

selves have often wearied of, but which, like death, remains one of the imperishable themes on which is made the poetry that has moved men's hearts through all ages. In her ingenuously wrought verses, through sheer simplicity and spontaneousness, Mrs. Johnson often sounds a note of pathos or passion that will not fail to waken a response, except in those too sophisticated or cynical to respond to natural impulses. Of the half dozen or so colored women writing creditable verse, Anne Spencer¹ is the most modern and least obvious in her methods. Her lines are at times involved and turgid and almost cryptic, but she shows an originality which does not depend upon eccentricities. In her "Before the Feast of Shushan" she displays an opulence, the love of which has long been charged against the Negro as one of his naïve and childish traits, but which in art may infuse a much needed color, warmth and spirit of abandon into American poetry.

John W. Holloway,² more than any Negro poet writing in the dialect today, summons to his work the lilt, the spontaneity and charm of which Dunbar was the supreme master whenever he employed that medium. It is well to say a word here about the dialect poems of James Edwin Campbell.³ In dialect, Campbell was a precursor of Dunbar. A comparison of his idioms and phonetics with those of Dunbar reveals great differences. Dunbar is a shade or two more sophisticated and his phonetics approach nearer to a mean standard of the dialects spoken in the different sections. Campbell is more primitive and his phonetics are those of the dialect as spoken by the Negroes of the sea islands off the coasts of South Carolina and Georgia, which to this day remains comparatively close to its African roots, and is strikingly similar to the speech of the uneducated Negroes of the West Indies. An error that confuses many persons in reading or understanding Negro dialect is the idea that it is uniform. An ignorant Negro of the uplands of Georgia would have almost as much difficulty in understanding an ignorant sea island Negro as an Englishman would have. Not even in the dialect of any particular section is a given word always pronounced in precisely the same way. Its pronunciation depends upon the preceding and following sounds. Sometimes the combination permits of a liaison so close that to the uninitiated the sound of the word is almost completely lost.

The constant effort in Negro dialect is to elide all troublesome consonants and sounds. This negative effort may be after all only positive laziness of the vocal organs, but the result is a softening and smoothing which makes Negro dialect so delightfully easy for singers.

Daniel Webster Davis⁴ wrote dialect poetry at the time when Dunbar was writing. He gained great popularity, but it did not spread beyond his own race. Davis had unctuous humor, but he was crude. For illustration, note the vast stretch between his "Hog Meat" and Dunbar's "When de Co'n Pone's Hot," both of them poems on the traditional ecstasy of the Negro in contemplation of "good things" to eat.

It is regrettable that two of the most gifted writers included were cut off so early in life. R. C. Jamison and Joseph S. Cotter, Jr.,⁵ died several years

1. African American poet (1882-1975).
2. African American poet (1865-1920).
3. African American poet and journalist (1867-1896).
4. African American poet and orator (1862-

1913).
5. African American poet (1895-1919). Roscoe C. Jamison wrote *Negro Soldiers and Other Poems* (1918).

ago, both of them in their youth. Jamison was barely thirty at the time of his death, but among his poems there is one, at least, which stamps him as a poet of superior talent and lofty inspiration. "The Negro Soldiers" is a poem with the race problem as its theme, yet it transcends the limits of race and rises to a spiritual height that makes it one of the noblest poems of the Great War. Cotter died a mere boy of twenty, and the latter part of that brief period he passed in an invalid state. Some months before his death he published a thin volume of verses which were for the most part written on a sick bed. In this little volume Cotter showed fine poetic sense and a free and bold mastery over his material. A reading of Cotter's poems is certain to induce that mood in which one will regretfully speculate on what the young poet might have accomplished had he not been cut off so soon.

As intimated above, my original idea for this book underwent a change in the writing of the introduction. I first planned to select twenty-five to thirty poems which I judged to be up to a certain standard, and offer them with a few words of introduction and without comment. In the collection, as it grew to be, that "certain standard" has been broadened if not lowered; but I believe that this is offset by the advantage of the wider range given the reader and the student of the subject.

I offer this collection without making apology or asking allowance. I feel confident that the reader will find not only an earnest for the future, but actual achievement. The reader cannot but be impressed by the distance already covered. It is a long way from the plaints of George Horton to the invectives of Claude McKay, from the obviousness of Frances Harper to the complexness of Anne Spencer. Much ground has been covered, but more will yet be covered. It is this side of prophecy to declare that the undeniable creative genius of the Negro is destined to make a distinctive and valuable contribution to American poetry. * * *

1921

PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR

1872-1906

Dubbed the "Poet Laureate of the Negro race" by Booker T. Washington and praised by readers on both sides of the color line, Paul Laurence Dunbar was best known in his own time for his lively and genial verse in black dialect. Although he was not the first African American to write in this idiom, Dunbar demonstrated both the talent to "feel the Negro life aesthetically" and the craftsmanship to "express it lyrically," as the influential white critic William Dean Howells wrote in his introduction to Dunbar's *Lyrics of Lowly Life* (1896), the poet's best-selling book. Yet for all the unprecedented critical and commercial celebrity that Dunbar enjoyed during his relatively brief heyday, his place at the welcome table of twentieth-century literary criticism has often been challenged, and sometimes denied. Although African American schools, cultural societies, and literary prizes were named in Dunbar's honor in the

wake of his untimely death, during the last half-century Dunbar has frequently been treated as a cautionary example: a black artist co-opted by white media hype, a poet who by singing "serenely sweet" to whites only postponed the bitter realization resonant in his most poignant line: "I know why the caged bird sings."

A most unlikely candidate for literary fame in turn-of-the-century white supremacist America, Dunbar made his way to the top by remaking a regional persona into a racial one. The regional, or local color point of view, personified in a folksy, nostalgic celebrant of rural life and homely values, had charmed readers of American regional poetry and fiction since the end of the Civil War era. During the 1870s and 1880s, in the work of whites such as Irwin Russell and Joel Chandler Harris and blacks such as Daniel Webster Davis, the "old-time Negro," an entertaining black-face variant of the popular local color persona, began to make a name for himself in American literature. His peculiar dialect lent an air of apparent authenticity to the stories he told of quaint, amusing, and contentedly dependent blacks in the prewar and postwar South. Dunbar's poetry capitalized on the appeal that African American folk life in the South had to the sizable national reading audience won over by Harris and other cultivators of the plantation myth of benign southern race relations. A reading of Dunbar's most enduring poem, "We Wear the Mask," suggests that he may well have been aware of the liability of allowing his own poetry to evoke an image of black folk that played on thoughtless prejudices and degrading stereotypes. But to tar all of Dunbar's dialect poetry with the brush of social accommodationism is to forget that wearing the mask let Dunbar "mouth with myriad subtleties" truths that whites refused to confront face to face.

Dunbar learned about African American rural folk from his parents, former Kentucky plantation slaves whose stories of their pre-Emancipation experiences gave the future writer much valuable material. A city dweller practically all his life, Dunbar was born in Dayton, Ohio, in 1872. After his parents' divorce when he was four years old, he grew up under the care of his watchful and encouraging mother, Matilda Glass Dunbar. Paul was an excellent student at Dayton High School; though the only African American in the school, he was elected president of his class and delivered the class's graduation poem in June 1891. Refused subsequent employment in Dayton newspaper and legal offices because of his color, Dunbar found a job as an elevator operator. Between calls he wrote poems and articles for various midwestern newspapers while studying his favorite poets: Tennyson, Shakespeare, Keats, Poe, Longfellow, and the Midwest's most famous regionalist, James Whitcomb Riley.

In 1893 Dunbar took out a loan to subsidize the printing of his first book, *Oak and Ivy*. This collection of fifty-six poems impressed many of the poet's early readers by its range of matter and mood and by the maturity of its technique. No one seems to have been bothered by the ease with which Dunbar could sound sentimental, even reactionary, about the pre-Emancipation South in the dialect poem "Goin' Back" while proclaiming elsewhere in the volume, in "Ode to Ethiopia," his pride in his race's progress toward an expanding freedom. Six years later the poet hinted at a reason behind the double-voiced way he spoke about race—seemingly carefree when in black dialect, but more serious and brooding in standard English. In "Sympathy," a self-revealing lament, Dunbar forecast his fate: like the song of a caged bird, his verse, although emanating from an intense desire for full artistic self-expression, would be deliberately misheard by whites as merely "a carol of joy or glee."

Dunbar's detractors have argued that he himself abetted this misevaluation by regaling his public with too many easygoing, uncritical portrayals of African American life and character in his dialect poetry. Dunbar's defenders answer that although the largest proportion of his verse was not in dialect, whites showed little interest in this side of the poet's talent. Inevitably constrained by the tastes of the times, Dunbar, like many of his literary contemporaries, white as well as black, tried to find ways to enlighten his audience without alienating them. Thus in his best dialect poems, such

as "When Malindy Sings" and "An Ante-Bellum Sermon," Dunbar paid tribute to the artistly inherent in black folk expression and, in the case of the dialect sermon, the subversiveness and social insight often hidden under the guise of simple down-home speech.

As the demand for his poetry grew, Dunbar cultivated literary friendships with prominent whites who in turn helped him publish and publicize his most famous volumes of poetry, *Majors and Minors* (1895) and *Lyrics of Lowly Life* (1896). Subsequent reading tours in the East not only enhanced Dunbar's popularity but also introduced him to the African American poet Alice Ruth Moore, whom he married in 1898. By that time, Dunbar had become an internationally acclaimed African American writer whose achievement earned him an appointment to a clerkship in the U.S. Library of Congress and an honorary masters of arts degree from Atlanta University.

In 1898 Dunbar began to make a name for himself as a fiction writer. During the next six years he published four books of short stories and four novels. Although many of Dunbar's stories spoke frankly about racial injustice in the South, many more pandered to popular racist images of slaves and ex-slaves, causing some critics to wonder about the genuineness of the author's identification with people whom he seemed at times to champion and at other times to patronize. Dunbar's first three novels drew little on African American experience. But his final, important book, *The Sport of the Gods* (1903), addressed a major question for black America at the turn of the century—the advantages and disadvantages of migration from the rural South to the urban North. The motives behind this grim foray into urban realism also impelled Dunbar to publish "The Fourth of July and Race Outrages" in the *New York Times* in 1903, a sardonic attack on the myopic indifference of American patriotism to the race riots, lynchings, peonage, and disfranchisement of black voters in the South. By this time, however, Dunbar's steadily worsening health, brought on by heavy drinking and tuberculosis, together with his harried finances allowed him little time or energy to undertake serious new departures in his writing.

At the end of Dunbar's life, his self-described disciple James Weldon Johnson congratulated him on having taken dialect poetry as far as it could go, giving it what Johnson called in his autobiography *Along This Way* (1933), "the fullest measure of charm, tenderness, and beauty" possible. Johnson recalled that Dunbar's rueful reply to this compliment was simply, "I have never gotten to the things I really wanted to do."

Ode to Ethiopia

O Mother Race! to thee I bring
This pledge of faith unwavering,
This tribute to thy glory.
I know the pangs which thou didst feel,
When Slavery crushed thee with its heel,
With thy dear blood all gory.

5

Sad days were those—ah, sad indeed!
But through the land the fruitful seed
Of better times was growing.
The plant of freedom upward sprung,
And spread its leaves so fresh and young—
Its blossoms now are blowing.

10

We Wear the Mask

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be overwise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile,
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
We wear the mask!

Little Brown Baby

Little brown baby wif spa'klin' eyes,
Come to yo' pappy an' set on his knee.
What you been doin', suh—makin' san' pies?
Look at dat hib—you's ez du'ty ez me.
Look at dat mouf—dat's merlasses, I bet;
Come hyeah, Maria, an' wipe off his han's.
Bees gwine to ketch you an' eat you up yit,
Bein' so sticky an' sweet—goodness lan's!

Little brown baby wif spa'klin' eyes,
Who's pappy's darlin' an' who's pappy's chile?
Who is it all de day nevah once tries
Fu' to be cross, er once loses dat smile?
Whah did you git dem teef? 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!

Let's th'ow him ouden de do' in de san',
We do' want stragglers a-layin' 'roun' hyeah;
Let's gin him 'way to de big buggah-man;
I know he's hidin' erroun' hyeah right neah.
Buggah-man, buggah-man, come in de do',
Hyeh's a bad boy you kin have fu' to eat.
Mammy an' pappy do' want him no mo',
Swaller him down f'om his haid to his feet!

Dah, now, I t'ought dat you'd hug me up close.
Go back, ol' buggah, you sha'n'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!

Her Thought and His

The gray of the sea, and the gray of the sky,
A glimpse of the moon like a half-closed eye.
The gleam on the waves and the light on the land,
A thrill in my heart,—and—my sweetheart's hand.

She turned from the sea with a woman's grace,
And the light fell soft on her upturned face,
And I thought of the flood-tide of infinite bliss
That would flow to my heart from a single kiss.

But my sweetheart was shy, so I dared not ask
For the boon, so bravely I wore the mask.
But into her face there came a flame:
I wonder could she have been thinking the same?

A Cabin Tale

The Young Master Asks for a Story

Whut you say, dah? huh, uh! chile,
You's enough to dribe me wile.
Want a sto'y; jes' hyeah dat!
Whah' 'll I git a sto'y at?
Di'n' I tell you th'ee las' night?
Go 'way, honey, you ain't right.
I got somep'n' else to do,
'Cides jes' tellin' tales to you.
Tell you jes' one? Lem me see
Whut dat one's a-gwine to be.
When you's ole, yo' membry fails;
Seems lak I do' know no tales.
Well, set down dah in dat cheer,
Keep still ef you wants to hyeah.
Tek dat chin up off yo' han's,
Set up nice now. Goodness lan's!