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Accommodating the Real: William Dean Howells' Editorial Reception of Paul Laurence Dunbar

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In the June 27, 1896 edition of *Harper's Weekly*, William Dean Howells reviewed Paul Laurence Dunbar's collection of poems, *Majors and Minors*,² and in doing so took one of the boldest steps of his editorial career. Written during one of the most intense periods of social and racial unrest in American history, Howells' review would have a significant impact not only on the evolution of Dunbar's career, but also and by extension, on the development of African-American literature.

Underlying Howells' celebration of Dunbar's poetry is the lofty socio-political design to re-introduce his predominantly white and genteel readers to African-American culture in terms that would presumably challenge the hostile and mis-informed stereotypes of African-Americans which were being perpetuated in American society at large. Howells' review of *Majors and Minors* is an

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². Paul Laurence Dunbar, *Majors and Minors* (Toledo, Ohio: Hadley & Hadley, 1885). Reprinted in William Dean Howells, "Life and Letters," *Harper's Weekly*, 27 June 1896. Hereafter referred to as "Life."

extension of his larger project to de-emphasize the increasingly popular view of the African-American as a dangerous and criminal type — a project which informed his treatment of “the negro question” in his earlier novel of miscegenation, *An Imperative Duty*. Attacking racial stereotypes and barriers, he observed:

I have sometimes fancied that perhaps the negroes *thought* black, and *felt* black; that they were racially so utterly alien and distinct from ourselves that there never could be common intellectual and emotional ground between us, and that whatever eternity might do to reconcile us, the end of time would find us as far asunder as ever. But this little book, [*Majors and Minors*] has given me pause in my speculation. Here, in the artistic effect, at least, is white thinking and white feeling in a black man, and perhaps the human unity, and not the race unity, is the precious thing, the divine thing after all. God hath made of one blood all nations of men: perhaps the proof of this is to appear in the arts, and our hostilities and prejudices are to vanish with them.³

Taking exception to notions of social distinction and division, Howells here subverts theories of racial hierarchy by prioritizing the idea of an all inclusive “human race” over that of a “black race.” Advancing a belief in a larger, transcendent human community which manifests itself through the cultivation of the arts, while simultaneously rejecting the idea of racial division, he forcefully, forthrightly and indeed radically erases the color line.

Yet, what Howells rejected through the notion of an all-inclusive human community, he reinstated through his reading of Dunbar’s artistic merit. That is, when examined in light of his treatment of Dunbar, his seemingly radical vision of racial similarity and harmony becomes nothing more than a reiteration of the ideology of disenfranchisement in aesthetic terms. For while he posited the idea that aesthetic effect is universal and points towards the “common ground” of the larger and transcendent human community (a common ground which was central to the genteel notion of the “cultured” sensibility), he nonetheless celebrated Dunbar’s poems precisely because they are “expressions of a race-life from within the race” (“Life,” 251). For Howells, the fact of Dunbar’s race superseded the fact of his posture as a poet. And even though he celebrated Dunbar as an example of “white thinking and white feeling in a black man” (note the cultural and aesthetic assumption), he went on to recognize the overwhelming influence of race on Dunbar’s poetic bearing by observing that “I am speaking of him as a poet; but the notion of what he is insists too strongly for present impartiality” (“Life,” 250).

³. William Dean Howells, “Life and Letters,” p. 251.

What Howells highlighted in Dunbar's work was the latter's expression of racial type and character. *Majors and Minors*, Dunbar's second work, is a collection of poetry written in both dialect and standard English. Howells assumed that Dunbar intended the Majors to be those poems written in standard English and the Minors those written in the African-American vernacular. But in the review, he inverted the presumed formal hierarchy by observing that

Most of these pieces (the Majors), however, are like most of the pieces in most young poets, cries of passionate aspiration and disappointment, more or less personal or universal, which except for the negro face of the author one could not find especially notable. It is when we come to Mr. Dunbar's Minors that we feel ourselves in the presence of a man with a direct and fresh authority to do the kind of thing he is doing. ("Life," 254)

As was the case in his reviews of other local color writers, Howells valorized Dunbar's poetry because it articulated the presumed traits and values of an American sub-culture in a vernacular voice:

...in his treatment of it (African-American character) he has been able to bring us nearer to the heart of primitive human nature in his race than any one else has yet done. The range between appetite and emotion is not great, but it is here that his race has hitherto had its being, with a lift now and then far above and beyond it. He is, as far as I know, the first man of his color to study his race objectively, to analyze it himself, and then to represent it in art as he felt it and found it to be; to represent it humorously, yet tenderly, and above all so faithfully that we know the portrait to be undeniably alike. A race which has reached this effect in any of its members can no longer be wholly uncivilized; and intellectually Mr. Dunbar makes a stronger claim for the negro than the negro yet has done. ("Life," 247, 50)

Declaring Dunbar's genius the genius of the vernacular, Howells simultaneously and in part advanced a Du-Boisian view of African-American intellectual and artistic capacity. As examples of artistic accomplishment, Dunbar's poems serve a larger, socio-cultural function not only because they represent the African-American race realistically, humorously and tenderly, but also because they illustrate the capacity of African-Americans to lift themselves beyond the constraints of their own inferior culture and to demonstrate a higher sensibility which can no longer be considered "wholly uncivilized."

Howells' reception of Dunbar, then, can be viewed as a gesture toward the inclusion of African-Americans in the larger domain of American literacy, artistic and, by extension, "cultured" life. The very fact that Howells recommended Dunbar's work to the readers of *Harper's* signifies a radical departure in the relationship between African-American literature and the predominant aesthetic

view and reception of African-American writers. For, as Howells' remark that Dunbar's *Majors* are noteworthy in part because of "the negro face of the author" suggests, by the end of the century, African-American writers had by and large been ignored by the white and genteel public. While the general readership of the period had been exposed to those earlier African-American writers who had been championed and guided by their Abolitionist patrons, it was hardly cognizant of the African-American literary tradition which had developed in relative silence around it.⁴ Howells' own view that Dunbar was the first African-American writer to aesthetically treat African-American culture perhaps best points toward the obscurity in which the African-American writer found himself toward the close of the century.

But if Howells' reception of Dunbar was a gesture of inclusion, it was simultaneously a gesture of exclusion. For although he emphasized Dunbar's artistic talent and began to challenge predominant notions of African-American cultural "barbarism," his evaluation of Dunbar was nonetheless based upon an assumption of African-American inferiority. Howells' language of celebration is overloaded with cultural assumptions about African-Americans that correspond to prevailing, racist attitudes. He championed Dunbar's dialect poems because they are "vistas into the simple, sensuous nature of his race;" they demonstrate the "appetite and emotion" of the African-American's "primitive human nature." Dunbar's poetry may have given Howells evidence of the fact that African-Americans are not "wholly uncivilized," but the underlying assumption here is that African-Americans are comparatively uncivilized nonetheless.

What Howells demonstrates throughout his review is a patronizing attitude toward the African-American character — a perspective which was rooted in the race ideology of his Abolitionist forebears, and which emphasized the childlike simpleness, the sensuousness, and ultimately the inferiority of the African-American character. However, given the racist assumptions informing his attitude, we must be careful not to presume that Howells intentionally extended a vision of African-Americans that was commensurate with that of a racist tradition. Rather, we can more accurately evaluate his act of racist reaffirmation as an example of his unconscious submission to the deeply inscribed attitudes underlying the cultural presumptions of the genteel world-view. Hardly an instance of conscious racist classification, Howells' views were articulated in the spirit of liberation from the racist sensibility and climate that were so forthrightly

⁴ See Dickenson D. Bruce, Jr., *Black American Writing from the Nadir: The Evolution of a Literary Tradition, 1877-1915* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989).

and so violently condemning African-Americans at large in late nineteenth century American society. Paradoxically reaffirming the racist assumptions of the class with whom he identified through a deliberately antagonistic act that was intended to challenge the very values that it ultimately served to reinforce, Howells' review ironically conserved rather than debunked the larger ideology of disenfranchisement that was prevalent throughout American society.

Failing to transcend the patronization and condescension toward African-American inherent in the ideology he shared and cultivated, Howells' accommodation, inclusion and aesthetic liberation thus failed to break down the radical barriers and prejudices that it so forthrightly presumed to oppose. But more significant than the fact that his review pointed toward his own, seemingly inevitable, culture-bound and racist assumptions were the repercussions that the review had upon Dunbar's career. For the impact of Howells' reception and critique was to have residual consequences that in large part defined the aesthetic boundaries in which Dunbar could work and, hence, profoundly affected the evolution of Dunbar's later poetry and fiction.



Prior to the appearance of Howells' review, Dunbar was a little-known writer from Ohio. Although he had published poems in such leading journals and papers as *Century* magazine and the *New York Times*, for the most part Dunbar worked in relative obscurity. Moreover, he also suffered from financial difficulties, and relied heavily upon the pecuniary aid of such leading Toledo citizens as William Lawson Blacher, who financially guaranteed his first volume of poetry, *Oak and Ivy*, and Dr. H. A. Tobey, a prominent Toledo psychiatrist who helped defray costs for *Majors and Minors*.

But, upon the publication of Howells' review, Dunbar gained immediate attention and recognition from a national audience. The fact of Dunbar's instantaneous success attests to the power and respect that Howells' voice wielded not only in literary circles, but in late nineteenth century American culture at large. Almost overnight, Dunbar's name and reputation were established among readers across America, and he quickly became one of the most popular poets of his time. In the opinion of James Stronks, Howells' review was "a priceless boost to Dunbar's career," and possibly the greatest single one

event in American Negro literature to this day.”⁵ In addition, by bringing Dunbar’s work to the attention of American readers, Howells enabled Dunbar to become the first African-American writer to earn a living with his pen. For Dunbar’s overwhelming success was measured in dollars as well; from the year of Howells’ review until his untimely death in 1906, Dunbar enjoyed the monetary rewards of an enormously successful public reading career, as well as from lucrative contracts that he negotiated from leading publishing houses. Dunbar himself acknowledged his material debt to “the Dean”, observing in a letter to Howells that “My affairs have very materially changed for the better, and entirely through your agency.”⁶ Reminiscing about one of their many visits together, James Weldon Johnson alluded to Dunbar’s popularity and financial success by observing that

During his visit he wrote half a dozen or so poems. As quickly as he finished them he sent them off, two of them, I remember, to the *Saturday Evening Post*; and I was amazed at seeing how promptly he received checks in return. Whatever he wrote was in demand.⁷

However, notwithstanding the fact that Howells launched Dunbar’s career and thus made a significant gesture toward the incorporation of African-American writing within the larger, dominant culture, the review of *Majors and Minors* was not without its negative and indeed damning effects. For the very act of aesthetic incorporation itself tacitly reaffirmed the pre-established standards of taste and aesthetic merit. And while Howells celebrated the artistic achievement of an African-American voice, he also delimited that very voice by categorizing Dunbar as a dialect poet, observing that Dunbar’s dialect poems were authentic statements of the fundamental truths and features of the African-American character and culture. Howells’ emphasis on Dunbar’s dialect poems at the expense of the poems written in standard English at once made Dunbar the poet laureate of African-American culture and defined him as a local color realist engaged in the artistic representation of a misunderstood yet often vilified American sub-culture.

5. James B. Stronks, “Paul Laurence Dunbar and William Dean Howells,” *Ohio Historical Quarterly* 67, (April 1, 1958), p. 108.

6. Paul Laurence Dunbar, “To William Dean Howells,” (July 13, 1896). Reprinted in *The Paul Laurence Dunbar Reader*, ed. Jay Martin & Gossie H. Hudson (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1975), p. 435.

7. James Weldon Johnson, *Along This Way: The Autobiography of James Weldon Johnson* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1973), pp. 169-60. Hereafter referred to as *Along*.

But upon closer examination, Dunbar's dialect poems are neither authentic nor realistic. Dunbar was not writing from the knowledge and perspective of direct experience, but rather from a retrospective view of life in the ante-bellum South that he had learned about from his mother, as well as from the poets of the plantation tradition. Derivative of the writers of the New South, Dunbar's dialect poems are in large part imitations of the Southern poetry that pictured the ante-bellum South as a Golden Age. Glorifying the aristocratic, agrarian and presumably idyllic features and the ante-bellum past, the plantation tradition also confirmed the increasingly popular ideology of disenfranchisement by re-enforcing the dominant conviction that the African-American should be kept in his natural, if inferior, place, and that he wanted nothing more than this.

The derivative and indeed racially pejorative atmosphere of Dunbar's dialect poems is clearly illustrated in "Accountability," a dialect poem that Howells chose to quote at length from in his review of *Majors and Minors*.

Accountability

Folks ain't got no right to censuah utha folks about dey habits;
Him dat give de squir'ls de bushtails made de bobtails fu' de rabbits;
Him dat built de grea' big mountains hollered out de valleys;
Him dat made de streets an' driveways wasn't shamed to make de alleys.

We is all constructed diff'rent, d'ain't no two of us de same;
We cain't he'p ouah likes an' dislikes, ef we' se bad we ain't to blame,
Ef we' se good, we needn't show off, 'case you bet it ain't ouah doin';
We gits into su'ttain channals dat we jes' cain't he'p pu'suin'.

But we all fits into places dat no uthah ones cud fill,
An' we does the things we has to, big er little, good er ill.
John cain't tek de place o' Henry, Su an' Sally ain't alike;
Bass ain't nuthin like a suckah, chub ain't nuthin' like a pike.

When you come to tink about it, how it's all planned out it's splendid.
Nuthin's done er evah happens, 'dout hit's somefin' dat's intended;
Don't keer what you does, you has to, an' hit sholy beats de dickens —
Viney, go put on de kittle, I got one o' mastah's chickens.⁸

It is significant that Howells selected this particular poem to illustrate Dunbar's poetic genius. "Accountability" is not solely functioning in the review as a representation of a dialect poem: it also serves to buttress Howells' larger convictions about racial type and African-American character. Thematically, the

⁸. Paul Laurence Dunbar, *Majors and Minors*.

poem is an attempt to account for, justify and indeed celebrate difference, and thus reflects Howells' larger social and political intentions in the review. And while the speaker suggests that difference exists at the individual level — that "We is all constructed diff'rent, d'ain't no two of us de same;" he also emphasizes the inherent difference of type — "Bass ain't nuthin' like a suckah, chub ain't nuthin' like a pike." Underlying the poem, then, is an appeal to the presumably white reader to accept the primary and innate difference of the African-American speaker, a difference that is divinely determined as well as a natural fact: "Him dat give de squir'ls de bushtails made de bobtails fu' de rabbits."

But while "Accountability" solicits the reader's acceptance of innate differences, it also proffers a view that suggests that the African-American type represents a difference of an inferior kind. This becomes especially conspicuous when we consider Dunbar's use of "Negro dialect" itself. The use of the vernacular may have been a rhetorical tool intended to lend a poem or fictional work lifelikeness and cultural authenticity, but it also betrayed the speaker as socially inferior and often morally lacking. Moreover, "eye dialect" — the rendering of a word as it phonetically sounds rather than as it appears in the dictionary — was a tool used by Harris and Page to give the effect of illiteracy, and Dunbar here applies it with the same result. Philosophizing upon the larger human condition in a language that butchers standard English, the speaker takes on the aspect of a comic figure whom the reader, like the master, is expected to condescendingly indulge. Sterling Brown and Benjamin Brawley have both observed that the use of dialect as a means of depicting racial character deprived the African-American of his humanity by perpetuating familiar stereotypes: the Contented Slave, the Tragic Mulatto, the Comic Negro, the Exotic Primitive and the Criminal Negro.⁹ In "Accountability," Dunbar blends two of these stock types into one: the speaker is a happy slave who cheerfully accepts and justifies his servile condition as a natural one, and he also recalls the stock plantation slave who is not beyond "stealin' from mastah."

Reinforcing normative, if antiquated, views of African-Americans, Dunbar's dialect poems accommodated popular views of racial inferiority — views that were in large part substantiated by a traditional and literary perspective. But, while they categorized the African-American as someone different and inferior and thus served the dominant ideology of disenfran-

⁹ Sterling Brown, "Negro Character As Seen By White Authors," *Journal of Negro Education* 2 (April 1933), pp. 180-200.

chisement, the dialect poems also sold. Dunbar continued to produce dialect pieces throughout his career because they kept him in the public eye and earned him financial success. As he told James Weldon Johnson, it was not that he wanted to write dialect poetry, but that "I've got to write dialect poetry, it's the only way I can get them to listen to me" (*Along*, 160).

Far from enjoying his popularity as a dialect poet, Dunbar came to resent the fact that Howells' review had limited his poetic voice by turning him into what Jean Wagner would later derogatorily label the "prince of the coon song writers."¹⁰ In a letter to a friend, Dunbar admitted his frustration with his identity as a dialect poet, and went on to observe that Howells' famous review had done him "irrevocable harm."¹¹ His wife, poet Alice Moore Dunbar, confirmed Dunbar's resentment of Howells' categorization, remarking in a retrospective essay about her husband:

Say what you will, or what Mr. Howells wills (*sic*), about 'feeling the negro life aesthetically and expressing it lyrically, '... it was in the pure English poems that the poet expressed *himself*. He may have expressed his race in the dialect poems; they were to him the side issues of his work, the overflowing from a life apart from his dearest dreams."¹²

Dunbar's disillusionment with his role and fame as "poet laureate of the Negro race" is most poignantly reflected in the last stanza of his standard English poem, "The Poet," in which he writes:

He sang of love when earth was young,
And Love, itself, was in his lays.
But ah, the world it turned to praise
A Jingle in a broken tongue.¹³

What Howells' pigeonholing and Dunbar's subsequent frustration point toward is the larger problem of identity which has defined and, to a certain degree, plagued African-American culture and sensibility since the colonial period. Inhabiting the larger, dominant culture of mainstream America while remaining a sub-culture that is apart from, little known by, yet presumed to be

¹⁰ Jean Wagner, *Black Poets of the United States, From Paul Laurence Dunbar to Langston Hughes*, trans. Kenneth Douglas (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973), p. 78.

¹¹ Paul Laurence Dunbar, "Letter to a Friend," reprinted in *Crisis* 20 (1920), p. 73.

¹² Alice Moore Dunbar, "The Poet and His Song," *A.M.E. Church Review*, XXXI (1914), p. 174.

¹³ Paul Laurence Dunbar, *Lyrics of Love and Laughter* (New York: Dodd & Mead, 1903.)

innately inferior to that of the mainstream, African-Americans continually have had to interpret themselves in biracial and bicultural terms. Moreover, occupying a position of difference, but being forced to perceive that position through the lens of the dominant culture, the African-American has often had to view himself in a mirror that reflected a stereotypical and often caricatured image of himself. W. B. E. Du Bois defined this condition as "double consciousness" and described its socio-psychological effects by observing that

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with a second-sight in this American world, — a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.¹⁴

A product of the historical dialectic between African-Americans and the dominant white culture, double-consciousness imposed particularly crippling demands on the African-American artist. Forcing him into a contradictory position from which he at once recognized the innate beauty of African-American folk culture, yet also acknowledged its inferior status and also unacceptability to the eyes and discrimination of the mainstream culture, double-consciousness denied the African-American artist his true voice.

The innate love of harmony and beauty that set the ruder souls of his people a-dancing and a-singing raised but confusion and doubt in the soul of the black artist; for the beauty revealed to him was the soul-beauty of a race which his larger audience despised, and he could not articulate the message of another people. This waste of double aims, this seeking to satisfy two unreconciled ideals, has wrought sad havoc with the courage and faith and deeds of ten thousand thousand people,—has sent them often wooing false gods and invoking false means of salvation, and at times has even seemed about to make them ashamed of themselves. (*Souls*, 10)

Du Bois could very well have been writing with Dunbar in mind here. Wooing the false god Mammon through his dialect poetry, Dunbar appears to have denied and belittled his people and culture by capitulating to and reinforcing a view of African-Americans which corresponded to the traditional and pejorative

¹⁴ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), pp. 8-9. Hereafter referred to as *Souls*.

attitude of the mainstream. Disclaiming his authentic African-American voice, Dunbar projected a vision of African-Americans that indeed made himself, along with his contemporaries, ashamed, and, as a result, his dialect poetry came under critical censure from such leading African-American figures as his friend James Weldon Johnson (*Along*, 160). Moreover, Dunbar was acutely aware of the double-consciousness in his poetry, and he went on to deplore the condition imposed him in his best known and anthologized poem, "We Wear the Mask."

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 over-wise,
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! (*Majors*)

Written in standard English, "We Wear the Mask" is a powerfully realistic poem expressing the psychological condition and effects of double-consciousness. Assuming a false demeanor of song and smiles, the African-American has been forced into completely yielding to and indeed perpetuating the dominant and stereotypical view of the African-Americans as "happy-darky." Yet, while the poem thus announces the self-alienation of African-Americans in general, it can more specifically be viewed as an apologia for the lie about African-American people and character that the African-American poet — and particularly Dunbar himself — was forced to adopt and to perpetuate. Concealing the mask that grins and lies, Dunbar at once acknowledges his Uncle Tomish pose and accounts for it as a response to the repressive conditions imposed upon him by mainstream thought and behavior.

With respect to the ideas of double-consciousness and aesthetic categorization which were becoming increasingly recognized and denounced by African-American intellectuals toward the turn of the century, we might, then, view

Howells' review of *Majors and Minors* as a masking of the artist. In a sense condemning Dunbar as the representative voice of African-American sensibility, while basing his evaluation of Dunbar's vernacular genius on a traditional, culture-bound perspective on African-Americans, Howells at once limited the aesthetic possibilities for Dunbar, and preserved stereotypical assumptions about African-American character. His celebration of Dunbar's voice as that of the realist thus manifests a quintessential example of double-consciousness in practice. Compelling Dunbar to re-present a vision of the African-American sub-culture that corresponded to and accommodated the racist stance of the dominant code, Howells' gesture toward recognition and inclusion was nothing more than a conservative re-classification of African-American cultural and "natural" make-up and capacity that reinscribed oppressive attitudes and assumptions.

Howells' celebration of Dunbar's dialect poetry was a sincere gesture toward inclusion and racial reform, but it also claimed that Dunbar's dialect poems represented an authentic window opening onto the "real" African-American landscape. Manifesting a perspective and logic that silently yet powerfully promoted the ideological underpinnings of a prejudiced perspective that classified African-Americans as warm, cheerful, relatively harmless, yet inferior others, Howells' review supported rather than challenged the prevailing racist sensibility of his class and culture.

However, even though Howells thus reaffirmed a cultural and ideological position that subordinated and belittled the African-American, we must not be too quick to condemn his review of *Majors and Minors* as simply and solely a preservation of the racist views advanced by the dominant culture. To rest our account of Howells' review on the ideological underpinnings informing his own perspective would be to ignore the larger effect of the review. For whereas Howells underscored stereotypical attitudes toward African-Americans and forced Dunbar to regard his most financially successful pieces as a humiliation, the review was not without its positive effects on Dunbar's career as a writer and subsequently on the development of African-American literature. Moreover, by ending our analysis of Howells' reception of Dunbar here, we advance the view that double-consciousness was an entirely limiting condition, and that Dunbar — and, by extension, the African-American artist — never surmounted the constraints that it imposed upon him.

We have defined double-consciousness as a self-alienating condition that forced the African-American writer and artist to consider and to represent himself from the perspective of the dominant culture. For Du Bois, double-consciousness was thus a debilitating constraint that prevented the African-American writer

from expressing the essential character of his culture and people, and hence to develop his own voice within the larger parameters of the mainstream culture. Yet, as Dunbar himself recognized, double-consciousness may have forced the African-American writer to "wear the mask" of capitulation and accommodation, but, in doing so, it also forced him to develop a "mouth with myriad subtleties." What Dunbar's poem signals is not solely a denunciation of the oppressive conditions imposed upon African-Americans by the dominant culture, but more significantly, an assertion of the ability of the African-American to endure and transcend the very condition of double-consciousness and to adapt his voice to its limiting constraints in a positive and creative way. The mask that the African-American is forced to assume is nothing more than a hollow facade that misleads the presumably white observer into believing "otherwise." Calling our attention to the conditions of double-consciousness, the poem also points toward the fact that there is a world and indeed a consciousness behind the mask that is quite different from its surface representation.

The notion of deceptive masking is central, I believe, to an understanding of Dunbar's career and poetic posture. A trickster artist, Dunbar wore the mask of dialect poetry not simply in order to earn public notice, fame, and fortune, but also because it was, in his own words, "the only way I can get them to listen to me." In light of his larger opus, Dunbar's dialect poems must be viewed as a kind of aesthetic lure. Seducing the reader into a view of African-American character that reinforced dominant views, they nonetheless became the means for him to unmask racial prejudice and to expose the lie of the stereotypes. Exploiting his myriad voices, Dunbar was hardly an Uncle Tom, and to conclude that he capitulated to the conditions of double-consciousness by simply echoing the racist views of the dominant culture is to ignore what James Emmanuel has called "the racial fire" in Dunbar's collective work.¹⁵

It is beyond the scope of this study to examine Dunbar's poetry in detail, but it is nevertheless important to note that while many of his dialect poems preserved the stereotypical assumptions about the African-American type, he also wrote poems in both standard and dialect English that challenged and defied dominant attitudes and assumptions, and that also articulated African-American race-pride. In "Ode to Ethiopia," a poem that appeared in his first book, *Oak and Ivy*, for example, Dunbar exhorts "Be proud, my Race, in mind and soul: / Thy name is writ in Glory's scroll / In characters of fire." In a later poem, "To the

¹⁵ James A. Emmanuel, "Racial Fire in the Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar," *A Singer in the Dawn: Reinterpretation of Paul Laurence Dunbar*, ed. Jay Martin (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1975), pp. 75-93.

South on Its New Slavery," Dunbar speaks directly to the "foe," and denounces the injustices of contemporary racial politics.¹⁶

Yet, while Dunbar's poems in part demonstrated a certain race consciousness, it is toward Dunbar's prose writings that we must turn in order to appreciate the extent of his radical reaction against the oppression of African-Americans. His novel, *The Sport of the Gods*, in particular must be singled out as a major work in the development of African-American consciousness and fiction. Debunking the myths, stereotypes, and romantic paternalism of his white audience, *The Sport of the Gods* is an indictment of both Southern disenfranchisement and Northern commercialism. Along with Charles Chestnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition*, it is considered one of the first African-American novels to treat racial injustice directly and without apology.¹⁷ Moreover, capitalizing on the fact that he had indeed "got them to listen to me," Dunbar became an outspoken advocate of African-American rights and protested against the increasing and widespread violence toward African-Americans. In "The Fourth of July and Race Outrages: Paul Laurence Dunbar's Bitter Satire on Independence Day," an article that appeared in the *New York Times* in 1903, Dunbar denounced the race riots in Evansville, Belleville and Wilmington, noting that

For the sake of reenslaving the negro the constitution has been trampled under foot, the rights of man have been laughed out of court, and the justice of God has been made a jest—and we celebrate. . . . Every wire, no longer from the South alone, brings us the news of a new hanging or a new burning . . . some fresh degradation of an already degraded race . . . and yet we sing 'my country 'tis of thee' . . . How long, O God, how long.¹⁸

Dunbar's fictional works and newspaper articles provide a corrective to those statements by critics — both African-American and white¹⁹ — who have isolated Dunbar's Uncle Tomism and identified it as his primary poetic voice. Hardly a subservient and conciliatory today, Dunbar worked within the confines of an oppressive and limiting aesthetic political climate, and managed to protest

¹⁶ Paul Laurence Dunbar, "Ode to Ethiopia," "To the South on Its New Slavery," *The Paul Laurence Dunbar Reader*, ed. Jay Martin and Gossie H. Hudson (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1975), pp. 277, 322.

¹⁷ Bernard W. Bell, *The Afro-American Novel and its Tradition* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987) p. 71. Hereafter referred to as Bell.

¹⁸ Paul Laurence Dunbar, "The Fourth of July and Race Outrages: Paul Laurence Dunbar's Bitter Satire on Independence Day," *New York Times* 1903. Reprinted in *The Paul Laurence Dunbar Reader*, ed. Jay Martin and Gossie H. Hudson (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1975), pp. 50-1.

¹⁹ See Jay Martin, ed. *A Singer in the Dawn*. (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1975).

effectively against the injustices of the American system toward African-Americans. An artful dancer in a rigidly fixed system, he told the truth to power by employing subversive aesthetic and rhetorical strategies, and, ultimately, expanded the aesthetic horizon for later African-American writers.

While it would be both unjust and an extravagant overstatement to suggest that Howells' review was thus directly responsible for Dunbar's development as a writer, the fact that it empowered Dunbar and became a vehicle by which he was able "to get them to listen to me" compels us to examine the review in a different light and to place it within the more complex web of ideological intentions, assumptions and undercurrents. Howells may have expressed a humiliating, white paternalism and perpetuated the conditions of double-consciousness, but the fact that he was willing to go beyond the overwhelmingly negative and aesthetically stifling attitudes of his contemporaries and to celebrate the African-American voice in aesthetic terms points toward his active, and, ultimately, positive role in African-American aesthetic life and culture. We may feel obliged to denounce his stereotypical assumptions about African-Americans, but we must view them not as aspects of a consciously racist pose, but rather as the silent and profoundly delimiting effects of what Pierre Bordieu has called the "cultural unconsciousness."²⁰ We can and indeed must be cognizant of the inherent racism that Howells unconsciously assumed and perpetuated, but we cannot deny the significance of his role in the emergence and development of Dunbar's career. Howells' individual assumptions were indeed stereotypical and partially debilitating, but the larger implications of his reception of Dunbar extend beyond Howells the individual; his review occupies a place of singular importance in American literary history.



²⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), p. 77.

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