The Dream of the Secular City: Mencken, Locke, and the "Little American Renaissance"

Without great audiences, we cannot have great poets.

—Walt Whitman

If there was one literary figure in the America of the 1920s who symbolized the divisions between country and city, it was Mencken. Though often gruff and uncivilized in person, he always spoke for civilized values—a sense of fair play, a refined aesthetic response, a heightened intelligence—and he saw the city as the provider of these values. Mencken sometimes gave the impression that all rural areas were simply the South writ large. Occasionally he sounded as if he could take the place of Dorimant on the Restoration stage, to whom it is said, "I know all beyond Hyde Park's a desert to you." This of course applies to the public Mencken, the Mencken given to large generalizations; the private Mencken could be much more charitable to country pleasures. Yet it is the public Mencken who caught the eye of the Harlem Renaissance's intellectuals, and they often shared his sentiments about the country, especially if the country meant the South. In Mencken's sometimes polarized world, the country was peopled by the boorish "Husbandman" whose greed threatened the economic fabric of the Republic and whose morality forced Prohibition upon its cities. The word "Prohibition" meant more to Mencken than just a short supply of spirituous liquors; it suggested the very antithesis of good temper, amiability, grace, and "moral innocence." It suggested a world of nay-saying, pinchy-assed Puritans. As we have seen, the Renaissance's intellectuals more than once made the connection between puritanism and racism, and Mencken
tended to locate both in the country. A very real reason that Mencken appealed to the black intellectuals of the 1920s was that he personified an idea of the city for them—the city as a community of sophisticated men and women.

Why at this time was the opposition between country and city so acute? Light is shed on this question by a simple statistic that startled Americans in the initial year of the decade. In 1920, the census takers had noted for the first time in the nation’s history that there were more people living in the cities than in the country. To be sure, the percentage of city over rural dwellers was small—about 51 to 49 percent—and the survey itself was not precise (the census takers had named as cities small towns of twenty-five hundred people). Nevertheless, the facts revealed by the census were indicative of what had been happening to America since the end of the Civil War. It was rapidly becoming an urban civilization, though not without—as the political battles of the 1920s showed—some strong resistance to this new turn of events. As we know, black people shared in the general migrations to the cities, and the process had been accelerated by the worsening conditions in the South. "Before 1910," states Burl Noggle, "some 90 per cent of all blacks in the United States lived in the South," but during World War I, "a half-million" southern Negroes fled to the urban North. A statistic such as this explains Alain Locke’s emphasis upon the city in *The New Negro* (1925), the anthology of arts and letters which served as the manifesto of the Harlem Renaissance, but it does not explain his idealization of Harlem as a cultural Mecca.

It is possible to consider Mencken’s view of Baltimore as a clue to Locke’s conceptualization of Harlem, though both attitudes can be traced back to a pattern of ideas about culture which belong to the pre-World War I years of the “little American renaissance.” Mencken was very much a part of that period’s optimism about America’s literary future, but he also came to question its first premise, the idea of the unified community, a premise that Alain Locke and other Renaissance intellectuals wanted to believe was a distinct possibility for Harlem. In fact, when the dream of the secular city failed for the Renaissance, Mencken was often the first person the intellectuals turned to for an explanation. Nonetheless, Mencken did believe that the city was America’s last, best hope. Yet it was not the gaudy “carnival” of New York that he admired, but Baltimore—a city small enough to accommodate elegance and urbanity as well as a proper reverence for neighborhood and the household gods. In short, Mencken wanted the best of both worlds, for his ideal city was a kind of fifth-century Athens, in which one could be both cosmopolitan and a citizen. Although he worked in New York, he continued to live in Baltimore all his life. His complaint against Gotham was that few
people owned their own homes, so that the mass of New Yorkers were reduced to the level of rootless vagabonds. His ideal, as was Alain Locke's, was a city that is also a community, and the artist-audience debate among black intellectuals that took place in the 1920s was tied to this ideal of the city as the locus for the perfect community.

Thus, Locke engineered a view of Harlem in his anthology, *The New Negro*, that tried to achieve just the right balance between the citizen and the sophisticate, between community and culture. For instance, in James Weldon Johnson's *New Negro* essay, "Harlem: The Culture Capital," Johnson argued that Harlem is like an "Italian colony," but it is not a "quarter." The Harlemite is a villager in that he belongs to a well-defined community, and he is also a world traveler in that he can participate, if he so desires, in the rich life of the city beyond his immediate neighborhood. In *The New Negro*, Locke himself marveled at the diversity of black people in Harlem—West Indian, African, city Negro, country Negro—at the same time saying that "their greatest experience has been the finding of one another" (p. 6).

In his introductions to the separate sections of *The New Negro*, Locke constructed a model of the perfect community, one that he believed to be based upon empirical evidence. He argued in his anthology that the present migrations of Negroes to Harlem have resulted in a cultural metamorphosis. The old rural Negro was naive, mentally insular, and afraid of his own shadow. Before the urban experience, the only bond between black people was "that of a common condition rather than a common consciousness; a problem in common rather than a life in common" (p. 7). However, in this new city-state in the North, Negroes are finding that their shared experience as a people comes not from an outer-directedness (we versus they) but from an inner-directedness (I am like him because I live with him in this community). By living together in Harlem, Locke said, Negroes are coming to maturity as a people—they are undergoing a "spiritual Coming of Age" (p. 16). In the past, they saw through a glass darkly, but now they see each other face to face.

The advantage of this communal situation for the Negro artist is obvious: If the great Greek dramatists were nurtured by Athens and, in turn, wrote great plays to sustain its spirit, the Negro artist might recreate this perfect symbiotic relationship between artist and audience in Harlem. Even now, Locke noted, the younger generation is experiencing this "life in common." Throwing off the "trammels of Puritanism," it refuses to depict black people as victims, the community of black people as the oppressed (p. 50). Young people are investigating their Negro heritage and the life around them in the hopes of creating realistic portraiture rather than propaganda. Soon the black audience will recognize its face in the mirror of art, Locke believed, no longer seeing the gross distortions
of the past, and it will support and applaud the black artist: "So, in a day when art has run to classes, cliques and coteries, and life lacks more and more a vital common background, the Negro artist, out of the depths of his group and personal experience, has to his hand almost the conditions of a classical art" (p. 47).

For Locke, the "personal" and "group" experiences will be one. Whereas before Negro writers "spoke to others and tried to interpret, they now speak to their own and try to express." Locke's sentence—neatly holding antithetical elements in balance—reflects his belief in the value of the unified community for black artists. In the past, they spoke from the outside to the outside; they described themselves as case studies to people who knew them not. Now, however, they express themselves from within, yet the "expression" is always larger than "self," since it comes from an individual who has been formed by the living community. Thus, no matter how individual the voice, the artist's work will always reflect the community's values and consciousness. Locke's basic premise is that Negro artists "now speak to their own," because their own are ready to listen.

The crucial element in Locke's paradigm is the black audience. As he was to admit many years later, the literary movement had symbolized the triumph of realism and the defeat of special pleading, but more importantly the young writers of the 1920s had "turned inward to the Negro audience in frankly avowed self-expression." Yet even before 1940, he would also admit that the first generation of New Negro writers (1917-1934) had been "handicapped by having no internal racial support for their art, and as the movement became a fad the taint of exhibitionism and demagogery inevitably crept in." What had happened to the black audience? Like the rabbit in the magician's hat, it seemed to appear and disappear in the same instant. Whatever happened to it, the dream of there being one to support the Harlem Renaissance was shared by every black intellectual of that generation—including George Schuyler, who had insisted that the whole literary uproar was pure "hokum." People as different as W.E.B. DuBois and Wallace Thurman, or Kelly Miller and Theophilus Lewis—men who had trouble agreeing on a consistent attitude toward the Ku Klux Klan—did agree on this one thing: the need for a Negro audience. Old Guard and Young Turks alike complained of the Negro's unwillingness to support his own, and the point most often repeated was Whitman's: "Without great audiences, we cannot have great poets."

In truth, Locke's ideal black audience in The New Negro was a myth, just as was his city-state (Harlem). But it was a useful myth, one that had been put together with great care. And it had not been his alone: The nostalgia for the organic society was a seminal idea in the literary and
cultural revolt that had been going on since the turn of the century—the revolt against the genteel tradition. Both Mencken and Locke played their parts in this revolt—Mencken fighting in the trenches and Locke mopping up after the real battle had occurred.

The real battle, of course, had been fought by a generation of white writers which had preceded the Harlem Renaissance by only a few years. Known as the “little American renaissance,” this group of writers and critics had included such distinguished names as Van Wyck Brooks, Waldo Frank, and Randolph Bourne, and their influence may be seen in the works of Lewis Mumford and Paul Rosenfeld. All these men were concerned with the subject of a proper audience for the American writer. They felt that if the American public could provide a sympathetic atmosphere for the artist, then a rebirth of the arts was possible. Mencken had been on the periphery of this group, but he never actually joined it. Nonetheless, he not only contributed his views to their analyses of American culture, he also wanted to believe in their ideals. At times, he was seen by the members of the “little American renaissance” as the grand old warrior in the fight against puritanism; and yet his cynicism and flippancy were often deplored. In truth, Mencken was as ready as the next man for the renaissance to arrive; and, like the others, he too was preoccupied with the theme of community and the artist’s relationship to it. That he was less optimistic than the members of the “little American renaissance” was due to his natural skepticism; a small voice kept telling him that Americans were never going to escape the heritage of their past. He also doubted whether the artist’s audience would be—or could be—as extensive as the more enthusiastic of the younger men believed. Acting as the gadfly of the “little American renaissance,” Mencken ironically came to play the same role vis-à-vis the Harlem Renaissance.

 Appropriately, it had been Locke’s former mentor at Harvard, George Santayana, who had defined the spiritual divisions in American society which came to preoccupy the members of the “little American renaissance.” Santayana argued that the weekday ways of Americans had nothing in common with their professed ideals—ideals that had been bequeathed to them by society’s Brahmins. These ideals formed the basis of the American’s conception of “culture,” for they were garnered from Great Literature, and they existed in the rarified atmosphere of Thought. Moreover, these same ideals stood guard over our Morals, refined our crude Sensibilities, and provided the criteria by which all literature was to be judged. Unfortunately, said Santayana, such “opinions,” while noble in themselves, bore no relationship to life as Americans actually lived it.

These opinions, which were expressed from the Ivory Tower (the pulpit and the academy), came to be associated with both the genteel
tradition and puritanism. To the rebels of the "little American renaissance," the first tradition suggested an effete, emasculated literature, and the second, a literature fit only for Mencken's shoe-drummers and shopgirls. Thus, for those critics around 1911 who wished to champion a new American literature, puritanism and the genteel tradition were joined in an obscene embrace. To flagellate puritanism, then, became a way of dealing with genteel conservative critics—Paul Elmer More, Irving Babbitt, Stuart Sherman—who represented the literary establishment and who made it difficult for a writer such as Dreiser to gain an audience or even to get published.

While the critics of puritanism gathered like a crowd at a public hanging, the intellectuals who most interested Locke—Van Wyck Brooks, Randolph Bourne, Lewis Mumford, and, to a lesser extent, Waldo Frank—attacked puritanism with the hopes of overhauling the very foundations of American civilization. To these men, puritanism consisted of a set of attitudes which had persisted throughout our history and which had prevented Americans from experiencing a sense of national community. Bourne called the dominant puritan trait "the will to power." It was the cancer of the disconnected self, who in arrogating everything to itself—whether salvation or money—destroyed the possibility of community. For Brooks, Bourne, Frank, and Mumford, the battleground was located in the antinomy of puritan versus polis. The puritan was moralistic, egocentric, and life-denying; the polis was pagan, social, and life-affirming.

It was Brooks who expressed for his generation this gap between the floating Faustian spirit and the viable community that could have supported him:

The vague ideal of every soul that has a thought in every age is for that communion of citizens in some body, some city or state, some Utopia, if you will, which the Greeks meant in their word πολιτεία [commonwealth]. Those artificial communities—Brook Farms and East Aurora—are so pathetically suggestive of the situation we all are in. "We get together" (what an American phrase that is!) because we aren't together, because each of us is a voice crying in the wilderness, individuals, one and all, to the end of the chapter, cast inward upon our own insufficient selves.

And in America's Coming-of-Age, Brooks further developed Santayana's idea of puritan dividedness. Puritanism, Brooks argued, has led to a strange bifurcation in the American character between the lowbrow, acquisitive businessman who can not rise above business and the highbrow intellectual who retreats to the Palace of Art in order to escape being overwhelmed by amorphous American life. Here, in short, is the tragic
lot of the American artist: Unable to plant himself in the rich soil of a community, he speaks in windy abstractions to a nonexistent "ideal" audience.

Nevertheless, it was left to two disciples of Brooks, Randolph Bourne and Lewis Mumford, to find an urban home for the organic community. Bourne had been impressed with the cultural unity of the European village, and he argued that this situation could be repeated within the American city. Taken as a whole, he said, America is an anticulture, represented by the colorless, tasteless "movies, the popular song, the ubiquitous automobile." In this sense, nothing is distinctive about the American people; the melting pot has only melted out all their unique, individual identities. Fortunately, continued Bourne, this anticulture has a weak hold on Americans—they still remain a "federation of nationalities." Borrowing a phrase from Josiah Royce (another former teacher of Locke at Harvard), Bourne believed that "the Beloved Community" could exist within the walls of the city. Given its diffuse population in a single geographical space, the city could foster separate "villages" of ethnic groups, and these would be healthily "provincial" in the Roycean sense of the word (belonging to a province whose collective self gave ballast to the individual ego). At the same time, these groups would be, by necessity, "unprovincial," for in living next to individuals who are as distinctive as they, they are forced to be tolerant and broadminded.

Bourne died of influenza at thirty-two, in the same year that the Great War ended, but his dreams for an American city-state were passed on to Lewis Mumford. In his first book, The Story of Utopias (1922), Mumford set out not simply to describe the history of imaginary societies, but rather to present a rigorous criticism of our own social failures. The irony of Mumford's study is that these unreal cities (for cities are the utopias he had in mind) are more real than our own botched cities. For although they are fictions of the imagination, they are in touch with the needs of the human spirit. Plato, said Mumford, could not have conceived of a city-state whose population was so large and so spread out that all sense of community was lost. After all, the purpose of a city is to foster the interrelationship of human activity, the communication of ideas, the continuity of human experience. Once the city loses its telos—its capacity to bind people together in a living organic whole—it is no longer a city. It becomes something else: a place for manufacturing goods, a place for selling real estate, a place for "a rabble of individuals 'on the make.'" The medieval cathedral town is Mumford's ideal, but its destruction came with industrialization. The country house and coketown symbolize the bifurcation of the modern city, the schizophrenia, as it were, which corrupts it. In the country house (the suburbs, in contemporary terms), goods are preferred to the good life; and in coketown, goods are produced
for the consumers living in the country house. In this setting, art is simply a “product” like any other product; it no longer symbolizes the spiritual wellsprings of the community. In classical antiquity and the Middle Ages, Mumford argued, this divorce of art from the actual life of the polis was unknown. In fifth-century Athens, a person did not step outside his ordinary round of activities when he went to see a play; the play was as much a part of his existence as was the shoemaker’s shop. By making art into a product, we have essentially reduced it to being “picturesque”—something to be “seen,” without a relationship to any other experience. (One can easily discover here the basis of Locke’s complaint against the treatment of Negro life as picturesque. Not only is it unrealistic, but also, by restricting the Negro character to being “colorful,” the artist is abstracting him from his communal life; he is in fact creating a product for the “exotic tastes of a pampered and decadent public.”)1

Mumford also had another point to make about art in its proper social context. In an ideal society, art is not “a personal cathartic for the artist”; it is “a means by which people who have had a strange diversity of experiences have their activities emotionally canalized into patterns and molds which they are able to share pretty completely with each other.” The purpose of art is “to impregnate the community in which it exists with its ideas and images,” and in turn the artist is nourished by the “patterns and molds” which he finds in the continuing community. Not only is the relationship between artist and audience reciprocal, but the common man is not excluded from the idea of an audience. “The notion,” said Mumford, “that the common man despises art is absurd. The common man worships art and lives by it; and when good art is not available he takes the second best or the tenth best or the hundredth best.” In a spiritually healthy society he gets the best; in a sick society he feeds on sick art: escapist literature, propagandist literature, “Pollyanna in the face of Euripides . . . ‘just folks’ in the face of Swift . . . niceness in the face of Rabelais.”19

Throughout the 1920s, Mumford continued to hammer away at his favorite theme: art as a reflection of the health or sickness of a society.20 It is worth noting, however, that this had been Mencken’s theme throughout the pre- and post-World War I years, and that Mencken too had seen the city as a counterforce to the pervasive puritan hegemony. In fact, in 1917 he had contributed to the glow of optimism surrounding the “little American renaissance,” for he ended his essay “Puritanism As a Literary Force” with this remarkable statement: “Maybe a new day is not quite so far off as it seems to be, and with it we may get our Hardy, our Conrad, our Swinburne, our Thoma, our Moore, our Meredith, and our Synge.”21 Although Mencken lampooned puritanism throughout this essay with his usual fierce indignation, he also fixed the reader’s eye on those bursts of urban creativity which might pose as models for a revitalized American
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society. The English Renaissance in London, the French Enlightenment in Paris, Dionysus in Athens—these suggest an alternative to puritan sterility. And there is always the question of those feisty ethnic groups who have formed the mudsill of American civilization. Mencken described their quiet but heroic accomplishments in his usual, mock-deprecating way: “The only domestic art this huge and opulent empire knows is in the hands of the Mexican greasers; its only native music it owes to the despised negro.”

This strange combination of ethnic creativity, Dionysian energy, and urban sophistication was to find its home in Locke’s Harlem.

What Locke set out to do in *The New Negro* was to teach white Americans that the Negro had learned the truth of Oswald Spengler’s remark that “all great cultures are city-born.” This had been a significant theme in Robert Park’s coauthored book on the city (*The City*), which was published in the same year as Locke’s anthology. Locke would have known of the work of this noted sociologist through Charles S. Johnson, a former student of Park’s at the University of Chicago and the man who had handpicked Locke for the role of Renaissance spokesman.

In *The City*, Park had argued that whereas the Anglo-Saxon became a romantic adventurer in the city, the immigrant sought to establish a community within the larger urban scene. Anglo-Americans, insisted Park, had much to learn from the “solidarity” of the Jews, the Negroes, and the Japanese.

Solidarity, of course, is the theme of *The New Negro*, and the changes that Locke made in the original source for his anthology indicate the emphasis that he sought to achieve. Basing *The New Negro* upon his Special Negro Number for the *Survey Graphic* magazine (March 1925), Locke revised old material and added new. The *Survey* issue had attempted to depict Negro Harlem in all its various hues; it was seen as a dome of many-colored glass. *The New Negro*, in contrast, generally refrained from staining the white radiance of eternity—the Harlem it showed tended to shy away from either harsh realities or negative interpretations. For instance, Locke excised an article from the *Survey* issue which had exposed the stark economic conditions of Harlem. In “Ambushed in the City: The Grim Side of Harlem,” Winthrop D. Lane had listed all the ills that met the rural Negro as he got off the train: ruthless landlords, quack doctors, fake druggists, numbers runners, fortune tellers, bootleggers, gamblers, and other con men of various colors and persuasions. The article that replaced Lane’s was Paul Kellogg’s “Negro Pioneers,” which applied Frederick Jackson Turner’s thesis about the frontier to Harlem—this environment created new men, leveled class differences, called for “the spirit of team play” (p. 274).

Two other articles that Locke deleted from the *Survey* issue were Kelly Miller’s “Harvest of Race Prejudice” and Eunice Hunton’s “Breaking Through.” Both articles saw the idea of a segregated community, such as
Harlem was, in a bad light. As Hunton said, Harlem was "self-sufficient, complete in itself," but this very fact made it a ghetto and created ghetto minds: "bound." This was hardly the point Locke wanted to italicize in his new book. He sought to stress the living community as a force for the liberation of art, ideas, and consciousness. He steered clear of a Harlem where Blake's "mind-forged manacles" imprisoned the Negro within a world of warped perspectives and debilitating anger.

The most significant change that Locke made in his new book was to replace an article entitled "The Church and the Negro Spirit" with one (written by himself) called "The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts." The city of art was to be the Negro's new church—not the city of God. This secular city would bring him the salvation that the old dispensation had promised only in another world. And it would be salvation, for though Locke was supposedly talking about a real place, the idea of a city did have religious overtones for him, as is illustrated by his substitution of one DuBois article for another. DuBois's *Survey* article ("The Black Man Brings His Gifts") was just that—a survey of past contributions, whereas his *New Negro* article ("The Negro Mind Reaches Out") looked toward the future. Locke placed this essay at the end of *The New Negro*, in a clever rhetorical ploy. The image Locke wanted in the reader's mind as he closed the book was the portrait of Liberia—"a little thing set upon a Hill" (p. 414). This country was the New Negro's "City upon the Hill," the beacon light in Africa which called attention to the black man's new status in the world.

Thus Locke began and ended *The New Negro* with the idea of a city. He began with Harlem as a potential Athens (or a potential Dublin, Prague, or Paris) within the American scene, and he ended with Liberia as an embryo that would grow into a new millennium for black people within the world. As a mythmaker, Locke seemed to be going against the American grain, for he was turning the pastoral myth upon its head: Harlem was a return to paradise, not a flight from it, and the chief characteristic of his American Adam was not innocence but urbanity. And Turner's frontier—the place that magically turned Europeans into Americans—became a city in which doctors, lawyers, and ministers, by following their clientele from the South, were now capable of identifying with the masses. These new bonds meant that an audience was out there waiting for the Negro artist to express its "common consciousness." Locke never precisely identified this audience in *The New Negro*, but he assumed it was there, and he further assumed that the masses made up a good part of its membership.

What did not find a home in *The New Negro* was Mencken's general skepticism concerning the common man as a potential audience for a potential cultural renaissance. In order to appreciate the differences
between Locke and Mencken on this matter, as well as to understand the source of a similar ambivalence that beset them, we must look more closely at Mencken’s opinions concerning the idea of an audience for the American artist. If Mencken was not a full-fledged member of the “little American renaissance,” he certainly accepted its basic premise. He agreed that the need for an audience was undeniable. “The notion that artists flourish upon adversity and misunderstanding, that they are able to function to the utmost in an atmosphere of indifference or hostility—this notion is nine-tenths nonsense. . . . Who was it who said that, in order that there may be great poets, there must be great audiences too? I believe it was old Walt. He knew.”

The problem with American culture, as Mencken saw it, is that the tyranny of the majority makes the existence of “great audiences” impossible. When the average man acts in concert with his brothers (and is given full power as in a democracy), he intimidates others so that they behave as he does. Thus mass man, paranoid and incapable of intellectual curiosity, attaches “bugaboos” to any object under discussion, and these stick like gum to a shoe. No idea is treated disinterestedly in America; it is either jingoed to the skies or hooted down, and those who hoot the loudest are often the very people who should serve as a responsible, spiritual aristocracy. From fear of being un-American, from fear of not showing the correct moral rectitude, they abandon their intelligence for emotionalism.

There is also another reason that America has failed to produce a spiritual aristocracy, an audience that would protect and support the American artist. Americans may be too good at what they do best. Because they are such expert hewers of wood and drawers of water, they are never tempted to give up this “industry” to do anything else. Consequently, America’s rich “are too diligently devoted to maintaining the intellectual status quo” to serve as movers and shakers. “A great literature,” states Mencken, “is thus chiefly the product of doubting and inquiring minds in revolt against the immovable certainties,” so what chance does the artist have in a world of Bottom the Weaver? The answer is, not much: “The artist in America stands in completer isolation than anywhere else on earth.” And the blame for this sad situation lies “chiefly . . . in the failure of the new aristocracy of money to function as an aristocracy of taste.”

Mencken’s attack on America’s philistinism could be misleading, because he did believe that money provides the necessary foundation for true aesthetic appreciation. The “connoisseur,” he argued, is the “finest flower of civilization”—he makes possible the birth of beautiful things—yet his growth “presupposes economic security.” This soil “is as essential to civilization as enlightenment.” Without money, there can be
no intelligent sympathy, no "eager curiosity," no "educated skepticism," no "hospitality to ideas"—all those qualities that belong to the spiritual aristocrat, the man who is free of chill penury. What has happened in America (and here Mencken was in agreement with the analyses presented by members of the "little American renaissance") is that money and material progress have become ends in themselves. Put quite simply, philistine self-satisfaction goes hand in hand with puritan self-righteousness. Energetic in their pursuit of money, Americans are intellectually slothful; they can not imagine ways of living other than their own, and lives they do not understand they call evil. Thus, when philistinism feels threatened, puritanism becomes a "force," carrying a banner for what it considers the Moral Order. In this situation, puritanism then calls itself the New Humanism. When philistinism feels at ease in Zion, puritanism simply becomes The Way of looking at the world. In either case, said Mencken, "the artist, facing an audience which seems incapable of differentiating between aesthetic and ethical values, tends to become a preacher of sonorous nothings, and the actual moralist-propagandist finds his way into art well greased." For Mencken, no class in American society escapes the curse of puritanism: The plutocrats count their money instead of buying books; the intelligentsia settle for "correctness" instead of vision; and the common man is simply indifferent to art. Is the last-named incapable of appreciating it, or is he corrupted by the antiintellectual nature of the society in which he lives? Mencken never quite answered this question. On the one hand, he took a firm stand against the common people as a possible audience. When William Allen White wanted to elevate the culture of Kansas by making arts "more a part of our daily lives," Mencken responded, "The truth is that the common people have no more capacity for comprehending the fine arts than they have of comprehending astrophysics." Here he implied that even without the leveling effects of democracy, they would choose a barroom ditty over Beethoven. On the other hand, what about the railroad conductors and ice-men whom Mencken said knew a hawk from a handsaw? If they could "comprehend" sham, could they not also "comprehend" Beethoven? And further yet, was there ever a time when a barroom ditty might be an example of the "fine arts"? When he talked about the unknown bards of the Negro spirituals, he implied that such men might rival Beethoven. Did only "superior" men sing these songs, or were they sung by the masses? And if the masses did sing and listen to them, would that fact not argue for some kind of sophisticated aesthetic response—not the response, perhaps, needed to appreciate Beethoven but a response that might be just as sophisticated, only of a different kind? That Mencken never seriously considered this possibility, that he remained tied to his concept of High
Art despite his passionate interest in "folkways," is one of the mysteries of his personality. And it is also one of the paradoxes that plagued the Harlem Renaissance. Its leaders were determined to have a literary movement supported by the common people, and yet they could not quite believe in that group's intelligence or artistic tastes.

Raymond Williams has pointed out the serpent that lay waiting in Locke's urban paradise. Although in his excellent book, *Culture and Society, 1780-1950*, he is discussing English social thought and not American, several of his generalizations provide an incisive critique of *The New Negro*—and, for that matter, of "the little American renaissance." Those who argue for an organic society, says Williams, face a special problem. They wish to posit a society based upon interrelatedness, not individualism, and they argue for human values, not material ones. They set qualities such as "refinement," "loyalty," and "art" against the "cash nexus," the only bond in a society run by a laissez-faire philosophy. In short, they set "culture" against "anarchy," against a world that fails to make meaningful discriminations. Yet in the very act of asserting that there are bonds more precious than cash, that there are values more important than material goods, lies a dangerous tendency to define culture as something separate from, and superior to, common people. The organic society then slips into a feudal arrangement in which, as Locke said in *The New Negro*, "the cultured few" interpret the folk-spirit to the yet inarticulate masses (p. 53).

The linchpin of Locke's entire aesthetic philosophy was the hope that the masses would become articulate. The Renaissance was to embrace everyone. Locke's complaint against modern society was that its life has no center, and hence its art reflects its fragmentary condition, its state of ill health. "It is the art of the people that needs to be cultivated," he told Negro writers, "not the art of the coteries." Yet "cultivation" for Locke was a term of ambiguous reference, and he was not always sure how he wanted to use it. On the one hand, he tilled the common soil in the hopes that the common people would be "cultivated," that is, made responsive to their own artists. On the other hand, he talked of cultivation as something reserved for a special class of people. In this case, the mutual responsibilities of artist and audience (Locke's Athenian democracy) collapsed into the single responsibility of an aristocracy to the "best that is thought and said."

In his essay "The Ethics of Culture" (which originally had been a speech addressed to the elite of the Negro race, the students at Howard University), Locke contrasted the cultured individual with the "crowd" ruled by "the tyranny of the average and mediocre." The person who is self-reliant, Locke argued, can develop a refined sensibility and a discerning judgment. Such a man becomes the backbone of a civilization or
a race; if enough like him exist, he is capable of turning a country into a culture. Quoting Cicero, Locke took the aristocratic point of view; the elite of any country or race have an obligation to become cultured "for the welfare of the Republic." Moreover, "when all the other aristocracies have fallen, the aristocracy of talent and intellect will stand."

Locke warned the Howard students that they might be working in certain areas of the country which could truly be called the "Saharas of culture": "You betray your education, however, and forgo the influence which as educated persons you should always exert in any community if you subside to the mediocre level of the vulgar crowd." In this essay, Locke assumed that the attitudes of the masses are more or less permanent, and that the man of culture must separate himself from them: "In the pursuit of culture one must detach himself from the crowd." Yet we see here two influences at war upon Locke. He wanted to believe with Royce that the "mob-spirit" in man was only temporary—the consequence of not having a genuine community to give him definition. Yet, like Mencken, Locke simply could not rid himself of the idea that the masses are unintelligent.

Another generation of Negro writers would argue that the masses failed to support the Harlem Renaissance not because they were stupid but because they were poor. Furthermore, even though they were poor, they did love art—not the High Art of the Renaissance but the art of everyday life: music, dancing, the oral tradition. Curiously, Locke had demanded that this folk art be recognized, that it be treated in literature, but in this he remained ensnared by a version of the genteel tradition from which even Mencken had not freed himself. The written word was superior to the oral word, and literature was still to be spelled with a capital L. Poetry, by definition, was superior to either the blues or jazz, so Locke used it, and not music, as a means by which to measure "the present cultural position of the Negro in American life." It, and not music, was "the serious art which can best represent to the world the Negro of the present generation." Both he and Mencken rebelled against middle-class gentility but ended up substituting an aristocratic gentility that would not take the art of the masses seriously.

Mencken took the superiority of literature one step further. He recognized hierarchies of excellence within literature itself. Poetry was inferior to prose because it was a purveyor of emotion, not ideas; the very nature of its form made it fit for lyricism but not for philosophy or realism. And yet Mencken loved music, perhaps the most emotional of all the arts. Given his low view of an emotional appeal in art, how could he argue that Beethoven was more "rational" than jazz? Still, he did just that because, like Locke, he was committed to High Art as he narrowly defined it, and so he overlooked the significance of jazz artists like Duke
Ellington, Fletcher Henderson, and Jelly Roll Morton who had large white followings, and he appeared to miss entirely the purer black artists such as Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, Blind Lemon Jefferson, and Charley Patton. This last omission is especially ironic since, as we know, as poor as the black masses were, they did support an art that reflected their real culture. The phenomenon known as "Race Records" is a case in point. In the 1920s, recordings of black blues were sold out of suitcases and off the backs of trucks in impoverished rural areas, and in funky music stores (or in any kind of store) in the urban ghettos. And though the sharecroppers, housemaids, and garbagemen who bought them were hardly "connoisseurs" in Mencken's sense of the word, they did have the connoisseur's nonmaterialistic appreciation of art. After all, they were often so poor that they had difficulty financing their next meal, and yet they bought records (and financed a musical industry) that fed their souls. We know, for instance, that by the mid-1920s Race Record companies were selling "five or six million records annually" (to a Negro population of about double that number), that "blues records were not cheap" (seventy-five cents to one dollar each for the expensive ones), and that even high prices "did not deter sales of over 20,000 for the more popular Bessie Smith issues." Here indeed was an audience willing to sacrifice a good deal for art.

Yet neither Mencken nor Locke recognized this kind of cultural response to art, because they were plugged into a certain view of culture. And in this light, it could be argued that the intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance simply repeated the same circular pattern that had limited the members of the "little American renaissance." Seven Arts magazine (1916-1917), as Warner Berthoff notes in his stimulating book The Ferment of Realism, had announced in its first issue that the time was ripe for a rebirth of the arts in America, and in such an epoch "the arts [would] cease to be private matters." American artists would now participate in a new fellowship to express the "national self-consciousness" of a people, perhaps even to create it. Yet Berthoff points out that even as this ideal relationship between artist and audience was being set forth, Seven Arts also asked the artist who contributed to its pages that he be true to his own artistic vision, to "self-expression without regard to current magazine standards." In this instance, "self-expression" is set in opposition to "magazine standards," which are seen as a debasement of culture. However, if those standards are the same as those of the polis itself, how can an artist be responsible both to himself and to a world he feels alienated from? And even if those standards are not the same, asking the artist to be true both to himself and to the polis inevitably brings up the question of conflicting loyalties. Berthoff argues that the paradox of the artist's responsibility to himself and to the "consciousness" of a people
was never resolved by the American intellectuals in the decade before the 1920s—nor, it might be added, has it been resolved since.

Both Locke and Mencken had talked about the need of the artist to express himself—“avowed self-expression” was Locke’s phrase—and yet they assumed that his expression could change things in the outside world. Mencken liked to believe that the audience for the American artist would be “aristocratic,” but he left the door open to that august company for men such as N. H. Hall, the Pullman porter whom he published in the *Mercury*. And if the truth be told, he never quite gave up on the middle class—either the sodden plutocrats or the hustling “booboisie.” In one *Smart Set* review after another (and the title of the magazine indicates his audience), Mencken attempted to raise the consciousness of readers whom he supposedly had given up on. And this didactic effort on Mencken’s part (which continued in the *Mercury* as well) perhaps explains the difference between Mencken and most other white intellectuals in the postwar period. What they had realized was the total impossibility of elevating the consciousness of a nation whose middle class controlled not only the magazines but all cultural life in America. After the war, they fled to Europe, and although they sometimes wrote about America, they had no hope of expressing its soul. Intellectuals such as Mumford and Rosenfeld who remained behind still believed in the old dream of “great audiences” supporting “great poets,” but the Harlem Renaissance actually tried to make the dream a reality. As Christopher Lasch and Marcus Klein have shown, the postwar white American writer had rebelled totally against a middle class that he felt was beyond saving.

This was not really true for Mencken, however, and it was even less true for the Harlem intellectuals. For if one distinction can be made between the white intellectual of the 1920s and his black counterpart, it is this: The rebellion of the black American writer against his middle class was riddled with ambivalence. He may have done his share of complaining about the values of the middle class, but he hoped for, and expected, its loyalty. No spokesman for the postwar “little American renaissance” ever made the appeals to the white middle class that the black intellectuals made to theirs—nor did he express the corresponding disappointment and anger when that loyalty failed to materialize. Throughout the 1920s, the black middle class was cajoled, threatened, and satirized. One need only look at the title of an article written by Locke in 1925 to see the difference between black and white expectations. What white writer in 1925 would have entitled his attack on the middle class, “To Certain of Our Phillistines”? (Italics mine.) Throughout his essay, Locke’s anger is a clue to his real attitude—he wants to humble his audience so that it will recognize the true value of the Renaissance and support it. (It is no wonder that Locke’s essay never had the effect he intended, for, as Larzer
Ziff observes, how does one educate the middle class without alienating it?) Locke ended his essay with an analogy between the Negro artist as David and the black middle class as Goliath, and these two, we might say, remained engaged in mortal combat throughout the 1920s. No self-respecting white intellectual would have even thought of warfare with the middle class by this time—it was simply a lost cause.

Perhaps an explanation for this ambivalence concerning the black middle class can be found in the belief in the word “art.” Throughout the 1920s, it was taken for granted that “art” was a talisman. Even the disgruntled DuBois was not an exception to this rule. Although he claimed that “all art was propaganda,” his conception of propaganda was the same as his conception of art: truth about black life. Once that truth was told, then the Negro people would buy books about themselves. The counterpart of “art” was an audience whose taste was, to use DuBois's word, “catholic.” Somehow the turn to art was to occur in a hermetically sealed world where the brute facts of economics were just a bit beside the point. It took the black writers of the 1930s to point out the errors of the Renaissance’s ways. How can one talk about such matters as “culture” and “urbanity” and “taste,” implied Richard Wright in 1937, when people are starving? When it should have concerned itself with the environment in which Negroes lived, the Renaissance had been preoccupied with art. No Negroes bought its books, because none could afford them. And this situation was almost as true for the black middle class, argued E. Franklin Frazier in 1950, as it was for the masses. The “old” middle class, Frazier maintained, had inherited a cultural tradition from the nineteenth century, and though its members too had been poor, they loved beautiful things. The “new” middle class of the 1920s became infatuated with money, which nevertheless eluded its grasp. Desiring respectability as a substitute for the economic security it did not possess, the new middle class turned its back on the Renaissance, which was neither marketable nor respectable.

And yet, despite its naivete, the Renaissance’s preoccupations still tease us into thought. Locke wanted to believe that Brooks’s organic community was present in Harlem, and, like Mumford, he wanted to believe that the common man loved art. Yet in fabricating a Harlem that never existed on sea or land, he created a New Negro who simply was not “common,” and in throwing out the nastiness of city life, he managed to throw out the baby as well as the bathwater. For if Harlem had the “conditions for a classical art,” was it still possible for that art to be “communal”? Not as Locke defined “classical art.” An essay that reveals his definition with all its prejudicial overtones is “The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts,” which he added very purposefully to The New Negro. In this essay, Locke clearly recognizes that African art is grounded in the
lifeblood of the community; yet such was his penchant for High Art that he focuses upon the "classical background" of the African aesthetic heritage (p. 256). Discipline, technique, control, form, abstraction—these are qualities that belong to the Great Tradition in Western art as well, and these are qualities that Locke says the Afro-American artist should strive to achieve. Also, since the mastery of these qualities takes a lifetime of diligent application, Locke implies that only someone with sophisticated aesthetic taste can respond to this art. In fact, he strongly implies, and the article itself is proof, that with this kind of art we will need someone like Alain Locke to explain it to us.

Locke did not see that a people could have a communal art that might not be High Art but might in fact be the best art. The implications of Mumford's remark about the common man are relevant here. The common man loves art, said Mumford, and will take "the second best or the tenth best or the hundredth best" if good art is not available. But could not the "hundredth best" be the best if it were truly an expression of the people, like jazz or the blues? Locke's dilemma was that he wanted to recognize communal art, yet he kept trying to superimpose aesthetic values from without. Negroes should learn to appreciate literature, painting, and sculpture because they are superior art forms. Like Mencken, Locke ultimately cast his vote for an art that was elitist, and this was the flaw in his dream for a "democratic" utopia. He wanted art to be communal but not too communal, real but not too real, pagan but not too pagan.

As we have seen, Mencken opened the pages of the Mercury to black intellectuals so that they could discuss problems important to them, and no problem was more important in the 1920s than the subject of an audience. Since this same subject had preoccupied Mencken long after most white intellectuals had judged it a red herring, it is not surprising that he published an article by James Weldon Johnson that discussed the Negro author's "dilemma" regarding his audience. In this article, Johnson deviated from Locke's theme that the Negro now spoke primarily to his own, for Johnson noted that the black writer can not help thinking about a white reading public whether he wants to or not. In fact, Johnson defined the Negro author's dilemma as a kind of cultural schizophrenia, as a variation on DuBois's famous statement that the Negro in America sees the world with divided vision—as a Negro and as an American. Johnson said in the Mercury article that
the Aframerican author faces a special problem which the plain American author knows nothing about—the problem of the double audience. It is more than a double audience; it is a divided audience, an audience made up of two elements with differing and often opposite and antagonistic points of view. His audience is always both white America and black America. The moment a Negro writer takes up his pen or sits down to his typewriter he is immediately called upon to solve, consciously or unconsciously, this problem of the double audience. To whom shall he address himself, to his own black group or to white America? Many a Negro writer has fallen down, as it were, between these two stools.\(^{50}\)

According to Johnson, if the black writer fulfills the expectations of the white audience, he outrages his black audience; if he satisfies the black audience, he bores his white audience. The white reader wants the black character in literature to fit his conception of the black character in life: His nature is comic and his society is primitive. The black reader, however, wants a "nice literature," one that reflects the bourgeois aspirations of the race. "This division of audience," Johnson lamented, "takes the solid ground from under the feet of the Negro writer and leaves him suspended." In the future the best segments from these two audiences might fuse, Johnson suggested, but for the present the situation must remain uncertain.

The *Mercury* article was not Johnson's last word on the subject of audiences. He wrote an article for the *Crisis* six months later entitled "Negro Authors and White Publishers." In it he warned the black writer against making a "fetish of failure" as the result of believing the myth that white publishers accept only works that degrade the Negro. He pointed to an enormous list of recently published books reflecting the "upper" levels of black society, noting as well that they were far more numerous than those dealing with Harlem lowlife. The gist of his essay was that all levels of black life should be open to the artist and that the talented black authors have "as fair a chance today of being published as any other writers."\(^{51}\) In short, Johnson urged the black writer to create art and to worry less about how he appeared to both black and white audiences.

In these essays Johnson spoke from two different platforms. In the first, he assumed that an artist created a work of art for a specific audience. "It is doubtful," he said, "if anything with meaning can be written unless the writer has some definite audience in mind." In the second, he argued from another position: The sanctity of art is the artist's only concern, and white publishers judge a man's writing on the basis of its intrinsic merit. Thus on the one hand, art is its own end, but on the other hand, it is rhetorical—its ultimate purpose is communication. Although
Johnson's two essays are not necessarily contradictory, the second reflects an unconscious answer to the dilemma stated in the first: If the black artist can not depend upon an intelligent audience, black or white, he can claim that he has an obligation to a higher authority, art. Johnson did in fact make such a claim at the end of his first essay, after he had admitted that the problem of an audience remained unsolved: "Standing on his racial foundation," he said, the Negro artist "must fashion something that rises above race, and reaches out to the universal in truth and beauty." Johnson's lofty conclusion in the face of his dilemma partially explains why the Negro artist in the 1920s sometimes became a poseur. Unable to trust either a black or a white audience, the black artist grew insecure and then self-conscious. He loudly declared that only "pure art" mattered, and he withdraw to Axel's Castle to create it.

Perhaps the most curious case of being troubled by a double audience was that of black novelist Walter White. In 1924, the year Knopf published *The Fire in the Flint*, White wrote to one correspondent, "I have told several publishers . . . that the reason colored people do not buy books is because publishers have not brought out the right sort, i.e. they have published caricatures of the Negro like the stories of Octavus Roy Cohen, Hugh Wiley, and Irvin Cobb, or base libels on the Negro like the vicious novels of Thomas Dixon." However, when he talked about his own novel to Mencken, he claimed he had written it for white people. After Doran had rejected the manuscript of *The Fire in the Flint*, Mencken promptly suggested that White send it to a black publishing house, pointing out that he would meet the same "difficulties" from other white publishers "as you encountered with Doran." But White replied that he wanted a white publisher, the more established and conservative the better. "Colored people know everything in my book—they live and suffer the same things every day of their lives. It is not the colored reader at whom I am shooting but the white man and woman who do not know the things you and I know."

Now here is a strange paradox: White had complained to Eugene Saxton at Doran that no novelist in America's past had adequately portrayed "what an intelligent, educated Negro feels." His novel, he argued, depicted the Negro in all his humanity. Surely, then, such a character as White's Dr. Kenneth Harper should appeal to black readers, yet he had said that he was "shooting at" a white audience. Why? He certainly wanted a black audience, for he told Mencken that he expected a huge sale to members of the NAACP. I suspect, however, that White unconsciously knew that the black audience he had promised to white publishers was illusory. And, in fact, records in the Library of Congress indicate that it was illusory. White did try to sell the novel for Knopf
through the NAACP, and the results were disastrous. For instance, the Denver branch returned seventy-six of the hundred copies it was asked to sell to its members, and since White had assumed financial responsibility, his royalty went toward paying for these copies. Similar situations occurred in Sioux City, Omaha, and Des Moines, and although White never gave up on the idea of securing a black audience, he quickly realized that the chief supporters of the Renaissance were white people.

Yet the problem of what the Renaissance imagined its audience to be is as interesting as the issue of why black people generally did not support it. Who made up this imaginary audience? What attitudes should it have? These were the questions James Weldon Johnson asked in his Mercury article, and they were asked by others throughout the decade. There is no doubt that the Renaissance's intellectuals expected their audience's tastes to be mature. In 1926, DuBois complained the "the young and slowly growing black public still wants its prophets . . . unfree." Talk of sex frightened it; religion insulated its outlook; its worst side had been shown so often "that we are denying we have or ever had a worst side." He urged "that catholicity of temper which is going to enable the artist to have his widest chance for freedom. We can afford the Truth." Both Jean Toomer and Claude McKay agreed with DuBois that the black middle class had not grown spiritually. McKay told James Weldon Johnson that the Negro middle class did not like his novel Home to Harlem (1928) because it showed the realities of lower-class existence, which embarrassed them. He then added ominously, "We must leave the real appreciation of what we are doing to the emancipated Negro intelligentsia of the future, while we are sardonically aware now that only the intelligentsia of the 'superior race' is developed enough to afford artistic truth." By the word "sardonically" McKay implied that no white man, however intelligent, can replace the black writer's rightful audience; at the same time he also repeated Mencken's complaint that his middle class had not developed into an "aristocracy of taste." Toomer too was to echo Mencken's view of the middle class, that it continued to remain mired in the puritan tradition. In a letter to Mae Wright, he noted that Negroes had never spiritually freed themselves from their enslavers: "We who have Negro blood in our veins, who are culturally and emotionally the most removed from the Puritan tradition, are its most tenacious supporters. We still believe, in fact we believe it now more so than ever, that a man's worth should be gauged by material possessions. . . . We are sceptical of the value of art." In that same year, Toomer told Sherwood Anderson that he wanted to start a literary magazine "that would function organically for what I feel to be the budding of the Negro's consciousness." Yet, while he saw a "tragic need" for a magazine to provide "creative
channels” for young black talent, he also suspected that black people generally would not respond to it. “In fact,” he said, “they are likely to prove to be directly hostile.”

This theme of intellectual rot at the core of black middle-class life led Langston Hughes to attack the enemy in a Menckenian vein. For that matter, it might be said that all onslaughts upon the philistines involved Mencken’s premise about America’s plutocrats—that they had not developed into a spiritual aristocracy. That the Renaissance’s intellectuals rarely stopped to ask if their plutocracy wasn’t more show than substance is not surprising. For them, art had an intrinsic worth, so that they assumed that its brilliance should automatically attract people, whether they had money or not. If art did not attract people, then the people themselves were to blame. Langston Hughes, in his well-known essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” could celebrate the Negro artist’s triumph over two obstacles, racial prejudice (white people) and class indifference (middle-class black people), without looking too closely at the subject of an audience. “We,” said Hughes—and here he referred to the other artists of his generation—“stand on the top of the mountain, free within ourselves.”

A year later, however, writing for a black newspaper and not the Nation, Hughes would lash out twice against the narrow-mindedness of his own in a manner that sounded very much like Mencken’s castigations of the American public. His attitude in these two newspaper essays fluctuated between his tacit belief that the artist stands in need of a select, understanding audience (which the present middle-class reader fails to provide) and his view that he could, if need be, make a virtue of Mencken’s pronouncement that the American writer may have to do without an audience entirely. In any event, both essays seem to question Hughes’s assured stance in “The Negro and the Racial Mountain.”

In these articles, Hughes’s anger is the outrage of disbelief more than anything else: How can my own people be this obtuse, this perverse? Does the middle class not realize that although Cane was well received throughout literate America, it remained virtually unknown in the city of Toomer’s birth? Hughes found it incredible that the “best people” expected flattering portraits of themselves instead of honesty from Negro artists. And why? Because they wanted white people to think well of them. What great artists, Hughes snapped, echoing Mencken’s attack on America’s cultural humility, hold up their characters for a foreigner’s approval? “Does George Bernard Shaw write plays to show Englishmen how good the Irish are?” And then Hughes added something that was more telling than he realized. “Does any true artist anywhere work for the sake of what a limited group of people will think rather than for the sake of what he himself loves and wishes to interpret?” Some, like Mencken, would
have answered “yes” to this question, if (and it was a big “if”) that “limited group” had an intelligence and sympathy commensurate with the artist’s own. Without realizing it, Hughes’s criticism was putting him and his fellow artists in a room with only one exit. He ended the second article by implying that perhaps Negro artists would have to write for one another, since they could not depend upon anyone else in the community. We get some idea of the dilemma Hughes faced vis-à-vis his black audience if we pay attention to the implications of a statement he made in his Nation essay. Here the racial mountain is higher than he imagined: “Whereas the better-class Negro would tell the artist what to do, the people at least let him alone when he does appear.” But to be “let alone” was hardly what Hughes and others of his generation wanted.

George Schuyler thought that there was a way of getting “the people” interested in the Renaissance, but it meant getting rid of what he called the “bulwarks of snobbery.” By this last phrase, he referred to the literary clubs in the black community which were usually “social affairs where much tea is guzzled and someone recites Gunga Din.” However, he did believe that these clubs contained the potentiality for creating a viable audience for the Negro writer, and he singled out The Saturday Evening Quill in Boston as a glowing example of what ought to exist: “There is room and need for one in every Negro community. Those who write ought to get together, read each other’s work and get the value of each other’s criticisms.” In forming such a group, Schuyler urged, the common man should not be forgotten. “An effort should always be made to get the intelligent people in the community, irrespective of how much book knowledge they possess, to support such movements. Some will be found washing dishes, others doing laundry work, a few waiting tables or driving automobiles. It will be impossible to find very many because there are not very many intelligent people, but the majority will (or should) come from the working classes.”

In another article, he warned his fellow intellectuals that they must “humanize [their] knowledge and make it understandable to the washerwoman, the dishwasher, and the stevedore.” Avoid verbal fireworks, he advised young writers, and you will have an audience: “The bulk of readers, black and white, read to be entertained and not dazzled by the intellectual brilliance and rhetorical gymnastics of sophisticated literati.” This does not mean, he continued, that you have to “ditch your themes and write garbage” to be appreciated; develop a lucid prose style to express them, and you will find that you will be read. For “it is nonsense to contend, as some of our literary folk do, that Negroes do not read. Negroes do read. Negroes read the daily newspapers, the Sunday Supplements and all of the magazines from Breezy Stories to the American Mercury.”
Like Mencken, Schuyler was giving his elitism a democratic twist. There are not very many intelligent people in the world, but what few there are will not be found among the tea-guzzlers. Also, the onus suddenly shifts to the author, not the audience. Now it is the author who should be less elitist and more responsible to the common sense of his readers. Thus, Schuyler took Mencken's notion of the natural aristocrat and put the emphasis on the natural, not the aristocrat. Yet Schuyler, as we shall see, did not always have the courage of his convictions, and like other members of his generation, he wavered between an elitist view of art and an art that could flourish among the masses.

Schuyler's friend and partner in wit, Theophilus Lewis, also oscillated between an elitist attitude and a real belief in those lower down. He too agreed with Schuyler that the masses should take a more active part in the Renaissance, but the problem as he saw it lay in an appropriate method whereby they could be tricked into reading. First, a noble soul should take it upon himself to start a Negro publishing house. ("Next to a good fifteen-cent drink of liquor," such a venture is what "this country needs most.") Then he should employ some subtle strategy in his opening procedures. Since the masses know nothing about "art," the publishing house should begin by publishing junk—"adventure stories, uplift stories, love stories," and so on—but junk immersed in black life. This pulp would not only be profitable, it would also have a great educational value for both author and audience. "The success of the venture would turn the eyes of Negro writers inward toward the things and people they are familiar with." Once the "market for trash" had been conquered, the firm—and white firms as well—could then consider publishing books for "the intelligent minority of the race." Since by this time Negro writers would be accustomed to writing about their own kind for their own kind, they could now address themselves to producing good literature for an appreciative audience that presumably might begin to include some people from the lower classes. For Lewis, this step-by-step process was the only way out of an intolerable situation, black writers affecting "the ultra-sophistication of Oscar Wilde or James Branch Cabell" in order to please a white publisher who thought he knew what books by a black author white people would pay to read. The solution was that both writer and audience had to be educated by degrees to see the light.69

Schuyler and Lewis agreed that the common man had an aesthetic sense, but they took the position that it was unformed. They backed off from the possibility that it might have been formed in another direction. One can see, however, that in shifting the responsibility from audience to author they both had the uneasy feeling that perhaps High Art might not be the only kind of art. Here they were sharing Mencken's ambivalence. Not all black critics, however, felt that "standards" should be lowered.
Walter White argued that black artists must continue to strive for excellence, for prizes given to them could be pernicious if given "only because the artist is a Negro." White praised Sinclair Lewis for refusing the Pulitzer Prize, saying that "the battle for honest standards... has a direct bearing upon the future of Negro writers and poets and, in turn, on all of us." White assured his readers that if the artist refused to yield to mediocrity, his audience's taste would improve.70

The whole idea of "honest standards," of course, was the reason that most black intellectuals tended to look toward the middle class for their audience. Despite his interest in elevating the tastes of the proletariat, Schuyler had certainly placed his faith in the middle class. When Jessie Fauset's novel There Is Confusion was published in 1924, Schuyler was enthusiastic: "Here for the first time we are presented with a novel built around our own 'best' people who, after all is said, are the inspiration of the rising generation." He urged Negroes to buy her book, so that "there will be a widening field of opportunity for our rising group of young writers, struggling to express the yearnings, hopes, and aspirations of the race."71 But the "best people" did not turn out to be the inspiration Schuyler had hoped for. Three years later he chastised these "best people" for complaining about Nigger Heaven and yet not supporting their own authors who do try to portray the most respectable side of Negro life: "Jessie Fauset's book There Is Confusion," Schuyler said, "fell almost flat from the standpoint of sales."72

Schuyler's disappointment in a black audience sheds a little light on why he might have written "Negro Art Hokum." If there were no internal support for the Renaissance, why not argue that there was no such thing as Negro art, only American art? If the Negro were only a "lamp-blacked Anglo-Saxon," then he merely reflected the larger sins of the Republic, which, as Mencken had shown, had proven catastrophic for the American artist. Although Schuyler could occasionally creep into Mencken's haven of skepticism, he was not—as indeed Mencken was not—always comfortable there. For someone who believed that Negro art was a misnomer, Schuyler spent a disproportionate amount of time trying to talk Negroes into supporting their writers.

If the masses were immature and the middle class superficial and cowardly, where did one turn? Theophilus Lewis's theatrical criticism in the Messenger tried to turn in all directions at once. Predictably, Lewis noted that a "discussion of the theatre can quite properly begin with the public." For "nowhere," he continued, "is the intimate relationship between art and life more clearly expressed than it is by the reciprocity existing between the public and the stage."73 But the Negro public, Lewis complained, has not held up its end of the bargain. The groundlings support the Negro theater with their "quarters and half-dollars" but
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unmistakably impose their low taste and standards upon productions. The middle class, offended by such buffoonery, stays away and criticizes from afar. Thus, the black theater has remained "at a standstill."

Lewis's solution to this stagnation has a familiar ring. We must create a new black theater, he argued, based upon a merger of the two black audiences. But how do we get the middle class to attend the Negro theater? Lewis admitted that this would be no easy task; it would require a very subtle kind of seduction. At first, the plays for this hypothetical Negro theater would be of a very low order—melodramas, farces, mysteries—and their lack of class would probably alienate the very people we were trying to attract. Nevertheless, the key to success lies in this: A play would "address its appeal exclusively to colored audiences." By imposing this realism upon low-grade material, we may slowly develop an appreciation for truth; and once a black audience has been secured, no matter how common, "higher forms of drama can be judiciously inserted in the repertory as a means of educating the audience." Now the "best people" will no longer stay away.74 And thus, we can have our Renaissance: "The way for the Negro to make his contribution to world culture is to narrow his art down to the tastes of his own little group. . . . Ask the ghost of Shakespeare if he didn't write his masterpieces for the strictly English audience of the Globe Theater." 75 Yet Lewis never quite got over his general pessimism concerning the Negro audience. As early as 1924, he was disturbed by a terrible contradiction in the Negro community: We have a collective life crying out to be dramatized, he noted, but no one seems interested. Given these ripe conditions, we should "expect to find malcontents leading revolts, amateurs making exhilarating and novel experiments; kibitzers vociferously offering advice, criticizing; a considerable minority of the laity aware that something is wrong and disgruntled by it, even if not just sure what is wrong. No such healthy discontent exists among Aframericans." 76 All the impetus for fostering a Negro theater, Lewis concluded, has come from white people, and all the good plays about Negro life have been written by white people. Where does that leave us?

The problem was, it did not leave Lewis with much. No doubt there was discontent aplenty among "Aframericans," but when it expressed itself in art, it usually took the form of music—blues and jazz—not plays. Thus, Lewis was left with Mencken's position: The American artist "stands in completer isolation than anywhere else on earth." Stuck to his theory of High Art, the tar-baby of the Harlem Renaissance, he could only lament that this situation was probably built into the scheme of things, that the artist was naturally at odds with the mores, opinions, and sensibilities of his age. On one occasion, Lewis discussed the "man of genius" in the abstract; and we may assume, I think, that his discussion represents
a reaction to bested hopes. The "creations" of the true artist, Lewis argued,

will at first appear unintelligible to men at large in proportion as they are original. Since what is unintelligible cannot be appreciated the repudiation of the artist by the crowd is both honest and sensible. The artist must wait until the more clear sighted of his contemporaries perceive the liaison between his creations and the trends of events and communicate the discovery to their fellows. This requires time and it usually happens that the original artist is not adequately appreciated until he is decaying in old age or eternity. Which is not all important, for the function of the artist is not to win applause for himself but to search the unknown for reality and interpret it in terms of beauty. 

On the surface, this statement about the artist's integrity suggests Joyce's remark that he wrote for the ideal reader with the ideal insomnia. In other words, the artist should damn the whole notion of an audience and get on with his work. Certainly, a later generation of black writers such as Wright and Ellison would be more sympathetic to Joyce's outlook, but only after the discovery that the idea of a black audience proved to be an ignis fatuus. When Lewis made this statement in 1925, however, he still wanted to believe that the potential for a black audience was a real possibility. In moments when he was tempted not to believe in this ideal, when the artist's audience seemed to disappear, then the pursuit of beauty became the artist's only raison d'être. This emphasis upon the purely aesthetic had also seemed an alternative to Mencken when he was faced with an unintelligent and unappreciative American audience. Then, almost by definition, the artist became an outcast and a loner. Nevertheless, both Mencken and Lewis hoped that an audience would emerge from the gloom, a hope that they never entirely abandoned. Tied to the mimetic tradition, they assumed that the artist and his audience were looking at the same thing, the external world as it was reflected in art. What kept people from appreciating art (other than their innate stupidity) was their inability to escape the fixities of their culture, for example, puritanism. When disillusioned, Lewis could only hope that some day the "original artist" would be appreciated by a more general audience. What he really wanted, of course, was that there would be no gap in time, that the black audience he had been seeking would suddenly appear, magically, with no questions asked.

Several years after the hoopla surrounding the Harlem Renaissance had ended, two novels by Negro authors appeared at the same time, and each focused in its own way upon the black writer's ambivalence concerning his audience. Both published in 1932, Infants of Spring, by Wallace
Thurman, and One Way to Heaven, by Countee Cullen, illustrate the extent to which the theme of artist and audience preoccupied the best minds of the Harlem Renaissance. If Alfred North Whitehead is correct—that an age is defined not so much by the answers it gives but by the questions it continues to ask—then these two novels contribute to the decade’s definition by repeating at its end the concerns that began it. And these are concerns, I insist, which the “little American renaissance” had subsequently dismissed (with the exception of Mumford and Rosenfeld) but which lived on in Mencken’s criticism of American society. What these two novels also illustrate is a moral confusion that perhaps explains why artist and audience could never have found each other during the 1920s, even if Harlem had been the utopian paradise that Locke had described in The New Negro.

In Wallace Thurman’s Infants of Spring, Hughes’s mountain is renamed “Niggeratti Manor,” and it too symbolizes (though this time the irony is conscious) the dilemma of the Negro artist. Euphoria Blake, a black Mabel Dodge, has turned her house over to a group of Negro literati, believing that this center of flourishing creativity will fill “a real need in the community.” The artists, however, do everything but create—they throw parties, seduce women, and talk incessantly about art. What was to be their haven has turned into a trap. Flattered by white society’s temporary interest in the “New Negro,” they think they need only live like artists to be artists. They are infants born into a false spring; they gather in a hothouse only to wither and die.

On the surface Thurman’s satire is obvious, but at points he strikes much deeper. In his novel he has documented the tragic insularity of the black writer, who is blind both to the worth of his own talent and to the world right outside his front door. Raymond, a novelist (and a portrait of Thurman himself), and his white friend Stephen have conversations on the theme of isolation and community. Stephen eventually leaves Niggeratti Manor, disgusted with the degenerate company in which he finds himself. Raymond explains to him that he cannot leave, that he has to make do with what he has. “I am forced to surround myself with case studies in order not completely to curdle and sour” (p. 194). But he has curdled and soured. Unable to relate to the black middle class, he finds bohemian life equally stultifying and debilitating. Determined to start afresh, he tells Stephen that he plans “to write . . . a series of books which will cause talk but won’t sell. . . . Negroes won’t like me because they’ll swear I have no race pride, and white people won’t like me because I won’t recognize their stereotypes” (pp. 214-15). Real rebellion, Thurman finally suggests, lies in the artist’s making contact with the audience of “a quarter million Negroes” living in Harlem (p. 222).
The question never answered in *Infants of Spring* is who will buy Raymond's books, if and when he ever writes them. Since Thurman always remained an elitist—often complaining as bitterly about the "mob" as he did about the middle class—it is doubtful that he had any hopes about the "quarter million Negroes." Furthermore, any possible affirmation we may have expected from Raymond's new intentions is forestalled by the novel's conclusion. In his best *fin-de-siecle* manner, Thurman describes the comic death of one Paul Arbian, a young bohemian who has modeled himself on both Huysmans and Oscar Wilde. As a grand finale, Paul arranges to commit suicide during a party, leaving his unpublished novel where it will be discovered by the guests. But the bathtub in which he dies overflows, the flood making his manuscript unreadable. Instead of showing any kind of hope commensurate with Raymond's intentions, the ending illustrates rather Thurman's generalization "that the more intellectual and talented Negroes of my generation are among the most pathetic people in the world today" (p. 225).

This is also the uneasy feeling we get from Countee Cullen's *One Way to Heaven*. Like Thurman's, Cullen's novel deals with the theme of infant damnation. In this case, the infants are not artists but connoisseurs of art, as if both Thurman and Cullen had intended that their novels taken together should illustrate Mencken's twin themes—that the American artist stood "in completer isolation than anywhere else on earth" and that the new aristocracy of money failed "to function as an aristocracy of taste." At Constancia Brandon's elegant home, the wealthy meet twice a month to discuss books written by Negroes. The original purpose of the "Booklovers' Society," stated by Constancia herself, is "to be a small but loyal body on which the Negro writer can depend for sympathy, understanding and support." Thus, Constancia's house is the counterpart to Niggeratti Manor. If Thurman's house of artists was to brighten the secular city with its radiance (like Ezekiel's temple in the revived Jerusalem), so too Constancia's "temple" is intended to provide a sanctuary for the black artist. Unfortunately, the people who attend Constancia's soirees are interested in other matters than self-education and civic responsibility, and books soon take a second place to food, drink, and gossip.

It is clear that Cullen admires Constancia herself. Intelligent, urbane, and witty, she fits the Menckenian ideal of a true marriage between wealth and taste. Yet she has surrounded herself with people whom she laughs not with but at. As the original purpose of her soirees fails, she begins to arrange them for her own amusement, the guests often becoming the objects of that amusement. Thus, Cullen treats Constancia as the Negro artist who takes revenge upon the very people who force him into isolation. However, although she has little in common with the guests of
similar background, she has no more in common with her maid, Mattie—and herein lies the novel’s real theme. The plot is split in half because Negro life is split in half: Artist is separated from audience, wealth from intelligence, rich from poor, reason from emotion. That Mattie and her husband, Sam—a con man, a gambler, and a vagabond along the lines of Black Ulysses—are overlooked by Constancia and her guests is a fit comment on the bifurcated Negro community.

There is a further irony: Sam may be a more genuine artist than any of those who attend Constancia’s parties. The novel begins and ends with a “performance” by Sam in which he displays all the histrionic talents of a seasoned actor. In the opening scene, he feigns a religious conversion to make money, and he also wins Mattie’s heart; in the concluding scene, he tricks Mattie again, pretending to hear the bells of the Heavenly City on his deathbed, so that she will not waste her life grieving for him. In a sense, this con man’s escapades are more successful than Constancia’s efforts to secure an audience for the black artist. Every time Sam “performs” in church, he plays to a packed house, and he actually moves people to pity and fear. “I’m far from being certain,” says a minister who is on to his game, “that you aren’t an unwitting instrument in the hands of Heaven” (p. 31). This same minister, it might be added, tells a story about himself which helps bring Cullen’s satire into focus. Having been invited to dinner by Mattie and Sam, the preacher recalls his maiden sermon to his first congregation. In the old days, he says, this initiation was intended as a kind of ordeal, for the backs of the preacher’s audience were turned to him. If, by the end of the sermon, he succeeded in making half of the congregation face him, he won his job. Sam asks him how he did, and the preacher responds, “I won them all . . . but I ended up with my coat and collar at my feet” (p. 226).

Perhaps Cullen suggests by this story that the artists who became celebrities during the Harlem Renaissance had it too easy. Because they were wined and dined by the white intelligentsia, they never extended themselves to speak to their own as the preacher had to. They expected the people to extend themselves, for wasn’t High Art worth the effort? At age twenty-five, Cullen undoubtedly thought it was, for he had been published regularly in prestigious white journals, and he too had been courted by the high and mighty. Yet by age thirty-two when he wrote this novel, he must have decided that there was, after all, more than one way to go to heaven. To put all the blame on an unappreciative black audience was simple-minded and even a bit dishonest. Still, like Thurman, Cullen never quite lost his elitism. To the end of his life, he wanted to be thought of as a poet and not as a Negro poet. Even in One Way to Heaven, Constancia remains the central figure, as though Cullen were saying that if the true artist has any hope of receiving intelligent sympathy,
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it will come from someone like her, someone who embodies the Menckenian "civilized point of view."

By the mid-1930s, the idea that a cross-section of society might support the artist as he treads his weary way toward Parnassus seemed to be, to paraphrase *The Great Gatsby*, buried under the cement of the Republic. Yet if the Renaissance never quite resolved its attitudes toward the common man, perhaps later black writers benefited from its inability to solve the artist-audience dilemma. Perhaps in exhausting this question, the Renaissance made it possible for Wright and Ellison and Baldwin to forget about it and write great novels. During the 1930s, the dilemma of artist and audience continued to exist but was absorbed into a political context generally foreign to the decade of the 1920s. And even though the question of artist and audience appeared to die after 1940, the idea of an appeal to Everyman seems important to American art and is likely to be periodically renewed. Witness the efforts by many black writers at all levels to reach the common reader in the 1960s, the case of Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) specifically illustrating a major black writer who began his literary career as an aesthete and became one of the leading advocates of black communal art.

As we have seen, the zenith of the artist-audience cycle occurred within the 1920s, the black intellectuals lining up sometimes for an audience of the masses, sometimes for an elite audience, and sometimes for the artist alone. The dream of the Harlem Renaissance had been a secular city that was nourished by art and in which people of all classes supported their artists. The dream, of course, had belonged to an earlier generation of white intellectuals, and one underlying principle of the new America was to be Mumford's belief that the common man does not despise art. It was Mencken, however, who precisely pinpointed what both white and black intellectuals really wanted: The audience was to consist of a spiritual aristocracy, one that could include the common man. The problem for both Mencken and the black intellectuals was that they remained haunted by the suspicion that the common man would never cast off his ignoble self. Thus, no matter how democratic in spirit the Renaissance claimed to be, it really shared Mencken's skepticism about *boobus Americanus*, that he was a bird more common than Mencken's decent "normal citizen."

By the end of the decade, the Renaissance's intellectuals came to the conclusion that a native audience for their literary movement did not exist, in the sense of either financial support or aesthetic appreciation, and this realization caused some of them to rebel against the Renaissance's original conception of itself. We get an inkling of this self-questioning if we look at an interchange of letters between Walter White and Claude McKay. In 1925, an enthusiastic White had urged McKay to submit something quickly to a publisher because blacks were riding the crest of a
wave, but McKay's response was more tentative: "It's all right to have the boom, but are the people buying?"\textsuperscript{81} By 1930, Sterling Brown would complain in "Our Literary Audience" that not only were the people not buying, but as readers they lacked "mental bravery."\textsuperscript{82} Using Walt Whitman's well-known words as an epigraph—"Without great audiences, we cannot have great poets"—he again stressed the need for an organic community, only this time his tone was elegiac and bitter: Our own people, he said, have not risen to the occasion; they have failed to be "great audiences" because they lack the courage to look at themselves in the mirror of art. Mencken was to make a similar charge in 1927, though in his view the onus fell upon Negro artists and the Renaissance's failure to produce great ones.