

B A N T A M C L A S S I C

THE SOULS OF BLACK FOLK

W.E.B. Du Bois



With an Introduction by
HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.

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W.E.B. DU BOIS, born in 1868 in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, was one of America's greatest social activists, scholars, and writers. Of mixed French, Dutch, and African parentage, he first confronted the problems of racial prejudice when he attended Fisk University in Tennessee. Also educated at Harvard University and in Europe, he became a pioneer in sociology and historiography and began documenting the oppression of black people and their strivings for equality in the 1890s. *The Souls of Black Folk*, one of the most influential books ever published in America, appeared in 1903. A professor at Wilberforce University and at Atlanta University for many years, Du Bois went on to found the Niagara Movement (1905), a forerunner of the NAACP (1909); became the editor of the NAACP periodical *Crisis*; and produced numerous books on black history, including his monumental work *Black Reconstruction* (1935). Drawn to socialism, and eventually to communism, Du Bois came into conflict with the U.S. government for his position with the Council on African Affairs and his work with the Peace Information Center, which opposed the use of nuclear weapons. Only after a long legal battle was he issued a passport to travel abroad, and in 1958, at the age of ninety, he toured Europe, the U.S.S.R., and China. In 1961 he joined the Communist party, and at the invitation of the Ghanaian president he moved to Ghana, where he died in Accra on August 27, 1963.

To Burghardt and Yolande
The Lost and the Found

This edition of
The Souls of Black Folk
is dedicated to
John Hope Franklin

INTRODUCTION

Henry Louis Gates, Jr.
Ithaca, New York

DARKLY, AS THROUGH A VEIL

"This book [The Souls of Black Folk] is indeed dangerous for the negro [sic] to read, for it will only excite discontent and race hatred and fill his imagination with things that do not exist, or things that should not bear upon his mind."

—ANONYMOUS, NASHVILLE AMERICAN, 1903

"The Souls of Black Folk should be read and studied by every person, white and black. We cannot find language to express our appreciation of this production, which from every point of view, can well be termed 'a masterpiece.' "

—WENDELL PHILLIPS DABNEY,
OHIO ENTERPRISE, 1903

I

ON APRIL 18, 1903, A.C. McClurg and Company of Chicago published *The Souls of Black Folk*, just two months after the author's thirty-fifth birthday. Between 1903 and 1905, no less than six printings of the book were necessary to satisfy demand. Despite his young age, the author, William Edward Burghardt Du Bois (1868–1963), had become by the turn of the century "one of the two or three best-known Afro-Americans in the nation," as the historian Herbert Aptheker accurately observes. Indeed, Du Bois's emergence as a dominant political figure in the Afro-American community is without parallel in the history of black leadership, because his vehicle

to prominence was the written word. Even his contemporaries realized how curious his route to power had been; as the Afro-American educator William H. Ferris, a Yale graduate, put the matter in *The African Abroad* in 1913:

Du Bois is one of the few men in history who was hurled on the throne of leadership by the dynamic force of the written word. He is one of the few writers who leaped to the front as a leader and became the head of a popular movement through impressing his personality upon men by means of a book.

What's more, Ferris concludes, his ascendancy was inadvertent: "He had no aspiration of becoming a race leader when he wrote his 'Souls of Black Folk.' But that book has launched him upon a brilliant career."

The publication of *The Souls* marked the apex of Du Bois's phenomenal career development between his graduation from Fisk University in 1888 and 1903. At his graduation from Harvard in 1890, where he took the B.A., cum laude, in philosophy (he had taken his first A.B. at Fisk), he delivered one of the five commencement orations. The address, on Jefferson Davis, received extraordinarily broad mention in the national press. In the fall of that year, he entered the Harvard graduate school. While an undergraduate at Harvard, his principal mentors had been William James and George Santayana (philosophy), Frank Taussig (economics), and Albert Bushnell Hart (history). Du Bois's first love was philosophy. But, because employment opportunities were limited for black philosophers, he decided on graduate study in history. Study in Europe had long been Du Bois's dream; so, in October 1892, having earned the M.A. in history at Harvard the year before, he pursued further graduate work at Friedrich Wilhelm University in Berlin, studying sociology and economics with Gustav Schmoller and Adolf Wagner, and history and political theory with Heinrich von Treitschke.

Berlin was all that he had hoped for academically; Du Bois even was able to hear lectures by the great sociologist Max

Weber, who would remain a friend. (In 1904 Weber would participate in Du Bois's annual conference at Atlanta University.) Du Bois wrote a thesis on agricultural economics in the South and ardently desired to take the Ph.D. in Berlin. Unable to do so at Friedrich Wilhelm (because of a residency requirement that he was unable to satisfy for lack of funds), Du Bois returned to the United States and began to teach the classics at Wilberforce University, in Xenia, Ohio. A year later, in 1895, he became the first person of African descent to take the Ph.D. from Harvard.

Du Bois's next eight years were exceptionally productive. In 1896 he published his doctoral dissertation, *The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade to the United States of America, 1638–1870*, as volume one of the Harvard Historical Monograph Series. That autumn he moved to the University of Pennsylvania to undertake a sociological study of the Negro population of Philadelphia. One year later, he joined with Alexander Crummell and other black scholars in founding the American Negro Academy, the very first black institute of arts and letters in the world.

In the fall of 1897 Du Bois commenced a professorship of economics and history at Atlanta University, where he assumed the directorship of the "Atlanta Conferences," convened annually to generate precise, scientific research about the actual living conditions of Negroes in America, about whom surprisingly little scientific data was established. Du Bois edited the results of these conferences and published them in a monograph series, between 1889 and 1914, in sixteen volumes. His intention was to collect, collate, and analyze socioeconomic data about every conceivable facet of being a black person in America. This project was a bold, imaginative venture, one motivated by Du Bois's belief that ignorance, rather than a primal xenophobia or economic relationships, was the primary cause of racism. Du Bois would later abandon that view, deciding that material relationships masked themselves in the guise of race relationships.

In 1899 the results of his research at the University of Pennsylvania were published as *The Philadelphia Negro*. Between

1897 and 1903 Du Bois, starting with an essay printed in the *Atlantic Monthly*, became the most widely published black author in the United States. His essays appeared in such prominent publications as *The Independent*, *Nation*, *The Southern Workman*, *Harper's Weekly*, *World's Work*, *The Outlook*, *The Missionary Review*, the *Literary Digest*, the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, and *The Dial*, among other magazines and journals. *The Dial*, owned by the McClurg Company, was edited by W. R. Browne and Francis Fisher Browne. Publication in its pages proved to be a positive fortuity: Francis Fisher Browne would later serve as the editor of *The Souls of Black Folk*.

By 1903, then, W.E.B. Du Bois could not only count himself among the most deeply read, most widely traveled, and most broadly and impeccably educated human beings in the world, he had also become the most widely published black essayist in the history of African-Americans since the abolitionist campaign led by "the great form" of Frederick Douglass—"the greatest of American Negro leaders," as Du Bois called him. He was, more than any other figure, including his nemesis, Booker T. Washington (the founder of the Tuskegee Institute and the dominant political force in Negro politics between 1895 and 1915), the public "voice" of the Negro American intellectual.

Du Bois did not die until 1963, on the eve of the March on Washington, at 11:40 P.M. on August 27, at Accra, Ghana, where he had moved in 1961 at President Kwame Nkrumah's invitation to become the editor, at the age of ninety-three, of *The Encyclopedia Africana* project, a project that Du Bois had conceived in 1910. Earlier in 1963 he had renounced his American citizenship, and in a highly symbolic gesture toward the Pan-Africanism that he had advocated since 1900 (when he addressed the first Pan-African conference in London and declared that "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line"), Du Bois became a citizen of the Republic of Ghana. The African-American had returned to die in his symbolic native land.

Between 1903 and 1963 Du Bois's position as the dominant intellectual leader of African descent could not be challenged.

Herbert Aptheker's definitive annotated bibliography of Du Bois's books, essays, and poems has 1,975 entries. This means that Du Bois wrote on average one work of one sort or another *every twelve days* between the ages of thirty and ninety-five. From November 1910 to July 1, 1934, he served as the very capable editor of *The Crisis*, the official journal of the NAACP, an organization that he had helped found in 1910. Through the sheer force of his rhetorical skills, imagination, and intellectual authority, Du Bois transformed the official organ of a political lobbying group into the major outlet for black political opinion and literature in the world. Circulation climbed from one thousand in 1910 to thirty thousand just three years later, reaching a peak in 1919 of one hundred six thousand. Du Bois was a person of both action and words; he did more to inscribe the features of "the race" (as Negroes then commonly called themselves) upon the text of Western letters than has any other writer, before or since. Rhetorically, in so very many ways, he was "the Negro."

Such authority—matched with an unshakable integrity—did not avoid controversy. Du Bois's career was as much fraught with political censorship and repression as it was marked by homage and respect. Beginning in 1913, when the chairman of the board of directors of the NAACP, Oswald Garrison Villard, resigned in a huff over Du Bois's editorial independence at *The Crisis*, Du Bois was forced to engage in a series of struggles to speak and to write as his conscience dictated. His clashes with the powerful Booker T. Washington over the efficacy of their respective political strategies, detailed in *The Souls* in "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others," no doubt steeled him for subsequent frays. A list of other such incidents reveals a consistent pattern: Du Bois was threatened by the Department of Justice in 1918 for protesting racism in the military, undermined by Britain and the United States in his attempts to organize the first Pan-African Congress at Paris in 1919, attacked in the House of Representatives that same year for allegedly inciting race riots, censored by the board of the NAACP in 1934 for his editorial independence (he resigned, effective July 1), fired from his professorship at Atlanta

University in 1944 for his radical views, fired in 1948 from the NAACP staff (to which he had returned in 1944, with the greatest reluctance, to serve as director of special research) because of his criticism of American foreign policy and his favorable assessment of several aspects of race relations and anticolonialism in the Soviet Union, indicted by the United States government on February 9, 1951, under the Foreign Agents Registration Act of 1938 (he was acquitted on November 13), refused a passport by the State Department in 1952 because he would not sign a statement that he was not a member of the Communist party (the passport would not be reissued until 1958), and harassed between 1952 and 1958 as a “Communist-sympathizer.” Nonetheless, Du Bois stood unbowed: he ran for the United States Senate in New York in 1950 on the American Labor party platform and along with others fought unsuccessfully to prevent the execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg in 1953. Du Bois’s career, as he put it so very well himself in the title of his account of his indictment and acquittal, was truly one *In Battle for Peace*.

Few American intellectuals have been treated with as much scorn and disrespect or harassed so relentlessly as Du Bois was during the McCarthy era. Within the African-American tradition, perhaps only the government’s treatment of Paul Robeson comes to mind as more heinous than that of Du Bois, particularly because Robeson’s censorship prevented him from earning a living through concert performances and recording sessions. Few Americans today could possibly disagree that the American government owes Du Bois’s heirs a formal apology.

Granted his passport in 1958, Du Bois left New York in August on a world tour that took him to Western Europe, Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union (where he met Nikita Khrushchev), and Beijing, where he met Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai. In 1960 he attended ceremonies in Africa in honor of the establishment of Ghana as a republic and the founding of the Republic of Nigeria. In 1961 Du Bois applied for membership in the Communist party of the United States, then departed for Ghana. A year later, following surgery in Accra and Bucharest, he met Charlie Chaplin in Switzerland (another victim of

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American government harassment), then traveled again to China. One year later, he died. No black intellectual, before his time or since, has been more important as a truly international figure, a citizen of the world. And of his myriad achievements, none has had a more salient legacy than the little book of essays that he published in 1903, *The Souls of Black Folk*.

II

Du Bois saw himself as fundamentally a man of letters, a person who had enjoyed a truly liberal education, but one who was thrust into political activism on behalf of the Negro because of his privileged education. As we can see from his academic appointments, the boundaries of disciplines observed so strictly today had little or no meaning for Du Bois. At various times in his long academic career, he enjoyed appointments in departments of classics, history, sociology, and economics—surely an impossible achievement for any scholar of our generation. Du Bois, in many ways, has served as the model for the inter- or multidisciplinary methodologies to be found in black studies departments today.

If Du Bois brought a truly interdisciplinary perspective to the study of African and African-American cultures, society, and history, he manifested that perspective—informed by his impressive command of so very many disciplines—in several writing styles and over several genres. The poem (lyric, the elegy), the novel (he wrote five), the short story, the editorial, the obituary (he wrote over two hundred in *The Crisis*), historical narrative, the sociological and economic monograph, occasional speeches—in each of these forms chosen as the ideal genre to contain and clothe his thoughts, did Du Bois excel. He was a wordsmith, a master craftsman of the English language. But with no form was he more adept at rhetorical manipulation than with the essay. And never would his essay collections exceed the power and effect achieved in *The Souls of Black Folk*.

The critical reception to *The Souls* was immediate and extraordinarily energetic. The two epigraphs that begin this introduction to the Bantam edition mark the poles of the contemporary critical reception. Several commentators, as we shall see, recognized the publication as a literary event, with the greatest of political implications. Never before had reviewers been able to see “past” or “through” the political or sociological content of a black author’s work to proclaim its primarily *aesthetic* merits as literary art, as a sublime use of language. That the sheer rhetorical force of Du Bois’s text called attention to itself almost as often as his political positions did is testament to the author’s knowledge of craft, to his sensitivity to the essay form—especially as practiced by Carlyle and Emerson—and to his deep familiarity with classical discourse in Greek, Latin, German, French, and English. Du Bois knew, above all else, that the noblest sentiment could not stand by itself, as it were, that form and content, manner and matter were one. *The Souls of Black Folk*, then, is a “classic” not because of the phase of Du Bois’s ideological development that it expresses but because of the manner in which he expressed his ideology. Within the black tradition perhaps only James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison, in the essay form, are as accomplished rhetorically as Du Bois.

For the thirty-five-year-old scholar, the critical response to his book of “fugitive pieces,” as he called them, must have been stunning.

Though Du Bois’s political beliefs led in the 1950s to his persecution by the United States government and to public disavowal of and distancing from him by several other black writers and intellectuals, the critical reception to *The Souls of Black Folk* has remained remarkably consistent and enthusiastic, particularly among black writers and critics. Indeed, so sustained has this response been that one could very well write a history of the criticism of Afro-American literature in the twentieth century based on readers’ responses to this book alone.

Several early commentators asserted the canonical status of the book. I would venture to say, no other text, save possibly the King James Bible, has had a more fundamental impact on the shaping of the Afro-American literary tradition. Indeed,

Langston Hughes made just this comparison when he recalled that "my earliest memories of written words are those of Du Bois and the Bible." As William Ferris had put it earlier, in *The African Abroad*, *The Souls* was "the political Bible of the Negro race." And James Weldon Johnson, in his novel *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (1912), wrote that *The Souls* was "a remarkable book," because "it began to give the country something new and unknown, in depicting the life, the ambitions, the struggles, and the passions of those [Negroes] who are striving to break the narrow limits of traditions." Johnson would conclude later, in his autobiography, *Along This Way* (1933), that Du Bois's little book "had a greater effect upon and within the Negro race in America than any other single book published in this country since *Uncle Tom's Cabin*."

Contemporary reviewers also recognized the literary merits of the book. Herbert Aptheker has surveyed them. John Daniels, the reviewer for the black Boston periodical *Alexander's Magazine*, pointed to "the dominating spirituality of the book" and called *The Souls* "a poem, a spiritual, not an intellectual offering." Du Bois's book deserved "the highest place" in literary history: "not that of a polemic, a transient thing, but that of a poem, a thing permanent." Daniels was the first commentator to claim for *The Souls* those properties that make a "classic" work classic.

Daniels was not the only reviewer at that time to do so. The book was "almost unexampled in the literature on the Negro question," thought Richard R. Wright in his review in the *Christian Recorder*. Wendell Phillips Dabney, from whose *Ohio Enterprise* review one of our epigraphs is taken, saw clearly that *The Souls* was "a masterpiece." *The Detroit Informer*, similarly, pointed to the book's literary properties: "We claim a place for it among the archives of English classics." The *New York Evening Post* thought it "remarkable as a piece of literature," and the *Chicago Tribune* declared it to be "a real, not an imitation book." *The American Monthly Review of Reviews* also was struck by the book's style: "Of the literary quality of the essays too much cannot be said." Kate Stephens, in the *Topeka, Kansas Capital* found "a lasting [literary] significance about the book."

Even the white, prosegregation *Christian Advocate* (published in Nashville), in an unfriendly review, paid Du Bois a backhanded compliment by asserting that his “literary style shows the highly colored, if somewhat incoherent, imagination with a touch of pathos, which is characteristic of his race.”

As the other epigraph to this essay also reveals, not everyone was charmed by Du Bois’s prose. The reviewer for the *Louisville Courier-Journal* thought Du Bois’s book “crudely written” and “characterized by incoherent statements and disconnected arguments.” Du Bois, in fact, “educated, aspiring—voices of the black race better than a thousand Booker Washingtons could do—because he reflects their . . . exaggerated estimate of any mental attitude among themselves.” The *New York Times* saw the book as a strange admixture of “acquired logic” with “racial characteristics (i.e., the “sentimental,” the “political,” the “picturesque”) and “racial rhetoric.” Nevertheless, even when reviewers disagreed with Du Bois’s positions on contemporary political or social matters, fewer denied his rhetorical mastery, his superb command of the English language.

Long after the social issues with which Du Bois wrestled so intensely and so passionately have become chapters in the chronicle of African-American history, students and their professors continue to turn to *The Souls* to experience the power of its lyricism, the “poetry” of its prose. Henry James, the great novelist and the brother of one of Du Bois’s professors at Harvard, William James, asked his brother, rhetorically, to explain how, within a “complex, a ‘great political’ society can *everything* so have gone?—assuming indeed that, under this aegis, very much ever had come. How can everything so have gone that the only ‘Southern’ book of any distinction published for many a year is ‘The Souls of Black Folk’ by that most accomplished of members of the Negro Race, Mr. W.E.B. Du Bois.” Despite James’s backhanded compliment (he was, in fact, using the example of Du Bois, a black person, to insult the white South’s level of cultural development), Du Bois’s book has continued to elicit praise from critics for its literary art. For the black literary critic William S. Braithwaite, Du Bois was

"the most variously gifted writer which the race has produced," and *The Souls* was "the book of an era," its narrative strategies indicative of "the birth of a poet, phoenix-like, out of a scholar." Benjamin Brawley, the dean of black critics until the thirties, saw *The Souls* as the highest example of "classic English" written by a Negro, and literary historian J. Saunders Redding, who compared Du Bois's stylistic achievements in *The Souls* to those of Carlyle (Ferris had done the same, recalling that the effect he experienced on reading *The Souls* when he was a sophomore at Yale was similar to that produced by Carlyle's "Heroes and Hero Worship" and "Sartor Resartus" and Emerson's "Nature and Other Addresses"), astutely observed that *The Souls* "is more history-making than historical."

How can a work be "more history-making than historical"? It becomes so when it crosses that barrier between mainly conveying information, and primarily signifying an act of language itself, an object to be experienced, analyzed, and enjoyed aesthetically. *The Souls of Black Folk* has served as a veritable touchstone of African-American culture for every successive generation of black scholars since 1903. Reading it has functioned almost as a cultural initiation rite for writers as diverse as William Ferris, James Weldon Johnson, Jessie Fausett, Sterling Brown, Langston Hughes, J. Saunders Redding, and John Hope Franklin, to list only a few. And, as Robert Stepto has demonstrated in such splendid detail, *The Souls* has had a crucial shaping effect upon the formal development of Afro-American literature in this century, serving as the "silent second text" of such works as Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923), Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Richard Wright's *Black Boy* (1945), and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952). In this way, *The Souls* has functioned as an urtext of the African-American experience.

Early on, Du Bois's contemporaries had recognized his potential to produce a great work of art. Elia W. Peattie, in her *Chicago Tribune* review of *The Souls*, quoted Paul Laurence Dunbar as remarking to her once that "Du Bois is our great

man. . . . He has passion and eloquence and he is going to *express us*.” [emphasis added] What a curious phrase, “to express us.” Du Bois’s contemporaries, and subsequent scholars, generally have agreed that two of the uncanny effects of *The Souls* are that it is poetic in its attention to detail, and that it succeeds, somehow, in “narrating” the nation of Negro Americans at the turn of the century, articulating for the inarticulate insider and for the curious outsider (those within and without what Du Bois describes metaphorically as “the Veil” that demarcates the semi-permeable boundary between black American culture and white) the *cultural particularity* of African-Americans. Standing at the crossroads between these two worlds, mediating between the white world and the black, addressed to both at once in a double-voiced discourse, was *The Souls*. As even a sampling of his reviews reveals, the effect was dazzling.

Perhaps William Ferris, among all of Du Bois’s contemporaries, put it best. *The Souls*, Ferris recalls, “came to me as a bolt from the blue,” conveying “in words of magic beauty the worth and sacredness of human personality even when clothed in a black skin.” Du Bois’s ultimate achievement, Ferris concludes, was to “come to a self-realization of the ideals of his own race.” Du Bois, in other words, created a narrative voice, a fictional “I,” that functions as articulator for the American Negro people at the turn of the century. Even when apparently at its most personal or individual, Du Bois’s “I” represents the Negro people, in the relation of a part for the whole. Du Bois described this effect most aptly when he subtitled *Dusk of Dawn* (1940), his third autobiographical work, “An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept.” *The Souls* functioned in this way as well. Even when Du Bois is functioning as a social scientist, the poetic effect of his rhetorical strategy is apparent: as a reviewer in the *Times* of London put it, *The Souls* is “an extraordinary compound of emotion and statistics.” As Yale professor Robert Stepto concludes, one sign of Du Bois’s genius was his capacity to turn data into metaphor. The political authority that came to Du Bois after 1903 was