DUNBAR'S POETRY IN LITERARY ENGLISH

BY CHARLES EATON BURCH

If Paul Laurence Dunbar is to continue to have a place in American literature, it seems to be fairly well agreed that it is to be accorded to him largely because of his poetry written in the Negro dialect. While such a statement is true in the main, it does not define the range of his work. His poetry in literary English has sufficient merit to warrant attention and study; and no survey of his poetry can be considered complete which totally ignores his English verse. As a student in the high school he attracted the attention of his teachers, not because of his poems in the Negro dialect, but because he exhibited rare signs of promise in the production of English lyric poetry. The student of his biography will recall that before he made any serious efforts in the Negro dialect, his verse occasioned the favorable comment of such men as James Whitcomb Riley, James Herne, Dr. James Ridpath, and Colonel Robert Ingersoll.

A few admirers of the poet's work have endeavored to establish the fact that his English verse is "pregnant with a depth of thought." To many, however, the application of this view to the greater portion of his poetry is too sweeping. It is only for a very small part of his verse in literary English that such a claim can be made. For Dunbar's lack of broad literary training prevented him from accomplishing any sustained flights in the established media of the language. That he felt the need of a broader training for his life-work, may be seen in his efforts to enter college. There is some "depth of thought" in these lines:

"When sleep comes down to soothe the weary eyes
Which all the day with ceaseless care have sought
The magic gold which from the seeker flies;
Ere dreams put on the cap and gown of thought
And make the waking world a world of lies—
Of lies most palpable, uncouth, forlorn,
That say life's full of aches and tears and sighs—
Oh, how with more than dreams the soul is torn
Ere sleep comes down to soothe the weary eyes."
Ere sleep comes down to soothe the weary eyes
How questioneth the soul that other soul—
The inner sense which neither cheats nor lies,
But self exposeth unto self a scroll
Full writ with all life's acts, unwise or wise,
In characters indelible and known;
So, trembling with the shock of sad surprise
The soul doth view its awful self alone,
Ere sleep comes down to soothe the weary eyes."

"The Mystery" and "The Dirge" may also be included in
this small group of selections. These three or four gems are
worthy of the greatest masters. Such is the type of poetry
produced on a much larger scale by some of our great literary
spirits.

Paul Dunbar was at home in dealing with rollicking
humor. His dialect poems show him at his best in this field.
However, his English humorous verse is interesting. One
might with some justice claim that in dealing with Negro
plantation life he was furnished with a wealth of humorous
material. But since he had no such help in his English humor­
ous verse, we are forced to conclude that he was of an essen­
tially humorous nature. "At Cheshire Cheese" is indicative of
what he was capable of doing at times.

"When first of wise old Johnson taught,
My youthful mind its homage brought,
And made the ponderous crusty sage
The object of a noble rage.

Nor did I think (How dense we are!) That any day, however far,
Would find me holding unrepelled,
The place that Doctor Johnson held.

But change has come and time has moved,
And now applauded, unimproved,
I hold with pardonable pride,
The place that Johnson occupied.

Conceit! Presumption! What is this? You surely read my words amiss! Like Johnson I—a man of mind— How could you ever be so blind?

No. At the ancient "Cheshire Cheese" Blown hither by some vagrant breeze, To dignify my shallow wit, In Doctor Johnson's seat I sit."

Our author was on his own ground when he turned to
genuine pathos. His way was not strewn with roses. The
few years of domestic happiness were soon overshadowed by
the loss of companionship of the one who had exerted a real
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influence on his life and work. And when we add to this misfortune an enfeebled body it is not difficult to account for a portion of this poetry of pathos. However, there is a danger of over-stressing the influence of these circumstances on his poetry. For many poems of this character were written before these forces began to operate in his life. Among the many poems of this character his “Ships That Pass in the Night” is perhaps his best effort. It is truly a modest contribution to the world's literature of pathos.

“Out in the sky the great dark clouds are massing,
I look far out into the pregnant night,
Where I can hear a solemn booming gun
And catch the gleaming of a random light,
That tells me that the ship I seek is passing, passing.

My tearful eyes, my soul's deep hurt are glassing,
For I would hail and check that ship of ships.
I stretch my hands imploring, cry aloud,
My voice falls dead a foot from mine own lips,
And but a ghost doth reach the vessel passing, passing.

O Earth, O Sky, O Ocean, both surpassing,
O heart of mine, O soul that dreads the dark!
Is there no hope for me? Is there no way
That I may sight and check the speeding bark
Which out of sight and sound is passing, passing.”

Dunbar had a true appreciation for the beauty of external nature. In our day when the poetry of nature has come into its own and can claim some of the world's greatest poets, there is a tendency to overlook the nature poetry of some of the lesser lights. The critics are perhaps justified in claiming that in many instances modern nature poetry is too often a repetition of what has been so well done by earlier writers. Yet a new note is often heard. And if it cannot be called a new note, there is a freshness in the portrayal of a familiar native scene, a new turn of phrase, a depth of imaginative power displayed, that challenge the attention of the student of poetry. Dunbar, in his English verse, seldom sounded any new notes; his nature poetry generally follows the paths so well begun in the latter half of the eighteenth century. That he was capable of writing the poetry of the commonplace in nature may be determined from his treatment of Southern plantation life in his dialect poetry. Yet a few nature poems in literary English are worth mentioning. There is a touch of nature in “The Poet and the Song.”
And when at eve I long for rest;
When cows come home along the bars,
And in the fold I hear the bell,
As night, the shepherd, herds his stars,
I sing my song and all is well.
My days are never days of ease;
I till my ground and prune my trees.
When ripened gold is all the plain,
I labor hard, and toil and sweat,
While others dream within the dell;
But even while my brow is wet,
I sing my song and all is well.

"The Drowsy Day" is full of suggestions of the gloomy mood of nature:—

"The air is dark, the sky is gray,
The misty shadows come and go,
And here within my dusky room
Each chair looks ghastly in the gloom.
Outside the rain falls cold and slow—
Half stinging drops, half blinding spray."

The following is an example of more poetical language:—

"I look far out across the lawn
Where huddled stand the silly sheep."

"The Sailor's Song" breathes something of the rugged yet fascinating life of the ocean:—

"O for the breath of the briny deep,
And the tug of a bellying sail,
With the seagull's cry across the sky
And a passing boatman's hail.
For be she fierce or be she gay
The sea is a famous friend alway.
And a fight at night with a wild sea sprite
He! for the plains where the dolphins play
And the bend of the masts and spars,
When the foam has drowned the stars.
And, pray, what joy can the landsman feel,
Like the rise and fall of a sliding keel?"

To Paul Dunbar is often accorded the title of poet laureate of the Negro race. This high-sounding term is, however, only suggestive. Dunbar was not only the first American Negro to gain a fairly large degree of recognition for his work in creative literature, he was also the first to give a true lyrical expression of the life of the Negro of the plantation. In examining his verse in literary English, one discovers the Dunbar who is proud of the struggles and aspirations of the "New Negro," just as truly as his dialect poetry reveals his sympathy with the lowly life of his people. He never allows any of the larger happenings of his people to pass
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unnoticed. Often he is found paying a tribute to the departed Negro who has labored in behalf of his people; at times he exults in the victories of the colored soldiers of America, or proudly raises a song in honor of his race. "The Ode to Ethiopia" is perhaps better known among the masses of the colored people of America than any other one of his English poems. Colored children in many sections of the country often can be heard reciting:

"Oh Mother race! to thee I bring
This pledged faith unwavering,
This tribute to thy glory.
I know the pangs which thou didst feel,
When slavery crushed thee with its heel,
With thy dear blood all gory.

On every hand in this fair land,
Proud Ethiope's swarthy children stand
Beside their fairer neighbor;
The forests flee before their stroke
Their hammers ring, their forges smoke,
They stir in honest labor.

Go on and up! our souls and eyes
Shall follow thy continuous rise;
Our ears shall list thy story
From bards who from thy root shall spring
And proudly tune their lives to sing
Of Ethiopia's glory."

Dunbar did not produce any great poems in literary English; however, he did add a few charming poems to the native literature. His was not the role of the great master with the mighty line. But his simple lay is so full of melody, so full of heart, that the lover of literature often leaves the major poet to spend many pleasant moments with him.

THERE are two Dunbars. There is the Dunbar of "the jingle in a broken tongue." The other Dunbar matches himself with poets who shine as stars in a firmament of our admiration. He was a prophet of a new generation.

—Kerlin