken's method as a possible way of dealing with racism. Nevertheless, Johnson did not just sit back and listen. On one occasion he proceeded to lecture the Sage of Baltimore about the real reasons for the Negro's emergence in the South.

On 3 July 1918, Mencken had written a piece for the New York Evening Mail called "Mr. Cabell of Virginia." Once again he raised the question of cultural impotency in the South, and once again he pointed to the consequences of the Civil War as an answer. With the aristocracy defunct and the poor whites in control, the whole show below the Potomac was pure Barnum. Johnson was not satisfied with this account. In the same article in which he called Mencken "the cleverest writer in America today," he wondered if Mencken had not overlooked something. Were the poor whites "so innately inferior to the Southern aristocracy?" Johnson asked. Could they be "any more handicapped than the 'Ethiop,' who, Mr. Mencken says, 'alone shows any cultural advance'?" Johnson then proceeded to give his own explanation for the decline of intellectual life in the South:

We do not think that the destruction of the old Southern Civilization or any innate inferiority of the poor white trash is the reason; the real reason is that the white South of today is using up every bit of its mental energy in this terrible race struggle. All of the mental efforts of the white South run through a narrow channel . . . All of the mental power of the white South is being used up in holding the Negro back, and that is the reason why it does not produce either great literature or great statesmen or great wealth . . .

On the other hand, the Negro is not using up any of his strength in trying to hold anybody back; he is using every ounce of it to move forward himself. His face is front and toward the light; when the white man tries to force him back he, the white man, turns from the light and faces backward.

Although no one can prove that Mencken read Johnson's piece in the New York Age, it is more than likely that he did. He took an interest in Johnson's work around this time. (Johnson was probably the first to introduce him to the world of Negro newspapers, which Mencken read with some regularity throughout his life.) Also, the two men exchanged letters often between 1917 and 1920, and Mencken more than once seemed to be persuaded by Johnson's eloquence. Witness, for instance, Mencken's
response to a letter from Johnson concerning the terrible race riots of 1919. Mencken begins by calling the "low-caste white man" a coward: "He is, by nature, a gang-fighter; a poltroon under his hide, he delights in operations which allow him to kill without risk." He ends by taking Johnson's side completely: "As you say, fighting back changes the scene. Once he is convinced that chasing Negroes is dangerous, he will stop it." It is not surprising, then, that soon after Johnson's newspaper article Mencken too became preoccupied with the "mental energy" of the South. In two *Smart Set* essays called "The Confederate Pastime" and "The Confederate Mind," Mencken suggests that lynching is a psychological phenomenon—a pathological substitute for the lack of harmless amusements, which a normal, civilized culture provides as a matter of course. If, for instance, the South would play host to more brass bands and boxing matches, there would be fewer dead Negroes. As it stands now, Mencken declares, the place is a paradise for "Freudians"—and not simply for those who are "psychologists." What the South needs is a good dose of psychiatric treatment.

Yet Johnson's influence upon Mencken may have been even more subtle. In the 1917 version of "The Sahara of the Bozart" (published on 13 November 1917 in the *New York Evening Mail*), Mencken had not even mentioned the Negro; all his emphasis was upon southern decadence. However, in the version published in *Prejudices, Second Series*—the one that made him a hated man in the South—Mencken gives the Negro a prominent place. Perhaps thinking of Johnson's remarks in the *New York Age*, Mencken says of the poor whites that "the emerging black" is "the cornerstone of all their public thinking." He adds that the only prose writer in recent history (besides James Branch Cabell) to write anything of note was Joel Chandler Harris, and he turned out to be "little more than an amanuensis for the local blacks." His works, continues Mencken, "were really the products, not of white Georgia, but of black Georgia. Writing afterward as a white man, he swiftly subsided into the fifth rank."

Often in this famous essay Mencken sounds as if he has a special kind of knowledge about black America which others, especially southerners, lack. Near the end of "The Sahara of the Bozart," he refers to an article in a "stray copy of a negro paper," which had poked fun at the incongruity of an ordinance recently passed in Douglas, Georgia. It seemed that the good people of this community wished to prevent the Negro "trouser-presser" from ironing the wardrobe of white folk. Yet as the article amusingly noted, nearly all the clothing in the town was "handled" by black washerwomen, and sometimes it remained in Negro homes (Mencken quotes the newspaper as saying) "for as long as a week"
Mencken's comment on the "absurdity" of this situation is instructive, for again it reminds us of the reasons for his tendency to identify with the Negro immediately following the Great War. He sarcastically tells his audience to keep this comedy quiet—"keep it dark"—for "a casual word, and the united press of the South will be upon your trail, denouncing you bitterly as a scoundrelly Yankee, a Bolshevik Jew, an agent of the Wilhelmstrasse." Since Mencken had been called a German spy by the same people who passed the ordinance against the "trouser-passer," it is not surprising that he would respond to the humor in a stray Negro opinion.

In another section of the same essay, Mencken mentions a "curious article by an intelligent negro" (probably Walter White), in which the author points out how easy it is for a light-skinned colored man to pass for white in the South. The reason for this, says Mencken with mock solemnity, is that not a few southerners "have distinctly negroid features." Moreover—and here the satire takes on a new dimension—the white ancestors of these Negro-fied southerners selected their sexual partners with great care: "The men of the upper classes sought their mistresses among the blacks," and thus "there was created a series of mixed strains containing the best white blood of the south, and perhaps of the whole country." As for the poor whites, alas, they "went unfertilized from above." All that pride in racial purity is really only a by-product of neglect. And the despised Negro race? It has produced the mother of aristocrats.

As Louis D. Rubin observes, Mencken has reduced everyone in the South to the level of breeding animals. And as Fred C. Hobson says, most of the animals bear a remarkable resemblance to Swift's Yahoos. Yet there is another Swiftian touch that would have especially pleased the black intellectuals who read Mencken's essays. Says Mencken of the South, it is a land "so vast" that "nearly the whole of Europe could be lost in that stupendous region of fat farms, shoddy cities and paralyzed cerebrums: one could throw in France, Germany, Italy, and still have room for the British Isles." If we subtract the "fat farms," what Mencken has given us is not Book Four of *Gulliver's Travels* but Book Three. In the whole of this intellectual "vacuity," the emptiness of which Mencken compares to the vast "interstellar spaces," there is only James Branch Cabell, the Lord Munodi of a modern-day Balnibarbi, struggling to keep his sanity in a world given over to lunacy. But he is not quite alone. Throughout the revised "Sahara" Mencken keeps pointing to the intelligent Negro who is cracking open his cocoon and trying to fly.

Mencken is not sure how high he will fly, but he has already surpassed those who would keep him on the ground:
Like all other half-breeds he is an unhappy man, with disquieting tendencies toward anti-social habits of thought, but he is intrinsically a better animal than the pure-blooded descendants of the old poor whites, and he not infrequently demonstrates it. It is not by accident that the negroes of the South are making faster progress, economically and culturally, than the masses of the whites. It is not by accident that the only visible aesthetic activity in the South is wholly in their hands. No southern composer has ever written music so good as that of half a dozen white-black composers who might be named. Even in politics, the negro reveals a curious superiority. Despite the fact that the race question has been the main political concern of the southern whites for two generations, to the practical exclusion of everything else, they have contributed nothing to its discussion that has impressed the world so deeply and so favorably as three or four books by Southern negroes.

This passage is significant for several reasons. First, now Mencken’s mulatto is “unhappy” because of his environment, not because he can never be as good as an intelligent white man. Mencken has shifted the burden of innate inferiority to the “poor whites,” a change of thinking due, we might surmise, to his own black-washing during the Great War. Second, the indirect references to the Johnson brothers, Harry Burleigh, and others (composers) and to Kelly Miller and W.E.B. DuBois (political theorists) are obvious. After 1917, Mencken took to studying what other outsiders like himself were thinking and doing, and the results impressed him. Finally, there is the crucial idea in this passage—one that subsequently would be taken up by some (not all) Harlem Renaissance writers—that the “aesthetic” province is theirs by birthright. Let the white man fumble with technology and business; the Negro will create art that will ensure his own immortality.

As Mencken’s animus toward the South grew, so did his tendency to believe that the hope for southern literature lay in the hands of Negro writers. In the same month (October 1920) that the revised “Sahara” was published in Prejudices, Second Series, Mencken gave his prescription for the Negro novel in his review of Ovington’s Shadow. A month following, he wrote a Smart Set piece (“Letters and the Map”) in which he complained of the lack of “realism” in southern literature, adding that the South had never been treated in the manner that Edgar Lee Masters and Sherwood Anderson had “done” the Middle West. The only hope that it would be done—and done correctly—lay with “the new school of Aframerican novelists, now struggling heavily to emerge.” Actually, Mencken had indirectly hinted at the possibility of the Great Negro Novel as early as 1917, when he reviewed Johnson’s Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man in “Si Mutare Potest Aethiops Pellum Suam.” The novel had been published anonymously in 1912, and Mencken had only recently learned
—from Johnson himself—that his friend was the author. He told Johnson in a letter that it was an “excellent piece of work,” and his review may have been the catalyst that caused Johnson to announce his authorship. However, Mencken mistook the book for a sociological treatise, and although he was favorably impressed with the information it provided, he made it clear that he would have preferred a novel. For the second work he reviewed in “Si Mutare . . .” was a novel and, though it was written by a white man, Mencken thought that it showed the Negro writer the direction he should travel.

Yet there was a certain irony in Mencken’s choice of Paul Kester’s *His Own Country* as a model. Kester, Mencken argued, had treated the Negro problem with impartiality and without sentimentality. He stood “above the gaudy balderdash of a Thomas Dixon as a novel by Dreiser stands above the boudoir goods of Robert W. Chambers.” What appealed to Mencken about Kester’s hero was that he was not a stereotype; what would not appeal to the Harlem Renaissance was that he turned out to be a moral monster. A kind of black Thomas Sutpen, Julius Caesar Brent wreaks vengeance upon those who humiliated him as a youth. When he leaves Virginia, this young octoroon goes to Montreal and becomes a physician. Hearing the call of his native land, he returns, only to bring destruction upon himself, his family, and many innocent people. One can see why the Harlem Renaissance authors would not try to recreate this character; here was realism that acknowledged the existence of a grotesque, a grotesque that they feared would be interpreted as a stereotype. The advice they would take from Mencken would be that given in the Ovington review. Deal with “normalities,” Mencken said, not extremes.

With this flood of articles between 1917 and 1920—dealing with both the South and the Negro novelist—it is curious that Mencken has been overlooked by critics of the Harlem Renaissance. After all, following the war Mencken was at the height of his popularity; he was read by more Americans than perhaps any other living writer. Certainly James Weldon Johnson offers proof that Negro intellectuals were not behind the times. Furthermore, as George Schuyler tells us, Theophilus Lewis was an “avid reader” of the *Smart Set,* and Walter White, as we shall see, came close to believing that Mencken was a deity; when the Sage of Baltimore spoke, all was light (except of course in the South).

By 1920, Mencken had become a household word among black intellectuals. Now they not only quoted him, they sometimes sounded like him. James Weldon Johnson started saying things like “Southern bunk” and “pish-posh” when he was amused, and the following when he was angry: “One of the mysteries to us is, what is there to boast of in being a Southerner? . . . Among so-called civilized white men the
Southerner is the most backward, the most ignorant, the most uncivilized and the most barbarous in the world. His section is without scholarship, without art and without law and order; it is even without money, except what it can borrow from the North. Both DuBois and Johnson saw the implications of Mencken's thesis in the "Sahara" and elsewhere as an explanation for the past poverty of Negro art. As Johnson put it in his preface to The Book of American Negro Poetry (1922), the reason that the American Negro has not produced a Pushkin or a Coleridge-Taylor was that he was "consuming all his intellectual energy in this grueling race struggle." Although Johnson was contradicting himself (witness his New York Age remarks), his point was that this futile energy consumption had been forced upon the Negro by his environment (he mentions Mencken's "Sahara" as proof), and that from this moment on, the past no longer existed: The Negro now planned to devote all his energy to art.

Hence, Mencken's thesis concerning southern decadence was useful to black authors for many reasons. For one thing, it put the sock on the other foot. Instead of the Negro's having to argue that he was not a savage, the southerner now had to prove that he wasn't a Yahoo. According to Mencken—or rather according to his black interpreters—the Negro symbolized the last vestige of civilization in a dying culture, and, moreover, he symbolized the South's sole hope for a future regeneration. Mencken thus made it possible for the Negro intellectual to dismiss special pleading altogether. What was there to plead for, when it was clear to every reasonable human being that the superior man in the South was the one with the dark skin? In actual fact, even in the revised "Sahara," the Negro played a small part in Mencken's thesis about the South, for nowhere did he say that the Negro problem was the sole cause of the South's cultural decline. For Mencken, the South was intellectually dead because the Yahoos were in the saddle, and even if they had not ridden roughshod over the Negro, they still would have destroyed the old civilization. Nevertheless, Mencken's revisions of the "Sahara" did add a new note to the cacophony that Mencken heard below the Potomac, and if men like Johnson chose to interpret that new note as the sound of southern blues, who could blame them?

When "The Sahara of the Bozart" made its appearance in 1920, the response of Negro intellectuals was intense and varied. Walter White was inspired to write The Fire in the Flint; Montgomery Gregory considered it a clarion call to the Negro novelist. When Jean Toomer's Cane was published in December 1923, Gregory used Mencken's vocabulary to
describe its uniqueness: "It is a notorious fact that the United States south of the Mason and Dixon line has been, in the words of Mr. Mencken, a 'Cultural Sahara.'" Noting that "great art, like great deeds, cannot flourish in a land of bigotry and oppression," he pointed to the Negro as someone who has suffered from this blight. Hypersensitive to his wrongs, he has resisted attempts by his own artists to depict his folk-life. *Cane,* however, represented a new approach, Gregory stressed. It was a concrete example that the Negro could rise above his environment and create great art. Now, Gregory pleaded, if only the "Reader" could make the same leap above the sordid conditions that enslaved the white South—then we could have a Renaissance.42

For the most part, Mencken's essay provided ammunition to authors who wanted to punish the South in a straightforward, nonsatiric manner. J. Milton Sampson used a passage from "The Sahara of the Bozart" as an epigraph to "These Colored United States" in the *Messenger* (July 1923). Mary Owen, in the same magazine, called her essay "The Decadence of Southern Civilization" (February 1924); her theme was that the South has no culture because the whites spend all their energies in subduing the Negro. Yet the real impact of Mencken's essay, as Johnson had predicted, was that it led to the call for a Negro satirist. The response came almost immediately. Arnold Mulder wrote in the *Independent* (1924): "You remember how Dean Swift turned the tables on civilized man by taking Gulliver into the land of the Houyhnhnms where horses were the rational beings and where men, called Yahoos, were the subject race. And the diabolical ingenuity of Swift succeeded in making man as ridiculous, from the horse's point of view, as the name given him by those intelligent beings. Suppose a negro Swift should arise."43

In 1927, writing for the *Mercury,* George Schuyler said that "the intelligent Aframerican" cannot "help classing the bulk of Nordics with the inmates of an insane asylum." What we need, he continued, is a "black American Balzac" to write a new "volume of Droll Stories." For, said Schuyler, "the Negro is a sort of black Gulliver chained by white Lilliputians, a prisoner in a jail of color prejudice, a babe in a forest of bigotry, but withal a fellow philosophical and cynical enough to laugh at himself and his predicament. He has developed more than any other group, even more than the Jews, the capacity to see things as they are rather than as he would have them."44 Schuyler's Negro, of course, had those characteristics that Mencken admired: He was civilized, clear-sighted, and without illusions. In other words, he was a perfect candidate for the office of satirist.

Mencken had said essentially the same thing when he had responded to a *Crisis* questionnaire in 1926. The Negro should not complain about being caricatured by the white man, Mencken urged. Rather, he should
pay him back "in his own coin": "The white man, it seems to me, is extremely ridiculous. He looks ridiculous even to me, a white man myself. To a Negro he must be a hilarious spectacle, indeed. Why isn't that spectacle better described? Let the Negro sculptors spit on their hands! What a chance!" Four months later J. A. Rogers, writing for the *Amsterdam News,* would make a similar plea in "Wanted: A Satirist." Here the absurdity to be satirized was the "Nordic doctrine of superiority," the supreme delusion of a deluded culture. No other subject in America, said Rogers, has so much "comedy and even burlesque" built into it: "Some day a satirist is going to see the possibilities in the race question and produce a book that will eclipse Swift, Martial or Juvenal."

Thus, when Mencken assumed the editorship of the new *American Mercury* in 1924, he was followed with considerable interest by literate black Americans. And Mencken did not let them down. By Fenwick Anderson's count, in the decade that Mencken ran the *Mercury* (1924-1933) he published fifty-four articles by or about blacks. More specifically, his editorial policy in the new magazine continued to reflect his previous attitudes toward the Negro. He wanted to give Negro writers a chance to express what they thought and felt about themselves and America. Their appearance in his magazine was not to be a token performance; they would appear beside some of the most distinguished writers in the country (as benighted as it was). Mencken also wanted to cover the subject of race and racial relationships from all possible angles, and therefore he solicited articles from anthropologists and even from white southerners.

In the *Mercury,* Mencken encouraged black writers to hold forth on a multitude of subjects: politics, religion, art, folklore, black newspapers, music—even the race's "inhibitions." One attitude that appeared often—and it was one that Mencken had urged blacks to express at the outset—was the attitude of Negro superiority. In "The Dilemma of the Negro," by W. E. B. Du Bois, the issue of superiority became the subject of the entire essay. Although Negroes were forced to go to separate schools, said the editor of the *Crisis,* they often created educational institutions that were a cut above those attended by most whites. Yet if the level of culture among middle-class blacks was higher by far than that attained by the average white man, it had been achieved at a high cost. No matter how well educated, these Negroes were denied access to the world beyond color; the only way whites would allow them to escape their parochialism was through humiliation, and that their pride would not brook. Like Du Bois, George Schuyler believed that the greatest injustice caused by segregation was cultural deprivation. In "Keeping the Negro in his Place," he said that the present dispensation "leaves the Negro all dressed up with nowhere to go." And he made it quite clear that "nowhere" included
the North as well as the South. Even in Harlem, cabarets segregated Negroes or denied them entrance altogether.

J. A. Rogers took an Olympian view of racial relationships in "The American Negro in Europe." He systematically discussed how different countries reacted to the presence of a black man in their midst—his was a study in cultural comparisons. For instance, people of African origins were highly regarded in France, he noted; white women even "frizzled" their hair to imitate them. In England, however, the Negro's lot was "far worse than in America." Although Rogers was critical of the injustices that the Negro suffered abroad, his tone remained consistently urbane. He was Goldsmith's Citizen of the World, more amused by than contemptuous of the white man's mysterious quirks and habits.

The variety of articles by Negroes in the *Mercury* illustrates Mencken's desire to include all viewpoints—to be a kind of Diderot to the American Negro. He wanted other perspectives than those presented by the Negroes themselves. As he told Schuyler in 1929, "Lately I bought an article on the Negro question by a white Virginian. Having printed no less than twelve pieces by the dark brethren, it seemed to be high time to give the Ofays a hearing." The author from Virginia defended the status quo in the South, arguing from a social Darwinist position that only the fittest should survive. He stated further that although he sympathized with the Negro's plight, he did not care to jeopardize his friendships and his ties to the broader community. Mencken told Schuyler privately that he found the conclusions of the Virginian "despairing."

Perhaps the most perceptive white commentator on "the Negro question" was L. M. Hussey, a chemist by profession and a personal friend of Walter White. In "Homo Africanus," he noted that the mask of humility worn by black people—from the lowly sharecropper to the most exalted academic—often hides their real contempt. The Negro educator in the South, for instance, smiles at the white philanthropist because he wants his money, yet he knows too that this money serves to keep the Negro in his place. Hussey also observed that despite the simple-minded white view that a Negro is a Negro is a Negro, the members of the race live within a clearly defined class structure. Many of them know their genealogy, and some of them have found their ancestors to be southern aristocrats. These Negroes are proud—not because their blood is white, but because it is the best. Undoubtedly, both observations are insightful, the one foreshadowing Faulkner's marvelous character in *Go Down Moses* (1942), Lucas Beauchamp; and the other breaking ground for Ralph Ellison's finely drawn portrait of the Negro "educator" Dr. Bledsoe in *Invisible Man* (1952).

As interesting as these *Mercury* articles are, they are not as compelling as those that were inspired by the satiric impulse. What Mencken
The Sage in Harlem

really wanted to offer the Negro writer was the opportunity to "spit on
his hands" and write satire. We are accustomed today to look upon satire
as a purely fictional art, having similar rules controlling its nature to
those, let us say, which control a novel or a poem. But Edward Rosenheim
is surely right when he argues that satire is difficult to pin down as a
literary form because it can move so easily from references to the real
world to references to Cloud-Cuckoo Land. On the one hand, it will
attack historically verifiable particulars; on the other hand, it can slip
into an imaginative world that is as unbelievable as the most surrealistic
novel. To consider the nature of satire is necessary, because the Harlem
Renaissance has been accused of writing very little satire. This accusation
is true if we define satire as a genre that sustains its dramatic illusion from
beginning to end. However, it is not true if we consider satire a hybrid
form: half rhetoric, half fiction. The essays that the black writers wrote
for Mencken's Mercury make no claim to being fictional, but that is part
of the fun: The world in these "United Snakes" which they proceed to
describe is completely loony, and yet it is all "real."

Another point about the Renaissance's satire is worth making.
Though they wanted to ridicule their white adversary, the black writers
of this period did not wish to appear boorish in their revenge. Boorish-
ness smacked of the very propaganda that they sought to steer clear of,
and satire, if pushed too far, sounded suspiciously like propaganda. So
they developed the urbane voice, one that Mencken had urged them to
take all along. Yet Mencken had hardly taken that voice in "The Sahara
of the Bozart." When he lashed out against the South's lack of civilization,
he himself did not hold back—his loud guffaws and his Brobdingnagian
contempt reduced the whole notion of urbanity to a top hat in a wind
storm. However, the black writers of the 1920s in this instance preferred
Mencken's advice to his example; the sharp breeze of urbane satire was
safer than the eye of the hurricane. Perhaps this is one reason that the
Renaissance did not produce a Gulliver's Travels or even a "Sahara of the
Bozart."

Throughout the 1920s, Mencken told black writers to assume an
urbane persona, especially when writing for the Mercury. The postulates
that made up this persona went something like this: You are a civilized
man; the racist is not; do not fight with the enemy on his own ground but
make him fight on yours; do not plead with him to grant you your
humanity, but laugh at the loss of his; do not admit inferiority in any
sense, but claim—directly or indirectly—that you are superior. It is he,
after all, who is the savage, the vulgarian, the fool.

Thus, in "A Negro Looks at Race Prejudice," James Weldon Johnson
can only shake his head over the subject he is to discuss. The closer he
looks at it, "the more paradoxical and absurd it seems." He is especially
puzzled by southern behavior. Why is the black mammy the sine qua non of aristocratic distinction—especially in light of the fact that southerners claim to despise Negroes? Also, if there is so much animosity between the races, why are there so many mulattos in the South? Could it be that there is a discrepancy between myth (the taboo of miscegenation) and reality? And then, another behavioral quirk strikes Johnson as extremely funny. Whites seem to think that the darker brother spends most of his time dreaming up ways to enter the social world of the Caucasian. Johnson assures them that Negroes do not need their company to enjoy themselves.

This point, however, brings him to a more serious subject, and now Johnson shifts his tone from amusement to clinical detachment. The racist, he decides, is really a case for the “psychologist.” Like the puritan who cannot stand people enjoying themselves, so too the prejudiced man tries to prevent the Negro, through segregation, from enjoying the goods of this world. Johnson concludes his essay with an anecdote that illustrates the theme of Caucasian incivility—nay, even pathology. On board a ship returning from Europe, Johnson discovers from a friend that one of the white passengers has asked that Johnson be removed from the first-class dining room. The incident leads to the following reflection: “What is it in him that makes the sight of a solitary Negro sitting in a café in Paris or Berlin allow him no peace of mind until he has put forth every effort to have the black man kicked out? I admit he is a fanatic, but I also insist he is a vulgarian and a bounder.” In short, the racist is Mencken’s puritan redux, the petty moralist who makes truly civilized behavior impossible. He is less evil than pathetic.

Johnson’s rhetorical stance is that of the outsider, a traveler in a strange land who is observing the habits and mores of some rather peculiar people. This was the approach that George Schuyler took in “Our White Folks,” published a year earlier in the Mercury. In a letter, Mencken had encouraged Schuyler to do an article on “how the whites look to an intelligent Negro.” He told Schuyler that he had asked “various dark literati of my acquaintance” to attempt it, but “they couldn’t get rid of politeness.” Do “something realistically and fearlessly,” he said, “like your excellent stuff in the Pittsburgh Courier.” When Schuyler replied that he hoped to spoof the white man in the manner Mencken suggested, Mencken responded enthusiastically: “Lay on. . . . I’d be delighted to see him dosed with the same kind of medicine that he has been giving the Ethiop for so many years. Certainly he must be a ridiculous figure seen from without.” Yet Mencken also warned Schuyler on another occasion that he should not express anger when he exposed his enemy: “In such writing it seems to me that the really effective weapon is irony. The moment you begin to show indignation you weaken your whole case.”
Thus Schuyler was to be “fearless” but cool-headed; angry but urbane; plain-dealing but smooth as glass.

In “Our White Folks,” Schuyler has followed Mencken’s advice. Instead of being depicted as a monster, the white man is shown to be a source of endless amusement to the Negro. Although the southerner claims to know everything there is to know about the Negro, he fails to realize that he too is under observation. His knowledge of the Negro is usually superficial, whereas the Negro knows his enemy intimately—he has to, to survive. And “knowing him so intimately, the black brother has no illusions about either his intelligence, his industry, his efficiency, his honor, or his morals.” At their worst, says Schuyler, upper-class whites are lazy and hypocritical; their lower class counterparts, appallingly stupid.

The “one-drop theory” especially brings “mirth” to the darker brother, says Schuyler. In a recent court ruling in Virginia, fifty white children were barred from a white school because it was feared that they had been tarnished by the tarbrush. Could one find better farce in a minstrel show? And the side show up North is no different, except that the hypocrisy is more blatant. Still, Negroes have learned to live in both worlds, and their sense of humor is their salvation. The word “amusement” runs all through Schuyler’s essay, for the tone he wants is Horatian, not Juvenalian. Nevertheless, the indictment of white people is all-encompassing, including even white intellectuals. Says Schuyler: “They have a great deal of information but are not so long on common sense. . . . They lack that sense of humor and gentle cynicism which one expects to find in the really civilized person, and which are the chief characteristics of even the most lowly and miserable Aframerican.”

Nineteen twenty-seven seems to have been the year for satire. In “Blessed Are the Sons of Ham,” Schuyler argues that a black man’s life is never dull in a world full of foolish Nordics. Just to have a meal out is an adventure, as managers and waiters fumble to find reasons why a poor Ethiop cannot be seated, and customers buzz their indignation. “I cannot help but enjoy all this,” says Schuyler. “Over a hundred proud Nordics nonplussed by a lone Negro.” If he tries to go to a play, the hilarity increases. When the ticket agent tells Schuyler that the seats he has reserved are sold, Schuyler watches the man’s face, caught in his lie: “I smile. He blushes. A look of annoyance comes over his face. That is my reward; it fills me with glee—just that expression.”

In this essay, Schuyler wavers between genuine amusement and whistling in the dark, but in “Our Greatest Gift to America,” also published in 1927, his ironic tone never falters. This wonderful spoof works on several levels. First, it is an obvious satire on the white man’s ability to delude himself; and second, it casts a comic glance at apologists such as
DuBois who are forever pleading, on the basis of the Negro’s contributions to civilization, that the Negro is a human being. Schuyler says simply that the white man needs a “nigger” to bolster his self-esteem; in short, the Negro’s greatest gift is flattery. His presence in America allows the lowliest white man to think himself a superior person. Seeing a minstrel show, he can always say to himself that at least he is “not like these buffoons.” Besides, he can stand upon the black mudsill of humanity and claim kinship with Rockefeller, Edison, and Carnegie because of his white skin. Democracy has worked better because of the Ethiop’s presence, says Schuyler with tongue in cheek: White men in America have reached toward the stars, propelling themselves upward by shoving the darker brother further into the mud. Yes, concludes Schuyler, we have “roused the hope and pride of teeming millions of ofays—this indeed is a gift of which we can well be proud.”

Schuyler’s satire depends upon a clever rhetorical reversal: The Negro’s greatest gift is what the white man desperately needs. If he did not have the Negro’s flattery, God knows how he could live with himself. In 1927, Theophilus Lewis also published a piece that depends upon an ironic reversal for its satiric effect. It is a variation on Swift’s “Modest Proposal,” its humor directed at both the Negro intellectuals and the South. Lewis argues that the Negro has made a mistake by not exploiting the southern myth that the black man is a natural rapist. Why not glamorize this fiction, says Lewis, and make the Negro into Don Juan, a daring lover who makes love on the run? Instead of the “burly brute” of southern lore, we would then have a “romantic rogue with a certain fascination about him.” You can be sure, says Lewis, that once southerners got wind of this new interpretation, they would drop the rapist label like a rotten watermelon. Furthermore, smiles Lewis, it would spare the Negro from writing so many tedious pieces of useless propaganda.

Schuyler’s essays also implied that the white man’s delusion depends upon an imaginary Negro; and the satire of both Lewis and Schuyler stressed that the white man in America can achieve psychic wholeness only if he has a nigger to complete him, to assure him that he is indeed what he would like to be. Take away the imaginary Negro, and down comes the scaffolding. It is clear, then, that white people are insane, and that the caste system is the cause of the insanity.

In 1927, E. Franklin Frazier explored the theme of Caucasian insanity in a brilliant satiric essay called “The Pathology of Race Prejudice.” Like Schuyler, Frazier pretends to take a purely scientific attitude toward his topic. In this “treatise,” he sets out to demonstrate that “the behavior motivated by race prejudice shows precisely the same characteristics as those ascribed to insanity.” For instance, the insane construct an elaborate system of ratiocination to “support their delusions,” says Frazier;
it is not true that they are simply “irrational.” So, too, southerners weave webs of logical arguments to support the “delusion” of the racial inferiority of the Negro. First they find a convincing theory to prove “that white blood is responsible for character and genius in mixed Negroes”; then they find an equally convincing theory to show “that white blood harms Negroes.” But no matter what the theory, if a person is insane, he will always use it to contravene the facts of experience; he will always use it to protect his obsession. A normal mind is flexible; an insane mind is not. Thus, even in the face of overwhelming evidence, the southerner will not give up the belief that “the Negro is a ravisher.” It is an idée fixe, Franklin observes with detachment, a “projection” from the inside outward. Because “inmates of a madhouse are not judged insane by themselves, but by those outside,” a southerner’s behavior never seems peculiar to another southerner but only to people outside the South.

Like others of his generation, Frazier was inspired in this piece to see the South as Mencken had seen it in his seminal satiric essays. The South was a casebook for pathologists; and lynching, a manifestation of cultural rot. Having lost its aristocracy, the South had been given over to the white trash; having lost its principle of order, the South had de-evolved into Conrad’s Congo or Swift’s Houyhnhnm-land without the Houyhnhnms. The whole culture, then, was topsy-turvy. The bottom was at the top, and the top either was dead or had fled to the North. For Frazier, racial prejudice is the dominant symptom of the South’s insanity. His essay ends with a quotation from Nietzsche: “Insanity in individuals is something rare—but in groups, parties, nations, and epochs it is the rule.” Certainly for this generation of Negro writers, Mencken had shown that it was the rule for the South.

If Frazier made fun of the insanity, Walter White considered it deadly serious. Still, the persona of the civilized outsider visiting a strange, mad world remains the same. In “I Investigate Lynchings,” which White wrote for the Mercury in 1929, he tells hair-raising tales of outwitting the local yokel as he tried to gather information about the horrors of Bedlam.66 A year before, Knopf had published his Rope and Faggot: The Biography of Judge Lynch (1928), ostensibly an objective study of a peculiar societal phenomenon, lynching. Actually, White’s document is more satirical than scientific. Quoting Mencken frequently, White psychoanalyzes the South. He finds close connections between the South’s religious fanaticism, its sexual obsessions, and lynching. For White, the continued presence of lynching in the South, like heroin for a dope addict, deprives the culture of the psychic energy necessary for it to transcend its inertia.

In Rope and Faggot, lynching is just one form of pathology in a sick society. Again, Mencken’s thesis prevails. Lynching exists in the South,
argues White, because the South has no real civilization. It is a world of insane puritans, dull towns, and boorish bumpkins. In such a world, the obscene becomes an everyday occurrence. In such a world, a civilized man is as rare as a flower on a sand dune. Although White is willing to admit that some light has recently brightened a corner of the general gloom (for instance, Howard Odum’s work at the University of North Carolina), he gives the final impression that the area is still a case study for a Freudian textbook.

Generally, however, blacks publishing in the *Mercury* did not dissect the South with such grimness. In “Traveling Jim Crow,” for example, Schuyler sees the comic side of segregated travel. His South is mad indeed, but it is like being lost in the funhouse. Schuyler delights in documenting one absurdity after another: a one-mile stretch of railroad track in Kentucky where passengers must observe the Jim Crow laws (after riding one hundred thirteen miles without them); a light-skinned “colored” lady who passes for French in order to ride with the gentry, yet “who would starve to death in France if she had to order her own meals”; a southerner who won’t speak to Schuyler as the train passes through the South, but who treats him as a long-lost friend once the train enters the North.

Of course Mencken did not leave all the wit to the Negro writers. One butt of his satire was the self-appointed racial authority, such as Madison Grant or Lothrop Stoddard. He delighted in puncturing their pseudoscientific theories about the long-headed Nordic, the round-headed Alpine, and the broad-headed Mediterranean (the latter, as Mencken noted, “with his vague smears of Ethiopian blood”). In his last year with the *Smart Set*, Mencken laughed at novelist Gertrude Atherton for her attempt to apply the wisdom of these two savants to American fiction. Atherton had complained that the novel as an art form had been inundated by authors of Alpine origin, and that this inundation had resulted in the vulgarization of our national letters. Mencken gleefully called his rebuttal “Nordic Blond Art”; in it, he sardonically seeks to investigate the truth of Atherton’s claims by examining her own recently published novel, *Black Oxen*. By the end of his criticism, he comes to the conclusion that although the “inferior herd” of which Atherton complains may be vulgar, it has more life than the whole lot of “dolichocephalic Nordic blonds” who inhabit her novel. Nevertheless, since he, Mencken, is a Nordic blond “of the purest type, Teutoburger Wald or greyhound,” he has taken her advice to heart and has sent “copies of her article . . . to all of the principal middle western novelists, including Dreiser.”

Mencken continued his warfare against the defenders of Anglo-Saxon purity in the *Mercury*. Month after month, Franz Boas or Melville Herskovits or Raymond Pearl (his personal friend and a member of the
Johns Hopkins Medical School faculty) would blast the idea of a pure race. Mencken, of course, had other reasons for printing these articles than the desire to defend the Negro. He also wanted to attack the Anglo-Saxon's unwarranted arrogance, one manifestation of which was what he called “Ku Klux” literary criticism. Throughout the Mercury, he kept up a constant artillery barrage against “Anglo-Saxonism,” noting that the dominance of this racial type was giving way to that of the hyphenated-Americans. The method of attack was usually Shavian. What were the Anglo-Americans doing when Dreiser's ancestors “were raising grapes on the Rhine”? Mencken's answer was that they “were hanging witches in Salem.” We need not add that someone like Alain Locke was quick to seize upon Mencken's distinction. If Dreiser's ancestors were civilized men when the New Englanders were barbarians, Locke would claim that his ancestors were also superior men. Long before Salem, the Africans had maintained a tradition of craftsmanship and elegance in the visual arts.

Another implication of Mencken's remark concerning the Salem witch hunts was that the early puritans were the ancestors of the present-day Negrophobes. The tendency to see the world in black and white terms on a metaphysical plane can easily be transferred to seeing it so on a physical one. Recognizing this phenomenon, Negro writers in the 1920s were fond of linking the American's thoroughgoing moralism with his myopic racial prejudice. It is not surprising to find, therefore, that two of Langston Hughes's stories from The Ways of White Folk (1934) first appeared in the Mercury, and that the enemy in both stories is puritanism. The Pembertons of Mapleton, Vermont (“Poor Little Black Fellow”) and Mrs. Art Studevant of Melton, Iowa (“Cora Unashamed”) are not southerners and are not rabid racists. Their crimes against humanity are the results of their constricted hearts.

In keeping with his desire for balance, Mencken encouraged Negro writers to satirize black life as well as white. In one article, Eugene Gordon tells tales out of school and discusses the Negro's “inhibitions.” Here he is speaking primarily of the modern middle-class Negro who has become so embarrassed by objects associated with his past—watermelon, pork chops, fried chicken, bright colors, razors—that he seeks to avoid them at all costs. As a consequence, he has become “a sad Freudian case.” Moreover, he has as many prejudices as white men, one being a preference for light-skinned members of his own race. Foreshadowing a theme that Wallace Thurman was to develop in The Blacker the Berry, Gordon says that a truly black girl, no matter how talented, does not stand a chance in Negro society.

Gordon wasn't always so critical of his own kind, however; he could take a wry, amused attitude if the occasion warranted. When he discussed
Negro newspapers, for instance, he was both informative and satirical. “There was a time,” he smiled, “when the ordinary colored American laughed at the suggestion that he read Negro newspapers.” Now both highbrow and lowbrow read them eagerly, the lowlifers fixing their eyes on the tabloid murders and baseball scores and the sophisticates turning their attention to the theater section and editorial pages.\textsuperscript{73}

Rudolph Fisher too could take an amused view—this time of himself. He wrote an article for Mencken discussing the cabaret scene, in which he expresses shock at discovering that the old hangouts are filled with white people. Instead of being outraged, he is amused that some of these “Ofays” dance even “better than I.” Perhaps on a deeper level, he thinks, they “have tuned in on our wave-length.” Could it be, he asks, that “they are at last learning to speak our language”? Although he doesn’t try to answer this question, he is ready to admit that perhaps Negroes may not have judged their Caucasian brothers as fairly as they ought to.\textsuperscript{74}

Other \textit{Mercury} articles by Negroes, however, did not use the light touch when it came to discussing their own; and, as we shall see, the astringency of this satire sometimes indicated a break between two generations of black writers in the 1920s. George Schuyler is a case in point. Nothing by him appeared in Mencken’s magazine until December 1927, and then he became the most published \textit{Mercury} writer, black or white, in Mencken’s tenure as editor. (Between 1927 and 1934, no less than nine of Schuyler’s titles graced the famous dark green covers.) By 1927, both Mencken and the Young Wits had begun to question the movement’s integrity, and thus in the \textit{Mercury} Schuyler often took a hard look at Negro foibles, as if they in themselves might provide a clue to what had gone wrong with the Renaissance. For instance, Schuyler complained in “Uncle Sam’s Black Step-Child” that the progeny of American Negroes in Liberia had learned the wrong lessons from America’s past.\textsuperscript{75} Though black themselves, they not only exploited the native population, but they also practiced a system of slavery remarkably similar to the American kind. (Schuyler would later give dramatic expression to both subjects in his novel \textit{Slaves Today} [1931].) And in another article—actually, a series of sketches of Negro soldiers—Schuyler pointed out that many woes were of the Negro’s own making.\textsuperscript{76} He satirized the delusions of a Sergeant Jackson who had been taken in by the patriotic jingoism of the white press during World War I. Given a wartime promotion, the naive sergeant proudly wore his captain’s uniform back home, only to be humiliated by a passel of Southern whites. Instead of focusing upon white cruelty, Schuyler took the opposite tack: A smart man would have known when not to ask for trouble. In another sketch, Schuyler ridiculed a penny-pincher named Hodge who in the end got fleeced in one of his own get-rich-quick schemes.
Schuyler was to become the most acid-tongued critic of black life—not only in the Mercury but elsewhere. To appreciate the sheer versatility of his wit, as well as its development, one should begin with his apprentice years with the erratic Messenger, a magazine whose politics changed as often as its owners. As early as 1923, Schuyler wrote a satiric column called “Shafts and Darts,” and in these delightful pages he managed to insult everyone, black and white. For a while, his friend Theophilus Lewis shared the column, the two declaring their “dominant motive” to be malice. No one was to be spared their lashes, they smugly claimed—not even “the President of the Immortals.” Yet the tone throughout was light and breezy, with Mencken hovering somewhere in the background as the patron saint of all those who would smile at contemporary follies. And like Mencken, Schuyler pretended to be indifferent to moral reform, pretended merely to delight in the endless parade. In reality—again like much of Mencken’s satire—the demolition work was to serve as a preface to new construction.

Schuyler’s lampoons of white people followed Mencken’s advice to the letter; high comedy held center stage at all times. In one piece called “The Caucasian Problem,” Schuyler discusses, with mock-gravity, various solutions to the white menace. It is true, he says, shaking his head in sad disbelief, that the “offenses” of this “minority group” are quite “serious.” Indeed, its members have almost ruined civilization with their pushy, monomaniacal theories about hard work, thrift, and success; but then they are ignorant people, Schuyler explains, and know no better. “Given the opportunity,” he assures his readers, “we know that a white boy or girl can absorb as much knowledge as a colored boy or girl.” It is all a question of education, really, and he for one is against such extreme measures as “segregation” or “extermination.”

In another article, Schuyler warns his readers that they should not automatically assume that the Negro is “superior to the Caucasian.” The white immigrants, he patiently explains, were mere savages when they came to America, and “it takes time to civilize such poor stock.” These unfortunate people just did not have the advantages Negroes had in Africa. While Negro ancestors were weaned on a great civilization, theirs were running about the woods, half-naked and smelly. However, their progeny do show healthy signs of adaptation, and if they can just rid themselves of such lamentable bad habits as “gullibility” and “superstition,” there might yet be hope for the poor unfortunates.

On another occasion, Schuyler pretended to agree with the white polemists. His ostensible position is that the African cultures of the past produced nothing to equal the accomplishments of the modern Caucasian.
civilizations. Nevertheless, Schuyler’s Western smugness is assaulted by a gadflyish friend. What about African art, his skeptical companion asks: “Look at the magnificent sculpture, excellent pottery, clever ironwork and wonderful weaving.” Schuyler dismisses the comparison, showing himself to be just as American as George Babbitt. “How absurd!” he exclaims: “The idea of comparing handicrafts with machine-made goods. What of the white man’s movies, comic strips, billboards and Sunday supplements? Only a dozen people may see some excellent mask in a jungle village, but a million Nordics see Mutt and Jeff everyday.”

Here, of course, is Mencken’s “third-rate” culture in all its glittering emptiness. And it is worth noting that Schuyler in this instance is not claiming to be merely a “lampblackened Anglo-Saxon,” as he did in “The Negro Art Hokum.” In that controversial piece, he was talking about the Negro from an anthropological perspective, underlining the same point that James Baldwin was to make in Nobody Knows My Name (that one is created by one’s culture—made in America—whether one likes it or not). Here he is criticizing the world that made him by comparing it to a place, a civilization, that still has some sense of aesthetic values.

When Schuyler attacked his own kind in the Messenger, the satire also focused upon the loss of values. He told his audience in 1925 that in spite of complaints, he was going to “continue to hold up the mirror to Aframerican life without camouflage.” We are not as good as we think ourselves to be, Schuyler insisted: There are real “skeletons” in “our racial closet.” And at different times, Schuyler thought all sorts of Negro behavior, at all levels, to be ludicrous. His favorite targets were hair straighteners, bleaching creams, or any of the paraphernalia that promised a new human being but produced, instead, the same old corruptible Adam. Coming from someone who called Negroes merely “lampblackened Anglo-Saxons,” this constant reminder of black pride seems a bit surprising, but what may appear to be a contradiction is actually a perceptive insight. Negroes may have been the products of a certain culture—as indeed were whites—but being an American did not mean that one had to sacrifice his personal integrity. In trying to look like someone else, a person gave up his own identity, just as in joining a mob, he relinquished individuality. Conformity meant that a person no longer believed in himself, that he was no longer a moral agent. In the Messenger, Schuyler tells an amusing tale about a young black girl who works as a maid for a lecherous middle-aged white man. The girl is ashamed of her dark skin and takes arsenic tablets to lighten it. At the same time, she has a very high regard for her chastity, so that when her employer predictably tells her that he wishes to set her up in a plush apartment, she replies, “No, Mr. Morrison. I’m one colored girl that can’t be bought.” The irony, of course, lies in the fact that she has already been bought. She has prosti-
tuted herself to a system that says "white is right," and her haughty refusal of Mr. Morrison's offer is a moral gesture by someone already compromised.\(^{83}\)

Schuyler waged an endless war against such trivial items as hair straighteners because he saw them as symbols of capitulation, of the loss of the moral self. (He comically remarked on one occasion, "As a group we have year by year been getting lighter and lighter, both as to complexion, morals and brains.")\(^{84}\) The inability to make moral distinctions was a constant theme in his attacks upon black society's "best people." In one *Messenger* story, "Seldom Seen," a gambler courts a high-toned young lady but is rejected by her parents because his "profession" is not dignified enough. However, a fast deal with a bootlegger brings him new wealth, and he buys a partnership in a "tonsorial" parlor (actually a front for his illicit booze). As a consequence, because he now owns "half-interest in the biggest Negro business in Baton Rouge,"\(^{85}\) he undergoes a sea change in the girl's eyes and her family's. Cash has cleared up his reputation (the beer bottles hiding behind the barber chairs are conveniently overlooked), and he is given permission to marry the girl.

In other tales, color replaces cash as the prime corrupter of ethical values. The value placed on a light skin in "At the Darktown Charity Ball" emphasizes the irony of the play's title.\(^{86}\) The "best people" have no charity, and the darker brother is a pariah at his own dance. In a farce called "The Yellow Peril," a prostitute admits that she is only another white woman downtown, but "up here I am worshipped by all the successful businessmen, professional fellows and society swells, because I am a high yaller."\(^{87}\) Here Schuyler's satire is directed less at the girl than at the "swells" who are duped by her. She herself is a symbol of their grand illusion that they are important because they have her on their arms.

In Schuyler's satire, the "best people" are both foolish and vicious. They have an unreal picture of themselves, and Schuyler does not hesitate to puncture the balloon. "This black bourgeoisie consists of doctors, lawyers, dentists, undertakers, school teachers, kink removers, editors, barbers, and the proprietors of some small businesses. Many of these people have considerable means, but in the main, they are really black coated workers—white collar slaves—catering to the needs, desires and whims of the Negro population. The Negroes of the Empire State are precariously hanging onto the fringes of the economic life of the communities in which they live."\(^{88}\) That is, this social class is no leisured aristocracy. Also, it is an odd assortment of miscellaneous types, most of whom are on the make, but who are in fact being made themselves by the system under which they live. Nevertheless, they do think of themselves as the old aristocracy, especially the "doctors, dentists, undertakers,
clergymen, and, of course, the ubiquitous school teachers.” Schuyler’s comedy grows sharp when he notes that money—the one thing the “best people” all worship—has brought the old aristocrats some strange bedfellows. In “At the Darktown Charity Ball,” doctors and dentists rub shoulders with bootleggers and “number barons,” criminal elements that now make up the new aristocracy. Although Old Money presently snubs the new aspirants to social recognition, Schuyler suggests that the latter’s flourishing green, like a patented spot remover, will soon rid their reputations of all blemishes. After all, the “best people” once looked down upon the lowly undertakers, until “the influenza epidemic [of 1919] made their social position unassailable.”

The lust for money among the “best people,” to the exclusion of all other values, leads Schuyler to discourse upon his favorite theme: the “Higher Mendicancy.” The new “mendicants” are “gentlemen of color who became experts in the art of extracting coin to save the race.” They are professional beggars who use moral issues like lynching and segregation to prey upon the sympathies of whites and make money for themselves. Although it is tempting to charge Schuyler with a certain insensitivity in attacking people like W.E.B. DuBois and Walter White, we must keep in mind that he was after much larger game than just these individuals. Schuyler’s satiric point was the same as Mencken’s: the tendency in American life for every idealistic venture to develop into a scam, and for every scam to hide behind an idealistic facade. For Schuyler, Negro artists have learned the “game” from the professional “mendicants”:

If old Kinckle and “Rusty” of mendicant fame, Grabbed off wads of cash in the panhandle game; Cannot we alleged writers and singers and such, Playing on “racial differences,” cash in as much?

Although this jingle seems to express a hostility to Negro art, Schuyler was attacking the “hokum” side of the Renaissance, not the Renaissance itself—as we shall see in chapter 4.

That the best-intentioned plan may go astray is Schuyler’s theme in his first novel, Black No More (1931). Dr. Crookman has developed a formula to turn Negroes into white men, but no matter how altruistic his intentions at the beginning, he is soon corrupted by his invention. Inevitably, one form of graft (selling color for money) leads to another. Max Disher (now a white man known as Mat Fisher) uses his newly cleansed exterior to con his way into the Knights of Nordica (heir to the defunct Ku Klux Klan), to marry its leader’s daughter, and to become one of the most powerful figures in the South. He is, of course, Schuyler’s “nigger in the woodpile.” Since Max knows so much about the white
man’s fears, he has achieved his place of authority by preying on them. The results of his methods illustrate Mencken’s thesis that intelligent discussion on any issue in America is impossible, because sooner or later all controversy degenerates into emotionalism, into the holding forth of the “bugaboo.” In one situation, Max is called in by a group of factory owners to stop a possible strike in their plant. He does so by pretending to be a labor organizer who is desperately worried that among the workers may be some newly whitewashed Negroes. All discussion of rights and wages ceases; racial purity becomes the battle cry of the moment. At the end of the purge in their own ranks, the workers return to their jobs, as poor and as ignorant as the day they challenged their bosses. Objects of laughter and not pity, they have duped themselves. When the flag with the word “nigger” was waved, they charged blindly after it.

Schuyler’s satire stretches even further, however. It seems that the new process of color conversion has caused havoc among those Negroes who have been making money from the racial conflict in America. Madame Sisseretta Blandish, who has risen to a prominent place in the black community because of her hair straighteners, whitening creams, and arsenic tablets, now goes bankrupt. So too the leaders of the National Social Equality League (the NAACP) are in a panic because there is no longer any Negro to save, and thus no longer any money coming in from white philanthropists. Here is a situation worthy of Bernard Mandeville’s “Grumbling Hive: Or, Knaves Turn’d Honest.” Suppose, the eighteenth-century satirist imagines, that all the members of a society become completely virtuous overnight, would we then have a utopia? Well, yes and no. The moral order would be restored, but the society would be poor. Suppose, said Schuyler, that the Negro could lose overnight the stigma that condemns him to pariah-hood, would all Negroes be happy? Not quite. Max Disher has found happiness because he has developed a new scam, but Dr. Shakespeare Agamemnon Beard (DuBois) and Walter Williams (White) are miserable because they have lost theirs.

One reason Schuyler’s book has been neglected by modern readers (or has simply been misunderstood) is that he is recreating an older kind of satire: the world of knaves and fools, which so delighted classical antiquity and the English Renaissance. Max Disher is the clever servant who turns the tables on his masters. Moreover, the novel’s ending repeats an important theme in Swift. In his famous “Argument Against Abolishing Christianity,” Swift reminds us that man’s flaws cannot be removed simply by legislating against them. So too we discover in Black No More that the removal of skin coloration has not solved the racial problem in America. Those who took Crookman’s cure are now being discriminated against; since they are paler than real Caucasians, it has become fashion-
able to cultivate a sun tan in order to prove that one belongs to the original, exclusive group.

In *Black No More*, the perversity of human nature continually re­asserts itself, and for Schuyler this perversity is best described in terms of the endless folly of human nature. The novel’s theme implies that self-interest will always be a more powerful drive than either race loyalty or moral integrity. However, Schuyler never quite gives up hope. Near the novel’s conclusion, when almost the whole world is white, Max Disher discovers the existence of one woman who has refused to go along with the mob, who has refused to conform to the general norm of literal and metaphysical paleness. “How come she didn’t get white, too?” Max asks his friend Bunny. The latter responds, with “a slight hint of pride in his voice,” “She’s a race patriot. She’s funny that way” (p. 195). For Schuyler (as for Mencken), one sane man tests the rule that all men are mad; one generous man tests the rule that all men are corrupt. There is only a hint of light in this American *Dunciad*, but a hint is enough.

Given Schuyler’s overall theme, it is not surprising that he asked Mencken to write an introduction to *Black No More*:

You are in my opinion the best person to write such an introduction because I think you most thoroughly appreciate my point of view. What I have tried to do in this novel is to laugh the color question out of school by showing up its ridiculousness and absurdity. Practically all writers who have sought to deal with this question have been too damn serious either in one direction or the other depending on the so-called race to which they belonged. I have tried to deal with it as a civilized man; to portray the spectacle as a combination madhouse, burlesque show and Coney Island.96

The “point of view” that Schuyler expected Mencken to understand was one that Mencken himself had often assumed. In America, Schuyler seems to be saying, the racial “spectacle” is irrational, but a “civilized” man can make sense of it. He can detach himself from the lunacy to see certain universal principles at work. In addition, although the spectacle threatens to overwhelm us with its immediate and inescapable presence, the artist can distance us from it through laughter. Finally, since the spectacle is simply another manifestation of human folly, there is no hope for altering it. Pious writers of both races have wasted barrels of ink in trying to find utopia. Their appeals have always been to the fine sentiments of mankind, never to its intelligence. *Black No More*, Schuyler implies, will appeal to those who belong to Mencken’s spiritual aristocracy—to those who take pride in the sharpness of their wits, not in the fullness of their emotions.
Yet Schuyler's attitude does not express the whole truth about the Renaissance's satire. Its members wanted to do more than laugh "with a few friends in a corner"—to quote the epigraph that I have chosen for this chapter. They seriously expected that satire would be efficacious. That is, they assumed that whereas the racist would not be moved by direct appeal or rebuke, he would feel the sting of satire. This view was wishful thinking, as was the belief that Negroes would be respected as a people once they could prove to the world that they were artistic. It did not take the Renaissance's writers long to discover the fallacy of both ideas, yet they could never quite escape the ideals of civilization that lay behind them. Even in *Black No More* Schuyler hoped that civilized men would stand together against folly; if they could not remove it, at least they could laugh at it—in concert.

Thus it is not surprising that W.E.B. DuBois could admire *Black No More*, even though he had been personally attacked in the novel. "Schuyler's satire," said DuBois, "is frank, straight-forward, and universal." By this he meant that the enemy was clearly defined, be he black or white, and so were the values that the satirist held. Yet DuBois was harshly critical of Schuyler's second novel, *Slaves Today*, and his criticism pointed to what DuBois believed was happening to many of the decade's younger writers. The trouble with *Slaves Today*, said DuBois, was that Schuyler substituted his brief impressions of Liberia for solid research on the subject. The implication was that Schuyler had become facile where once he had been profound, and, as we shall see, Mencken was to share the blame for what was considered the new flippancy of the younger generation.

Yet before I treat this theme in more detail in chapter 5, I shall look at the dream that both old and young held before it fell apart. It was a dream as ancient as Western civilization itself, but it had been given new life by the special circumstances of the 1920s. For if the Renaissance means anything, the intellectuals argued, it means that artist and audience live in a unified community—a community in which artist and audience share a common experience and a common understanding. If white people refuse to hear the black artist, that is one thing; but surely he may count on the good will of the people whose lives he is expressing. That this dream turned out to be without substance is a large part of the history of the Harlem Renaissance, a history that began with grand ideals and ended in bitter arguments and fragmented perspectives.