We Wear the Mask

Paul Laurence Dunbar and the Politics of Representative Reality

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The Kent State University Press
KENT, OHIO

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The Glamour of Paul Laurence Dunbar

Racial Uplift, Masculinity, and Bohemia in the Nadir

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IN 1903, PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR was asked to contribute an essay on "Representative American Negroes" to an anthology entitled *The Negro Problem,* which featured commentary from T. Thomas Fortune, Charles W. Chesnutt, Booker T. Washington, and W. E. B. Du Bois. He took the assignment seriously, researching and inquiring into the lives of the men whose lives he sketched. By way of introduction, Dunbar provides a laconic definition of his framing term: "Some men are born great, some achieve greatness, and others lived during the reconstruction period. To have achieved something for the betterment of his race rather than for the aggrandizement of himself seems to be a man's best title to be called representative."[1] The first sentence, a renovation of a line from Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* (2.5), captures Dunbar's pessimism about success in the period called the "nadir" of African American history.[2] The third clause of the sentence is deadpan and ambiguous, suggesting that the standard circuitry among circumstance, greatness, and achievement cannot be assumed by those who "lived during the reconstruction period." Dunbar's allusion to the English author most often identified with Anglo-Saxon greatness is in the service of a stricture that African American achievement should also be identified only when it is a credit to the race. This ironic reconfiguring of cultural forms might have been called "symbolic action" by the great modern literary theorist Kenneth Burke, whose work is frequently cited by Albert Murray and Ralph Ellison for its usefulness for thinking about African American life. In his 1941 collection, *The Philosophy of Literary Form,* Burke writes about the way proverbs form a mutable social algebra that works as "equipment for living."[3] Dunbar's own work has occasioned urgent debate about the stylization of folk culture and whether his aesthetic forms an appropriate set of tools for negotiating modern life. In the face of nearly impossible contradiction, he brokers a compromise among the requirements of bohemianism, racial uplift, and the vernacular mode.

Dunbar was disappointed with his tremendous popularity. That his poetry in Standard English met with disinterest was a source of severe confusion, and he occasionally felt trapped by his audience's demand for dialect writing. This situation presents a jagged paradox: his own success as an African American poet is predicated on literary work that was taken to be an insult to his race. In his introduction to *Lyrics of Lowly Life,* William Dean Howells sets the terms of this entanglement: "He reveals in [the dialect poems] a finely ironical perception of the negro's limitations, with a tenderness for them which I think so very rare as to be almost quite new."[4] The progressive newness of Dunbar's vision is based on his penetration of the "negro's limitations." The latent contradiction would only be visible to later readers of Dunbar's work. Langston Hughes has Howells's support in mind when he writes in his seminal essay, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," that Dunbar was read with "the same kind of encouragement one would give a side-show freak."[5] Dunbar came to feel that by the end of the nineteenth century, the newly scientific ideology of race had become more pernicious.[6] This examination of Dunbar's ideas of uplift, bohemia, and folk culture will demonstrate that he was often much more interested in the potential than the limitations of black people. In his elegy to Frederick Douglass, Dunbar's antiquated usage neatly but suggestively characterizes the situation of African American achievement during the height of American racism: "We ride amidst a tempest of dispraise."[7]

Dunbar's critics associated his success with Booker T. Washington's agrarian-mechanical doctrine of racial uplift, and his dialect writing came to be seen as a capitulation to stereotype. His status as "the rejected symbol," in Darwin Turner's useful phrasing, is the result of his supposedly accomodationist cant.[8] Victor Lawson, author of the first book of literary criticism of Dunbar, writes, "The very popular jingles of courage and success, like the poems of race spokesmanship, emphasized an optimism based on a short-sighted part-vision of the needs, hopes, and aims of the Negro."[9] This diagnosis is based on some assumptions about literature and African American life in general, and Dunbar in particular, that need updating.

In the American literary tradition, it has been customary to see themes of uplift or improvement as the sign of bad writing. This view has its origins in Poe's concept of the "heresy of *The Didactic,*" and in the opposition of the American Renaissance writers to what they saw as the excessively prescriptive ethics of the "d——d mob of scribbling women."[10] By the 1940s, when Lawson wrote his book and the American Renaissance had formed the looming

consensus vision of nineteenth-century poetry, this view had found a home in New Criticism, which restricted the work of reading to examination of the text itself, and which saw the search for morals as fallacious or, again, "heretical." The occlusion of improvement from the high brow was meant to bulwark a new religion of literature or simply art for art's sake.

August Meier's *Negro Thought in America, 1885–1915* describes a development that must be seen as adjacent for the purposes of understanding Dunbar's project.[11] In this period, during which intellectual history is traditionally divided between the academic social criticism of W. E. B. Du Bois and the more practical program of Booker T. Washington, African American leaders across the spectrum turned to the idea of economic as well as intellectual and moral self-help to supplement the loss of their political efficacy.[12] In an essay criticizing the black press, Dunbar's complaint is part of this tendency: "The space that might contain some story or poem that would inspire the young reader to do or be something is given over to twaddle about the merits of the candidate for sheriff. The column that might be filled with helpful household hints to the girls whose mothers have so lately returned from toiling in the cotton fields, is devoted to exploiting the merits of the man who wants to be county prosecutor."[13] It is fair to argue that this repels, inasmuch as Dunbar appears to value "helpful household hints" over the development of real African American political culture or civil society. However, the inexpediency of this sacrifice should not prevent us from trying to understand what Dunbar "would inspire the young reader to do." With southern states seeking to limit suffrage through property and literacy requirements, this tactic was urgently political even as it appeared to refuse politics.

Nevertheless, because of his involvement with this aspect of the difficult terrain of black public life at the turn of the century and his engagement with the problem of the didactic in poetry, Dunbar's work came to bear the stigma of self-help twice over. He has never been treated as a parvenu, *arrivant,* or pretender by the African American cultural establishment that uneasily bears his legacy, although he certainly was by the white hotel clerks whom he met on his reading tours. The way that his work is diminished by the prejudice against self-help is evident in Sterling Brown's searing critique of Benjamin Brawley's biography of Dunbar in "The Literary Scene" column of *Opportunity.* In noting that Brawley has failed to situate Dunbar frankly in relation to other black leaders or to the problem of labor, he writes with visible disappointment that "the biography before us is uncomfortably close to Horatio Alger."[14] In the 1930s, such an association, however conditional, would have been deadly among the left-wing literary circles that might have been sympathetic to a black poet.

Since the publication of Meier's work in 1970, however, a number of scholarly projects have begun to provide ways of evaluating the rich array of responses to the nadir.[15] Dunbar saw himself as responding to a deeply felt need in African American culture. In the short story "One Man's Fortunes," about a young black college graduate who tries and fails to become a lawyer in his hometown, he writes, "All the addresses and all the books written on how to get on, are written for white men. We blacks must solve the question for ourselves."[16] Perhaps the most common theme of contemporary black self-help writing is this frustration with the absence of more writing of its kind, especially in the face of the flood of publications by white authors.[17] To get a sense of what Dunbar thought his readers needed, I'll turn to the work of his friend and editor George Horace Lorimer, a white self-help philosopher with his own ideas about folk culture and bohemianism.

Lorimer was the dynamic editor of the *Saturday Evening Post* from 1899 to 1937. The *Post* had been in circulation for around seventy years when it was purchased in 1898 by Cyrus Curtis, the owner of the *Ladies' Home Journal,* one of the most successful monthly magazines in America. Lorimer was brought on to differentiate the magazine from its towering sister publication. His strategy was to align the *Post,* which falsely claimed to have been started by Benjamin Franklin, with the kind of exaggerated masculinity that was fashionable at the turn of the century, following the lead of Teddy Roosevelt, dime novels, Bill Riordan's *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall,* and the evangelist Billy Sunday. These works presented themselves in the rough veneer of common sense and common living but were unerring in their focus on progress. Lorimer writes, "To get any sense of a proverb, I usually find that I have to turn it wrong side out."[18] The nostalgic patriotism for which the magazine is known, most closely associated with the covers of Norman Rockwell, who started at the *Post* in 1916, was not precisely the tone of these earlier issues. Lorimer courted the imaginations of young men with dreams of success in business, but he did not shy away from its ugly side. Frank Norris's novels *The Pit* and *The Octopus* appeared in the *Post* under his stewardship. Somehow, Paul Laurence Dunbar fit into this strategy: he was published in the *Post* no fewer than seventeen times between 1900 and his death in 1906. The height of the poet's career coincided with the meteoric rise of the magazine's fortunes.

Dunbar dedicated his collection of short stories, *In Old Plantation Days* (1903), to Lorimer, thanking him for suggesting its subject matter. The relationship appears not to have just been one of simple professional courtesy. In a

letter to his agent, Paul Reynolds, Dunbar explains why he continued to offer his work to Harrison S. Morris of *Lippincott's* and Lorimer once his popularity would have allowed him to find more lucrative venues: "Both are my personal friends and I should feel myself rather niggardly if I should withhold from them first sight of the things that are in their line merely because now that my things are selling better I could get better prices elsewhere. . . . I feel a sense of honor and obligation towards these men which is a little beyond price."[19] The word "niggardly" is not etymologically related to the ethnic slur that is its homonym—it has a Scandinavian and German origin meaning "narrow," unlike the Latin root *niger,* which gives us the ethnic slur. However, *The Oxford English Dictionary* does say that "coincidence in form and pronunciation in some regional varieties with 'nigger' have enlarged the definition of 'niggard' to include not only the sense of 'miserly' but also 'barbaric.'" The "sense of honor and obligation . . . is a little beyond price" but follows a mysterious aristocratic protocol. At once cautiously and flagrantly skirting internalized racism, Dunbar informs his editor that the character of his publishing practices reflects on his race. As in his poetry, plays, and fiction, he does so with a deft use of double language that belies settled prescriptions for the behavior of African Americans.

One place to look for a sense of the rules of conduct that Dunbar thought he might break by seeking better prices for his work is Lorimer's own series of advice columns in the *Post,* published contemporaneously with Dunbar's work. Lorimer took on the persona of a Chicago packing magnate writing letters to his effete son at Harvard University. Lorimer distills a vision of the modern captain of industry barreling into the machine age with native American brawn. But he also depicts a character who has learned to bring careful skepticism and humility to the rapidly differentiating and future-oriented business world. His willingness to adapt ostensibly folksy wisdom to the exigencies of a new situation is neatly exemplified in improvised proverbs that double as jokes: "Business is a good deal like nigger's wool—it doesn't look very deep, but there are a heap of kinks and curves in it."[20] So at the same time that Dunbar is taking less money for his work because he perceives that he has been initiated into a mutually beneficial order of businessmen, Lorimer uses antiquated caricatures of black bodies to fill out his image of the business world.

The column's epistolary form has a long and venerable tradition in conduct writing from at least the eighteenth century; both Benjamin Franklin's autobiography and the wildly popular work of Lord Chesterfield were published as letters to their sons. In the eighteenth century, these works provided the middle class with a window onto the inheritance of power—personal, social, political, and economic. Think of it in counterpoint with Dunbar's "Representative

American Negroes," which is a series of discrete biographical sketches quite unlike the intimate passing on of practical knowledge and useful structures of feeling that characterize the letters between father and son.

Lorimer's use of this form at the dawn of the twentieth century brings into question the insistent significance of genealogy, family, and race for a supposedly monadic modern individual trying to help himself. Pierrepont "Piggy" Graham comes in for all kinds of verbal abuse from his father, John "Old Gorgon" Graham. Old Gorgon begrudges the ease and privilege his son is afforded by his success. The prejudice against inherited wealth and the liberal arts education that often accompanied it was common among the newly moneyed robber barons. They didn't need new-fangled professional training or esoteric classical learning to get on in the world, just native grit. Of Pierrepont's desire to go on to graduate school, Old Gorgon says, "There's a chance for everything you have learned from Latin to poetry, in the packing business, though we don't use much poetry here except in our street-car ads., and about the only time our products are given Latin names is when the Board of Health condemns them. So I think you'll find it safe to go a little short on the frills of education; if you want them bad enough you'll find a way to pick them up later, after business hours."[21] After all, Richard Hofstader calls the *Post* an "unimpeachable source of anti-intellectualism" in his classic history.[22] But in bullying his son into the family business, Old Gorgon is compelled to indicate where his arcane skills might find be useful. To leave room for compromise, Graham imagines meatpacking as a potentially humanistic activity—"There's a chance for everything you have learned." It is an odd concession, given the character's comical blustering throughout. But it appears to be a necessary one, motivating Pierrepont to come back home to Chicago. In later columns, father and son are still communicating by mail because Old Gorgon, in physical need of some of the Old World culture he sought to limit to his son, is traveling to European spas to rest his overworked body. Despite the one-sidedness of the conversation—only Old Gorgon's letters are presented—there is real conflict to be reckoned with between education and industry, history and race, privilege and disadvantage, leisure and work.

Lorimer and his paragon both know, however, that the natural order of competition will remain preserved beneath the shifting terrain of culture. In the letters, courtesy is always a way of placating opponents, or seeming to be considering opposition:

> Tact is the knack of keeping quiet at the right time; of being so agreeable yourself that no one can be disagreeable to you; of making inferiority feel like quality. A tactful man can pull a stinger from a bee without getting stung.[23]

> Superiority makes every man feel its equal. It is courtesy without condescension; affability without familiarity; self-sufficiency without selfishness; simplicity without snide. It weighs sixteen ounces to the pound without the package, and it doesn't need a four-colored label to make it go.[24]

These insights are not unique to Lorimer; there are shades of Franklin here, and a whole history of self-help writing that preaches dissimulation as the way to win in a hierarchical society.[25] In this case, Pierrepont needs his father's help in coping with the resentment of his co-workers at the meatpacking plant, who have worked longer to get the job that he finds waiting for him after college. "Of course, everybody's going to say you're an accident. Prove it. Show that you're a regular head-on collision with anything that gets in your way. They're going to say you've got a pull. Prove it—by taking up all the slack they give you."[26] The manipulated language of these punned proverbs indicates the framing of force in the presentation of the self. Their individuality is in the way they sound both immanent, trans-historic vernacular honesty and interrupted, futuristic modernist irony.

The place that Dunbar's work might have in a world like this is difficult to imagine; unlike his contemporary Mark Twain, he never put his name to products and he was an unabashed classicist. In the 1910s and 1920s, Lorimer went on to become a rabid anti-immigrationist and turned the *Post* into an organ of aggressive racism and nativism. Responding to the regular appearance of the work of Octavus Roy Cohen, W. E. B. Du Bois wrote him a frustrated letter: "We are continually receiving by word of mouth and by letter, protests against the treatment of the colored people in the *Saturday Evening Post*." Lorimer responded, first defensive and then insulting: "There is not the slightest intention or wish on our part to be unfair in our treatment of the colored people. When Paul Lawrence Dunbar was alive he was a regular contributor to our columns and we would welcome to our pages another colored writer with his abilities."[27] In this private exchange between two very public men, Dunbar's misspelled name flashes up as an insult, his greatness again used to detract from that of "the colored people." His worries about seeming "niggardly" are finally allayed, but at the sacrifice that his talent is supposed to be unrecognizable among black poets of the 1920s.

Whatever betrayal may have been the conclusion of this story, it is important to note that Dunbar was able to find space in Lorimer's vision of the American literary imagination. While Lorimer was certainly looking for representations of African America that fit plantation nostalgia, he published "Negro Society in Washington," Dunbar's famous essay describing the lives of upper-class professional black families. His sense of the variety of American life, especially during Dunbar's career, cannot be underestimated as plainly xenophobic. At the very least, Dunbar and Lorimer share a recognition of the irony of self-help: to get ahead, you must have a vision of your origins that is as obscure and terrifying as it is lovely. For the poet, this meant rendering African American life in an extremely aesthetic lyric form.

Despite his frustrations with the appraisal, Dunbar was unwilling to let go of what Howells saw as his "distinctly modern consciousness."[28] In explaining his decision not to send a promised magazine to his future wife because of its erotic content, he writes declamatorily: "I am a Bohemian. . . . There is much purity of thought, motive and action in Bohemia as elsewhere—perhaps more. In this world it isn't so much among what people one lives or where one lives,—it is more *how* one lives."[29] In this self-description Dunbar allies himself with the still unformulated modernist emphasis on form and art as a way of life, in opposition to the romantic search for an expression of the spirit of a people or place. In a more speculative mood, he asks an interviewer: "Do you think it is possible now to invent a new form?"[30] Dunbar has a problematic and unconscious kinship with modern aestheticism—a decadent and blasé bohemianism.

As a poet working two decades before what David Levering Lewis has called "civil rights by copyright,"[31] Dunbar could not have been sanguine about the prospect that literature could resolve the tension between the realities of black life and the requirements of racial uplift. In a typical complaint about his audience's desire for dialect, he alludes to his ambition in conversation with the young James Weldon Johnson: "I have never gotten to do the things I really wanted to do."[32] He was often given to extremes of despair, which found their place within his poetry's wide range of sentiment, as in the short poem "Resignation":

> Long had I grieved at what I deemed abuse;
> But now I am as grain within the mill.
> If so be thou must crush me for thy use,
> Grind on, O potent God, and do thy will![33]

The contrast here with what Lawson views as optimism is almost too stark to mention. It is worth noting the rhetorical turn: Dunbar's speaker offers himself—"now I am as grain"—but then asks again for mercy—"If so be thou must crush me"—in consideration of his pitiful spectacle. Dickson D. Bruce Jr. writes definitively, "Here was the real paradox of Dunbar's writing. Known as the poet of joy and simplicity and as one of the first poets to make

a conscious effort to explore the black folk heritage, he was also the first black writer to create a literature of pessimism and despair. . . . In this creation he made an important break with the middle-class black literary tradition that had preceded him."[34] This assessment is useful in that it casts Dunbar's work in terms of innovation. However, it is not the syncopation of "joy and simplicity" with "pessimism and despair" that makes Dunbar's dramatic rupture with "the middle-class black literary tradition."[35] Take, for example, "The Poet and His Song":

> Sometimes the sun, unkindly hot,
> My garden makes a desert spot;
> Sometimes a blight upon a tree
> Takes all my fruit away from me;
> And then with throes of bitter pain
> Rebellious passions rise and swell;
> But—life is more than fruit or grain,
> And so I sing, and all is well.[36]

Here it is not simply the existence of the "folk" scene of the garden or the "rebellious passions" that comprise the interest, but rather the intrusion of the song itself, the capitalizing of culture within the emotional arc. The innovation is in the use of literature as a palliative—rather than as a tool for social advancement—a turn whose politics are necessarily obscure even as they are desperately political.

Two characters from Dunbar's fiction sketch out his understanding of bohemianism usefully for our concerns about racial uplift and the vernacular. Sadness Williams of *The Sport of the Gods* and Taylor of *The Uncalled* each play the role of an immoral monitorial friend to the troubled young male protagonist. The setting of *The Uncalled* (1898)—Dexter, Ohio, a small but burgeoning town loosely based on Dunbar's hometown of Dayton—presages the work of Sinclair Lewis, Sherwood Anderson, and Willa Cather, who often include a yearning aesthetically minded youth in their diagnoses of the modernizing Midwest. Fred Brent is adopted by a staunchly Methodist woman, Miss Hester Prime, after the death of his alcoholic mother. An older woman set in her ways, Miss Prime is not prepared to be flexible with a young boy, scolding or whipping him for giggling in church, fighting, or playing baseball, and she eventually forces him into the seminary. In the course of his heated meditations on vocation, morality, and hypocrisy in small-town Ohio, Fred turns to Taylor for advice as he tries to decide whether he is satisfied by the liberating poverty his choice to become a poet provides. Acting as the exemplar of hopeless *poète maudit* commitment, Taylor

responds with a cryptically naturalistic metaphor: "I chose the [calling] that gave me the most time to nurse the serpent that had stung me."[37] This occult foreboding fails to deter Fred, who is drawn to the lurid streets of Cincinnati in search of sin to test his own poisonous capacities. He eventually settles down to a more liberal Congregationalist home life and a clerkship at a meatpacking business, but Dunbar never subjects Taylor's influence to the moral judgment he reserves for the more conformist Midwesterners. His venom is categorizable as a kind of necessary antidote to the prohibitions of Fred's vaguely Calvinist upbringing.

A more fleshed-out but less directly artistic vision of the bohemian life is discernable in the character Sadness Williams of Dunbar's classic final novel *The Sport of the Gods* (1903). Sadness is a roustabout who hangs out at the Banner Club, "an institution for the lower education of negro youth" in the Tenderloin district of Manhattan, where the Hamilton family's final destruction takes place. He introduces himself with campy flamboyance: "Better known as Sadness. . . . A distant relative of mine once had a great grief. I have never recovered from it." The biological improbability of this idea of affect, detachment, and personality is his trademark and has echoes of Oscar Wilde and Mark Twain: "It's a pity you weren't born older. It's a pity that most men aren't. They wouldn't have to take so much time and lose so many good things learning."[38] Sadness's peculiar combination of flippancy and mournfulness becomes dangerous when he counsels Joe Hamilton in his artfully beggary lifestyle. For Joe, Sadness's style is profound. "The only effect that the talk of Sadness had upon him was to make him feel wonderfully 'in it.' It gave him a false bravery. . . . It was plain to him now that to want a good reputation was the sign of unpardonable immaturity, and that dishonor was the only real thing worthwhile."[39] His sophisticated enticement seals Joe's identification with a "great hulking, fashionably uniformed fraternity of indolence": "A peculiar class,—one that grows larger and larger each year in New York and has imitators in every large city in this country. It is a set that lives, like the leech, upon the blood of others,—that draws its life from the veins of foolish men and immoral women, that prides itself upon its well-dressed idleness and has no shame in its voluntary pauperism."[40] There is certainly no indication here of the sweet and light love of his verse, nor is there any hint of the fact that this "peculiar" vampiristic class has its origins in the sphere of art. In this bleak picture of the world, the artistic coteries of the Banner Club fail to produce any beauty besides the "coon shows" and the yellow journalism that gets the aged Berry Hamilton released from jail. Likewise, the moralizing in the novel about the theater and its influence does not square with Dunbar's own extensive and groundbreaking work with William Marion Cook and James Weldon Johnson in that genre.

Here in Sadness's lecture to Joe, just as in *The Uncalled,* the denizens of café society are characterized as diseased:

> It's dangerous when you're not used to it; but once you go through the parching process, you become inoculated against further contagion. Now, there's Barney over there, as decent a fellow as I know; but he has been indicted twice for pocket-picking. A half-dozen fellows whom you meet here every night have killed their man. Others have done worse things for which you respect them less. Poor Wallace, who is just coming in, and who looks like a jaunty ragpicker, came here about six months ago with about two thousand dollars, the proceeds from the sale of a house his father had left him. He'll sleep in one of the club chairs to-night, and not from choice. He spent his two thousand learning. But, after all, it was a good investment. It was like buying an annuity. He begins to know already how to live on others as they have lived on him. The plucked bird's beak is sharpened for other's feathers. From now on Wallace will live, eat, drink, and sleep at the expense of others, and will forget to mourn his lost money. He will go on this way until, broken and useless, the poor-house or the potter's field gets him. Oh, it's a fine, rich life, my lad. I know you'll like it. I said you would the first time I saw you. It has plenty of stir in it, and a man never gets lonesome. Only the rich are lonesome. It's only the independent who depend upon others.[41]

In this dynamic passage, the ironic way that Dunbar's bohemian characters describe themselves is given several figurative incarnations. Sadness draws a parallel between the Wild West of Twain and the dime novelists: "a half-dozen fellows whom you meet here every night have killed their man." The poverty of vagabondage is turned around as an "investment" in street knowledge—the Protestant work ethic of the starving artist. The prophetic is the rhetorical mode played out in a series of sharply dialectical epigrams, which have at once the ring of common sense and the scratching tone of an unforgiving modernism. It remains to be seen what experience gives these detached and exhilarating lines their bitter force.

Many of Dunbar's would-be bohemian characters—Sadness, Walter, and Taylor—are presented as detached from their homes and families. Sadness's father has been lynched, for instance, and so he has "aspired to the depths without ever being fully able to reach them."[42] Then the Hamilton family is evicted from their rooms because Minty Brown, a vengeful and gossipy young woman, brings the story of their shame to New York. His mother disowns Joe in disappointment and rage, sending him on the binge that culminates in his murder of Hattie Sterling, his dissolute actress-girlfriend. "It's been a long time sence you been my son."[43] Before concluding, I'll turn to a poem about black family life to tease out a conception of what is lost to the perverse characters to whom he gives such woeful life.

In "Little Brown Baby," from the collection *Poems of Cabin and Field* (1899), a man affectionately addresses his child, whose face and hands are covered with molasses. The poem was well liked enough to be made the title of one of Dunbar's unique art nouveau illuminated photo books. Joanne Braxton, in her introduction to the current scholarly edition of Dunbar's *Collected Poetry,* takes the poem as an example of his hidden cultural politics: "Dunbar refutes the popular myth that slave fathers did not love their children. . . . Here in his own subtle way, Dunbar argues that the black family did survive enslavement and that black fathers bonded with their children and attempted to shield them from painful encounters with racist oppression."[44] This reading misses some key accents in the poem that are integral to understanding Dunbar's sense of self-help within the context of an aesthetically rendered vernacular culture. If the poem is to be taken as an argument for the survival of the black family and as a record of that survival, then these themes should be understood in the terms that would have framed them at the time of the poem's composition. The survival of the black family and its protection from racist oppression would have been discussed in terms of racial uplift, a furiously contested set of ideas that are now politically unpalatable.

Racial uplift in "Little Brown Baby" is encoded in a tender scene unconsciously layered with social import. The father calls his wife to tidy the little boy while musing on his messiness. He arrives at a teasing conceit: that the boy will be eaten up by bees because he's covered in sweet molasses. Taking this further into playful teasing, he pretends not to recognize the baby:

> My, you's a scamp!
> Whah did dat dimple come f'om in yo' chin?
> Pappy do' know you—I b'lieves you's a tramp;
> Mammy, dis hyeah's some ol' straggler got in![45]

The father then goes on to summon the "buggah-man" to carry off the vagrant he has conjured into their midst. The appearance of the "buggah-man" in Dunbar's work is not unique to this poem; "The Buggah Man" and "At Candle-Lightin' Time" feature adult figures telling ghost stories to frighten their children. Even more horrifying, the speaker asks him to eat the baby:

> Buggah-man, buggah-man, come in de do',
> Hyeah's a bad boy you kin have fu' to eat.
> Mammy an' pappy do' want him no mo'.[46]

In these lines, which address neither the baby nor his mother, the indentation is subtly altered to indicate the change in voice for an imagined addressee. The

boy is so bad that a ghostly and presumably grotesque sentry must be called to make him disappear. But once he has thoroughly terrified the object of his teasing, the man begins to assure the baby,

> Dah, now, I t'ought dat you'd hug me up close.
> Go back, ol' buggah, you shan't have dis boy.
> He ain't no tramp, ner no straggler, of co'se;
> He's pappy's pa'dner an' playmate an' joy.
> Come to you' pallet now—go to yo' res';
> Wisht you could allus know ease an' cleah skies;
> Wisht you could stay jes' a chile on my breas'—
> Little brown baby wif spa'klin eyes![47]

The boy is reinvited into the family. That the man "wisht" his boy could "allus know ease an' cleah skies" is paradoxical given that he has just staged this scary scene. Here a threat masquerades as play. Braxton assumes that the buggah man is an apparitional white man. If so, why would a protective father want to frighten his infant son with an amalgamated incantatory figure of the world system that makes their lives contingent, violent, and impoverished?

It is left to the reader to speculate on the significance of this intimate and overdetermined little scene. In a narrow sense, the racial content of the poem is difficult to ascertain: it is not clear whether the boy's brown color is due to the molasses or his race. To what end is the boy exposed to the distinction between paternity and paternalism? Does the poem preoccupy itself with cleanliness and therefore white respectability? These questions are answered finally only at the peril of grisly pragmatism.[48] That the poem may have been composed in response to the flirtations of Dunbar's then-fiancée, Alice Ruth Moore (later Alice Dunbar-Nelson), complicates things immensely: "Do you know that I have had occasion to laugh at myself a number of times since your letter came. I cannot help feeling I am again an uncle and in fancy I see myself trotting little Alice Ruth upon my knee and singing lullabies to her. The best and tenderest bit of verse that I have done since I came here is a little lullaby called 'Little Brown Baby with Sparkling Eyes.'"[49] Dunbar-Nelson's letter is unfortunately lost. This sketchy conversational exchange about the poem does hint that it refers to their own affections through several layers of masquerade and transposed relation—parent and child to lovers, father and son to man and woman.

To restore a sense of aestheticism to Dunbar's work requires that one address the ludic element of his work, however morbid it may sometimes seem. The problem here is that the idea of play in Dunbar cuts too closely to the image

of happy slave. But this cannot disqualify the existence of play on the level of form. Dunbar's work, and his relevance to literary history is in his acute sense of the various possibilities available in the social exchange between black poet and reader. His agility with the permutations of the lyric scene is formidable.[50] The social critique and ethical rhetoric ("meter-making argument" in Emerson's phrase, racial uplift in the African American public sphere of Dunbar's moment) are disguised in half-tone ironies and dense nostalgic mist. In "Little Brown Baby," Dunbar superimposes a set of relations (artist-lovers, black and white society) onto a detached sequence of loving family life. Paul Valéry, in an essay on a well-known poem of his own, "Le Cimetière marin," offers a statement of his goals that may well have described Dunbar's as well: "In the lyric universe each moment must consummate an indefinable alliance between the perceptible and the significant. . . . There is not one time for the 'content' and another for the 'form'; and composition in this genre is not only opposed to disorder or disproportion but also to decomposition. If the meaning and the sound can easily be dissociated, the poem decomposes."[51] Valéry demands of himself a union of form and content so absolute that it takes into its sweep the parallel dichotomy of "the perceptible and the significant." The question of analysis—the parsing of technique and meaning—is to be left to some moment after the poem. Dunbar shares some of this commitment to the holism of poetic experience, to the breaking forth of the lyric. It is in this way that he is able to maintain the compromise between the very disparate concerns of his literary work—uplift, improvement, and self-help; the vernacular language and folk culture of African Americans; and finally the requirements of the cult of art, or bohemia, as he calls it.

The word "glamour" appears four times in *The Sport of the Gods* in reference to the sordid attractions of New York City life. There is a strange wrinkle in its etymology, which will provide a fitting conclusion to these remarks. The use of the word "glamour" to signify beauty and high living was an American development roughly contemporaneous with Dunbar's writing. The word is of Scottish origin, originally signifying magic, enchantment, or the occult. It is a derivative of the English word "grammar," meaning the system of linguistic inflection and syntax. This connection between grammar and witchcraft goes back to the Middle Ages, when "grammar" (*gramer* in Old English and *gramarye* in Old French, though both occur in English) signified both general knowledge—in a sense like philology—and specifically the knowledge of Latin in particular. Both Walter Scott and Robert Burns used the term "glamour" in

this sense, carrying with it a longtime understanding of language as imported evil magic. The word "spelling" has a similar double meaning.

For Dunbar, poetry experiments in deep histories of language and cultural knowledge. In a letter to Helen Douglass about his elegy for her husband, Dunbar defends his writing: "As to your remarks about my dialect, I have nothing to say save that I am sorry to find among intelligent people those who are not able to differentiate dialect as a philological branch from the burlesque of negro minstrelsy."[52] He came to know that he could not protect his "philological" inquiry from the necromancy of racism and so became a dark artist himself. In "The Paradox," he is at his most vatic: "I am the mother of sorrows, / I am the ender of grief; / I am the bud and the blossom, / I am the late-falling leaf. / I am thy priest and thy poet, / I am thy serf and thy king."[53] These lines, confident and melancholic, declare an essence at once aligned with and overarching the categories of contemporary identity. The powers reserved therein by poetry were left outside the reach of the institutional languages of racial uplift and vernacular culture. Dunbar's sad grace left a choreography for American poetry that is not yet fully danced out.

Notes

Thanks to Courtney Boissonnault and Marcellus Blount, without whom this essay could not have been written.

1. Paul Laurence Dunbar, "Representative American Negroes," in *The Paul Laurence Dunbar Reader: A Selection of the Best of Paul Laurence Dunbar's Poetry and Prose, Including Writings Never Before Available in Book Form,* ed. Jay Martin and Gossie H. Hudson (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1975), 51.

2. Dunbar's periodization is perhaps different from our own; following contemporary convention, he assumes that Reconstruction is still going on at the turn of the century. For "the nadir," see Rayford Logan's *The Negro in American Life and Thought: The Nadir, 1877–1901* (New York: Dial Press, 1954).

3. Kenneth Burke, "The Philosophy of Literary Form" and "Literature as Equipment for Living," in *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973). In associating Dunbar with American modernism, I have also taken cues from larger framings of the term "modernism" found in Matei Calinescu's *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1987) and Marshall Berman's *All That Is Solid Melts into Air* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982). As well, I have also benefited from the perspective of Cary Nelson's *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910–1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992).

4. William Dean Howells, introduction to *The Complete Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1921), xvii–xviii.

5. Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," *Nation,* June 23, 1926, 693. Having been christened "poet 'low-rate' of [the] Harlem," by the *Chicago Whip* (Feb. 26, 1927), a backhanded compliment to Dunbar and his immediate predecessor, Albery Allson Whitman, the "Poet Laureate of the Negro Race," Hughes was in a good position to comment on this situation. On Whitman, see Joan R. Sherman, ed., *African-American Poetry of the Nineteenth Century: An Anthology* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 236; for Hughes, see Arnold Rampersad's "Langston Hughes's *Fine Clothes to the Jew,*" *Callaloo* 26 (Winter 1986): 151.

6. See especially George Frederickson's *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817–1914* (New York: Harper & Row) and C. Vann Woodward's *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955).

7. *The Collected Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar,* ed. Joanne M. Braxton (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1993), 208.

8. Darwin T. Turner, "Paul Laurence Dunbar: The Rejected Symbol," in *The Journal of Negro History* 52, no. 1 (1967): 1–13; E. Franklin Frazier, in *Black Bourgeoisie: The Rise of a New Middle Class* (New York: Free Press, 1957), tells how "the small Negro elite, comprised mostly of mulattoes, had reacted . . . against" Dunbar's dialect poetry (124). However, this passing comment contradicts the numerous contemporary accounts and the poet's own famous exposé in the *Saturday Evening Post,* "Negro Society in Washington." Also see Willard B. Gatewood's voluminous *Aristocrats of Color: The Black Elite, 1880–1920* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2000). My sense of the way that these scenes of reading inform one another successively and dialectically is based on the work of two critics: Jonathan Arac, especially his *Critical Genealogies: Historical Situations for Postmodern Literary Studies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), and Jerome McGann, especially an essay on one of Dunbar's influences, "Keats and the Historical Method in Literary Criticism," *MLN* 94, no. 5 (1979): 988–1032.

9. Victor Lawson, *Dunbar Critically Examined* (Washington, D.C.: Associated Publishers, 1941), 48.

10. Edgar Allan Poe, "The Poetic Principle," in *Essays and Reviews* (New York: Library of America, 1984), 75; Nathaniel Hawthorne to William D. Ticknor, Jan. 19, 1855, in *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne,* ed. William Charvat, Roy Harvey Pearce, and Claude M. Simpson (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1962), 17:304.

11. August Meier, *Negro Thought in America, 1880–1915: Racial Ideologies in the Age of Booker T. Washington* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1970).

12. There was some disagreement as to the place of the arts in this program. Alexander Crummell, for instance, in *Africa and America* (New York: Negro Universities, 1969), voiced his concern about what he saw as "an addiction to aesthetical culture as a special vocation of the race" (22), qtd. in Kevin Gaines's *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996). In *Negro Thought in America,* Meier notes that Dunbar's celebrity should be viewed alongside the contemporary institutionalization of African American culture through elite literary societies and magazines (266–69).

13. "Of Negro Journals," in *In His Own Voice: The Dramatic and Other Uncollected Works of Paul Laurence Dunbar,* ed. Herbert Woodward Martin and Ronald Primeau (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002), 174–75.

14. Sterling Brown, "The Literary Scene," *Opportunity,* Sept. 1937, 216.

15. Kenneth Warren has reminded readers of Howells and James that the work of Anna Julia Cooper and Charles Chesnutt was integral to those writers' sense of American life in his *Black and White Strangers: Race and American Literary Realism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993). The anthologies edited by Joan R. Sherman as well as her *Invisible Poets: Afro-Americans of the Nineteenth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974); Dickson D. Bruce Jr.'s *Black American Writing from the Nadir: The Evolution of a Literary Tradition, 1877–1915* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989); Jean Wagner's *Black Poets of the United States: From Paul Laurence Dunbar to Langston Hughes,* trans. Kenneth Douglas (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973); and Chidi Ikonné's *From DuBois to Van Vechten: The Early New Negro Literature, 1903–1926* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1981) are all useful for filling in the literary historical context for Dunbar's work.

16. *Dunbar Reader,* 140.

17. A great deal of the growing scholarly literature on black self-help and the doctrine of racial uplift takes literature as at least a partial focus. Gaines's *Uplifting the Race* is the only work to give substantial treatment to Dunbar, treating the way his views of urbanization both overlap with and diverge from uplift ideology. See also Meier, *Negro Thought;* Saidiya Hartman, "Fashioning Obligation," in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); William L. Andrews, "The Representation of Slavery and the Rise of Afro-American Literary Realism," in *Slavery and the Literary Imagination,* ed. Deborah McDowell and Arnold Rampersad (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 62–80; Ralph Luker, *The Social Gospel in Black and White: American Racial Reform 1885–1912* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991); Carla Peterson, *Doers of the Word: African-American Women Speakers and Writers in the North (1830–1880)* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); and Jacqueline Moore, *Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois, and the Struggle for Racial Uplift* (Wilmington, Del.: SR Books, 2003).

18. George Lorimer, *Letters from a Self-Made Merchant to His Son* (Boston: Small, Maynard, 1902), 116.

19. Paul Laurence Dunbar to Paul Reynolds, Oct. 25, 1901, courtesy of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library. Most of what has survived of Dunbar's business correspondence languishes at the Ohio Historical Society in a difficult-to-translate species of shorthand that was indigenous to Ohio. Two more letters to Lorimer, as well as a number of others to public figures like W. E. B. Du Bois, are in that collection, but I've been unable as yet to decode them. The story of Dunbar's relationship to Lorimer is mentioned in passing by Peter Revell in what is perhaps the most comprehensive book-length study of Dunbar: *Paul Laurence Dunbar* (Boston: Twayne, 1979), 107–9.

20. Lorimer, *Letters,* 151.

21. Ibid., 29–30.

22. Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Vintage, 1962), 218.

23. Lorimer, *Letters,* 163.

24. Ibid., 89–90.

25. See especially chapters 1 and 2 of Karen Halttunen's *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830–1870* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1982).

26. George Lorimer, *Old Gorgan Graham: More Letters from a Self-Made Merchant to His Son* (New York: J. H. Sears, 1927), 34.

27. George Lorimer to W. E. B. Du Bois, Dec. 22, 1922, *The Correspondence of W. E. B. Du Bois: Selections, 1877–1934* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), 259.

28. Howells, introduction, xvi.

29. *Dunbar Reader,* 434.

30. *In His Own Voice,* 206.

31. David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (New York: Penguin, 1997), xxviii.

32. Qtd. in James Weldon Johnson, *Along This Way: The Autobiography of James Weldon Johnson* (New York: Da Capo, 2000), 161.

33. *Collected Poetry,* 106, lines 1–4.

34. Bruce, *Black American Writing,* 98. This view of Dunbar is consonant with William L. Andrews's repeated insistence that Dunbar's work is much more cynical than both the hopeful self-help ideology of Frances E. W. Harper's *Iola Leroy* and the calls for progressive social reforms that conclude Charles W. Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition.* See his introduction to Dunbar's *The Sport of the Gods* (New York: Signet Classic, 1999), xi, and *The Literary Career of Charles W. Chesnutt* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), 87.

35. The black middle-class literary tradition is difficult to identify from the context here: are happy poems middle class? In a work with significantly different priorities from Bruce's, Wilson J. Moses refers to Dunbar's "Ode to Ethiopia" in his *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850–1925* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1978), partly in support of his halting axiom: "Black nationalism is a genteel tradition in English letters."

36. *Collected Poetry,* 5, lines 25–32.

37. Dunbar, *The Uncalled* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1898), 140.

38. Dunbar, *Sport,* 66, 64, 83.

39. Ibid., 85–86.

40. Ibid. The scholarly writing on black bohemia and its cognates before the New Negro movement is, happily, growing. William J. Maxwell's essay on Dunbar's bohemianism was not published in time for me to consult for this piece but is forthcoming in the *African American Review.* Monica Miller's project on the black dandy is also due out soon, but see her "W. E. B. Du Bois and the Dandy as Diasporic Race Man" in *Callaloo* 26, no. 3 (2003): 738–65. Also important is Houston Baker's reading of *The Sport of the Gods,* which does not take notice of Sadness Williams or his bohemianism but does emphasize the importance of form as it is figured in the novel. Baker's argument is that the theft blamed on Berry Hamilton by the artist Frank Oakley is replicated in the destruction of his family by the phantasmagoric life of the city epitomized in the coon shows' "sea of sense"—each an artistic corruption. For Baker, this unity opens up the possibility that Dunbar's indication of the vast will that controls the fate of his characters signals an awareness of authorial power as much as it does resignation before social circumstances. "The characters of Dunbar's work are, finally, victims of their own individual modes of processing reality. Their failings are paradoxical results of their peculiarly human ability (and inclination) to form theories of knowledge," which are corrected by the white "blues detective" and yellow journalist Skaggs. An emphasis on Sadness shifts the focus away from the progressive social reform at which his whistle-blowing presumably aims, toward a character who is a sort of counter-imaginary, or "buggah-man," of black self-help. See Baker, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 124–25.

41. Dunbar, *Sport,* 84–85.

42. Ibid., 84.

43. Ibid., 80.

44. *Collected Poetry,* xxvii.

45. Ibid., 134, lines 13–16.

46. Ibid., 134, lines 21–23.

47. Ibid., 134, lines 25–32.

48. Booker T. Washington's implausibly superficial "gospel of the tooth-brush" in *Up from Slavery* (New York: Norton, 1996) resonates with the father's joking disapproval of the child's over-indulgence (80).

49. *Dunbar Reader,* 442.

50. This has been most forcefully demonstrated by Marcellus Blount in his "The Preacherly Text: African American Poetry and Vernacular Performance," *PMLA* 107, no. 3 (1992): 582–93.

51. Paul Valéry, "Concerning 'Le Cimetière marin,'" in *The Art of Poetry* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1958), 150.

52. "Paul Dunbar," in *Poetry Criticism: Excerpts from Criticism of the Works of the Most Significant and Widely Studied Poets of World Literature,* vol. 5 (Detroit: Gale Research, 1992), 143.

53. *Collected Poetry,* 89, lines 1–4, 6.