

Introduction

In the prime of his literary career, Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872–1906) published four novels: *The Uncalled* (1898), *The Love of Landry* (1900), *The Fanatics* (1901), and *The Sport of the Gods* (1902). Despite widespread critical interest in Dunbar's writing during his time and ever since his death more than a century ago, the novels have largely been subordinated to his short stories and especially to his poetry. Between 1890 and 1905, he wrote slightly more than one hundred short stories, which he published either in collected volumes or individually in periodicals, and for which he earned some acclaim.¹ During this period, he also wrote hundreds of poems and published them in similar forms. His skills as a poet, rather than his skills as a fiction writer, were primarily responsible for his ascent to fame in the United States and abroad. In *Harper's Weekly*, the influential American magazine of culture and letters, William Dean Howells's praise of the black dialect in Dunbar's second book of poems, *Majors and Minors* (1896), triggered the avalanche of acclaim.² For the rest of his literary career, Dunbar was the de facto "Negro poet laureate," the first African American poet born after slavery to become an international phenomenon, and this reputation superseded the fact that he demonstrated expertise in writing fiction as well as songs, plays, and essays. Furthermore, ever since his death, Dunbar's reputation as an important American poet has remained relatively intact. While the numerous reprintings and constant circulation of his poems have stimulated the enthusiasm of general readers and the criticism of scholars, the novels Dunbar published during his lifetime—although reprinted, circulated, read, and studied, too—are usually an afterthought in the argument for his stature in American literary history.³

The Collected Novels of Paul Laurence Dunbar aims to redress this imbalance. Although not the first publication to transcribe, correct, standardize, and reprint a novel by Dunbar, it is the first to apply uniform editing to all four novels and collect them in one volume. This collection shows that his novels, as clearly as his short stories and poetry, reflect his exceptional literary talent, giving readers an equal opportunity to explore the characters, landscape, atmosphere, and visionary sensibilities of a preeminent African American writer. This general introduction and the subsequent introductions to the individual novels describe the major forms and themes of the novels, placing them in the proper contexts of Dunbar's creativity, his professional career, and American literary history. Each novel explores, in varying degrees, the issues of race, class, politics, region, morality, and spirituality. The first three novels, given their focus on white main characters, together challenge the long-standing assumption that African American authors should cast only blacks as main characters and as messengers of racial justice.

Although several collections of Dunbar's writings have been published, including not only the poems and the short stories but his plays, essays, and letters

as well, only a few can claim to represent comprehensive and definitive sources. The fact that Dunbar's oeuvre spans hundreds of pages across these volumes testifies to his astonishing productivity. Despite having lived only thirty-three years, and despite having been a professional writer (that is, earning substantial money from his writings) for little more than a decade, he published fourteen books of poetry, four books of short stories, four novels, and many songs, dramatic works, short stories, poems, and political essays in newspapers or magazines. Publication of Dunbar's collected works in each genre testifies to the collective depth of our appreciation of his writings and our desire to preserve them, in their best and most convenient forms, for current and future generations to appreciate and preserve as well.

Neither Dunbar nor his contemporaries probably could have predicted that, at the turn into the twentieth-first century, his diverse range of writings, not only his poetry, would continue to live on and to intrigue so many readers. Indeed, in his own time, his efforts to experiment with different literary genres and styles beyond the black dialect poetry that launched his career were often met with disapproval, indifference, or at best faint praise. Much of that work in dialect was popular, though often for commercial reasons that were narrow and delimiting; Dunbar felt compelled to create work guaranteed to produce financial profit while continuing to seek critical recognition. Consequently, public expectations, which exploited racial stereotypes and celebrated literary expressions of racial authenticity, constrained and troubled Dunbar. Thus, his contemporaries simplistically reduced most of what we now see as Dunbar's innovative achievements. If ever there was a price for success, the African American writer once an elevator operator from Dayton surely paid it.

The centenary year 1972 marked the (relatively reluctant) emergence of academic interest in Dunbar. The Centenary Conference on Paul Laurence Dunbar held at the University of California at Irvine resulted in the landmark collection of essays edited by Jay Martin, *A Singer in the Dawn: Reinterpretations of Paul Laurence Dunbar* (1975). The centenary also featured a celebration at the University of Dayton, where Margaret Walker, an African American poet, introduced the academic community to the sophisticated ways of reading Dunbar that she and three generations of parents and grandparents outside the academy had been practicing for decades. The long-overdue attention to the complexity of Dunbar's poetry that ensued from such conferences and celebrations began to unravel the myth, originating with Howells in 1896, that only Dunbar's dialect verse was worthy of praise. It was a myth of racial authenticity that prefigured the labeling of African American poets of the twentieth century, who include the poets of the 1920s Harlem Renaissance (Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, and James Weldon Johnson), the 1930s and 1940s modernist movement (Gwendolyn Brooks and Melvin Tolson), as well as the 1960s and 1970s Black Arts Movement (Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, and Nikki Giovanni). As in these cases, Dunbar's renditions of dialect were long assumed to be either praiseworthy authentic folklore or de-

meaning minstrelsy, depending on one's perspective. Only archival research and a confidently post-Black Arts, post-black pride notion of African American literature were able to guide our attention to Dunbar's nondialect poetry (of which he wrote approximately as much as his dialect poetry). Similarly, we have been able to turn our attention to Dunbar's short stories and novels, among other writings, that also defy expectations.

A nuanced portrait of Dunbar has thus finally emerged. He was a writer who liked to try his hand at diverse literary genres, and was very good at each attempt. He was a writer concerned with matters of great historical import and significant social issues, and his essays are now read with keen interest. He was a writer whose poems are now reconnected to their contexts of imagination and production, thanks to the fact that a wide range of the poems have in the last four decades been read and performed with new insights. He was a fascinating dramatist who wrote comedies and musicals that sometimes fell into the minstrel traps and other times satirized the stereotyping with savvy and clout. He was also a writer who experimented with the British comedy of manners and, in *Herrick*, with incorporating what he had seen while living in London. In every case, he demonstrated a talent for trying anything once and doing it justice.⁴

With the publication of *The Collected Novels of Paul Laurence Dunbar*, the time has arrived for all four of Dunbar's novels, not only *The Sport of the Gods*, to receive the attention they too deserve. Dunbar's production of four novels between 1898 and 1902 is a notable achievement for a writer in the latter part of his twenties. Indeed, one of the novels, *The Sport of the Gods*, remains in print, and scholars tend to read it alongside the novels of other African American writers of racial uplift, including Sutton Griggs, Pauline Hopkins, and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, and of Anglo-American writers now identified with the literary tradition of naturalism, including Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, and Stephen Crane. Admittedly, *The Sport of the Gods* reflects a refined development of plot and characters that an author of his fourth novel, not his first, is more capable of accomplishing. This literary maturity, in addition to the novel's more conventional portrayals of race, is arguably in part responsible for its popularity and continued commercial availability. But the recurring overemphasis of these qualities has also neglected evidence of Dunbar's promise or talent in the first three novels. In bringing all four novels together, this volume invites readers to recognize the patterns that both unite and distinguish them. For example, Dunbar was writing and publishing the novels at an extraordinary rate, and he was just as invested in writing esteemed literature as he was in making money. To what extent does such biographical information support or undermine the literary value of the novels?

A long view of Dunbar's life and career may bring us closer to a grasp of what Dunbar was thinking as he wrote the novels. Dunbar was born in Dayton, Ohio, the son of former Kentucky slaves whose tales of their antebellum experiences inspired the vernacular language and themes of his creative writing. He grew up in a period following Reconstruction known as Southern Redemption to disaffected

white residents of the former Confederate states. In the mid-1870s, this group spearheaded the rollback of black civil rights that included the political disenfranchisement and racial segregation of blacks in public life. The social terror and political setbacks that blacks faced during the Jim Crow era have led scholars to call this period the nadir in African Americans' quest for political and social rights following emancipation. Despite victory in the Civil War and the formal mandates of Radical Reconstruction, which helped protect their entitlement to national citizenship, blacks now realized that their racial progress faced a politically uphill and violent battle.

Dunbar responded to this atmosphere of racial unrest by publishing essays in local newspapers, such as the *Dayton Tattler*. One essay, appearing in 1890 in this paper, implored local black readers to buy the paper to "espouse the spirit of honest republicanism." Another essay, published in 1893 in the *Chicago Record*, argued that the black press facilitated black political progress, also known as racial uplift. Similarly themed essays—printed in the *Toledo Journal*, the *Philadelphia Times*, and the *New York Times*—appeared over the next decade. His foray into political journalism illustrated his sensitivity to the conditions of black communities across the country. Yet the approach also anticipated the irony inherent in his literary talent, critical reception, and commercial success, all of which often contradicted his original political sensibilities.

The June 27, 1896, issue of *Harper's Weekly* in which William Dean Howells, the preeminent critic of American literature and culture, effusively praised Dunbar's second collection of poetry, *Majors and Minors*, marked a breakthrough for the author. (Dunbar's first collection, *Oak and Ivy*, arrived without fanfare.) Commenting on the portrait that served as the frontispiece of Dunbar's collection, Howells appreciated the ostensibly dark-skinned author as "the pure African type." Howells enthusiastically praised the poems written in dialect, which he felt represented exclusively black vernacular. Truth be told, the dialect poems reflected various regional and ethnic, not only black, dialects. The dialect poems also amounted to only a quarter of the book's poems; the other three-quarters were prayers, lyrics, odes, ballads, and sonnets in formal English. Nonetheless, the dialect poems, in Howells's eyes, represented Dunbar when he was "most himself," and through them readers could enjoy an authentic window into the black community. Coincidentally, the orthography of black dialect was a hallmark of popular American literature at the time, thanks mainly to the commercial success of white writers of the postbellum "plantation tradition," especially Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Nelson Page.

Most critics reviewing *Majors and Minors* followed in Howells's influential footsteps. They similarly lauded Dunbar's dialect poems, contrary to the bulk of evidence—including *Oak and Ivy*, *Majors and Minors*, *Lyrics of Lowly Life*, *Lyrics of the Hearthside*, *Lyrics of Love and Laughter*, and *Lyrics of Sunshine and Shadow*—that the fledgling black writer was most interested in writing poems in formal English. The critical neglect of Dunbar's poems in formal English resulted from the overwhelming commercial popularity of the dialect poems included in

these books, as well as such poems he published in magazines and performed in public. (To be fair to both critics and his public, he did not exactly oppose the financial incentives of this popularity. He needed the money.) The dialect poems often painted sentimental and romantic images of Negroes in the aesthetic tradition of mid- to late-nineteenth-century blackface minstrelsy, which appealed to the desire of many whites to return to the antebellum culture of blacks' supposed docility and subservience. Dunbar's dialect poems also ran counter to the prevailing signs of black political progress not only in the real world but also in the African American literature of racial uplift, written by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Pauline Hopkins, W.E.B. Du Bois, and, in some cases, Charles W. Chesnut and Dunbar himself.

Some of Dunbar's dialect poems, however, belong to the literary tradition of racial uplift: even as they may have perpetuated black stereotypes to achieve a mass appeal, they criticized racial injustice in subtle ways. For example, a poem that Howells lauds in his review, "When Malindy Sings," focuses on the extent to which a woman's talent as a singer captivates anyone who hears her. Buried beneath the poem's dense dialect, sentimental aura, and minstrel imagery (such as the banjo player) is the reference to Malindy's song, "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot." This "Negro spiritual" was first sung by slaves and, for generations, passed down among blacks as a melody of religious hope and civil rights activism.

In the preface to a 1922 collection of African American poetry, James Weldon Johnson laments that the "qualities that gave [black dialect poetry] vogue—tenderness, sentimentality, homely humor, genial optimism—are the very qualities that now bring disparagement on it." Johnson assesses Dunbar's legacy in these terms to cast him aside, to create room in the canon of African American poetry for himself, Langston Hughes, and Claude McKay, writers who became representatives of the Harlem, or New Negro, Renaissance. However, the allegation could not undermine the fact that Dunbar's orthographic dexterity with dialect and his thematic ironies inspired these and other writers of their generation to hone their skills in representing black vernacular while delivering subtle political messages.

In addition to poetry, Dunbar wrote or published in the second half of his life more than one hundred short stories, many of them in four books, *Folks from Dixie*, *The Strength of Gideon and Other Stories*, *In Old Plantation Days*, and *The Heart of Happy Hollow*. As the titles suggest, several stories in the books sympathize with antebellum racial politics and representations. Yet some also break from these themes, illustrating the cultural, political, and religious complexities of black communities, and humanizing blacks in ways that the formal exigencies of Dunbar's poems may not always have permitted. Dunbar's four novels are equally experimental in examining the naturalistic impact of the environment on human agency. The first three—*The Uncalled*, *The Love of Landry*, and *The Fanatics*—use whites as main characters to tell stories, respectively, about spiritual regeneration and redemption, about the stricture of social convention, and about the morality of the Civil War. In contrast, the last novel, *The Sport of the Gods*, returns to the conventional form of African American literary realism by using a black

protagonist to describe the cultural, regional, and ideological differences that fracture black communities.

To say the least, the reviews of all these works were mixed, showing the degree that Dunbar's experiments with literary form and theme contradicted mainstream critical and commercial demands. One century after his death, however, many critics and scholars have come to agree that his prodigious talent and versatility as a writer, and his sophistication and diplomacy in racial politics, deserve high admiration and further academic study, even as his career also suggests that he negotiated a personal crisis. Evidently, his creative loyalties were torn between, on the one hand, demonstrating his commitment to black political progress and, on the other hand, writing what prominent literary critics and publishers expected of him and of black writers in general. The standard biographies of Dunbar by Virginia Cunningham, Benjamin Brawley, Addison Gayle Jr., Peter Revell, Felton O. Best, and Eleanor Alexander support this assessment, but a closer look at his writings, including his novels, may also reveal the nuances of his life and career.

Even as he sometimes succumbed to the pressures of commercial demand, Dunbar sought nonetheless to maintain the integrity of his literary identity by seriously incorporating elements of his autobiography while modifying the literary conventions of naturalism, realism, romanticism, and even the racist plantation tradition. To begin with, *The Uncalled*, which is set in small-town Ohio, features a minister struggling against Puritan constraints who very well might be a stand-in for Dunbar himself. By the time he published this novel, Dunbar's proclivity to thread autobiography through his creative writing was already seen in such characters as the preacher of "An Ante-Bellum Sermon," a famous poem he included in *Majors and Minors*, or the poet Robert Herrick in Dunbar's long-lost play, *Herrick, An Imaginative Comedy in Three Acts*. Upon the release of *The Uncalled*, Dunbar came down with tuberculosis; while convalescing in Colorado, he contrived a love story that is, once again, autobiographical in its allusion to a maturing and satirical twenty-eight-year-old man against the backdrop of chameleonic train porters who, like Dunbar, dissemble as "good darkies." *The Fanatics* of a year later is a messy though fascinating social commentary on the Civil War, based on his research as well as on the stories handed down from his father, Joshua Dunbar, who fought in the war on behalf of the Fifty-fifth Massachusetts Colored Infantry and the Fifth Massachusetts Colored Cavalry. Finally, *The Sport of the Gods* tells the story of a young black man's moral decline as he transitions from the South to New York City, recalling both the pejorative connotation of the city in *The Uncalled* and Dunbar's own observations recorded four years earlier, in his 1898 essay, "The Negroes of the Tenderloin: Paul Laurence Dunbar Sees Peril for His Race in Life in the City." Autobiography had inspired Dunbar's writing to such a degree that, had he not become gravely ill and died a little more than three years after the release of *The Sport of the Gods*, he might in his maturity have written more novels, and his legacy might have been that of a novelist who happened to have written poetry earlier in his career.

Aside from strengthening our grasp of the novels, this collection also lays the groundwork for connecting them to Dunbar's other important writings. The political awareness and intellectual tenacity exhibited in Dunbar's novels, for example, are consistent with the social protest of his essays and the satire of his plays and musicals. These writings support the ironic thesis of Dunbar's classic poem, "We Wear the Mask," first published in *Majors and Minors*, for they highlight his long-lasting investment in the themes of black resistance and empowerment, even as his literary expressions consistently sought to appease racist public disaffection from such themes. This double move represents the mask of irony Dunbar mastered so well, both for the sake of making money and for the sake of communicating racial-political messages as subtly as possible. Gregory L. Candela, in his essay "We Wear the Mask: Irony in Dunbar's *The Sport of the Gods*," expounds on this point by identifying multiple levels of ironic masks in Dunbar's most famous novel.⁵ While both naturalistic and melodramatic, *The Sport of the Gods*, like Dunbar's first three novels, enables Dunbar to wear "a Juvenalian mask" in order to present his "knowing assessment of his country's failings." Further, Thomas L. Morgan, in his essay "The City as Refuge: Constructing Urban Blackness in Paul Laurence Dunbar's *The Sport of the Gods* and James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*," illuminates how the setting of the city helped Dunbar "challenge realism's reified pastoral caricaturizations of blacks" and imagine "an alternate space for theorizing black subjectivity."⁶ From Cincinnati in *The Uncalled* to New York in *The Sport of the Gods*, Dunbar created environments, at once realistic and imaginary, in which he could reconfigure black characters beyond the bounds of agrarian stereotypes, romantic melodrama, or minstrel ridicule. Morgan finds that "America's pastorally inflected beliefs about African Americans functioned as the glass ceiling" encountered by African American novelists of Dunbar's time. In those busy but short years between 1898 and 1902, Dunbar's novels indicated that he too was dealing with that ceiling.

Thus, we can only speculate on the progress Dunbar might have made had he lived longer. More certain is his seminal influence on the twentieth-century African American writers who followed him into the American canon. *The Collected Novels of Paul Laurence Dunbar* allows readers to assess Dunbar's life, literature, and legacy, hoping to stimulate interest and debate among students, teachers, scholars, and general readers for generations to come.

Notes

1. For more information on Dunbar's short stories, see Gene Andrew Jarrett and Thomas Lewis Morgan's introduction to *The Complete Stories of Paul Laurence Dunbar*, ed. Jarrett and Morgan (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005), xv–xliii.

2. For more information on Dunbar's poems, see Joanne M. Braxton's introduction to *The Collected Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar*, ed. Braxton (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1993), ix–xxxvi. Also see chapter 1 of Gene Andrew Jarrett, *Deans and Truants: Race and Realism in African American Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

3. To put the scarcity of academic interest in Dunbar's novels in perspective, a recent search (in 2009) of the Modern Language Association's *MLA International Bibliography*, which indexes each year about 66,000 scholarly books and articles on the subject of literature dating as far back as 1926, revealed that, of the 140 scholarly items focused exclusively or significantly on Dunbar, only 21 (or 15 percent) dealt with his novels. Of these 21 items, an overwhelming 17 (or 81 percent) dealt with his final novel, *The Sport of the Gods*, which, coincidentally, is the only novel to feature mostly black main characters and, like *The Fanatics*, concentrates on racial politics.

4. For more information on the variety of Dunbar's literary writings, see Herbert Woodward Martin and Ronald Primeau, eds., *In His Own Voice: The Dramatic and Other Collected Works of Paul Laurence Dunbar* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002).

5. See Gregory L. Candela, "We Wear the Mask: Irony in Dunbar's *The Sport of the Gods*," *American Literature* 48, no. 1 (March 1976): 60–72.

6. See Thomas Lewis Morgan, "The City as Refuge: Constructing Urban Blackness in Paul Laurence Dunbar's *The Sport of the Gods* and James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*," *African American Review* 38, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 213–37.