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"Selecting the Harlem Renaissance."

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Critical Response

Selecting the Harlem Renaissance

Daylanne K. English

Henry Louis Gates, Jr., says that “it is difficult not to recognize the signs that African Americans are in the midst of a cultural renaissance,” and he numbers this renaissance the “fourth such movement in the arts in this century” (Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Harlem on Our Minds,” Critical Inquiry 24 [Autumn 1997]: 2). He dates the first renaissance from about 1890 to 1910; the second and “most famous” renaissance, the New Negro movement, from about 1920 to 1929; the third, the Black Arts movement, from “1965 to the early seventies” (pp. 3, 4); he dates the current renaissance from about 1987 to the present, with Morrison’s 1993 Nobel Prize its sure marker. To suggest that four renaissances have occurred in ninety-three years is perhaps to drain the term of explanatory power. African American culture has sustained vibrancy and power throughout the century; it is, instead, our criticism—our version of cultural history—that ascribes rise-and-fall patterns to culture in general, in this instance to twentieth-century African American culture, especially literature. As Gates himself says, “All renaissances are acts of cultural construction, attempting to satisfy larger social and political needs” (p. 9). Indeed, literary and cultural movements are always, at least in part, critical constructions as well; and many critics construct the 1920s and the 1990s as clear peak periods of African American cultural production.

What of the decades left out of Gates’s chronology? The 1940s and 1950s witnessed the ascendancy of a number of important African American writers, many of whom merit far more scholarly attention than they have received to date (with Richard Wright an obvious exception). Ann
Petry, Chester Himes, Gordon Parks, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Melvin Tolson produced some of their greatest writing during the 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s—all non-“renaissance” periods. Zora Neale Hurston’s novels and her autobiography, reflexively and insistently assigned to the Harlem Renaissance, were published between 1934 and 1948. I do not wish to argue that there was no cultural flowering during the 1920s. But I do want to suggest that there is a contemporary academic selection process at work whereby the Harlem Renaissance often emerges as the most compelling moment in the history of African American culture, one that (not coincidentally) lends itself particularly well to generalization as well as periodization. Moreover, the Harlem Renaissance seems, for many critics, to represent a ready cultural and historical parallel to today’s abundant African American cultural production.1

Gates argues persuasively for a kind of cultural, and perhaps sociopolitical, correspondence between the 1920s and 1990s, but he does not explore his own impulse to draw parallels between the two decades. Skipping a generation, he is speaking of, and to, the “grandchildren of Du Bois’s ‘Talented Tenth’” (p. 5). Contemporary scholars’ frequent selection of the Harlem Renaissance as a field of inquiry in the 1990s may have reasons beyond the obvious—that is, the movement’s rich and thrilling cultural record. At the same time, in what may well be a related phenomenon, there is widespread scholarly acceptance of certain, far from inevitable, constructions of the Harlem Renaissance. All too often, a handful of the editors and arbiters of the “most famous” renaissance are permitted to direct current interpretations, chronologies, and genealogies of the movement. This critical bias results, in part, from contemporary critics’ frequent, and surprisingly uncritical, acceptance of the self-conscious (albeit ambivalent) assessment of the Harlem Renaissance offered by some of its own stars—especially W. E. B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, and Langston Hughes.

On the one hand, many of the arbiters of the New Negro Renaissance saw themselves as stars of an important cultural movement. As

1. Gates does not argue, however, that the two movements are identical. He offers a clear and persuasive analysis of the particular social and institutional conditions that have produced and that characterize African American cultural production in the 1980s and 1990s: a “new presence and authority of blacks in cultural institutions,” a “diversified, integrated audience,” and so on (p. 7).

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Locke put it in his 1925 manifesto, “The New Negro”: Harlem has the same rôle to play for the New Negro as

Dublin has had for the New Ireland or Prague for the New Czecho-

slovakia.

Harlem, I grant you, isn’t typical—but it is significant, it is pro-

phetic. No sane observer, however sympathetic to the new trend, would contend that the great masses are articulate as yet, but they stir, they move, they are more than physically restless. The challenge of the new intellectuals among them is clear enough.2

According to Locke, the “new intellectuals” of the race constitute “the thinking few,” the “advance-guard” who must guide “the Negro” from “medieval America to modern” (“NN,” pp. 4, 7, 14, 6). On the other hand, despite such early, self-selecting optimism, several Renaissance writers ultimately considered the movement to have been a failure. Both Hughes in The Big Sea and Wallace Thurman in Infants of the Spring evaluated the Renaissance satirically, even cynically. Hughes famously described the decade as “the period when the Negro was in vogue,” when “Harlemites” were “sure the New Negro would lead a new life from then on in green pastures of tolerance created by Countee Cullen, Ethel Waters, Claude McKay, Duke Ellington, Bojangles, and Alain Locke.”3 But it was not only hindsight that provided such a dual perspective on the Renaissance. As Gates points out, there appeared to be a sociopolitical and psychological contradiction inherent even at its geographical and cultural source.

Gates notes that the New Negro writers held Harlem up as a wondrous cultural center, even as it “was turning into the great American slum” (p. 11). He observes a similar dynamic accompanying “today’s re-

naissance”; once again, “stark statistics” regarding African American ur-

ban life are coinciding with a flourishing of African American arts and letters. Gates warns that the current renaissance therefore “runs the risk of suffering the sorts of critique that we level against the Harlem Renais-

sance” now, in the 1990s. He worries that a middle-class bias obtains in both the 1920s and the 1990s, that both movements will have failed to match their cultural output with the “social reality” of their day (p. 12). In other words, like Hughes in 1940, Gates today wants African American artists and writers to take note of “ordinary Negroes”: “The ordinary Negroes,” said Hughes in The Big Sea, “hadn’t heard of the Negro Renais-

sance. And if they had, it hadn’t raised their wages any.”4

Like Hughes, Gates believes that Harlem Renaissance writers failed

4. Ibid.
to "explore what the hyphenation of class" cost. He argues that now, what "remains to be explored," in the fiction of the 1980s and 1990s, "are the lives and times of the grandchildren of the Bigger Thomases and Bessie Mearses of Native Son" (p. 12). Gates is taking today's writers to task for their failure to extend the literary project, not of Harlem Renaissance writers, but of Richard Wright (who stands metonymically for a nonrenaissance period). But a number of contemporary writers can be considered literary "relatives" (to use Ralph Ellison's term) of naturalist writers such as Wright and Ann Petry (as well as some Harlem Renaissance writers). Sapphire's Push and Barbara Neely's detective novels come to mind as clear exceptions to Gates's assessment; just because these books can be termed "female tale[s] of the transcendence and emergence of the self" does not then mean that they cannot also deliver some version (however controversial or contingent) of what Gates terms the "nightmare reality of black inner-city life" (pp. 11, 12). It is worth challenging customary evaluations—both of today's literature and of Harlem Renaissance writing—as overly optimistic or as socially blinkered.

As a result of their influence on entire generations of students of African American literature and culture, the evaluations of the Harlem Renaissance offered by popular histories and anthologies call for our particular attention. For example, The Norton Anthology of African American Literature contends that

With very few exceptions, none of the younger writers of the movement saw himself or herself as part of the radical modernist strain of literature set in motion in America mainly through the efforts of poets such as Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, H. D., and Wallace Stevens or by . . . James Joyce . . . In part . . . these writers were after a different business altogether. Most could not be completely taken, for example, by T. S. Eliot's epochal figuring of the entire modern world as a "Waste Land." For many of them, the 1920s was a decade of unrivalled optimism, and all through the generations of slavery and neo-slavery, black American culture had of necessity emphasized the power of endurance and survival, of love and laughter, as the only efficacious response to the painful circumstances surrounding their lives.5

Even given the usual pressures toward compression and generalization, this anthology's view of the Harlem Renaissance is particularly, even Troublesomely, selective; it offers at best a partial view of the movement and the period. At the same time, The Norton Anthology of African American Literature is allowing the writers themselves to determine our understanding of their role in modern culture; the above passage stakes the legitimacy

of its assertions on the way younger Harlem Renaissance writers saw themselves. Certainly, the Harlem Renaissance was not wholly a period of "unrivalled optimism"—nor did its younger writers necessarily see their project as wholly unlike that of the white modernists. But this realization does not serve simply, or even primarily, to connect the works of "younger writers of the movement," such as Nella Larsen and Claude McKay, to those of Eliot and Pound; what is more important, it serves to expand our notions of a modern African American literary and cultural tradition. To put this another way, we need accept neither the Renaissance writers' self-evaluation nor their criteria for success; as critics, we can adapt William Wimsatt's intentional fallacy in order to construct alternative (and perhaps more inclusive) assessments and genealogies of the Harlem Renaissance.

Scholars frequently cite the return of African American soldiers from World War I as the origin, the genealogical starting point of the New Negro movement (fig. 1). The Norton Anthology of African American Literature, for example, offers 1919 as the first year of the Harlem Renaissance. Historian David Levering Lewis concurs, identifying the "authentic beginnings" of the Harlem Renaissance with the 1919 return of soldiers.6 But when The Norton Anthology, Lewis, Nathan Huggins, and others date

the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance from African American soldiers' return from the Great War, they are also necessarily masculinizing its genealogy (fig. 2). Along with Van DerZee's photograph of the 1919 parade, this January 1927 photo montage (from a Crisis monthly feature called Men of the Month) implies what sorts of subjects are being cropped from many of the period's portraits of the New Negro and from conventional genealogies of the Harlem Renaissance. Together, these photos of soldiers and middle-class men suggest that our pictures of the Renaissance have often developed not only as optimistic and youthful, but also as decidedly male.7

But, in spite of The Norton Anthology of African American Literature's association of "optimism" with younger writers, it was in fact the older generation of men of the Harlem Renaissance—generally its editors and critics—who often sounded overly "optimistic." Locke was, as Gates puts it, "always an optimist" (p. 11). In "The New Negro," Locke declared that "the younger generation is vibrant with a new psychology; the new spirit is awake in the masses," while he lauded the "development of a more positive self-respect and self-reliance" and a "rise from social disillusionment to race pride" ("NN," pp. 3, 10, 11). Du Bois registered similar optimism. In his famous 1926 essay "Criteria of Negro Art," he claimed that once the "art of the black folk compels recognition," then "they will . . . be rated as human."8 It is precisely this sort of claim by Harlem Renaissance writers that has led contemporary scholars to conclude that the movement was a failure; its aesthetics did not enact its politics. Lewis, for example, has steadfastly maintained that the movement was a "failure." As he puts it, the Harlem Renaissance "was not a success on its own

7. We must not underestimate the importance of photographs for the period's construction of the New Negro, nor for our construction of the Harlem Renaissance. During the first decades of this century, developing technologies of the visual not only enhanced, but functioned as perhaps the primary vehicle of the period's optimistic racial-familial portraiture. Indeed, The Norton Anthology of African American Literature might have been more on target with its assignment of "unrivalled optimism" to the photographic, rather than the literary, texts of the Harlem Renaissance. This is not to say that all African Americans' photographs from the period were "optimistic"; The Crisis, for example, sometimes published graphic pictures of lynchings. Still, a fairly random selection of photographs from the periodicals The Crisis, Opportunity, and Messenger during the 1920s generally discloses a rather aggressively optimistic visual construction of a thriving black community. Likewise, the photographs of Van DerZee, by far the most well-known Harlem photographer of the day, seem to tell an almost uninterrupted visual narrative of bourgeois material success. Suggestively, Van DerZee's visual texts themselves are generally selected as representative, like the subjects they document. His "Raccoon Couple" picture is without question the single photograph most closely associated with the Renaissance, despite its 1932 date. The male New Negro, with his material prosperity (he possesses both car and woman) is, indeed, at the center of this particular picture. The continuity of vertical risers, from running board to brownstone stairs, underscores the subjects' upward mobility—even in the midst of the Depression.

FIG. 2.—Men of the Month. From *The Crisis* 33 (Jan. 1927): 147.
terms." By turning down the volume on the voices of Du Bois and Locke, by foregrounding the movement’s less “optimistic” tropes and texts, and even by simply selecting some often overlooked (but crucial) passages from its canonical works, we can develop alternative constructions of the Harlem Renaissance.

To locate a contrast to the textual optimism of Locke and Du Bois, we need only look to Claude McKay. Regarding his departure from New York for Russia in 1923, McKay declared in his autobiography that he had to “escape from the pit of sex and poverty, from domestic death, from the cul-de-sac of self-pity, from the hot syncopated fascination of Harlem, from the suffocating ghetto of color consciousness.”

McKay presented a similar diagnosis in his 1928 novel, Home to Harlem, wherein one character states: “Wese too thick together in Harlem. Wese all just lumped together without a chanst to choose. . . . Harlem is lousy with crazy-bad niggers.” Ray, Home to Harlem’s Haitian immigrant author and a partial alter ego for McKay himself, assesses Harlem even more harshly and vehemently. In thinking about settling down with his girlfriend, Ray concludes that “soon he would become one of the contented hogs in the pigpen of Harlem, getting ready to litter little black piggies” (HH, p. 263). Ray is the civilized discontent; he functions as a foil to the novel’s vital working-class hero, Jake, who represents another part of McKay’s own psyche. The educated Ray views the sexually transmitted disease that strikes the more natural and sensual Jake as emblematic of larger social ills. Ray worries about Jake, whom he describes as “a handsome hound, quick to snap up any tempting morsel of poisoned meat thrown carelessly on the pavement.” Ray worries, too, about another male friend, “a work pal he had visited in the venereal ward of Bellevue. . . . The misery . . . overwhelmed him there, until life appeared like one vast disease and the world a vast hospital” (HH, pp. 228–29).

Ray (and McKay) were not alone in their preoccupation with the “misery” of the modern world, particularly as experienced in Harlem. Nella Larsen’s novels Passing and Quicksand, for example, could hardly be considered “unrivalled” in their optimism. Moreover, as Deborah McDowell has demonstrated, Larsen, too, worried about the unfettered expression of black female sexuality. But, unlike McKay, Larsen critiques the social and political pressures on modern African American women’s bodies from the perspective of the women themselves. Her characters are not themselves “poisoned meat,” but their environments are undeniably toxic. Quicksand’s Helga Crane, wandering and perennially dissatisfied, is tragically unable to find a setting that fits her; Passing’s Irene Redfield

and Clare Kendry, like McKay’s Ray and Jake, clearly represent parts of a fractured psyche. Thus, *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*’s evaluation of the younger writers of the Renaissance, such as Larsen and McKay, as “optimistic” begins to look rather like Du Bois’s stark misreading of *Quicksand* in his famous (or perhaps infamous) combined 1928 review of *Quicksand* and *Home to Harlem*.

Du Bois describes *Quicksand*, saying, “There is no ‘happy ending’ and yet the theme is not defeatist. . . . Helga Crane sinks at last still master of her whimsical, unsatisfied soul.” If you have read the novel, you may find that this description fits neither the protagonist nor the novel’s ending particularly well. At the end of the book Helga is sure to die while giving birth to her fifth child. In spite of the novel’s obvious grimness, Du Bois is “optimistic” in his reading of it because he believes it represents a New Negro literary subject that he finds not only acceptable, but appealing. “Helga is typical,” Du Bois declares, “of the new, honest, young fighting Negro woman—the one on whom ‘race’ fits negligibly and Life is always first and its wandering path is but darkened, not obliterated by the shadow of the Veil.” Again, if you have read the novel, Helga probably does not seem to you to be a woman on whom race “fits negligibly.” We can start here in our construction of an alternative “genealogy” for the Harlem Renaissance, one that originates not with the departure and return—that is, the mobility—of black American soldiers, but with the mobility of African American women at the turn of the century, and the period’s anxieties about and pressures upon their newly mobilized bodies and texts.

We must note here that both Du Bois, in his overly optimistic review, and *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, in its deployment of the phrase “unrivalled optimism,” are seeking to establish the Harlem Renaissance’s distinction from whiteness, from Anglo-American modernism. Du Bois says that “white folk will not like” *Quicksand*. *The Norton Anthology* claims that the young Harlem Renaissance writers were simply not “taken by” Eliot’s picture of the modern world as a “‘Waste Land.’” But the Renaissance writers were, in fact, preoccupied by the possibility and the picturing of various modern, and only sometimes racially specific, wastelands. We have seen McKay’s diagnosis of a “too thick” and “crazy” Harlem, and of the “world” as a “vast hospital”; we have seen, as well, Larsen’s suffocating New York parlors; we have heard Bessie Smith’s dim and flooded southern “lowland.” Here, interracial distinctions lead to intraracial selection and exclusion: in any fully “optimistic” picture of the movement, the blues are left out entirely, and crucial passages from ca-


nonical novels are selected against as well. But if we keep in mind all these texts, in their entirety, we must conclude that, while Larsen's and McKay's and Smith's words may indeed reveal a sense of "unrivalled optimism," they also testify to a clear and widespread sense of urgency, even of anxiety and despair, during the Harlem Renaissance. Thus, Gates is mistaken when he argues that "the tension between the myth of Harlem and its social reality is [not] to be found in a text produced in that period" (p. 12). The texts and passages I have selected are indeed aware that their moment constitutes a crisis; they worry about who will bear their urgent message, and about what will be made of their limited opportunities.

Certainly, Gates is right to suggest that we can criticize many, although not all, Harlem Renaissance writers for their failure to explore "what the hyphenation of class costs." The middle-class bias of Locke and Du Bois in their artistic preferences has been well established. And even Larsen's Passing worries in troublesome ways about sterility, both literal and figurative, within the Negro bourgeoisie at the same time that it represents hyperfertility among poor, rural, southern African Americans. But the stakes were quite high for the identification, selection, and documentation of a New Negro, a new subject who would represent with justice and accuracy the modern African American. Most Harlem Renaissance writers, photographers, and filmmakers clearly understood themselves to be, at least in part, in "the business" of counteracting a long legacy of racist stereotypes in white fiction and journalism. They were, perhaps inevitably, going to leave many out of their portraits of modern African American subjects. In other words, Du Bois, Locke, Oscar Micheaux, and Van DerZee were painting a relentlessly urbane and optimistic picture for strategic, as much as for personal or ideological, reasons.15

As Gates puts it, the writers and artists of the Harlem Renaissance were "determined to transform the stereotypical image of Negro Americans" (p. 10) (figs. 5 and 6).

It is to this recurrent editorial and photographic optimism during the Harlem Renaissance that I wish to turn in order to answer a question that began this essay: Why do contemporary scholars so often select the Harlem Renaissance as a field of inquiry? To adapt Lewis's adaptation of Hughes's phrase, it seems that we are in a critical era when the Harlem Renaissance is in vogue; and that vogue is not only critical and historical, but creative as well. In her 1992 novel, Jazz, Toni Morrison locates a usable African American past in the 1920s. Gates argues convincingly that Morrison resolves the "tension between the naturalism of Richard Wright

15. It is worth noting here that Van DerZee documented not only the lives and deaths of the well-heeled residents of Harlem. In the early years of his career, he photographed working-class and impoverished rural southerners. Despite the powerful narrative, even documentary, quality of these photos (as well as their sheer beauty), they are rarely reproduced and are even more rarely selected as representative of Van DerZee's work (figs. 3 and 4).
and Ann Petry on the one hand, and the lyrical modernism of Jean Toomer, Zora Neale Hurston, and Ralph Ellison on the other” (p. 12).16

Indeed, *Jazz* does abstain from “unrivalled optimism” in order to offer us a fuller, a less retouched, picture of the Harlem Renaissance.

In *Jazz*, Morrison creates an atmosphere at once of optimism and suspense, appreciation and diagnosis, past and present, love and violence. And she begins with women: black women who have moved from a rural past to an urban present, women who represent Harlem, the Renaissance, and the period as a whole. In the first chapter, the narrator tells us “I’m crazy about this City,” where “any blasé thing takes place: clarinets and lovemaking, fists and the voices of sorrowful women.”17 The narrator continues, still in the present tense:

I’m . . . like the City in 1926 when all the wars are over and there will never be another one. The people down there in the shadow are

16. Gates’s lineage for the novel seems just right; but it also effectively destabilizes his four-renaissance model for twentieth-century African American literature by linking a contemporary novelist with writers of the 1920s, 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s.

happy about that. At last, at last, everything's ahead. The smart ones say so and people listening to them and reading what they write down agree: Here comes the new. Look out. There goes the sad stuff. . . . Forget that. History is over, you all, and everything's ahead at last.

We know, although the novel's characters do not, the nature of the "everything" that lies ahead. Yes, the worst—the depressions of 1893 and 1903, the South and its racial terrorism, World War I—was all behind the New Negroes, both the migrants arriving from the South and the already urbanized native Northerners. But we, the novel's readers, know that the stock market crash and the Great Depression, World War II and the Holocaust, are what lie "ahead."

Jazz, like its readers (but unlike its protagonists), can picture this denouement. While a beautiful scene is being created by a man and a woman together in Harlem, Morrison's narrator says, "The sun sneaks into the alley behind them. It makes a pretty picture on the way down" (J, p. 8). In other words, the sun is setting on this engaging picture even as it develops. The novel knows that the Harlem Renaissance and the Jazz Age may represent for us a time when we can dwell, vicariously, in unrivalled optimism, where we can return to a time when, for a time, "everything was ahead." But the book also calculates the costs of such
selective memory and selective vision. Morrison’s narrator says, “I’m crazy about this City.” Yes, she loves the city, but it is also crazy-making. Like McKay’s “too thick” Harlem, Morrison’s Harlem, even with its optimistic picture and its pleasing frame, will ultimately turn out to have blemishes. Indeed, what did the picture of Harlem lack, even in 1926? According to Jazz, in Harlem

everything you want is right where you are: the church, the store, the party, the women, the men, the postbox (but no high schools), the furniture store, street newspaper vendors, the bootleg houses (but no banks), the beauty parlors, the barbershops, the juke joints, the ice wagons, the rag collectors, the pool halls, the open food markets, the number runner, and every club, organization, group, order, union, society, brotherhood, sisterhood or association imaginable. [J, p. 10]

Like a Harlem-specific version of Henry James’s famous list of American lacks, Morrison’s list is as much about absence as it is about presence. And what is present is not as ideal as the crazy-lovers of the city would have it. Harlem has no “banks” and no “high schools”; in other words, it lacks the symbolic corridors of national power. Educational and financial institutions did not offer many opportunities to African Americans in 1926 Harlem.

The text thus calls into question the project of full and healthy self-creation in the absence of social and political power, and in the absence of a usable—and well-used—picture of both past and present. Can the New Negro construct and picture an authentic self as wholly modern, wholly urban and urbane? A thoroughgoing modernity, for Morrison, as for Fitzgerald and Eliot—and Freud, for that matter—will result in dehumanization and alienation, in psychological splitting and in community fracture, and in the repression of a shared past. A fully optimistic picture of 1920s Harlem—what Gates terms the invention of “Harlem as a site of the black cultural sublime” (p. 10)—necessarily airbrushes out Larsen’s pessimism, the impoverished who did not wear raccoon coats in 1932, the still-rural black woman. As Morrison’s narrator puts it, the “woman who churned a man’s blood as she leaned all alone on a fence by a country road might not expect even to catch his eye in the City” (J, p. 35). But there were Harlem Renaissance texts equally skeptical about the viability of 1920s urbanity, just as there are 1990s novels concerned about the “reality of black inner-city life” (p. 12).

So, once again, why are we, in the 1980s and 1990s, drawn to the Harlem Renaissance—and why are we so often willing to permit it “unrivalled optimism”? It could be that the contemporary moment has a “natural” affinity for the period. Perhaps we, too, believe that the “worst” is over. This time it is World War II and the Holocaust, the white racial violence and the assassinations of the 1960s, the “recession” of 1973, that
are in the past. Are we, too, living in a period of "unrivalled optimism"? I would argue that, like some writers and critics of the Harlem Renaissance, we often overlook some texts and individuals in our constructions of an ideal postmodernity. On the other hand, in spite of the persistence and the risks of selective memory and partial vision, it remains emotionally, intellectually, and politically enriching to study a period that we can still, in many ways, legitimately describe as an optimistic one. Of course, we should acknowledge, as Morrison and Larsen and McKay and Smith do, that the 1920s also carried a sense of suspense, an awareness that the "everything that lay ahead" could not be good. The artists of the Harlem Renaissance did not realize, perhaps, just how ugly the picture would get. Likewise, our current picture of postmodernity may not ultimately develop into a particularly positive one. But to dwell imaginatively in a time of Crisis, of Opportunity, of various and talented Messengers is to remember what may be of incalculable value to us as we face the "everything" that lies ahead.