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## Rhetorics of Literacy

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## *chapter three*

# Lettered Dialect

*Paul Laurence Dunbar I*

*When the* Western Association of Writers convened in Paul Laurence Dunbar's hometown of Dayton, Ohio in 1892, he read a welcome address in verse to the group, from which the following lines come:

So, proud are you who claim the West  
As home land; doubly are you blest  
To live where liberty and health  
Go hand and hand with brains and wealth.

Throughout the poem, Dunbar uses the second person in greeting the Midwesterners in the audience, leaving room to question whether he would include himself among them as a Western writer, but the poem ends with his offering his own “welcome warm as Western wine, / And free as Western hearts.”<sup>1</sup> In fact, Dunbar saw his dialect work as belonging, at least in part, to a Western American literary tradition. Moreover, a conspicuously Western tradition of African American art and literature was beginning to develop in the last years of the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> Many of the African American poets writing at the turn of the century, such as James Edwin Campbell, James David Corrothers, and sibling poets Aaron Belford Thompson, Priscilla Jane Thompson, and Clara Ann Thompson,

lived in the Midwest for most or all of their lives, and several looked to Riley as one of the most profound influences upon their work.<sup>3</sup> Dunbar himself, in a letter to Dr. James Newton Matthews written early in his career, expresses his belief that “[t]here could scarcely be a better thing than the development of a distinctly western school of poets, such as Riley represents.”<sup>4</sup>

After receiving an encouraging letter from Riley following the Western Association of Writers reading, Dunbar and his reputation would come to be associated with the then-established Riley and his reputation for decades to come. The poets became friends and correspondents; in an interview conducted when Dunbar was passing through Indianapolis in 1900, he said that a “gratifying particular of my Western trip has been the meeting of James Whitcomb Riley, whom I met in Chicago, and whose friendship I have enjoyed for several years. His introduction to one of my books with that of William Dean Howells has been a valuable impetus to a recognition of my work.”<sup>5</sup> And, in fact, Riley seemed eager to position himself as a mentor to the younger poet, claiming that he “was the first to recognize Paul Laurence Dunbar.”<sup>6</sup> In 1898, enthusiastic rumors were circulating that the two were collaborating on a comic opera. The fantasy pairing made sense: Dunbar and Riley were among the best-selling poets of the 1890s,<sup>7</sup> and their dialect verse shares a nostalgic sentimentality as well as the Western sensibility suggested by Dunbar in his letter to Matthews.

Despite this shared sensibility, however, Dunbar’s correlation with his invented Southern black voices was so strong that books and articles sometimes grouped him with southern writers although he never lived in the South.<sup>8</sup> Dunbar’s performance as a Southerner goes beyond the stance within his poetry of stock characters of the plantation tradition (such as the displaced Southerner yearning for his days in the South) to the stance without his poetry of Dunbar’s perhaps accidental pose as a Southern poet. In retrospect, Dunbar’s false Southernness now seems to us one of the most glaringly inauthentic elements of his poetry, part of a general inauthenticity that readers now find jarring.

Dunbar’s inauthenticity can be understood as a consequence of two strategies. The first is his attempt early on to model himself after Riley not only in style, dialect, and theme, but also in performances—performances that, in Dunbar’s case, were produced and reinterpreted in the imagined tension between regionalist and African American literature. The second is his innovative attempt to view dialect’s perceived orality through the lens of literacy to an extent that Riley did not. The “mask” metaphor crit-

ics often invoke in discussing Dunbar's use of dialect (derived from his poem "We Wear the Mask") falls short of describing Dunbar's experiments with written language.<sup>9</sup> As James Smethurst writes, the complex performances of blackness throughout the nineteenth century turned Dunbar's mask into a metaphor of "endless regress, a sort of funhouse mirror stage in which the possibility of a double consciousness is asserted, but without the comfort of any absolutely stable features or 'natural' boundaries."<sup>10</sup> To treat dialect orthography as a mask under which authenticity can be found also simplifies the subtleties of orthographic experimentation, and what it can manipulate readers into doing. To say simply that Dunbar wears a mask in his "inauthentic" dialect poems and removes it for the "authentic" standard English ones merely reverses the positions of Dunbar's first critics, who faulted his non-dialect poems for their artifice. The reversal I will describe in the coming paragraphs should alert us to the capriciousness of trends of reading that depend upon treating one oeuvre as authentic because oral and another as inauthentic because literate. We might think of this problem in light of Gene Andrew Jarrett's recognition of "the broad ideological tradition of romantic racialism that anointed authenticity, both of authorship and textual representation, as the determinant of African American literary realism" and Henry B. Wonham's claim that "ethnic caricature performs an integral function *within* the political and aesthetic program of American realism."<sup>11</sup> In dismissing the turn-of-the-century valuation of authenticity that was grounded in romantic racialism or caricature, we have neglected to realize that a reversed valuation of authenticity still informs readings of Dunbar's poetry.

Before exploring the effects of Dunbar's introduction of literate modes of communication, such as letter writing, into what is ordinarily treated as an oral genre, let us look at the factors and conditions—including his reception in relation to Riley's—that effectively drove Dunbar to embrace inauthenticity and artifice.

## Dunbar's Performances

For most of his readers in the 1890s and early 1900s, Dunbar's picture of the South seemed accurate, conforming to their idea of what Jarrett calls "minstrel realism."<sup>12</sup> Many critics valued Dunbar for recording faithfully an existing culture and language that, they anticipated, would disappear soon.<sup>13</sup> Reviewers for Southern newspapers, however, seemed troubled by Dunbar's depiction of the black Southerner. One reviewer in Atlanta faults

Dunbar for failing to capture the speech of African Americans, saying, “If Dunbar ever understood his own race he has become so immersed in the culture of the schools that he understands it no longer.”<sup>14</sup> Curiously, even in taking Dunbar to task for his alleged ignorance of Southern black speech, the reviewer erases regional differences in the end, claiming that perhaps Dunbar’s failure can be traced to his forgetting what it means to be black. This response emerges from the prevalent view that Southernness, as J. Martin Favor argues in his study of authenticity and the “folk” in African American literature, was integral to representations of true blackness.<sup>15</sup> Rather than blaming Dunbar’s Midwesternness for his lapses in representing Southern speech, or simply ineptitude, the reviewer finds that the corrupting influence of “education,” apparently, is the culprit. Needless to say, Dunbar’s selection of the South as the setting for much of his work reveals, on some level, an attraction to the exotic, not a nostalgia for the familiar.

Moreover, as Peter Revell suggests, Dunbar’s choice of subject was strategic: he viewed his representations of Southern black life as a means toward “enlisting the sympathies of white readers by putting the Southern black farm laborer in a category with Riley’s Hoosier farm folk, as someone poor but attractive, simple but honest, to be protected and even cherished.”<sup>16</sup> Contemporary reviewers often discussed the nature of the affiliation between the two poets; a 1914 *New York Times Magazine* review stated, “What Mr. Whitcomb Riley has done for Hoosier folk in Hoosier dialect, Dunbar has done for his negro fellows in their quaint negro English.”<sup>17</sup> Reviews of Dunbar’s work invariably mentioned Riley, and Dunbar was often referred to as “the colored Riley” or “the Riley of his race.”<sup>18</sup> Even in Dunbar’s poems that are about Southern life, much of his technique and many of his ideas about dialect poetry—if not the dialect itself—come directly from Riley.<sup>19</sup> In fact, of the dialect pieces in Dunbar’s first major book, *Lyrics of Lowly Life* (1896), nearly half are written in a Riley-type Hoosier dialect. Dunbar’s earlier work in *Oak and Ivy* (1893) and *Majors and Minors* (1895) was even more heavily influenced by Riley, with two-thirds of the dialect poems in the former and half of the dialect poems in the latter written in a dialect resembling Riley’s.

As a writer appealing both to white and black audiences, Dunbar straddles in his poetry the late-nineteenth-century regional white literary dialect tradition epitomized by Riley on the one hand, and the early-twentieth-century—implicitly non-regional, though ostensibly centered in Harlem—black literary dialect tradition developed later by Langston Hughes on the other. Both a black writer and a local color writer, Dunbar belongs

to categories that are treated as practically mutually exclusive, treated so in part because of Dunbar's original reception by both black and white readers.<sup>20</sup> As Carrie Tirado Bramen writes, citing the example of Massachusetts resident W. E. B. Du Bois's being encouraged to attend a Southern black college where he would feel at "home" as opposed to Harvard, "Region and race . . . were not always allied: they might in fact be perceived as antithetical in the determination of one's subject position."<sup>21</sup> I have discussed how Dunbar's Midwestern and constructed Southern identities were in conflict, but, as the article from the *Atlanta Sunny South* suggests, there is more to Dunbar's non-regionalism than this. Riley's contemporaries may not have been in agreement about the authenticity of *his* dialect, but dialect writing was, in Dunbar's case, often considered to be a natural articulation of his (non-regional) blackness. William Dean Howells thought him the first black poet "to feel the negro life aesthetically and express it lyrically," and most of Dunbar's reviewers followed suit, praising his dialects.<sup>22</sup> Those writing for, editing, and reading periodicals aimed at African American audiences, too, generally preferred his dialect poems to his poems in standard English.<sup>23</sup> Dickson D. Bruce claims that "[t]he best evidence indicates that black authors and audiences liked dialect literature," and that it is wrong to think that African American literary magazines "accepted such writing with any less eagerness than did their mainstream counterparts," the *Colored American Magazine* even dedicating a section of the magazine to verse in dialect.<sup>24</sup> In fact, Dunbar, Lorenzo Thomas tells us, "was beloved by the black community. Fraternal lodges and cultural organizations were named for him during his lifetime."<sup>25</sup> Clearly, Dunbar's dialect poetry was not universally seen to be at odds with gentility and uplift.

Although Dunbar alleged that his work was linguistically sound, not like the demeaning exaggerations of blackface minstrelsy, much of his dialect verse is written—as it is clear to us now—in an imaginary Southern black dialect of an idealized recent past, calling to mind and seemingly derived in part from white writers such as Thomas Nelson Page and Irwin Russell.<sup>26</sup> Only recently have critics truly emphasized Dunbar's actual lack of familiarity with the varieties of Southern black speech he was supposed to be representing. On the other hand, Riley's late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century critics and readers were very well aware of the disjuncture between his middle-class upbringing and the poor, rural Hoosiers he created in his dialect verse. Riley's pose as one of those characters was understood and accepted as just that: a dramatic character. Part of the audience's pleasure in attending a Riley reading seemed to come from his

ability to inhabit character after character, remaining “blank” between poems. Dunbar’s audiences, however, came to see the “Negro boy-poet.” Of course, Riley, too, was saddled with epithets (“The Hoosier poet”), but these titles came with the trappings of early literary celebrity. Dunbar’s title, on the other hand, preceded him; it created his career and shaped his reception. He became, as Jarrett writes, “an icon of black authenticity.”<sup>27</sup> That a young African American man could or would write poetry was, in and of itself, enough to gain Dunbar publicity.<sup>28</sup> Because his dialect was essentialized, some of his dialect poems modeled after Riley’s—along with his poems in Irish, German, and other ethnic dialects—have been mistaken for failed attempts at “black dialect.”<sup>29</sup> One reporter attending a Dunbar reading writes that, after reading “The Cornstalk Fiddle,” Dunbar proceeded to read a standard English poem, surprisingly “[l]osing all trace of what is known as dialect.”<sup>30</sup> It was often assumed that Dunbar was not performing characters at all when he read dialect poems.

More recent attempts in the mid- to late twentieth century to place Dunbar in relation to Riley have only confused matters even more. Although Riley’s stock certainly has fallen, Dunbar has in a sense *still* suffered in comparison to Riley, now not for producing work of lesser quality but for falling short of an authentic black voice. As Gavin Jones begins an analysis of Dunbar, “Questions of authenticity have always been central to criticism of Paul Laurence Dunbar,” and the fact that Riley valued his own dialect for its supposed authenticity contributed to critics’ evaluation of Dunbar’s work according to that criterion.<sup>31</sup> Rather than simply transferring Riley’s techniques to a different milieu, Dunbar, it was now argued, cannibalized Riley’s dialects. In the 1939 *To Make A Poet Black*, J. Saunders Redding points to the fact that Dunbar’s dialect is “modeled closer upon James Whitcomb Riley’s colloquial language than upon the speech it was supposed to represent,” notably calling it “a bastard form” and a “synthetic dialect” created from Dunbar’s “scant knowledge of many dialects.”<sup>32</sup> Decades later, Bruce writes, “The dialect of Dunbar’s poetry seems to have had far more to do with literary traditions than with folk speech. It was based on many of the conventions that informed the works of both white and black dialect poets.”<sup>33</sup> Dunbar’s debt to Riley is ultimately and invariably seen as a weakness on his part. Revell writes in his 1979 biography of Dunbar:

Even so well-known a poem as Dunbar’s “When De Co’n Pone’s Hot,” with its celebration of the gustatory delights of a Southern black family’s table, owes a good deal to such popular Riley items as “Worter-

melon Time,” a Hoosier poem of appetite, and “When the Frost is on the Punkin,” whose rhythm is exactly matched by Dunbar’s poem.<sup>34</sup>

Tellingly, Revell argues that “Dunbar’s efforts in this manner only approximate the *genuine* and carefully constructed Hoosier speech of Riley’s work” (emphasis added).<sup>35</sup> This late-twentieth-century evaluation of the authenticity of Dunbar’s and Riley’s dialects strangely reverses their positions: according to Revell, Riley’s dialect reflects his true “Hoosierness,” but Dunbar’s dialect does not reflect his true “blackness.” In other words, Dunbar’s dialect poems can be understood as a hodgepodge, cobbled together from literary sources, including Riley’s poetry, and Dunbar’s own written interpretations of dialects he barely knew. As a result—so the current thinking goes—Dunbar is valuable to us only in his role as a foundational poet of the African American literary canon, but his inauthentic dialect hinders his full acceptance into this canon.

Dunbar’s experiments with dialect, despite being conceived by him as building in part upon the Riley tradition, of course had peculiar consequences for him that shaped his popularity and determined his status as a seminal figure for African American poetry. Listening audiences, black and white, were unwilling or unable to suspend belief in the way audiences did for Riley. Some black readers and listeners were growing more tolerant of dialect writing, believing that, as Bruce puts it, “Whatever the sources of black dialect writing, the most crucial aspect of this literature was that, in the hands of black writers, it became a black literature. . . . [T]hey took the form out of the hands of whites and made it their own.”<sup>36</sup> This view, requiring an audience to adopt literary dialect as “their own,” succeeds in making dialect legitimate only on the basis of its authenticity. For many white readers and listeners, on the other hand, Dunbar’s face notably signaled his “pure African blood” (as Howells described Dunbar) and, as it was “colored,” could not be perceived as “blank.”<sup>37</sup> Howells describes Dunbar’s physical features as if he is a caricature: he opened his book to the frontispiece to find “the face of a young negro, *with the race traits strangely accented*: the black skin, the woolly hair, the thick, out-rolling lips, and the mild soft eyes of the pure African type” (emphasis added).<sup>38</sup> In addition to evoking caricature, Howells’s words “strangely” and “accented” point, in their secondary meanings here, to the idea that Dunbar’s dialect (or “accent”) is linked to his exotic (or “strange”) appearance. “Absorbing” more than one character, to use Twain’s term, was not feasible for Dunbar because he was seen as a character, or even a caricature, himself. A 1900 *Boston Transcript* article praising Dunbar, attributed



to “E. S. F.,” maintains that the poet is no “burnt-cork minstrel” because he is “the genuine article, to the manner born; a poet born, not made; singing the songs of his people from a full heart.”

In response to this reception, Dunbar may have tried to distance himself from his literary dialect but, strangely, he did not disprove the assumption that literary dialect was authentic and was the proper medium for expressing authentic blackness. As Alice Dunbar-Nelson writes in a Dunbar memorial, presumably speaking also for her deceased ex-husband, “Say what you will, or what Mr. Howells wills, about ‘feeling the Negro life esthetically and expressing it lyrically,’ it was in the pure English poems that the poet expressed *himself*.”<sup>39</sup> The opposition Dunbar-Nelson makes between race and self deracinates the Dunbar who writes “pure English poems” in order to support the notion that Dunbar actually succeeded in representing authentic blackness in the dialect poems. It does nothing to dispute Howells’s influential assessment.

As Dunbar famously told James Weldon Johnson, his first poems in dialect were attempted in order to “gain a hearing.”<sup>40</sup> The hoped-for aural reception suggested by his choice of the word “hearing” reveals much about the foundation of Dunbar’s success. It was his triumph at the Western Association of Writers reading mentioned at the start of this chapter that led to a string of events landing Dunbar’s *Majors and Minors* in Howells’s hands. Dunbar was known as “an excellent reader of his own verses” who “liked to present them from the platform.”<sup>41</sup> Early in his career, Dunbar learned that it was best to read his public’s favorite pieces during his performances. The African American poet Joseph Seamon Cotter, Sr., suggested to Dunbar in a letter (dated July 9, 1896, shortly after Howells’s review of *Majors and Minors* appeared), “Why not make [Howells] a visit and recite ‘The Party,’ ‘An Ante-Bellum Sermon’ and ‘Whistling Sam.’ ‘Whistling Sam’ will carry New England.” Cotter goes on to say, “If you can carry this point with Howells, your audience will be the whole of New England.” When Dunbar strayed from his most popular dialect pieces, however, his audience did not respond well.<sup>42</sup> It is true that many writers of the period simply gave their audiences what they wanted during readings, as Daniel Borus points out: Twain, Howells, and George Washington Cable all “deliberately selected portions that they knew the audience loved,” as Riley did.<sup>43</sup> However, for Dunbar, the tyranny of audience proved more limiting than for his white contemporaries.<sup>44</sup>

As with Riley, Dunbar’s skill as a public reader contributed to his popularity, and the performance styles of the two poets were compared.<sup>45</sup> However, unlike Riley, Dunbar—facing audiences whose ideas of black

performance had few precedents other than minstrelsy,<sup>46</sup> then in its heyday—ended up recalling the worst of racist stereotypes in his antebellum characters of joyful slaves and despondent ex-slaves. The aforementioned Toledo reporter goes on to say, “Last evening he became a typical ‘jolly coon’ upon the occasion of his recitation of the plantation dance.” Yet another newspaper article illustrates just what is at stake in interpreting Dunbar’s performances as these reporters did. In the *Bowling Green Daily News*, one journalist writes that, while “[i]n his serious language poems, he shows his culture in a voice so free of the dialect that one fails to detect a false note,” in his dialect poems “he gives its natural limitation full sway and the negro is yours to command.” Hearing the speaker of the dialect poems as a “negro [who] is yours to command,” some audiences believed that the poetry gave them permission to return to an antebellum world where blacks had no “culture” to “show.” Sometimes, inexplicably, Dunbar even gestured overtly toward minstrel iconography; as Gavin Jones points out, James Weldon Johnson notes that a performance of “The Colored Band,” accompanied by Rosamond Johnson’s adaptation on the piano, included a “one-man impersonation of the marching band [that] was, in the main, some cleverly executed cakewalk steps.”<sup>47</sup> This performance was so successful that Virginia Cunningham claims an additional reading was scheduled “to appease those who had been turned away.”<sup>48</sup>

Dunbar’s popularity as a performer led to the popularity of his poems as recitation pieces, and they appeared often in elocution manuals and anthologies. Besides Riley and Eugene Field, wrote one reader in 1906, Dunbar’s “poems are oftener recited than the works of any other writer.”<sup>49</sup> Even in 1930, in an essay titled “Dunbar Thirty Years After,” Benjamin Brawley reminisces, “Many of us still remember the first time we read ‘The Ol’ Tunes,’ ‘Angelina’ and ‘When Malindy Sings.’ We recall too the ease, the eagerness with which we committed the lines to memory.”<sup>50</sup> Comparing Dunbar’s poetry favorably to “so-called modern verse,” Brawley finds that the simple melodies present in the former somehow attach themselves to unwitting readers. As I mentioned in my discussion of Harte and Riley, Dunbar’s are “lines you *do* remember” whether or not “you *should*” (emphasis in original).<sup>51</sup>

Considering that Dunbar’s success was, and continues to be, dependent upon performance—both as poetry recitation by himself and by others, and as racial and regional impersonation—it is curious that Dunbar himself claims to doubt the viability of dramatic form for African Americans. In an essay titled “The Negro in Literature,” he writes, “the predominating power of the African race is lyric.” Later, he repeats the sentiment,

even rendering this lyricism essential: “the black man’s soul is lyric, not dramatic. We may expect songs from the soul of the Negro, but hardly much dramatic power, either in writing or acting.” Leaving aside Dunbar’s many attempts at dramatic form outside of lyric poetry (the 2002 publication of *In His Own Voice: The Dramatic and Other Uncollected Works of Paul Laurence Dunbar* includes the heretofore unpublished play *Her-rick*, along with other dramatic fragments), we can easily find drama in the poems. Three of the six Dunbar poems identified by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in the foreword to *In His Own Voice* as his best known, “When Malindy Sings,” “An Ante-bellum Sermon” and “The Party,” could be categorized as dramatic monologues. In any case, Dunbar’s outlandish claims have not steered his readers away from seeing the dramatic potential in his work.<sup>52</sup>

Also, perhaps not surprisingly, five of the six poems identified by Gates (“When De Co’n Pone’s Hot,” “A Negro Love Song,” as well as the three mentioned above) are in dialect.<sup>53</sup> These six taken together, Gates writes, are “among Dunbar’s most accomplished poems, and his most frequently anthologized—‘anthologized’ by memorization, by word of mouth, by speakers.”<sup>54</sup> Gates’s redefinition here of the word “anthologized” to mean “most frequently memorized” is provocative: dialect and dramatic form both seem to work to make these particular poems more conducive to oral distribution. Just as audiences preferred hearing dialect poems to nondialect ones, performers of Dunbar’s poetry in dialect and dramatic form apparently were able to memorize more easily and to inhabit their characters more fully, as Brawley’s example makes clear. Dunbar’s most noteworthy experiment combining dialect and dramatic form involves a distinct subgenre of dialect poetry, one that is impossible in theory. What appears to be Dunbar’s innovation, signaling a departure from a Rileyesque dialect poetry, is his development of the epistolary dialect poem written by a fictional character, essentially a variation on the dramatic monologue. This form (which was taken up by Hughes and McKay, among others<sup>55</sup>) put pressure upon the concept of Dunbar as “the genuine article,” as the *Boston Transcript* article calls him, allowing him to circumvent the authenticity trap of dialect poetry and expanding the dialect poetry genre to include literate navigations of orality.

## The Epistolary Dialect Poem

Despite the fact that the letter is a literate form of communication, the intention behind the language used by the dialect letter-writer seems to be

to represent his or her own speech phonetically.<sup>56</sup> As a result, the epistolary dialect poem serves as a microcosm of the issues involved in writing dialect poetry in the first place. In Dunbar's case, the incompatibility of using a literate form to express speech in a dialect letter invokes the larger-scale incompatibility in using a literate form to express speech in dialect poetry generally. The letter-writer stands in for the poet in a way that Riley's child writer could not: the latter makes errors that point to the writer's semi-literacy, the former makes decisions that mirror the dialect poet's. What Dunbar is doing, in essence, is making the speakers of his epistolary dialect poems into dialect poets themselves—in order to transcribe speech, these characters would have to be accomplished enough in written English to experiment with it and to recognize where speech departs from writing. Dunbar's choice to represent their writing not as illiterate (as Riley's child writer is) but as simultaneously dialect *and* highly literate resists the association of dialect-speaking with illiteracy fundamental to so much contemporary dialect poetry.

The reading experience Dunbar directs his readers to have is a conflicted one: readers cannot recite the epistolary dialect poem as a more conventional dramatic monologue because, simply put, no one can be speaking. Letters, as private communication, are usually written and read silently, in the absence of the addressee and writer respectively.<sup>57</sup> Dunbar's choice of the letter as a model for these poems highlights a tension between a traditional dialect poetry that is performatory and an emerging dialect poetry of silent literacy. His epistolary dialect poem forces its readers to experience an admittedly inauthentic performance, to sense the resistance between the inclination to read dialect aloud and the inclination to read letters silently. In other words, Dunbar effectively makes recitation of these pieces problematic. In so doing, he emphasizes the continuities and tensions between orality and literacy in dialect poetry in general.

Dunbar's reception, in its significant difference from Riley's reception (despite his being described repeatedly as a "colored Riley"), appears to have increased his awareness of the inauthenticity of dialect performance. But even before his emergence on the national stage, Dunbar was pushing his poetry in the direction of inauthenticity. The epistolary dialect poem became for Dunbar a subgenre that would make silent literacy both a crucial and an explicit part of dialect poetry. Although he derives much of his dialect and performance practice from Riley, Dunbar was able to break from him precisely for this reason: because Dunbar's imitations of Riley's dialects were perceived as artificial while his imitations of black Southern dialects were praised as authentic, Dunbar turned to making the artifice of

the entire endeavor clear, projecting representations of speech onto literate forms in ways that Harte and Riley did not, and producing as a result a more complex dialect poetry.

His uncollected epistolary dialect poems, “Happy! Happy! Happy!” and “A Letter,”<sup>58</sup> demonstrate three interrelated features of Dunbar’s innovative approach to literary dialect: the persistent intrusion of the dramatic in his lyric poems; the application of dialect in a letter and what it might mean for dialect writing; and the introduction of issues of literacy for African Americans. The last of these is broader than the other two and proves crucial in understanding Dunbar’s sense of his African American reader—as also shown in essays such as “Is Higher Education for the Negro Hopeless?” (published in 1900 and reprinted many times)—and how this imagined reader might handle dialect poetry as a written form.

The first stanza of “Happy! Happy! Happy!,” cited below in its entirety as it appears in *In His Own Voice*, consists of a letter written by a woman (Mandy) to her presumably less educated lover (Julius), ending the relationship. The stanza is followed by five lines serving as a curious transition in an ambiguous voice, and a third stanza, Julius’s response:

“Dear Julius” I’ve been cogitating,  
     Long before expatiating,  
 On the hopeless alterations,  
     In our mutual relations;  
 Having mounted in position,  
     To a loftier condition,  
 And because I cannot flattah  
     I must say you are “*non grata*.”

Happy, happy, oh my best of queens,  
 Makes me feel as mealy as a pot of beans!  
     Tell you what’s the matter  
 I’m my lady’s own “*non grata*”  
 An’ I’m happy, happy, happy cause I do’ know what it means.

Dear Mandy I been readin’  
     With a pleasure most exceedin’  
 All the pleasant bits of writin’  
     Dat yo’ han’ has been inditin’  
 But you mo’ dan fill my measure  
     Wid de sugar-drip of pleasure,

When you say without a flattah,  
I's you' lovin' own "*non grata*."<sup>59</sup>

Perhaps the first thing a reader would notice about the poem is that Julius's response is written in literary dialect, but Mandy's initial letter is not (with one exception, to which I will return in a moment). Mandy's vocabulary consists of Latinate words ("cogitating," "expatiating," "alterations"), ending finally in an actual Latin phrase ("*non grata*"). The excessive and often unnecessary commas end-stopping the lines of her stanza contribute to the exaggerated hypotaxis,<sup>60</sup> underscoring the relative paucity of commas in Julius's stanza. Although it looks "standard," her dialect should not be understood as neutral. The poem mocks the "educated" woman; she is parodied as a snob. Her dialect, including her pretentious word choice and her awkwardly complex grammar, may be due to her "[h]aving mounted in position / To a loftier condition," making Julius now "*non grata*." In other words, she finds her status new and unfamiliar, and her assumption of this self-important and affected persona, along with its language, fits imperfectly. As much as her language reveals a desperate desire for propriety, her letter writing defies the etiquette rules given in nineteenth-century letter-writing guides; the samples therein were "overwhelmingly statements of sincere and heart-felt sentiment: they included marriage proposals, acceptances, and rejections." Mandy's use of Latinate words in this rejection is an effort "to produce an effect through fine words [that], the manuals warned, should be abandoned for the simple art of expressing true feeling."<sup>61</sup> Take, for example, these instructions from *Miss Leslie's Behaviour Book: A Guide and Manual for Ladies*: "The 'wording' of your letter should be as much like conversation as possible, containing (in a condensed form) just what you would be most likely to talk about if you saw your friend," and always avoiding a tone that is "affectedly didactic."<sup>62</sup>

Mandy's affected language has dramatic consequences in the poem: we find in the third stanza that Julius apparently misunderstands her letter. He claims that reading her rejection gives him "pleasure."<sup>63</sup> In fact, the word "pleasure" appears twice in the stanza, along with its variant "pleasant," mimicking the triple repetition of "Happy" in the poem's title and in the last line of the second stanza. His letter mirrors Mandy's structurally, especially in its last couplet, but the words ending the lines here are fairly common ones, and three ("readin'," "writin'," and "inditin'") are, not surprisingly, terms related to literacy. As I mentioned in my discussion of Harte's and Riley's dialect poetry, literary dialect is frequently used to give

a character the illusion of illiteracy; altering spelling in order to reflect a character's pronunciation can promote the misconception that standard spelling reflects the pronunciation of a standard English speaker. But altering spelling to represent neither a letter-writer's nonstandard speech nor his illiterate writing is what makes this poem substantially different from both conventional dialect poems and, for example, Riley's child-writing and Benjamin F. Johnson poems.

Again, the larger question looming over our readings of this poem is how a person's speech could be reflected in writing a letter. Just as the "author" of Riley's "The Squirrel and the Funy Litel Girl" would not write "an," as I pointed out in my reading of Riley's apostrophes in the previous chapter, no letter-writer would sincerely write "readin'." "The Squirrel and the Funy Litel Girl" and Benjamin F. Johnson's poems hardly foreground these slips, as Dunbar's epistolary dialect poems do. Riley attempts to distinguish between the representations of Benjamin F. Johnson's writing and speaking, but ultimately seems unaware of the differences between writing and speaking, demonstrating that he thinks of literary dialect as essentially oral. Dunbar, in "Happy! Happy! Happy!," experiments with this already-established dilemma in interesting ways. First of all, in producing a textual dialogue between Mandy and Julius that seems to stand in for a spoken dialogue, Dunbar allows the first and third stanzas to highlight the position of literary dialect as a medium that reflects orality through the lens of literacy.

In conceiving of literary dialect as representations of orality through literacy, Dunbar forces the "oral" elements of the poem to challenge the status of standard English.<sup>64</sup> Mandy's letter contains one word in literary dialect—"flattah"—and it is the only word repeated in Julius's stanza aside from its rhyme word ("*non grata*"). This is no accident. When the reader first encounters "flattah," in the context of Mandy's standard English stanza, we register it subconsciously as standard English. Because readers will think of the prestige dialect (that is, standard English) as corresponding with written English, we are coaxed into thinking that Mandy speaks it as well as "writes" it. Because of the social difference Mandy introduces as a means of defining her relationship with Julius, readers are led to perceive Mandy's "flattah" as something different from Julius's "flattah." However, our eyes tell us that this is not the case. Dunbar's approach to literary dialect grows out of his awareness of the prestige dialect *as* a dialect. Obviously, all ways of speaking belong under the rubric of orality, but dialect poetry, in its focus on nonstandard dialects, usually regards standard dialects as nothing more than the spoken articulation of

written language. As such, standard dialects are presumed to be closer to writing. Although Dunbar rarely represents the speech of his standard-English-speaking characters phonetically, as he does here with Mandy's "flattah," his decision to represent Mandy's speech exactly as he represents Julius's (if only for a moment) in effect turns standard English into dialect.

The second stanza seems to be written in Julius's voice, but here the dialect is closer to standard ("I's" in the third stanza is "I'm" in the second). Significantly, "matter" is allowed to rhyme with "non grata." Instead of changing the spelling to "mattah," mirroring the phonetic "flattah" in Mandy's and Julius's letters, this stanza allows for nonstandard pronunciation to be represented by standard spellings. A manuscript located in the Paul Laurence Dunbar Collection at the Ohio Historical Society shows that, in a working draft of the poem, Dunbar toyed with the possibility of writing the line "Tell you what's de mattah," and the change is a major revision in terms of reading this stanza as transitional.<sup>65</sup> The change to "matter" in the typescript (the version reproduced in *In His Own Voice*) shows that Dunbar intended, through ridding the stanza of most visual markers of dialect, to lead his reader away from the thought that Julius or Mandy would be speaking in this stanza. Moreover, rhyming "matter" with "non grata" urges the reader to pronounce the word without a post-vocalic *-r*, a pronunciation that could signal any number of English language dialects, some socially privileged and some not. Our perspective shifts. If a reader pronounces "matter" without the *-r*, he or she will not balk at rhyming the two words. One who does pronounce "matter" with an *-r*, on the other hand, will become aware of the fact that the poem is treating what is usually, in the United States, the nonstandard pronunciation here as the standard.

Perhaps the strongest evidence of Dunbar's experimentation with dialect perspective is the ambiguity of the last line of this second stanza. If we understand the perspective of this stanza to belong to Julius, our most plausible choice, the line finally makes no sense: presumably he is happy *not* because of his ignorance, which is what the line means literally, but because he thinks it is a good thing to be "non grata." The second clause of the line—"cause I do' know what it means"—makes a coherent reading of Julius's response even more difficult. Reading "do' know" as an elision of "don't know" leaves the poem comic, because Julius is portrayed as a fool. Reading it, on the other hand, as "*do* know" (with an extraneous apostrophe) may not explain Julius's happiness—unless he was eager to get out of the relationship—but it does mean that Julius is much more



knowledgeable than he appears to be. Julius's knowledge of the fact that Mandy's letter *is* a rejection becomes clear, and this insight, of course, colors our reading of the tone of the final stanza. His letter to Mandy could be sarcastic, or it could be spiteful, but it is no longer foolish. The dialect speaker is not the fool of the poem; instead, it is Mandy, whose pretentiousness is satirized by both Dunbar and Julius.

In contrast to the complex structure of "Happy! Happy! Happy!," "A Letter" is relatively simple.<sup>66</sup> Most of "A Letter" conforms to the genre of the nostalgic poem so common in Riley's verse (such as "The Old Swimmin'-Hole" and "An Old Sweetheart of Mine") and in the plantation tradition. In the form of a letter, the speaker tells his mother how he pines for the life he left behind in the South and the "ol' plantation." Dunbar returns here to the theme of the displaced Southerner longing for the rural South while living in the urban North. The "mystery" of the poem is why the speaker is now happy, in spite of the longing described in the second, third, and fourth stanzas. We have to wait the length of the poem to find out why, as the speaker writes in the first stanza, he is no longer homesick:

Deah Mammy I's a-writin'  
 Dis hyeah lettah full o' glee,  
 An' I guess you'll be a-wondrin'  
 What on earf's a-ticklin' me.  
 But you needn't try to guess it,  
 An' you needn't spread yo' eyes,  
 Fu' I sholy gwine to hit you  
 Wid a mighty big su'prise.<sup>67</sup>

In the end, after some homesickness for the South, the speaker decides "de no'f, hit ain't so bad!" Thus, the poem is in marked contrast to Dunbar's "Goin' Back" and "To the Eastern Shore," sentimental poems more clearly fitting into the plantation tradition thematically. Unlike the old man in "Goin' Back," who was told "that things were better North, / An' a man was held at his honest worth" only to find the North lacking in "real ol' Southern heartiness," the speaker of "A Letter" overcomes his nostalgia and is not left yearning for the South at the end of the poem.<sup>68</sup> The theme of nostalgic sentimentality that Dunbar appears to share with Riley is challenged by poems such as "A Letter," which in the end makes light of nostalgia as shallow and inauthentic.

The speaker's memory of the South first surfaces in the third stanza, where he finds himself:

. . . feelin' kin' o' lonesome  
 W'en I went to wo'k today,  
 T'inkin' 'bout de ol' plantation  
 An' de good ol' fashioned way  
 Dat we ust to hunt de possum  
 W'en de snow had kep' his trace . . .

The possum epitomizes his fantasy of the South, a loaded image considering its iconic value in blackface minstrelsy and other forms of caricature. (This focus on food is itself a feature of the plantation tradition.) His memory overcomes all of his senses, as his “mouf des sot fu' possum.” Eventually his memory gives way to the reality of his sterile Northern situation: “But I say, ‘now what’s de use? / Ain’t I no’f? Dey ain’t No possums / In dis lan’ a-runnin’ loose.” However, rather than ending with the speaker’s hopeless longing for the products and lifestyle of the South, the poem reveals its surprise:

Den I mos' nigh drap wid trimblin'  
 At a somep'n' dat I see,  
 'Twere a possum, froze an' hangin'  
 In a winder des by me!

Missing the taste of possum, the speaker is surprised to find it for sale in the North. Claude McKay, thirty years later,<sup>69</sup> would publish a nostalgic poem similar to this one: “The Tropics of New York.” In it, McKay’s speaker happens upon some of the fruits and vegetables of his native Jamaica, now made exotic by being placed behind a window in a New York grocery store. As with “A Letter,” the foods of his childhood lead the speaker of “The Tropics of New York” to memories of the landscape, idealized over time. Instead of a speaker who “mos’ nigh drap wid tremblin’”—for joy and surprise—at the sight of something from home, we have here a speaker whose equally visceral reaction manifests itself as a “wave of longing” sweeping through his body. Michael North’s excellent analysis of McKay’s poem describes how the poem critiques the separation of the individual from the products of his country by imperialist forces: as North writes, the poem is “about the radically different fates of passenger and cargo in the global economy, the cargo assimilated as an exotic treat, the passenger cut off from both tropics and New York.”<sup>70</sup> However, the most important difference between McKay’s and Dunbar’s poems is that, “[d]ough de buyin’ seemed a sin,” Dunbar’s speaker *does* buy the possum

and is able to recreate at least the culinary experiences he remembers from home. This is enough for him to be satisfied, and there is a depth of feeling in McKay's poem that is missing from Dunbar's. Unlike McKay's speaker, Dunbar's does not despair over his nostalgia, and the poem thus ends on an upbeat and comic note rather than a tragic one. The nostalgia depicted in "A Letter" is far from devastating.

Dunbar's poem argues that perhaps nostalgia is not as natural or authentic as poems of the plantation tradition would lead us to think. The plantation tradition, Gavin Jones writes, "worked by blurring the line between memory and reality; nostalgic stereotypes were politically powerful because they were so often taken as truths. In Dunbar's poems about slave life, however, there is a radical tension between the categories of memory and reality. Rather than a natural truth, memory is presented as a convention, a retrospective construction."<sup>71</sup> "A Letter" exposes reminiscing as a construction, in conforming to expectations early in the poem in order to upset them at the end. One of the conventional types of memory common to poems coming out of the plantation tradition is that of the old man looking back; the sentiment behind it is that, no matter how long one lives in the North, one will always be homesick. For example, Dunbar's character in "Goin' Back" says that "thirty years ain't wiped . . . out" his doubt about the virtues of the North. He continues:

. . . year after year I worried along,  
 While deep in my heart the yearnin' strong  
 Grew stronger an' fiercer to visit once more  
 The well loved scenes o' my native shore.

For the character in "Goin' Back," his nostalgia has only gotten more overpowering, but the nostalgia of "A Letter" is deflated with the realization that this longing, although it feels insubstantial and abstract, can be composed simply of the material goods that can be obtained anywhere in an industrialized world. Because poems in the plantation tradition frequently revolve around stereotyped scenes of food—stealing it, eating it, cooking it, and so on—Dunbar uses this obsession in order to expose the caricature and fantasy supported by this type of nostalgia: the myth of mindlessly happy slaves living at ease in the land of plenty. A 1904 *New York Times* review of Dunbar's *Li'l Gal*, determined to situate it squarely and unproblematically in the plantation tradition, claims that Dunbar's "negroes are filled with the joy of material life when food was good and easily got, and no one took thought for the morrow," and this is not an unusual contem-

porary review of Dunbar's work.<sup>72</sup> In a memory that would appear to support the *New York Times* reviewer's impression of Dunbar's poetry, the speaker of "A Letter" never says he misses his mother, only that he'd have

. . . gin de whole creation  
 Fu' to hit yo' cabin do',  
 An' to see de smoke a-risin'  
 An' to smell dat bacon smell . . .

In the end, however, the nostalgia is finite and dissipates like the smoke pouring out from his childhood cabin. This critique of the nostalgia theme, a theme essential to dialect poetry in the Riley tradition and in the plantation tradition, for its emptiness and shallowness amounts to a refutation of stereotypes of black culture, and of the image of the displaced Southerner who can find no happiness in the North.

Again, just as "Happy! Happy! Happy!" does, "A Letter" introduces the question of how a letter might be written in dialect. The poem begins with a deictic expression—" [d]is hyeah lettah"—indicating that the letter is the poem itself, so it is clear that the poem is not a conventional dramatic monologue in which the person addressed is physically present. Strangely, there's a "—well—" in the poem, a clear signal of represented speech. That is, one doesn't *write* "well"; it is, especially surrounded by dashes, an unconscious interruption of thought. The authority of the dashes, however, is itself debatable. Of the three copies of the poem found in the Dunbar Collection, the two typescripts print the line as I have above, evocative of speech, but in the manuscript the line reads as follows: "But dat's ovah now, fu' well." The last two words of the manuscript version could be understood to mean "for good" or "full well," giving the line a completely different meaning.<sup>73</sup> In other words, Dunbar likely rewrote the poem to include *more* signals of represented speech.

Both "Happy! Happy! Happy!" and "A Letter" exhibit Dunbar's interest in showing how literacy, represented by letter writing, is constantly reshaping and restructuring orality, and vice versa, in a culture of secondary orality. As a poet who owed his career both to public performances of his poems (by himself and by others) and to impressive sales of his books, Dunbar saw the value of both oral and literate competence, viewing dialect as a vehicle to explore the space between the two modes. When Dunbar presented his work orally, it was received as an attempt to capture the true spirit and voice of African Americans in general. But, on the page, Dunbar's poetry is clearly interested in the inauthenticity of literary voice in

general, and in how orality and literacy inform each other through dialect poetry. The oral elements that enter into written documents (“—well—” in a letter, for example) and the written reworkings of speech represented by dialect letters themselves belong to the same project.

That Dunbar’s “A Letter” is preserved in both manuscript and type-script versions in the Ohio Historical Society microfilm of the Paul Laurence Dunbar Collection (the latter presumably typed using the typewriter preserved at the Paul Laurence Dunbar House in Dayton) allows us to see how a dialect poem that inhabits the space between orality and literacy changes as it travels from script to print and vice versa. Born just as the first typewriters were becoming commercially available—and in the same decade and town that saw the invention of the typewriter’s cousin, the cash register—Dunbar was one of the first or second generations of writers to produce literature as type.<sup>74</sup> Dunbar’s romanticism and apparent dedication to script in poems such as “A Garret,” whose speaker writes verses with his “ill-rewarding pen,” would suggest that he still views poetry writing as primarily scriptive (recalling Riley’s romanticization of chirographic poetic composition and his fetishization of the pencil in his “A Worn-Out Pencil”). However, to examine the Dunbar archives makes it clear that part of the compositional process must have included typewriting, as it did for Riley.<sup>75</sup> The author of *Paul Laurence Dunbar: Laurel Decked* expresses what he perceives as the discontinuity between dialect writing and typewriting when he observes Dunbar’s typewriter (a Remington Standard No. 6) as if talismanic, with a sense of awe and wonder: “There stands the typewriter which will never click to his wizard and industrious touch again. One wonders how any machine could be made to turn out his curious dialectic forms.”<sup>76</sup> For Dunbar, however, the typewriter was in fact a generative tool.

Ironically, oral interjections like “—well—” (which we also find in Riley’s poetry) translate into print more readily and more precisely than they do into script. As Charles Olson would write in “Projective Verse” decades later, the typewriter “due to its rigidity and its space precisions, . . . can, for a poet, indicate exactly the breath, the pauses, the suspensions even of syllables, the juxtapositions even of parts of phrases, which he intends. . . . For the first time he can, without the convention of rime and meter, record the listening he has done to his own speech and by that one act indicate how he would want any reader, silently or otherwise, to voice his work.”<sup>77</sup> However, Olson’s post-metrical conception of the printed poem as score cannot be applied exactly to Dunbar’s use of type, with his regular rhyme and meter already determining the length of

breaths and pauses. In any case, the turn-of-the-century typewritten poem foregrounds all of the “lines an’ dots” (to quote Dunbar’s “When Malindy Sings”) and “ever’ dot and cross” (to quote Riley’s *The Rubaiyat of Doc Sifers*) of dialect poetry more dramatically than does the handwritten one. The typewriter makes more visually apparent the dialect poem’s mingling of literacy and orality.

### Dunbar’s Class in Spelling and Reading

Dunbar’s thoughts about illiteracy among African Americans, implicit in his poetry, become explicit in his essays, letters, and interviews: his interest in oral art forms represented in dialect writing did not extend to a respect for orality in and of itself, which he viewed as limited. As I have tried to show, Dunbar’s poetry emphasizes what he sees as the shortcomings of both orality and literacy in and of themselves, but demonstrates, through the use of literate modes of communication and smaller-scale oral structures, how each can enrich the other. Bruce expresses the charges of many critics in his claim that “despite Dunbar’s professed interest in folk life, the folk Negroes whose lives his dialect poems evoked were not the black people he most admired,” pointing to Dunbar’s 1901 essay “Negro Society in Washington,” originally published in the *Saturday Evening Post*, in which Dunbar “praised the black elite’s distinctive love of pleasure.”<sup>78</sup> Signaling a departure from the “poet of the people” stance that Riley cultivated both within and without the literature, Dunbar’s persona in his essay writing is certainly elitist. Despite writing affectionately of “the lower walks of life [where] a warmer racial color is discoverable” in “Negro Life in Washington,” Dunbar goes on, in the same essay, to mark the lower classes as “of a different cast from that part of the Washington life which is the pride of her proudest people”: doctors, lawyers, and professors. He calls the last of these “the acme of titular excellence,” of whom there are more in Washington “than one could find in a day’s walk through a European college town.”<sup>79</sup>

Despite the favoring of a Du Boisian “Talented Tenth” that this essay reveals, with academics at the top of the hierarchy, Dunbar expresses in another essay views about what he considers the best type of education for African Americans. In “The Tuskegee Meeting,” Dunbar argues that the pioneering black colleges and universities, founded in the late 1860s, were not well suited for African Americans, some of whom only recently were legally forbidden to learn to read. He writes of the first graduates of

these schools that, when the “weight of classicity was placed upon them, they became mentally top heavy,” resulting in the “pompous, half educated, big-worded negro who came on the stage of active life after the war.”<sup>80</sup> Mandy of “Happy! Happy! Happy!” with her Latinate vocabulary seems to be a stereotype in this vein. Tuskegee’s approach, he argued, was proving more successful, producing graduates better equipped for individual and racial progress. This is despite the fact that, elsewhere, he expressed disapproval of the Tuskegee model and worried that a fundraiser in Boston where he was to appear alongside Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois would “destroy any future power Dubois [*sic*] and I may have by bringing us before the public in the character of speakers for the very institution whose founder’s utterances we cannot subscribe to.”<sup>81</sup> The inconsistency in Dunbar’s views of African American education is reflected in the split in his work between classical and folk influences.

According to Dunbar, literacy was the key to the sort of education, whether vocational or liberal, that would benefit the race—a familiar theme in the African American tradition that preceded Dunbar. As Robert Stepto writes, “One does not have to read very far into the corpus of Afro-American letters to find countless examples of the exaltation of literacy and the written word.”<sup>82</sup> A poet dependent upon book sales, Dunbar of course had personal motives for wanting to increase the number of black readers, already a significant number in the 1890s. However, the question of “Negro Education,” often understood as simply literacy education, was still a much-debated one in the last decade of the century: Dunbar himself wrote “Is Higher Education for the Negro Hopeless?” in response to an essay that argued in the affirmative to that question. In addition, only four years before Howells’s review of Dunbar’s *Majors and Minors* appeared in *Harper’s*, the *Atlantic Monthly* published an article by W. T. Harris called “The Education of the Negro,” in which the writer’s respondents (mostly white Southerners, often arguing with him<sup>83</sup>) addressed the points of the essay in footnotes. Lida Keck Wiggins recalls a conversation with Dunbar that is worth mentioning in light of Dunbar’s essays about African American education, and the historical context in which these questions were circulating:

Before I left him that afternoon, he took occasion to tell me that he was to have his “class” that night, and that he must rest a bit before the pupils came. I asked in amazement what class he meant, and he said, with an enthusiasm which left no doubt as to his heart-interest in the work:

“Why my class in spelling and reading. Some people think our people should be nurses and boot-blacks, but I am determined that they shall not make menials out of all of us.” This class he taught for weeks, giving literally of his very life for the betterment of the race.<sup>84</sup>

Dunbar-the-teacher, according to Virginia Cunningham, “still had his own McGuffey’s Readers” and he “bought himself a history of pedagogy and a book on methods of education.”<sup>85</sup> Dunbar’s determination to increase literacy and promote primary and secondary education among African Americans was linked in his mind to decreasing the ranks of menial workers in African American communities: he himself had been one; after graduating from high school, the only work he was able to get was as a janitor or an elevator operator.

The value of primary and secondary education, for Dunbar, was indisputable. His own mixed feelings about the value of higher education, which I discuss in the greater detail in the next chapter, are colored by the fact that he was unable to attend college; Brawley calls this one of the biggest disappointments in Dunbar’s life.<sup>86</sup> Dunbar may have been resigned to becoming an autodidact himself, but he clearly promoted the general value of higher education of the few for the many, in African American communities. He writes, in “Is Higher Education for the Negro Hopeless?”:

Every graduate from a Negro college, it is true, does not become a Moses in the community where he is settled, but, on the other hand, in every section where a Negro college is located, and where there are Negro graduates, it is proven beyond dispute, whatever detractors may say to the contrary, that the moral, social, and industrial tone of the people has been raised. They have gone into the districts where the people did not even know how to live, and by their own example taught the benighted the art of life, which they have learned in the schools for higher education.

The *Atlanta Sunny South* review I mentioned earlier in this chapter, which attacked Dunbar for “becom[ing] so immersed in the culture of the schools that he understands [his race] no longer,” reflected the views many held—including Dunbar at times—that the more educated an African American became, the further he or she was from black culture. In “Negro Life in Washington,” Dunbar writes that the African American of the middle classes, particularly the college-educated, “has imbibed enough of white civilization to make him work to be prosperous. But he has not partaken



of civilization so deeply that he has become drunk and has forgotten his own identity. . . . He has retained some of his primitive ingenuousness.”<sup>87</sup> For Dunbar, “civilization” and blackness are apparently at odds, but he thinks that there is some value to keeping the two in balance. The so-called primitiveness, the inability to “even know how to live” that Dunbar links to African American culture, can be saved by the forces of “civilization.”

In asserting his familiarity with the high as well as the low,<sup>88</sup> Dunbar was again attempting to distance himself from the “lowly” linked with dialect. Howells writes, of Dunbar’s work in *Majors and Minors*, “I do not think one can read his Negro pieces without feeling that they are of like impulse and inspiration with the work of Burns when he was most Burns, when he was most Scotch, when he was most peasant.”<sup>89</sup> But, in response to this dictum, Emeka Okeke-Ezigbo claims that Howells “unwittingly offended Dunbar by associating him with the very things he wished to avoid; for Howells was saying by implication that ‘Dunbar was the most “Negro,” the most Southern, and the most peasant.’”<sup>90</sup> And it does seem to be the case that, as much as his career depended upon the association, Dunbar resented being grouped with the black lower classes.

Several critics have pointed to this ambivalence as the driving force behind Dunbar’s repudiation of the dialect poetry that was so profitable for him. Okeke-Ezigbo claims that Dunbar “considered himself superior to the uneducated slaves and freedmen” and that his “condescending attitude toward the black folks conditioned his stance on ‘Negro dialect.’”<sup>91</sup> Jean Wagner, too, traces Dunbar’s approach to his own dialect poetry to a condescending and disdainful attitude toward poor blacks. He writes, “we need not summarily dismiss the possibility that Dunbar, by rejecting his dialect works that identify him with the people, was also rejecting his lowly social origins. In a certain sense, he may be considered as belonging to the developing black bourgeoisie which, in its urge to climb the social ladder, feels obliged to deny everything it might share with the lower class.”<sup>92</sup> There is certainly much truth to this. And, in fact—although Charles T. Davis claims that Dunbar “opposed the rampant materialism the dominated the age”—Dunbar did seem very concerned with making money and with upward mobility, having struggled financially during his first years as a poet and perhaps trying to achieve financially what Riley, famously, accomplished in his career.<sup>93</sup> The letter from Joseph Seamon Cotter, Sr., who also considered Riley one of his “literary idols,”<sup>94</sup> to Dunbar that I mentioned earlier in this chapter reveals something of the strategic opportunism and commercial-mindedness that the two young poets may have shared with Riley:

You and Gov. McKinley are close together in Harper's. Do you see the point? If he is made President get your friends to speak for you. It may bring you a position in Washington worth \$1000 or \$1200 a year.

If you can get some New York house to bring out your book, a little fortune will be yours.

By all means arrange and give some readings in New England.

If Howells hears you read he will say something that will mean thousands in your pocket.

The public readings of dialect poetry, upon which Dunbar's financial success depended, had the somewhat ironic effect of linking Dunbar with the lower classes from whom he may have wanted to distance himself. The larger his audience became (as Cotter projected, "Whistling Sam' will carry New England") and the richer Dunbar could become, the more "lowly" he would appear to his audiences.

## The Spelling Bee Poem Redux

Dunbar's practical interest in literacy extends, as I have said, to his poetics in dialect writing. Nowhere is this as evident as in Dunbar's spelling bee poems, a subgenre introduced in the previous chapter and to which I briefly return in closing this chapter.<sup>95</sup> Revell calls Dunbar's "The Spellin'-Bee" the poet's "tribute to Riley's 'At 'The Literary,'" a story of courtship conducted in the exchanges of a village literary meeting, with much use of Riley's characterization of village types, lawyer, parson, miserly farmer, and the usual crop of village beaux and belles."<sup>96</sup> The prize for winning the spelling bee is a "little blue-backed spellin'-book with fancy scarlet trimmin'," which is clearly Webster's.<sup>97</sup> A gathering revolving around acts of literacy—not only the act of "spelling down" one's opponent, but the act of competing to win a spelling book—would prove an ideal subject for Dunbar's dialect poetry. Strangely enough, the speller seems to entice adult members of the community to participate in the spelling bee. In an essay about the history of spelling bees in the United States, Allen Walker Read cites a historian who points out that, as spelling bees became more social, "the rest of the community would join in." The mature nature of these nineteenth-century spelling bees is suggested by the fact that "the small children did not come: it was for those boys and girls who were in their teens and who were old enough to enjoy and appreciate 'a good time.'"<sup>98</sup>

As if contagious, “folks ’ud miss the very word that seemed to fit their cases.” The town’s miser joins in and, fittingly, misspells “charity.” The most suggestive misspelling, however, is that of the lawyer who forgets the “h” in “honest.” This error has deep implications for literary dialect. The “h” in “honest” is never pronounced, so spelling it correctly, with an “h,” identifies the speaker as literate. Moreover, there are several English words beginning with “h” the aspiration of which marks someone as a Standard English speaker or not. Dropping the “h” in *spelling* “honest” calls to attention the common (mainly English) mistake of dropping it in *speaking* other words. Although dropping the “h” in speaking “honest” is consistent with most varieties of English, in *Pygmalion* the “reformed” Eliza Doolittle “[p]urposely drop[s] her aitches to annoy” the professor who has taught her to speak as he does: “Thats done you, Enry Iggins, it az.”<sup>99</sup> The “h” is used as a weapon by Eliza Doolittle, who, by the end of the play, is fluent in two English dialects. Elocution manuals, such as *The Popular Elocutionist and Reciter* (published in 1894 in both London and New York), caution reciters about the “h”: “Above all things, mind your *aitches*—an aitch dropped or wrongly aspirated, is to an educated ear what a note played out of tune is to a musician’s.”<sup>100</sup> In addition, two essays published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, “The H Malady in England” by Richard Grant White and “The Misused H in England” by Richard A. Proctor (appearing in January and May 1885, respectively) addressed the “h” issue, venturing answers to questions such as why the “h” is not dropped in America. The controversy over “h” in spoken English made it a vexed letter to exploit in literary dialect.

As I mentioned in my discussion of Harte’s spelling bee poem, this subgenre serves as an implicit argument for spelling reform: the fact that spelling “honest” without an “h” would mark one as illiterate, whereas pronouncing it *with* an “h” would mark one as an imaginary dialect speaker (and hence “illiterate” in the world of most dialect poetry) places the reader in an uncomfortable paradox. Dunbar—as a Westerner posing as a Southerner, as an urban dweller posing as a rustic, as one of the high-society set posing as one of the “lowly”—seems drawn to these linguistic paradoxes even as he is frustrated by them.

Dunbar addresses the dilemma raised by Harte’s and Riley’s dialects—that is, the dichotomy between Harte’s “plain language” and Riley’s “peculiar language”—by foregrounding the confusion implicit in dialect poetry’s dual identity as oral and literate. Although Dunbar builds upon their work, as we see in his use of the Spelling Bee subgenre, Harte’s and Riley’s dialects were essentially two methods of getting to the same place:

their dialects effectively became cautionary examples of the nonsensicality of attempting to force orality into a literate form. Riley dangerously conflated speech with illiterate writing and, in the nostalgia-inducing properties of his child writing, forwarded a progressive model of orality and literacy; Harte developed a type of literary dialect associated with transparency, which, despite his good intentions, dangerously propped up and provided fuel for racist views of Chinese Americans. Dunbar's attempted solution to the misuse of literary dialect was to experiment with including representations of speech in literate modes of communication, such as letter writing, allowing the dialect speaker to become a dialect writer by proxy. Although Dunbar's dialect poetry is considered either thematically reactionary or subversive now, supporting or rejecting racial stereotypes respectively, I would argue that Dunbar's innovation is a linguistic one, located in his buttressing of literate subgenres with oral structures and vice versa. His awareness of the racial stereotypes to which he and his work fell prey, resulting in part from the condescension a primary orality received in a culture of emerging secondary orality, prompted him to revise Riley's and Harte's views of the relationship between orality and literacy. That he did so by emphasizing the labor of reading and writing dialect poetry will be the subject of the following chapter.