The Sage in Harlem

Scruggs, Charles

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

Scruggs, Charles.
The Sage in Harlem: H. L. Mencken and the Black Writers of the 1920s.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/67865
CHAPTER FIVE

Et Tu Mencken?
The End of the Romance

Mr. Mencken: What Is He—Satirist, Humorist, Pessimist or Just Plain Sophist?

—Editorial, New York Age

But there is no doubt that they read Mr. Mencken.

—Editorial, Chicago Defender

Although Mencken thought in 1920 that a worthy Negro novelist would soon appear on the scene, he had to admit in 1922 that there was no sign of life. Negroes, he said, continue to produce "religious and secular verse of such quality that it is taken over by the whites," but the number "who show a decent prose style is still very small, and there is no sign of it increasing." The damning blow here was Mencken's explanation for this sad predicament: "Poetry is chiefly produced and esteemed by peoples that have not yet come to maturity"; by implication, those people who have come to maturity write novels.

In the very same year that Mencken made this ex cathedra pronouncement, James Weldon Johnson introduced him to Walter White, a young Negro who had only recently arrived in New York. Having left an insurance firm in Atlanta to become assistant secretary of the NAACP, White was brimming over with enthusiasm for the wonders of New York; and when he met Mencken, the city seemed truly to be paradise. White had always followed Mencken closely, but to the young man fresh from Georgia, the publication of "The Sahara of the Bozart" in 1920 seemed an event of special importance. (He was later to credit it as being
indirectly responsible for the Harlem Renaissance itself.)² For one thing, Mencken had looked at the southern darkness and had not winced at what he saw. For another, he had called White's own state the very heart of that darkness. "Virginia is the best of the South to-day, and Georgia is perhaps the worst. The one is simply senile; the other is crass, gross, vulgar and obnoxious."³ Inspired by Mencken's theme, White set about writing a novel, and almost singlehandedly Mencken got it published.

The history of the novel's publication is fascinating for several reasons. First, it debunks a number of myths about the Harlem Renaissance; second, and more importantly for our purposes, it marks the beginning of Mencken's skepticism about a Negro literary movement that in 1924 had only begun to stretch its wings. For between 1924 and 1927, Mencken's feelings about the idea of a Negro Renaissance underwent a radical change, and his new attitudes affected the black writers themselves, causing them to split into two separate camps. This may sound as if Mencken had an undue amount of influence, but it is significant that his name and his ideas were tossed back and forth with some regularity by the contestants.

The first serious thought White gave to writing The Fire in the Flint came with a letter he received from Mencken only a few months after he had met the Sage of Baltimore. What did he think of T. S. Stribling's newly published novel, Birthright, Mencken asked. (Stribling was a white southerner and had written about a small town in Tennessee.) White gave a direct answer: Stribling knew all about Negro servants, but he didn't have the slightest clue as to what an educated Negro was like. According to White's autobiography, published twenty-six years later, Mencken then asked White whether he couldn't do "the right kind of novel."⁴ The impression given by White is that Mencken's suggestion took him completely by surprise.

In fact, the unpublished correspondence between the two men shows that White probably had the novel in mind before Mencken mentioned it. In his letter to Mencken damning Stribling, he added, "I am praying for the advent of a first class colored novelist—but, no publisher would yet print his story if he told the whole truth."⁵ White was a clever strategist. The one thing that would catch Mencken's eye, he correctly surmised, was an untold tale that everyone was afraid to print. Besides, the author would be a Negro, the one person who could reveal the "inner life" of the race. And to add frosting to the cake, that author would be a refugee from Georgia, the state that Mencken had designated in "The Sahara of the Bozart" as the most degenerate spot in the entire Confederacy.

Spurred on by Mencken's encouragement, White wrote The Fire in the Flint in twelve days during the summer of 1922, and he then submitted it to Doran and Company. The publishing firm at first accepted the
Et Tu Mencken?

manuscript, but then had doubts. "Practically speaking," wrote Doran's representative, Eugene Saxton, to White, "there is nobody in court but the attorney for the prosecution." Naturally White was distressed, as his language in his reply to Saxton shows. He agreed that the southern white man had a "case but, by all that is holy, all we've had is his side." However, he admitted that his novel was far from perfect, that Saxton's criticism was just, and that he would be willing to revise the manuscript to close the "five per cent gap" that existed between the opinions of author and publisher.7

It is worth mentioning these details because White's account of his dealings with Doran is quite different from that revealed by his unpublished correspondence with the firm. Much later, whenever White told the story of how the novel came to be published, he pictured himself as a black David taking on a modern-day Goliath (Doran) who represented the philistine South. In his autobiography, he said that Mr. Doran himself had wanted him to make some "changes" in his Negro characters—they "uh, uh—are not what readers expect." He added that southern humorist Irvin Cobb had read the manuscript and was convinced that publication would cause "race riots in the South." Rather than "submit to emasculation," he told Robert Kerlin (after Knopf had accepted the novel), "I informed them [Doran] that I would destroy the manuscript." This tale, related to his friends and described in A Man Called White, is the one in which he came to believe more firmly as the years went by: He had withdrawn his novel from Doran because he would not be coerced into revising it.

The truth is less heroic but more interesting. White was not lying about Irvin Cobb's attempts to undermine his chances. The southern humorist had read the work and had urged Doran not to publish it. Yet it is doubtful that Cobb's advice had any real effect on Doran's final decision. As the correspondence indicated (and as any modern reader of The Fire in the Flint will readily admit), Doran had justifiable aesthetic reasons for rejecting White's manuscript.

Naturally White did not mention these aesthetic objections to Mencken when he wrote to tell him of the novel's rejection. He insinuated strongly that the novel had been sacrificed on the altar of southern justice. Knowing Mencken's "prejudices," he focused on Cobb's southern chauvinism and Doran's moral cowardice. "Irvin Cobb's influence on Doran," he lamented, "was too strong for me." Mr. Doran, he said, did not "dare" publish the novel (he had been told by Eugene Saxton) because the publishing firm had been "fearing the effect on the South." (Of course White neglected to speculate why, if Doran had been so terrified of the South, he showed any interest in the manuscript in the first place.) White further stressed that he had said "something worthwhile" in the
novel—"something which though not new in fact yet is new in publication. This is one of the first times that the viewpoint of intelligent Negroes has been given and the only question is whether or not that voice shall be heard."

Now the novel's fate took on a new significance for Mencken. Until this time, he had been curious about it, but not to the point of knocking on doors. White had convinced him that once again the South was responsible for suppressing the truth, so Mencken asked to see the manuscript, read it, and made a strong recommendation to his own publisher. "I have already told Knopf," he wrote White, "that I think it would be good business to publish the novel." And Knopf must have agreed, because he accepted it in December 1923.

This story is worth retelling because White's modern critics have overlooked his expert manipulation of Mencken's attitudes toward the South. On the contrary, they have tended to see the publishing history of The Fire in the Flint as a parable for the difficulties that the black writer in America had to face in the 1920s. This last point is a difficult one to assess, because by 1923 the intellectual climate had changed considerably; firms such as Doran and Knopf, which had previously published "darkey" stories, were now ready to welcome other modes of Negro portraiture. Much of the credit for this enlightened attitude belongs to Mencken, although what he himself had not counted on was that he could be duped by his own prejudices. For if the publishing history of White's novel indicates anything, it indicates that the tough critic from Baltimore could be a soft touch in the right circumstances.

As White's novel neared publication, both White and Mencken acted as if they were co-conspirators against the South. Several times Mencken wrote White urging him to send his novel to "the worst Negrophobe papers . . . for review, and so draw their fire." He added that his "own books have been greatly helped in the South by that means. The confederate is always an ass." On another occasion, he said that "the best plan, I think, is to egg on the Ku Kluxers. Can't you have some letters written to the leading Southern papers when the time comes, denouncing it as subversive and urging them to stir up the police? These imbeciles will then do all your advertising for you." Mencken also promised to review the novel in the Baltimore Evening Sun "to stir up some interest among the Negro Intelligentsia (if any!) there." White readily agreed to all of Mencken's proposals, and had Knopf send copies of the novel to the major newspapers in the South. He told Mencken, "I expect and hope to be furiously assailed from that quarter." In the meantime, he told Carl Van Doren that he was preparing an article for the Mercury in which he intended to prove, in the Mencken mode, that it would have been better
With the publication of *The Fire in the Flint*, White found himself lionized by the literary establishment as though he were the promise of the future. Respectable critics such as Lawrence Stallings of the *New York World* and Harry Hansen of the *Chicago Daily News* fulsomely praised his book. Carl Van Vechten sought him out after reading the novel, the two forming a friendship that would be profitable to both parties. Even before publication, Sinclair Lewis read his page proofs "page by page and line by line," and wrote some puffery for Knopf saying that White's novel and Forster's *Passage to India* "will prove much the most important books of this autumn." In 1926, after White's novel had been available for only two years, Jim Tully pulled out all the stops: "*The Fire in the Flint* is the greatest novel yet written by an American Negro." Such attention soon led to important social engagements and to White's being the focus of interest at fashionable parties. White began to call such people as Heywood Broun, Carl Van Doren, and Alfred Knopf by their first names and, not surprisingly, he grew somewhat vain through his contact with these luminaries.

Although White used his influence with the white literati to foster the growth of the Harlem Renaissance, helping writers such as Countee Cullen and Rudolph Fisher to find publishers, he sometimes seemed blinded by the brilliance of his own success. Having established himself as a Knopf-published author, he became, at times, arrogant and inflexible. He would, for instance, brook no negative criticism of his novels from black critics, although he was occasionally guilty of whoring after praise from white ones. If he gladly gave advice and aid to the members of the Harlem Renaissance, he was also guilty of great personal ambition and, like Pope's Atticus, he could "bear no brother near the throne." Furthermore, he never really caught sight of the fact that a renaissance means the rebirth of ideas as well as the recognition of its artists in the literary columns of popular magazines. Too often he treated his relationship to the Harlem Renaissance as though it were an extension of his former job at an insurance company in Atlanta: The more he advertised it, the better off it would be. That the literary movement finally suffocated from too much glitter and tinsel may suggest that White hurt its chances for survival as much as the unjustly maligned Van Vechten.

Mencken was not unaware of all the things that were happening to White. Although he never attacked White directly, he concentrated on the pampered Negro author as a symbol of what had dimmed the bright potential of the decade's opening years. Also, he never reviewed *The Fire in the Flint*, as he had promised White he would do, and we can only imagine that he found the novel embarrassing. He had gotten it published.
and then he saw it praised beyond its meager merits. Three years after the novel's publication, he did eventually talk about it at length, but his attitude was no longer one of eager expectation for the future.

With the *Mercury*, Mencken had other things on his mind than the development of Negro authors, yet whenever anything good came along, he was full of high spirits. He was especially pleased with the prospects that the publication of *The New Negro* (1925) implied. In early 1926, he reviewed Alain Locke's anthology of recent artistic accomplishments with enthusiasm, calling the book "a phenomenon of immense significance."22

As usual, Mencken read into the work what he wanted to see. He focused upon the boldness of this literary venture and the dignity of the men who contributed to it. For Mencken, it meant "the American Negro's final emancipation from his inferiority complex, his bold decision to go it alone." After reading this volume, said Mencken, one can no longer "think of the black brother as Sambo and his sister as Mandy." This Negro is a man of the world, "full of an easy grace and not at all flustered by good society"; and he is an urbane realist, discussing "the problems of his people soberly, shrewdly and without heat"—even, at times, poking "fun at their follies." The whole book, Mencken concluded, "is a masterpiece of self-possession."

Naturally, Mencken could not resist a side thrust at his old enemy, the South. Could anyone imagine, he asked, "a posse of white Southerners doing anything so dignified, so dispassionate, so striking? I don't mean, of course, Southerners who have cast off the Southern tradition: I mean Southerners who are still tenaciously of the South, and profess to speak for it whenever it comes into question." Mencken then weighed the wits of the Negro intellectuals and those of the die-hard southerners and decided that "the contrast is pathetic. The Africans are men of sense, learning and good bearing; the Caucasians are simply romantic wind-jammers, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

Nevertheless, Mencken saw some hard times ahead for this avant-garde of Negro intellectuals. Having declared their independence, he noted, they will have to go it alone. They will get no help from the "vast majority of the people of their race." These latter are "but two or three inches removed from gorillas," and it will be a long time before they become excited by "anything above pork-chops and bootleg gin." And, he added, the brave souls of *The New Negro* will receive little consolation from certain members of the black intelligentsia who are tied to the purse
strings of the whites. This patronage has compromised their integrity, making it impossible for them to be free men. Mencken concluded by picturing the men and women of *The New Negro* as sailing a boat in hostile waters, "having cut the painter." They will be tempted to call it quits, "but no race, I believe, ever gets anywhere so long as it permits itself to think of turning back. It must navigate its own course, in fair weather and foul. . . . Let us, then, sit back tightly, and observe what the colored brothers do next." Little more than a year later, however, Mencken did not have the patience to take his own advice.

On 17 July 1927, in an article that he wrote for the *New York World*, Mencken set about assessing the artistic contributions of the Negro race to date. By 1927, we should remind ourselves, the Negro vogue was in full swing, and Mencken himself would add to the general melee by writing "A Coon Age." In the *World* article, however, he took a completely different tack, although he began his piece in the most complimentary way. New York has been hospitable to the educated, middle-class Negro, he wrote, and the latter has deserved it: "The colored brethren, now that they go everywhere, add a great deal to its charm." These people are "amusing fellows," Mencken continued, "and not at all over-impressed with their new triumphs." But now came the rub: "The acceptance of the educated Negro removes his last ground for complaint against his fate in the Republic, and leaves him exposed to the same criteria of judgment that apply to everybody else."

Finished with the civilities, Mencken moved directly to his new critical point. Once we drop the notion of special consideration for the Negro artist, what do we find? "So far, it seems to me, his accomplishments have been very modest. Even in those fields wherein his opportunities for years have been precisely equal to the white man's, he has done very little of solid value. I point, for example, to the field of music." The best jazz and ragtime today, said Mencken, are being created by George Gershwin and Paul Whiteman, and although the spiritual is supposedly another Negro invention, "Where is the Negro composer who is writing spirituals today—I mean good ones?"

Mencken then considered the Negro poets, again distressed at what he saw. With the exception of James Weldon Johnson, they "have done very little to justify the excessive hospitality with which they have been received. Put all their work together and it is not worth much more than any one of a dozen of the epitaphs in 'The Spoon River Anthology.'" And it is the same with prose:

No Negro novelist has ever written a novel even remotely comparable to such things as *Babbitt* and *Jurgen*. No Negro writing short stories rises
above the level of the white hacks. There is here no prejudice to overcome, and, so far as I know, there never has been.

Even the Negro publicists make a sorry showing considering their opportunities. It is seldom, indeed, that one of them turns out an article or a book of any genuine value. Even on the subject of their race's wrongs they do not write as well, taking one with another, as the white scriveners who tackle the same subject. All the really first-rate books written by American Negroes since the Civil War could be ranged on a shelf a foot long.

Mencken concluded on a rather surprising note, surprising because of its tone. In 1920, not only had he been willing to wait and see, but he had actually predicted that the Negro writer would emerge. In 1926, when he reviewed *The New Negro,* he repeated his wait-and-see attitude with the same optimistic emphasis as before. Now, however, a certain cautionary skepticism appeared. The successful leap over the social barrier is all well and good, said Mencken, but to the Negro it means little

save a chance to show what is really in him. I am not altogether sure that his prospects in the fine arts are as good as his more optimistic partisans seem to think. He has shown that he can do respectable work, but he has certainly not shown that he can do genuinely distinguished work.

It may be that he has ventured into the arts too soon—that they can flourish only in a house more solid and stable than the one he is just moving into. It may be that his greatest success during the next generation or two will be made, not in the arts, but in business. There he seems to be making rapid progress, and it is no longer fictitious and transitory.

A number of points may be made concerning Mencken's about-face. For one thing, he may have been fearful that public acclaim had turned the head of the Negro artist and that he needed some taking down if he were to do good work. Fred C. Hobson has noted that after "The Sahara of the Bozart," Mencken had tried, with some success, to provoke the South into proving him wrong, and there is no reason to think that his motive here was any different. He was playing the gadfly at a time when there were all too few of these. Further, although he makes the same absolute statements as in "The Sahara of the Bozart" ("No Negro novelist," and so on), he seems less exasperated with the Negroes than with the southerners—perhaps because he sees the hubris of the Negro as produced by an outside source, white flattery. Finally, and perhaps most interestingly, Mencken has put his finger on a sore spot for the entire literary movement: money. That he was wrong about the Negro's present success in business is less important than the issues he raised. Did money, or patronage, help or hinder the artist? Mencken never quite followed this
question to a conclusion, as it pertained to either the black or the white artist. On the one hand, Mencken complained that the best minds in America went into business, not the arts; on the other hand, he was quick to observe that the artist needed sensitive and intelligent appreciation from a class of people who could afford to support him. The problem in America, as Mencken saw it, was that the rich were neither sensitive nor intelligent. But how could that be so if the best minds had gravitated toward the world of making money? If money created the "connoisseur," did it also rot his intelligence? Likewise, Mencken never quite decided when patronage was debilitating and when it was helpful. Concerning the Negro artist, Mencken noted that white patronage hurt his independence (for example, in the review of The New Negro), but he was also quick to point out that Negro arts and letters needed firm financial backing. What he did not see—but then, few did—was that Negro backing might also be fraught with problems. What he did see was that the Harlem Renaissance would have difficulty surviving without a firm economic base; and, sure enough, when the Depression came, the chief supporters of the "boom," white people, faded away like the roses of summer.

Of course, the most egregious howlers that Mencken made were his remarks about Negro music. At a time when Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, and Fletcher Henderson were revolutionizing jazz, Mencken was talking about Paul Whiteman. What is interesting here is not so much Mencken's misjudgment about particular men but his larger misperception, shared by others, concerning the nature of the Renaissance. Both Ellington and Henderson had come out of the same middle-class backgrounds as had Alain Locke, yet they instinctively recognized that their future lay in the smoky dives of Harlem night life. (Ellington even gave up a scholarship to the Pratt Institute to pound a piano in them.) While Locke was talking about "urbanity," Ellington was listening to the real sounds of the city as they whistled through the streets. Mencken chose Whiteman as his representative jazzman because Whiteman had refined the primitive sounds of Negro music. Similarly, Mencken and the Negro intellectuals chose literature over popular music, because literature symbolized a "classical tradition." Despite their strong interest in Negro folk art, literature, as James Weldon Johnson noted in his Book of American Negro Poetry and as Locke was to emphasize in "The Negro's Contribution to American Culture" (1929), was the main criterion that determined whether a race was great.

Mencken could not leave well enough alone, and two months later he returned to the theme of the Negro artist in his column in the New York World. As usual, his demeanor remained unruffled, even though, as he said, his July article had met with a "roar": "I was at once bombarded
with proofs of his [the Negro's] high attainments." He admitted that he had changed his mind in one particular (he had forgotten about Dr. Nathaniel Dett's spiritual "Listen to the Lambs"); but he stood firm on his basic premise, to wit, that in these last few years Negro artists have made few original contributions to the world of music, literature, and art. For the most part,

colored composers have done a great deal to popularize the music of their race, but they have done very little to develop it. It remains, in their hands, simple folksong. It is not Negroes but Jews who have turned it to more ambitious uses. In much the same way it is white novelists and dramatists and not Negroes, who have best utilized the Negro as a dramatic figure. The imaginative authors of the race all seem to be hampered by a propaganda purpose. They are so intent upon depicting the Negro as the hero of a moral melodrama that they fail to show him as a human being.

As Mencken warmed to his subject, of course he chose the novel as the art form to illustrate this most grievous failure to depict human beings. He singled out Walter White, the author of "perhaps the most successful Negro novel yet written," as a man with real talent who was blinded by moral earnestness. The hero of The Fire in the Flint, said Mencken, needed "to do something weak and human."

If he broke into a hoedown now and then he would be greatly improved. And it would be a relief to see him sit down to a hearty meal of Virginia ham, chitlings, cabbage sprouts, hominy cakes and corn pone, with a beaker of country buttermilk to wash it down.

Mencken's own rich language was meant to stand in marked contrast to White's racially pallid novel, and the humor of the above passage was intended to underscore the humorlessness of The Fire in the Flint. But as we shall see, White's aesthetic failings were due in part to Mencken's influence as both a literary and social critic, an irony that Mencken probably never recognized.

In this World article, Mencken saw a connection between the Negro's artistic failures and "the self-satisfaction which now afflicts the race not only in the aesthetic department but all along the line." (This seems like an absurd charge, unless we keep in mind the public attention given to the Negro intellectuals during the 1920s.) The inability to create "human" characters, said Mencken, means that not enough candor exists among the Negroes themselves. Once again he focused on the Negro preacher as a symbol of the world of illusion still at the core of Negro life. Until the Negroes themselves undertake to skewer this mountebank—along with
the "Negro Babbitt, who now begins to roar precisely like a white Rotarian"—they will never do anything befitting a civilized people. But fortunately, added Mencken, "the Negroes, despite their generally solemn and humorless mien, do not lack critics of their own race, and some of these critics, notably George S. Schuyler of the Pittsburgh Courier, are extremely realistic. . . . Led by the Schuyler aforesaid, a number of young colored intellectuals address themselves to flaying the follies of their people."

If Mencken's intention was to start a row in the Negro newspapers with these two World articles, he certainly succeeded. As the Chicago Defender noted after the first Mencken piece, "It is no mean feat to get this Race of ours to read and discuss topics, even if the topic happens to be the Race. But there is no doubt that they read Mr. Mencken." The Defender thought Mencken right in pointing to the church's failures, but it was willing to suspend judgment concerning the Negro's artistic merits—it first wanted to hear from the Negro artists themselves. However, it did thank Mencken for raising a ruckus, perhaps the best thing about the piece, "in that he provoked more discussion among the leaders and followers [of the race] than has been heard in these parts since Chief Sam started back to Africa."

Others besides the Defender thought that Mencken was simply telling the truth. Kelly Miller in the Baltimore Afro-American did not comment upon Mencken's opinion but admired his honesty. George Schuyler in the Pittsburgh Courier agreed with most of Mencken's pronouncements on Negro art: "Indeed I have said much the same thing myself." In music, continued Schuyler, we "have been far surpassed by the whites," and although Professor Mencken may have been too severe upon our poets, "judged by world standards, they haven't made much of a big noise." Even judged by the standards of American poets, Schuyler said sadly, "they are second-rate." And our prose writers? "Their record is worse."

But Schuyler did not let Mencken have the last word:

On the other hand, it seems to me that Br'er Mencken's attitude is a little pontifical. He forgets, it seems to me, that American writers generally haven't contributed much timeless literature, nor have any American composers, white or black, rivalled Beethoven, Wagner or Liszt. Our American poets, too, with the possible exception of Whitman and Poe, are decidedly not of the first water. The fact is that this is a young country just emerging from the pioneering stage. Heretofore, it has been absorbed with building a civilization and has just begun to criticize and interpret it.

In a sense Schuyler was pointing Mencken's guns right back at him. Mencken had criticized American writers "generally" for their mediocrity,
and so—Schuyler seemed to be saying—if he was going to single out the Negro for special disapproval, he should put him in the slow company of his countrymen, most of whom had not the Negro's disadvantages.

Yet Schuyler did agree with Mencken that Negro artists needed a solid substructure: "Wealth and leisure must come first before we can properly subsidize art." His conception of art (like Mencken's) was aristocratic.

It must have a monied class to which to adhere for its sustenance, for great art must have a limited audience and is seldom popular. Almost all great artists whether with pen or brush have been subsidized or have had great personal wealth and thus are free from the burden of making a living. There are few examples in the history of art and literature to which one can point where, money and leisure being absent, great work has been done. Negro composers in order to get along and make a living have had to take up most of their time writing coarse popular songs about "Mah Baby" and "Mah Man," while Negro writers have been largely engaged in writing racial propaganda and trying to voice the aspirations of what Dr. DuBois called "the mired mass."

Typical of Schuyler is the link between the "coarse popular songs" and the "mired mass," and yet he had previously looked for the intelligent stevedore within this mass. Again, the crucial question of the Renaissance hangs in the balance: Can the average Joe who listens to Bessie Smith singing about her man be educated by degrees to appreciate Beethoven? Although Mencken and Schuyler gave a qualified "yes" to this question, they added the codicil that the masses as a rule usually stay mired. But then, isn't the same true of the rest of the social classes? Natural aristocrats are rare birds, for the bird most commonly found is the *boobus Americanus*, one that not only knows no closed season but knows no particular social class. Hence both Schuyler and Mencken hedged on who made up the "great audience"; they both agreed that it would be "fit company though few," but they could not quite agree upon where the few could be located. The poor might be mired down, but the rich (or the pretenders to wealth) had their own sloughs to wallow in. One thing neither Schuyler nor Mencken would admit: the possibility that the stevedore or sleep-in maid who adored Bessie Smith had just as refined a taste for music as did the "connoisseur" who melted over the Great Masters.²⁸

Not everyone was quite so hospitable to Mencken's views as were Schuyler, Miller, and the editor of the *Chicago Defender*. In its reaction to the first World essay, the *Amsterdam News* laughed at Mencken's "half-truths": "The Negro has not been accepted socially, whether educated or not, and if Mr. Mencken doesn't know, it is not too late for him to
find out for himself." Since his basic premise is faulty, the editor concluded, the rest of his argument is "shaky." The newspaper credited Mencken with having "sincerity" but lamented his naivete. The Amsterdam News was even harsher in its treatment of Mencken's second World article. It was angry that Mencken was "undismayed by the protests of Negroes against his criticism last July." For the benefit of those who might have missed Mencken's message, the newspaper flashed it in neon. "He calls the Negro preacher the worst enemy of the Negro and describes him as a magnificently uneducated, self-seeking ignoramus with a swamp-bred theology and a pork-chop culture. He thinks that one of the Negro ailments is self-satisfaction and prescribes a dose of George S. Schuyler and unsentimental self-analysis." The News laughed (and justifiably so) at the idea of Negro "self-satisfaction." ("His trouble all along has been that he had too little of it.") And it sarcastically praised Mencken for finding one worthy composer (Dr. Dett) "since July." It then lumped Mencken with all the other whites who were mesmerized by the Afro-American; stuck to the tar-baby, "once they take hold of him they cannot let go."

Other responses to Mencken ranged from anger to ambivalence. The New York Age, frankly puzzled by Mencken's tactics, entitled its review of his July article, "Mr. Mencken: What Is He—Satirist, Humorist, Pessimist or Just Plain Sophist?" But one composer, Will Marion Cook, was outraged by Mencken's slander, and in a rare (and rather odd) coupling, he linked Van Vechten and Mencken together as twin sources of evil, both responsible for Harlem's moral degeneracy. "Stop Van Vechten-ing and Mencken-ing my race," he sharply ordered, as if the two white men were conjurers caught in the act. Poor Schuyler, as it turned out, was proven guilty by association. In the Pittsburgh Courier Schuyler noted that the Philadelphia Public Journal had called him an "infidel" when it discussed the Mencken articles. Schuyler bravely responded that if such an epithet put him in the company of such men as Mencken, Voltaire, and Shaw, then the said newspaper was free to call him one.

Responses to Mencken by DuBois and Locke tended to be less emotional than those of the black newspapers, but they also revealed a certain ambivalence. As we have seen, DuBois defended Mencken's personal integrity, but he noted that Mencken does "not understand just where the shoe pinches." The black artist is discriminated against in subtle ways by publishing houses, DuBois said; he is expected to write about "fools, clowns, prostitutes" and nothing else. Also, in his broad sweep of black artists, Mencken overlooked Dunbar, Toomer, McKay, and Hughes. "On the whole then," DuBois concluded, "despite a stimulating critic's opinion, we Negroes are quite well satisfied with our Renaissance. And we have not yet finished."
What is interesting about DuBois's appraisal of Mencken is that he did not hesitate to join those closing ranks against this white critic. In truth, DuBois himself around this time was beginning to feel uneasy about the direction of the Harlem Renaissance. In "Criteria of Negro Art," he feared that the literary movement might be headed toward a new kind of decadent aestheticism.\(^{35}\) (He disagreed with Locke over what he called Locke's "search for disembodied beauty.")\(^{36}\) Later, as he thought he saw the Negro artist following in Van Vechten's muddy footsteps, he arrived at a critical assessment far more pessimistic than Mencken's.\(^{37}\)

Alain Locke also decided to joust with Mencken, though he too, eventually, came to recognize the justice of Mencken's views. Mencken, said Locke in *Ebony and Topaz* (1927), has suggested that "we would do well to page a black Luther and call up the Reformation."\(^{38}\) Locke admitted that Mencken was right if one just looked at the bare facts; it was true that the Harlem Renaissance was short on goods, long on promises. Yet Mencken had made the mistake of limiting the idea of a renaissance to the Negro's contributions to it. The real aim of the Harlem Renaissance was "to infuse a new essence into the general stream of culture"; the Renaissance should not only be considered "an integral phase of contemporary American art and literature," but its purpose was also to make the American artist aware that Negro life is an untapped source for great art.

Locke was not being quite candid here, for the Renaissance as he defined it in *The New Negro* was a closed society. He did not exactly deny the white artist the opportunity to write about Negroes, but he made it quite clear that a "renaissance" presupposed an organic society in which the black artist spoke to and for a black audience. By 1927, his belief in such a society had been badly shaken, affecting his view of Harlem as the setting for the "Beloved Community." In attempting to answer Mencken's judgment upon the black artist, Locke pointed to the Negro's alienation from the South as one reason for his poor artistic showing.

Indeed, if conditions in the South were more conducive to the development of Negro culture without transplanting, the self-expression of the "New Negro" would spring up just as one branch of the new literature of the South, and as one additional phase of its cultural reawakening. The common bond of soil and that national provincialism would be a sounder basis for development than the somewhat expatriated position of the younger school of Negro writers. And if I were asked to name one factor for the anemic and rhetorical quality of so much Negro expression to the present, I would cite ... the pathetic exile of the Negro writer from his best material, the fact that he cannot yet get cultural breathing space on his own soil.
Words like "provincialism" and "soil" appear in a new context, and "transplanting" takes on a new meaning. The sense of community (Royce's "provincialism") now exists in the South; the "soil" is rural soil, and the Negro in being transplanted is uprooted. Living in the city has made an expatriate of him. His works are "anemic" because the city has not nourished him.

While deploring this situation, Locke tried to reduce the force of Mencken's criticism by turning his own weapons against him. The Negro artist, Locke continued, has recently pledged his allegiance to "a stridently self-conscious realism" in order to countermine a history of "sentimental partisanship," and yet this attitude of "studied . . . detachment" has robbed his work of "spiritual bloom." Thus the Negro artist is still ill at ease—real "Florentine ease and urbanity" continue to elude him, and Locke tacitly implied that Mencken's "realism" is as bad as all the other isms that have been foisted upon the Negro: "It is a fiction that the black man has . . . been naive: in American Life he has been painfully self-conscious for generations—and is only now beginning to recapture the naivete he once originally had." Locke could accept Mencken's paradox that "naivete" and "urbanity" were kindred virtues (belonging to the unself-conscious artist), but he argued that Mencken's insistence upon realism had deprived the Negro artist of his urbanity.

However, Locke never gave up his commitment to realism in literature, and after 1927 the idea of a "Reformation" began to concern him. He recognized the need for one in his "Reptrospective Review" for Opportunity magazine (a series of reviews which he first began in January 1929), and throughout the later 1920s and early 1930s he could never quite decide whether the literary movement was progressing or retrenching. To a certain extent, the metaphors that Locke employed to describe the Harlem Renaissance had some relevance to himself as well. He saw himself as a prince of a small city-state, a prince whose power and authority had been firmly established by his editorship of The New Negro and by his academic position at Howard University. (Besides, he had been chosen for his regal role by Charles S. Johnson, editor of Opportunity.) Yet by 1927 his position had been seriously questioned, and Mencken's articles seemed to have given permission to the younger generation to challenge authority—not only that of Locke but of DuBois as well.

This shift in Mencken's influence upon the black writers of the 1920s is significant. Previously, James Weldon Johnson, W.E.B. DuBois, and Walter White—in short, the NAACP group—had been moved by Mencken's attacks upon the South and his espousal of the educated Negro. Now, however, Mencken implied that it was not enough to attack the South, that the inner life of the Negro was not being depicted ade-
quately, and that the middle-class Negro lacked a sense of humor about himself. Mencken had already given license to the younger black writers to do sketches of Negro lowlife (his remarks on Odum's Left Wing Gordon),\(^40\) and now he was giving them ammunition with which to attack the Old Guard.

There is still, of course, a legitimate question to ask: Which came first, Mencken or the black Menckenites? As Schuyler pointed out, he had himself been skeptical of the accomplishments of the literary movement long before Mencken had challenged them. Yet it is also clear that Schuyler, Theophilus Lewis, Wallace Thurman, and Eugene Gordon, the Young Wits who were dissatisfied with the bombast attached to Negro literature, had all learned their muck-raking from Mencken. Thus, in October 1926 Lewis could puncture the Renaissance balloon in a Menkenian style:

I lead off with the cardinal heresy of denying that the spirituals are triumphs of art. I further depose and declare that I am aware of no Aframerican musician of the first order, barring a concert singer or two; that I do not concede the Aframerican any pronounced racial talent for dramatic or histrionic art; that not one of the expensive churches Negroes are building or buying indicates that the preacher has taste enough to prevent an architect or a passel of Jews from selling him a granite barn; that in the whole roster of colored prose writers under forty years old there are only two producing work which can be called literature without insulting the term: George S. Schuyler is a genuine humorist and Jean Toomer is the only story teller able to create a striking and original character; “promising” is the best you can say about the rest of the lot, and most of them are not promising very much. In fact, to make it snappy, the celebrazione of chocolate culture is 99.44-100 percent pale pink whoofle dust.\(^41\)

Not only does Lewis have Mencken's flair for the sweeping roundhouse right, but he also has a few of his prejudices. Whatever their failings, Lewis continued, Negroes have produced some solid poets. Yet instead of dwelling upon these poets' individual virtues, he took away with one hand what he had given with the other, adding that the reason they are poets and not prose writers is that the culture is immature.

Poetry is essentially the expression of emotion while prose is essentially a medium for the expression of ideas. Since in the common relations of life, anger, sadness, pity and the desire for revenge are feelings everybody experiences daily while only a few people either possess the ability or meet the necessity for sustained thinking it is inevitable that words and phrases packed with emotional meaning should multiply faster than terms invented to convey ideas. Thus the poet finds both the language and the habits of thought of a people prepared for him much earlier than the writer who wants to express himself in prose.
Et Tu Mencken?

The problem with Negro culture, Lewis continued, is that it has failed to create an environment that nourishes the intellect.

As for cultural ideas which grow out of a refined way of living the race has produced none at all, simply because there has been no refined way of living. With a background so saturated with feeling and so barren of ideas and refinement it is not at all surprising that we have swarms of respectable poets while we have not yet produced six fiction writers capable of consistently writing up to the standard of Snappy Stories.

Lewis's argument is essentially the same as Mencken's. Prose is the real barometer of a culture. When ideas flow freely, then the novelist can dip his bucket in the well; but when ideas dry up, as they do in a puritan culture like America's, then the novelist is cut off at the source. The function of criticism—and Mencken would have readily agreed to this Arnoldian view—is to stir up controversy, to motivate the free flow of ideas, so that the novelist can again slake his thirst.

The Young Wits considered Mencken an ally because he sanctioned rebellion against stodginess and self-satisfaction. They saw a connection between his attack on the genteel tradition in American literature and their own warfare against genteel Negro culture. When Wallace Thurman said that the black people who rail against Langston Hughes "have their counterpart in those American whites who protest the literary upheavals of a Dreiser, an Anderson, or a Sandburg," he was appealing to those who remembered, and sympathized with, Mencken's early battles. Moreover, Thurman often used Mencken's weapons as well as his themes. "The truly sincere artist," said Thurman in the first and only issue of the magazine Harlem (1928), "does not take into consideration what the public might say if his characters happen to be piano movers." This artist, if he happens to be black, does not care what the "best people" in the Negro community think because it is perfectly clear that the "best people... do not think at all." In short, being genteel does not necessarily mean that one is refined—quite the opposite. Those who are the most genteel are also the most fearful, the most moral, the most narrow-minded. For Thurman, DuBois became a symbol of this psychological paranoia. (Some author out there is trying to disgrace me!) For this reason, Thurman indirectly referred to him as the "Judge Landis of literature" (an updating of Mencken's Anthony Comstock).

Thurman (and others) kept up a constant sniper fire upon genteel Negro culture, and often the warfare spilled over to include the Renaissance itself. In one article, he said that the "results of the renaissance have been sad rather than satisfactory," and, on another occasion, he doubted if anyone could call it either new or unique.
Precisely the same thing is happening in Negro America as has already happened in the far west (finding expression in Twain, Miller, Ward, and Harte), in the middle west (note Norris, Dreiser, Sandburg, Anderson, Masters, Herrick, et al.), and concurrently in the south (vide Peterkin, Stribling, Heyward, Glasgow). It has also happened among the immigrant minority groups. And because the same nation-wide wind chanced to stir up some dust in Negro America, whites and blacks deafen us with their surprised and vociferous ejaculations. Renaissance? Hell, it's a backwash.46

It was the Menckenian tone of this passage which took one by surprise—that, and its sweeping judgment of a sacred cow. Locke too had recognized the literary movement's debt to America's recent upheavals, but he had always stressed the distinctive integrity of the Renaissance. Now here was a young upstart calling the whole thing a "backwash."

Not only did Thurman question the racial origins of the Renaissance, he added (via George Schuyler's "Negro Art Hokum") an additional skeptical note. If the Negro was essentially American, how could he produce "an individual literature"? "What he produces in the field of letters," said Thurman, "must be listed as American literature, just as the works of the Scotchman Burns or the Irishman Synge are listed as English literature."47 This last remark was probably meant to upset the Old Guard (DuBois, James Weldon Johnson, and White), who had made a special claim for the Negro's artistic contributions.

Thurman once said to Granville Hicks that "the wealthy, aristocratic Negroes . . . are proud of us [the younger generation] unless we tread on their toes by saying unkind things about them or by painting a realistic and uncomplimentary picture of the race."48 Thurman, it seems, did not want to give them a chance to be "proud of us," and he took a special opportunity to do some foot-stomping in Fire, another magazine like Harlem which had a brief flare and then died after one issue. After the magazine's failure, Thurman claimed that its only purpose had been to be artistic, to deal with proletarian characters and not the "bourgeoisie."49 For these reasons, he said, the "best people" had become very upset over the magazine's appearance. Yet he was not being very candid in this instance. As editor he had put together the magazine in such a way that it would upset the "best people." Moreover, Fire illustrated a confession he made to Hicks about the split between the two generations of Negro intellectuals. Referring to the "older movement led by W.E.B. DuBois and James Weldon Johnson," he said, "They tolerate us, and we laugh at them."

When Fire made its short-lived appearance, Langston Hughes wrote to Thurman and applauded his "laughter." Hughes's praise of Thurman's
satirical column, “Fire Burns,” is indicative of the way most of the younger writers felt at this time. Hughes told Thurman that the column in the magazine “should be kept burning.” What was needed was “clever, satirical comment on the vices and stupidities of the race. Make it hot.”\textsuperscript{50} As far as the Young Wits were concerned, heat, not cool decorum, was what the race needed, and the contents of Fire bear out Hughes’s directive: The “vices and stupidities of the race” were indeed satirized.

In Fire’s opening story (“Cordelia the Crude”), written by Thurman, the narrator is an ingénue, a “respectable” Negro. Much to his surprise, he discovers that the innocent gesture of giving a young lady two dollars is the first step towards making her a prostitute. So much for the middle-class virtue of charity. In a languid sketch of a penniless, bohemian black artist (“Smoke, Lilies, and Jade”), Richard Bruce delights in shocking the bourgeoisie. At one point, the young man’s reverie turns to his mother and her stuffy companions who “scoff at him for knowing such people as Carl [Van Vechten] . . . Mencken . . . Toomer . . . Hughes . . . Cullen . . . Wood [Clement] . . . Cabell . . . Oh the whole lot of them.”\textsuperscript{51} The illusion that these people are his friends sustains his sense of importance, and although Bruce is ridiculing the young man because of his self-deception, he is also mocking the middle class for knowing nothing of the privileged world that the young man dreams he belongs to.

A kind of antiintellectualism ran throughout Fire, as if Thurman were reminding the “best people” that the world is often seamy and unpredictable. Zora Neale Hurston treated primal vengeance in “Sweat,” and she delved into the realm of abnormal psychology in “Color Struck.” The mental machinations of Hurston’s heroine in “Color Struck” made a perfect introduction to Arthur Huff Fauset’s short essay, “Intelligentsia.” Here Fauset roasted everyone who pretended to the name, but his targets were so vague that readers could not tell whether the intellectuals he was attacking were black or white or both. One thing was sure, however; Mencken was not included. Said Fauset, “One can admire truly intellectual types like Sinclair Lewis, Dreiser, H.L.M., and Shaw,” even though their followers were “carrion.”\textsuperscript{52}

In a sense, Alain Locke was caught in the middle of all this. He sympathized with the attack upon DuBois by the Young Wits; he had, in fact, published his well-known piece “Art or Propaganda?” in Harlem. Coming out on the side of art, he seemed to be fit company for the new iconoclasts. Yet there was a side to Locke which disturbed them. Despite his desire for realism, he shied away from what he called “Menckenian skepticism” (a “negative pole”),\textsuperscript{53} and his own language tended toward a certain vagueness. More than one black intellectual would have agreed with Walter White’s complaint to Claude McKay that Locke’s “usual indefinite manner [of speaking] . . . did not amount to much when boiled
down to words of less than two syllables." Locke's problem was in trying to be all things to all men — interpreter of the Renaissance to the whites, defender of the decencies to the Old Guard, and rebel to the new men. Unfortunately, he ended by losing his credibility with young and old alike, but especially with the young, who saw Locke's celebration of the folk as being at odds with their desire to be self-critical. He called their self-criticism decadence, as did DuBois, and they called it satire.

By comparing J. A. Rogers's From "Superman" to Man with Schuyler's Slaves Today, one can easily see the difference between the satire at the beginning of the decade and at the end. Published in 1917, Rogers's work is a cross between Gulliver's Travels and The Wizard of Oz. Certainly its satiric strategy is indebted to Swift. A southern senator sits down next to a Pullman porter and begins a conversation in which he assumes intellectual superiority. He might as well be Gulliver attempting to present his "civilized" trinkets to a Houyhnhnm, for he soon meets the surprise of his life. Instead of being an ignorant darkey, Dixon is the embodiment of the Menckenian ideal: intelligent, educated, articulate, and well bred. The southerner, of course, is just the opposite: rude, emotional, unread, and provincial in the most negative sense. The comedy of the situation lies both in Dixon's unruffled demeanor as he faces the senator's anger and in his encyclopedic rebuttals as he challenges the senator's ignorance. The major thrust of the satire concerns the southern legislator's "education." Just as Gulliver discovers that the horses are not the inferior creatures he at first deemed, so too the senator finally sees himself and his countrymen in the mirror of reality.

Rogers, in the end, finally backs away from the bleaker implications of Swift's satire. It is true that twice in the story Dixon calls for a satirist of the extremest sort: "Juvenal, Voltaire, Swift nor any of the great masters of satire ever had so pregnant and suggestive a theme as this color situation." And, "Whom does the white American really worship, I ask? the fetish of color, or the Christ whose name he mouths? What material for a satirist. Voltaire nearly laughed the Pope off his throne in the Vatican for less than this." Yet the book's conclusion suggests that the senator is not so bad that he cannot be saved. When the train arrives in Los Angeles, he is a new man — ready to give jobs to Negro actors in the Hollywood movie studio he owns and ready, in general, "to make our beloved America into a real republic." Appropriately, the final scene takes place in the West of Rogers's imagination; satire is a cleansing fire whereby a new America will be born from the ashes of the old.

By 1931, the world was not quite so rosy for George Schuyler. His second novel, Slaves Today, was originally to follow the satiric pattern of Black No More, published in the same year. However, the Juvenalian satire of the first novel becomes overwhelmingly grim in the second and completely dominates the occasional comedy. We get some sense of the
original plan of *Slaves Today* in a letter Schuyler wrote to Mencken describing an article he wanted to do for the *Mercury*. In summarizing the history of Liberia, Schuyler said, “The American Colonization Society of Northern sentimentalists and Southern slaveholders [was] eager to get rid of troublesome freedmen. These freedmen went to establish a Valhalla for Zigaboos and perhaps your readers might like to know how the experiment has turned out.” Both the published article ("Uncle Sam's Black Step-Child") and the letter to Mencken dwelled upon the ironic results of the "experiment." Since this experiment was so similar to the archetypal American experiment, we can easily imagine how this "Valhalla" turned out. An additional irony lay in the fact that just as England had kicked out our Pilgrim ancestors (and forced them to dress up necessity as a virtue), so too these Negro adventurers, having been thrown out of America (by "Sentimentalists," no less), were determined to put the best face on a bad situation. In short, the Republic of Liberia, which claimed to be a paradise, actually was run by thugs who were even worse than the white exploiters in America. In fact, they had taken their masters' lessons to heart, and did unto their brothers what had been done unto them.

In *Slaves Today*, a little of this satiric comedy is indeed present. The rulers of Liberia are not aristocrats (as one recent critic has asserted), but low-caste blacks who behave like white trash. They ride roughshod over the country with all the finesse and political subtlety of a Clarence Snopes. It is as if President Johnson, Commissioner Jackson, and Captain Burns—characters who symbolize three levels of power in Liberia—had taken a correspondence course in civic government from the Imperial Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan. Yet never are these characters simply knaves; rather, they project the very irrationality of evil itself. Schuyler's depiction of their villainy is unrelenting, and often this villainy appears to be without motive.

Thus Schuyler found himself in *Slaves Today* creating a type of black character which had no place within the accepted boundaries of realistic portraiture. It had been easy at the beginning of the 1920s to justify satire's grotesques, since they were white characters who had been shaped by the racist society in which they lived. The Negro satirist sometimes assumed that his satire would reform these grotesques through the corrective power of laughter. By the end of the decade, Schuyler seemed to suggest both that the grotesques could be black and that they might be beyond humor's redemptive touch. Yet neither he nor the other black intellectuals of the decade could reconcile this possibility with realism (Mencken's "normalities"), and the possibility of reconciliation would remain unacknowledged until Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940).

An intriguing question remains: Why did the object of Negro satire change color? That is, why did the satirists suddenly focus more attention
on their own than on the master race? One possibility may be that the vices of white people had passed the point of being funny. Throughout the 1920s, racism was as virulent as it had been during the prewar period; the Dyer antilynching bill died time after time on the floor of Congress, and if such were the case, was it still possible to laugh at white Americans who were insensitive to ridicule? Was it possible to maintain an urbane voice of gentle cynicism in the face of nightmarish Yahoos? But perhaps an answer closer to home might explain why the black satirist now lampooned black people instead of white. Perhaps the real reason lay in the disillusionment with the very dreams of the Renaissance itself. For if the Renaissance did begin as an internal affair, as Alain Locke had argued, then it was only fitting that when disaster came, the black intellectuals would turn inward for an explanation of what went wrong.

In any event, at the end of the decade there existed a wealth of fine writing that fulfilled Mencken's demand for self-criticism. The short stories of Zora Neale Hurston, Claude McKay, and Rudolph Fisher, and novels such as *The Blacker the Berry, Infants of Spring, Quicksand, Passing, One Way to Heaven, Black No More, The Walls of Jericho*—these tackled such difficult subjects as self-hatred (*Quicksand, Gingertown*), prejudice within the race (*The Blacker the Berry*), racial chauvinism (*One Way to Heaven*), and the black confidence man (*Black No More*). To a certain extent, Mencken had paved the way for this sort of satire with his Ovington review. Yet the call to depict the inner life of the Negro was intended to produce the Great Negro Novel. By the end of the decade, looking at Negro life from the inside had degenerated (at least in some eyes) to a kind of irresponsible smartness.

This was the way it appeared to Allison Davis, who, writing for the *Crisis*, accused a whole generation of new "intellectuals" of being "Menckenites." He focused specifically on George Schuyler and Eugene Gordon, "young critics, writing for magazines and Negro newspapers ... largely inspired by their master's attack upon Negro preachers and 'misleaders,' and his heralding of the 'self-critical Negro.'" Davis accused both Schuyler and Gordon of dealing in "eccentricities." Trying to be original, they sacrifice truth for wit, he wrote; their cleverness is "without taste, their radicalism without intelligence, their contempt for Negro leaders and our upper class, uninformed by serious principles." These men—Mencken included—lack a "discriminating judgment." In contrast to Van Vechten's espousal of primitivism and sensationalism, both Schuyler and Gordon yield to a facile iconoclasm: "A sterile cynicism has driven our Menckenized critics into smart coarseness." He added that both men and "their imitators" ("at two removes from Mr. Mencken") are playing the clown for white folk. Self-respect, emphasized Davis, is an important quality for black people, and both Schuyler and Gordon have lost it. The real
virtues of the race are “fortitude, irony, and a relative absence of self-pity,” and yet these two pretend that these qualities do not exist in order that they might dance the cakewalk before a gaping multitude.

By 1928, however, when Davis’s article appeared, many Negro intellectuals did not believe that these virtues were endemic to the race—at least not to the upper crust of the loaf. Fearful of disgrace, humorless, ready to run to the Wailing Wall at a moment’s notice—these were some of the charges leveled by Langston Hughes in 1926. It was because Mencken seemed to stand behind the younger men that his reputation took on a new meaning. Now the black intellectual community no longer saw him as a defender of the people but rather as a disturber of the peace—not the peace of the southerners, as in the early 1920s, but the peace of the race itself. Why criticize Negro preachers, some wondered, when the Klan was still marching in Washington, D.C.? Why focus on something as problematical as Negro “self-satisfaction” when most Negroes in the South couldn’t vote? This approach by a former friend did not make any sense to the Crisis, but it did make sense to those black intellectuals who were tired of a black audience that had criticized their shortcomings but had failed to support their best efforts. These intellectuals—bogus or not—believed with Mencken that in a sense the external racial situation did not matter. What mattered was a clean house in a disordered world. To these men, skepticism and self-criticism seemed to be the only ways out of the sticky mess created by the race itself. They were ready to write satire, to paint the Negro’s portrait for the gallery of fools.

The change in the object of satire was only one manifestation of the new mood of the Negro intellectuals, young and old. By 1927, many felt that the Harlem Renaissance had simply come and gone, without much happening in between. The biggest disappointment lay not in the race’s failure to write satire at the white man’s expense, but in the race’s inability to produce the Great Negro Novel. Mencken had stressed that such a triumph would herald the emergence of the race from immaturity to maturity. This view was consistent, of course, with the broader one that held that if the Negro could create great art, if he could prove to the world that Negroes were an artistic people and loved great art, then the race would be accepted into the pantheon of civilizations. And although satire was naturally considered to be a noble endeavor, having behind it such prestigious names as Swift, Shaw, and Mencken himself, it was not the noblest endeavor—at least not for the America of the 1920s. No, the literary form to excel in was not satire but the novel. If one could write the Great Negro Novel, then the race would have something to be really proud of.