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Reflections of Cultural Trauma in the Short Stories of Paul

Laurence Dunbar

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In the early twentieth Century, the genre of the short story found a new life as the African American writers started practising the form with vigour, skill, and originality. Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872—1906), whose short stories offer a keen insight into American race relations as well as the cultural trauma experienced by African Americans, appeared as one of the chief practitioners of the genre. In the Postbellum period writers like Dunbar and Charles W. Chesnutt made an attempt to educate a Eurocentric reading audience about the racial nightmare in which those of African descent lived. But they also began to write with the assumption that black consciousness and black culture were significant, self-evident entities in the world, deserving of respect.

Both the exponents of African American short story, Dunbar and Chesnutt, in order to be published at all, had to come to terms with the literary forms and conventions of the Plantation Tradition whose chief exponents were Joel Chandler Harris, Thomas Nelson Page, James Lane Allen and Harry Stillwell Edwards. This literary convention stipulated that the black characters be presented as living contentedly in an Edenic South, that they be quaint, childlike and docile, tellers of exotic yarns for the entertainment of “massa’s” children or for “massa” himself. It is this tradition which gave rise to the literary stereotypes of the “Contented Slave,” the “Wretched Freedman,” who, being deprived of the paternal care of his master is unable to provide for himself, the “Comic Negro” and the “Local Colour Negro.” (Buck 21)

Dunbar has largely been accused of conforming to the limitations of the idyllic posture, wearing as it were, “the mask that grins and lies,” (Dunbar, 14). He has often been accused of being an accommodationist and has been criticised for the stereotypical portrayal



of blacks in his poems and plantation tales. Ralph Ellison condemned Dunbar for parroting dominant discourses of Black inferiority: "Now, the pathetic element in the history of Negro American writing is that it started out by reflecting . . . the styles of dialect humour transfused into literature from the white stereotype of the Negro minstrel tradition. This was Dunbar and Chesnutt" (quoted in Robinson and Robinson 219).

But I would argue that while reading Dunbar's poems, short stories and fiction, one has to always remember that he continued his career as a professional writer and in so doing accepted the limits imposed upon him by a publishing world dominated by white values. If we can judge from what the leading editor of his age found attractive in black writing, then we are led to the conclusion that a black writer was required to play the role of what William Dean Howells called the "exemplary citizen." In this phrase Howells was referring to the public image projected by the writings of Booker T. Washington. Howells' approval indicates the kind of decorum required of a black writer by his nineteenth century audience.

The kind of style that pleased Howells, he found in the writing of Dunbar, Washington, and the early Chesnutt. He admired above all its freedom from "bitterness." Unruffled by racial injustice, they wrote in a style that he characterised as showing a "sweet, brave, humour." Dunbar's career depended upon his being able to produce the desired tone. By confining himself to the stereotype themes of plantation fiction—racial reconciliation, black loyalty, and above all humour—Dunbar achieved this. It seems he was well aware of the genre's limitations.

Dunbar's stance as a writer seems to be largely dictated by the hidden conventions of decorum ruling the black writer's relationship with his audience. While we can assume that a white audience imposed severe restrictions of style and subject-matter on a writer, we must not underestimate the demands of the black middle-class. James Weldon Johnson, Dunbar's friend and literary heir, claimed that both black and white audiences exerted pressures on the black writer. Dunbar, faced with what Johnson called—"the problem of a double audience"—had to be careful to respect the prejudices of both sides (Byrd, n.p.). As a result, Dunbar had to evolve a series of strategies to cater to the demands of his reading public. A



study of his short stories shows that he tried to evade portraying any open conflict between the black and the white people. Secondly, he had recourse to irony and humour. Irony enabled him to distance himself from his material and so avoid any accusation that his intension was to complain or protest. Finally, Dunbar presented himself as an adept in the white literary code: an exemplary citizen supporting the values of white culture. The overall strategy appears to have been a form of self-defense for the writer.

Yet there are a few critics who have strongly refused to see Dunbar as a mere accommodationist who sought success in conforming to the white stereotyping of blacks. Darwin Turner argues that Dunbar's work is "much more a part of the protest tradition than his reputation suggests" (2). As his principal supporting evidence, he cites five or six of Dunbar's stories, published in *The Strength of Gideon*. A thorough study of Dunbar's stories proves the fact that he wrote a handful of protest stories which have attracted less attention than his accommodationist plantation tales.

While studying such diversified criticism of Dunbar's works we have to remember that the situation after Reconstruction produced a contradiction or doubleness in someone who was told in words, deeds and laws that he or she was a citizen and yet not a citizen. W.E.B. Dubois in *The Souls of Black Folk*, propounded the notion of the "double conscious" (692). It seems to be an appropriate description of the literally divided spiritual and psychological conditions of individual black artists and intellectuals at the turn of the twentieth century. The problem of dualism, whether in Dubois's semi-psychological proposition of two more or less unintegrated consciousness existing simultaneously in one body or Dunbar's strategy of the masking of one's true nature is this problem of being a citizen and yet not a citizen in an increasingly urbanised and industrialised United States.

In fact a reconciliation of African American aspiration with the principle of white supremacy was the focal point of Dunbar's career. In this he embodied the historical dilemma of the social class from which he sprang. The rising Negro middle class found its journey up from slavery blocked at every turn by the artificial barriers of caste. They were torn, in a consequence, between a desire to succeed, and a fear of retaliation in the event that they



should succeed too well. It was to this agonising conflict that Dunbar addressed himself in his short fiction (56-57).

Though born and brought up in the North, Dunbar was well aware of both the brutality of the slave past and the painful realities of racism in the present. His parents, Mathilda and Joshua Dunbar, had both been slaves in Kentucky. His father had escaped via the Underground Railroad and his mother had moved to Dayton after the war. They and their friends shared their stories of slave life with Dunbar as he was growing up. After he left Dayton and achieved national success as a writer, Dunbar continued to seek out former slaves and spend hours listening to their stories about life under slavery. Dunbar would inscribe the harshness of the world in places where one least expected it—places like the poem “The Old Cabin,” in which a slave bent on recalling other things refers casually to whippings and his fear of the lash and the auction block, or in the story "Nelse Hatton's Revenge," where the scar left by a master's lash figures prominently. While he required ex-slave informants in order to learn about the pain of slavery, Dunbar's first-hand experience taught him about postwar racism and discrimination; despite the fact that he was a star of his high school class, and an accomplished writer and editor, the only job Dunbar could get in Dayton after graduation was as an elevator operator. (Dunbar would address his response to these hardships in the well-crafted, loosely autobiographical story "One Man's Fortunes"). Therefore we may say that along with inheriting a generational trauma, Dunbar had also experienced the trauma of segregation.

Sometimes in Dunbar’s writing, especially in his short stories, we find testimonies of various eye witnessed traumatic accounts of African American people. These consist of accounts of the revolution of workers of a mine, slave beating, lynching and so on. However, the themes of his short fiction may be divided in certain different types. His four collections, *Folks From Dixie* , *In Old Plantation Tales* , *The Strength of Gideon* and and *The Heart of the Happy Hollow*, contain a total of seventy-three stories, which may be divided, according to historical setting, into thirty-one antebellum and forty-two post-emancipation tales. The antebellum tales mainly deal with the plantation myth. The stories with a post-emancipation setting deal somewhat more authentically with African American life. The settings of his



post-emancipation tales include the rural South (principally small town Kentucky), metropolitan New York and Washington. Robert Bone has divided Dunbar's stories into several types:

Six basic story-types encompass most of his output in the genre. First there are the pastorals, deriving essentially from the Plantation School. Next the travesties, deriving from the minstrel shows. Third, protestations of loyalty, which offer reassurance to the whites in the Washington tradition. Fourth, stories of uplift, which celebrate the success virtues. Fifth, protest stories, which challenge the artificial barriers of caste. Sixth, stories of illicit aspiration, which are close in spirit to the Brer rabbit tales (62, 63).

"The White Counterpane" is a story of the plantation tradition which attracts attention. Revolt against maternal domination produces guilt, which in turn necessitates reconciliation with the mother. This story depicts the reconciliation of a mother and her son, after a breach occasioned by the son's marriage. It is the mother's recollection of her own courtship that effects the reconciliation: "...she sat for a space, her mind roaming the green pastures of the past" (508). Sentimental memories of the past, in short, perform a harmonising function. However, six of Dunbar's stories clearly voice historic grievances, protesting current injustices, and defending his race from the ravages of the post-Reconstruction, repression. Two of these ("The Ingrate" and "The Easter Wedding") attack the institution of slavery; two ("The Tragedy at Three Forks" and "The Lynching of Jube Benson") are antilynching tracts; and two ("One Man's Fortunes" and "A Council of State") are direct assaults on the barriers of caste and the bastions of white supremacy.

"One Man's Fortune" is typical of Dunbar's protest tales. Autobiographical in origin, it reflects the young poet's bitterness, following his high-school graduation, when he was unable to find a decent job. Bert Halliday, the hero of the story, is a graduate of the state university who leaves alma mater full of hope, but is brought to the verge of despair by a series of disillusioning encounters with white discrimination and hypocrisy. Thwarted ambition is the story's theme. The protagonist insists upon his due, and a lower level of



aspiration, symbolised by teaching in the South, is accepted only under duress.

To borrow Robert Bone's words, I would say, "If legitimate ambition is thwarted by the color line, then illicit forms of aspiration are certain to appear" (71). Thus emerges the figure of the trickster hero in Dunbar's short fiction. His first treatment of the theme, "Aunt Mandy's Investment," is little more than a sentimental portrait of the conman with a heart of gold. In "The Mission of Mr. Scatters," however, we are confronted with a genuine rogue-hero. Dunbar's short story "The Scapegoat," which we have already discussed in the previous chapter, represents the culmination of this tendency. In his slickness, duplicity, and ruthless survival code, the protagonist Robinson Ashbury is a lineal descendant of the trickster hero, Brer Rabbit, of the African American folk tales.

Dunbar's story "The Lynching of Jube Benson" exposes the traumatic history of racist violence in the South. Lynchings, rare before emancipation because of the monetary value of a slave, reached a peak between 1880 and 1890 of 150 per year and their high point, 235, 1892. A form of racial terrorism, the practice was used, according to Ida B. Wells who devoted her life to its abolition, as an "antidote to black success" (quoted in Eyerman 34).

Post emancipation real life lynching stories abound in the American South. These lynching stories as trauma narratives commonly contain several elements or motifs. The first is a perceived violation of norms, contractual agreements, or prerogatives of the white people by an African American. Whites—usually a mob—then seek vengeance. The nature of the violation is sometimes shrouded in mystery and secrecy: families are frequently left without real knowledge of the final fate—or manner of death – of a loved one or friend. Narrators sometimes contrast self-assertion and dignity of the 'offending' African-American male with the viciousness and cowardice of white mobs. Finally, the lynching story juxtaposes the positive example of the victim's self-assertion or insistence on dignity against the craziness and unpredictability of whites. The prevalence of real life lynching stories and other accounts of the physical, emotional, and psychological abuse of African Americans in the South suggest that the violence that maintained white supremacy in the state, produced a pervasive sense of communal trauma among the African American population. According to sociologist



Kai Erikson , societal trauma can emerge from ‘ a persisting condition as well as from acute events.’ Contemporary experience of societies ravaged by war or terrorized by dictatorial regimes demonstrates that ‘damage can be done to a whole people by sustained dread and dislocation’ (Erikson 226). Communal trauma, writes Erikson, appears in two forms, one of which creates ‘social climates, communal moods, that came to dominate a group’s spirit.’ Especially devastating are those collective traumas ‘that have been brought about by other human beings’ because these ‘not only hurt in special ways but bring in their wake feelings of injury and vulnerability from which it is difficult to recover.’ Members of a victimised community or population may come to feel that ‘the environment ...has proved to be brittle and full of caprice,’ and may develop a ‘sense that the universe is regulated not by order and continuity but by chance and a kind of natural malice that lurks everywhere’ (Erikson 228—41). This seems especially the case among groups whom Robesrt J. Lifton has termed ‘designated victims’: ‘the Jews in Europe, and African Americans in this country’ (Caruth128—47).

However, the narrator of Dunbar’s story ‘The Lynching of Jube Benson’ is not a victimised African American but a White doctor, a friend of Jube. Suspecting his “trusted” friend as the rapist and murderer of his beloved, the narrator becomes the leading exponent in the lynching of Jube Benson. But when the doctor discovers that his friend was innocent and was wrongly accused, he starts suffering from a sense of acute guilt. Through medical testes he himself proves the fact that the murderer of his beloved was not a black man but a white one. From that day onwards, something in his ear kept crying, “Blood Guilty! Blood Guilty.” (8). Thus choosing a White narrator who is remorseful and guilt ridden Dunbar shows that social conditioning rather than innate nature determines the individual’s values and attitudes. It is social conditioning that teaches even a sensitive and educated White man to equate black skin with criminality and fraud. When Jube claims his innocence and expects the doctor to defend him, the doctor replies, “You lie!” and starts helping others in binding him upon a horse. The doctor reflects upon the incident and records his thoughts thus:

Why did I do it? I don’t know. A false education, I reckon, one false from the beginning. I saw his black face glooming there in the half light, and I could



only think of him as a monster. It's tradition. At first I was told that the black man would catch me, and when I got over that, they taught me that the Devil was black, and when I recovered from the sickness of that belief, here where Jube and his fellows with faces of menacing blackness. There was only one conclusion: This black man stood for all the powers of evil, the result of whose machinations had been gathering in my mind from childhood up... (6)

This story thus reveals the fact that African Americans represented anything that is dreadful and threatening to the White population. It shows how fear and fantasy sometimes determined life or death for any targeted African American. The lynching ritual serves here as an effective method of deliberate terrorism and social control of African Americans whose very existence as independent individuals posed a great threat to the white supremacy.

In the conclusion we may say that a thorough study of Dunbar's stories prove that though a large number of his stories follows closely the idea of the plantation tradition, there is also a significant body of Dunbar's short fiction that does not adhere closely to the tradition or that is at least sufficiently removed to demand a clear distinction. However, I have here attempted to explore how in his racial protest stories Dunbar has successfully recorded testimonies of communal, societal and cultural trauma that pervades the Nation.



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