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Michael R. Hill

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, michaelhilltemporary1@yahoo.com

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THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF W.E.B. DUBOIS: AN ANALYSIS¹

Michael R. Hill

Department of Sociology
University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Lincoln, Nebraska 68588-0324

Type of work: Autobiography

Author: William Edward Burghardt DuBois (1868-1963)

First published: *Vospominaniia*, 1962 (English edition, 1968).

The Autobiography of W.E.B. DuBois: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century tells the impressive and inspiring story of an individual's struggles, defeats and accomplishments, as well as his major ideas developed during ninety years of a life dedicated to promoting racial equality and the sociological study of African-American realities in the United States. The *Autobiography* presents a view of American life distilled through the perceptive, analytical eyes of this country's foremost African-American intellectual, William Edward Burghardt Dubois. Progressing from the reconstruction era at the end of the U.S. Civil War, through two World Wars, to the height of the Cold War and the atomic age, DuBois' personal reflections provide a critical, panoramic sweep of American social history of a scope usually restricted of necessity to novels, such as Mari Sandoz' *The Tom-Walker*. Dubois' *Autobiography*, like that of sociologist Jane Addams' *Twenty Years at Hull-House*, is simultaneously a history of personal and social struggle seen from the perspective of a central participant.

DuBois was not simply an observer of the American scene, he contributed instrumentally to the particular path taken by American history in his role as a leading architect of African-American thought during the growth of the American civil rights movement in the twentieth century. Thus, Dubois' *Autobiography* is an important documentary piece of American history — as is Addams' *Twenty Years*. From the inception of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909, DuBois was, as editor of its journal, *The Crisis*, its conscience and spokesperson. DuBois opposed the influential policies of Booker T. Washington, creating a vital dialogue within the African-American community about the proper route to take toward the future. Much of DuBois' vision of racial equality and African-American achievement remains unfulfilled today, and thus his *Autobiography* is necessarily as much a blueprint for tomorrow as it is an historical narrative of the past.

The chronological structure of the *Autobiography* is purposefully transposed. DuBois begins, not with his childhood, but with five brief chapters on his travels, starting in 1958, to Europe, the Soviet Union, and China. Here, after seeing the accomplishments of socialist organization first hand, DuBois announces the crowning ideological decision of his life: his conversion to communism. The remainder of the *Autobiography* is fundamentally an embroidery on the question: How and why did DuBois arrive at this

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crucial decision in the last years of his life? This chronological device focuses the entire work on DuBois' inexorable move toward communist ideals in a way that starting simply with his birth and youthful years in Massachusetts could not accomplish.

DuBois' chronicle of his childhood and early education is surprising precisely for its small-town conventionality and virtual lack of racial conflict. DuBois, it is crucial to remember, was born a northerner, in rural Massachusetts. Despite DuBois' African-American heritage and the close temporal proximity of his birth to the end of the U.S. Civil War, DuBois came neither from a slave family nor had direct childhood experience with the aftermath of slavery that characterized the southern United States. DuBois excelled in a predominantly white school and had white playmates. The strict norms of the time and region minimized opportunities for contacts with the opposite sex, Black or white, and thus DuBois not only grew up ignorant of sexual biology, but he also escaped the sanctions so ruthlessly imposed in southern states where whites' exaggerated fears of miscegenation too often ran rampant.

The *Autobiography* is replete with instances that illustrate DuBois' hard work, thrift, diligent study, and persistent planning. Were it not for the fact that DuBois' story ends with his expatriation, the narrative reads often like an African-American version of Horatio Alger. DuBois, ultimately, avoids the illusory trap that congratulates the self-made-man, asking instead: "Was I the masterful captain or the pawn of laughing sprites?" But, DuBois did not trust his life to luck, he "just went doggedly to work" and let the consequences fall where they might.

DuBois learned concretely about racial bigotry during his college years at Fisk University in Tennessee, prior to his return to Massachusetts where he continued his academic studies at Harvard University. DuBois learned from notable scholars (including William James) at Harvard, earned a second B.A. degree and, eventually, won a Ph.D. in 1895. His doctoral program included an hiatus for two years of study in Germany where DuBois came to appreciate high standards of scholarship and listened to the stimulating lectures of sociologist Max Weber. Following a year-long appointment at the University of Pennsylvania where he completed a landmark sociological investigation, *The Philadelphia Negro*, DuBois spent 1897-1910 at Atlanta University as the nation's leading African-American sociologist. If the Black experience in America was to be investigated objectively and scientifically, DuBois observed, it must be studied by astute, well-trained, African-American sociologists like himself.

Because of the national importance of DuBois' role in the NAACP, his considerable stature as a creative literary author and influential editor, and the problematic political legacy of the DuBois-Washington debate — all of which are detailed in the *Autobiography* and about which many critics and historians have commented, it is important to emphasize that a constant theme of the *Autobiography* is, in fact, DuBois' life and work as a major American sociologist. From beginning to end, DuBois worked to initiate, foster, produce, and plan an extended series of erudite, systematic sociological investigations of African-American life. It is DuBois' unrelenting drive to live an intellectual life, to teach the upper "talented tenth" of Black America, and to destroy white myths and misapprehensions about African-Americans by means of careful research, that gives coherence to his *Autobiography* and meaning to his accomplishments.

DuBois' many trips from North to South, to Europe and beyond, stand as metaphors for his complex, ninety-year intellectual journey from naive schoolboy to sage albeit idealistic communist. Along the way, DuBois enriched the sociological vocabulary with insightful concepts, including: "the color line," "the veil," "the talented tenth," "double consciousness," and many others. All find ready use and illustration in his *Autobiography*. DuBois revelled in the active, disciplined application of the mind. Philosophically and organizationally, DuBois travelled toward a world presently beyond the grasp of most mortals. His grand sociological project was possible yet visionary and never fully realized, his communism was inclusive, liberating, and cooperative, never totalitarian nor dictatorial. The temporary denial by the American government in 1951 of DuBois' passport, ostensibly limiting his ability to travel and observe outside the U.S., figuratively propelled DuBois toward a future unbounded by petty nationalisms, military-industrial excesses, or governmental oppression of the citizenry.

Perhaps the most gripping and instructive section of the *Autobiography* is DuBois' straightforward account of his mendacious indictment and persecution by the U.S. Government on trumped up charges, allegations infused with insinuations of treason and disloyalty. DuBois' trial and subsequent acquittal during 1950-1951 for alleged failure to register as an agent of a foreign government is a scary, sobering illustration of democratic institutions gone seriously awry. DuBois was cleared of all charges, but the trial cost him his savings and his reputation. His fundamental faith in American institutions, already strained by years of racist oppression, now crumpled completely and understandably. If DuBois was sometimes angry, he just as often had reasoned justifications.

DuBois' *Autobiography* is, from his perspective, a final reckoning and laying to rest of old battles. DuBois outlived most of his enemies and thereby won the privilege of the last word. It is this personal dimension on which the *Autobiography* is least satisfying. The veracity of DuBois' recollections concerning old animosities and interpersonal power struggles cannot be decided on the basis of the *Autobiography* alone. DuBois leaves us fundamentally with selected, carefully crafted impressions of himself, his foes, and his intellectual journey. This book, he states, is "a theory of my life," it "is the Soliloquy of an old man on what he dreams his life has been . . . and what he would like others to believe."

DuBois refers pointedly to his autobiography as a soliloquy. Literally speaking to oneself in a soliloquy is a venerable technique in western literature, especially in drama, reaching its classic form in William Shakespeare's plays and, more recently, in stream-of-consciousness writing typified by James Joyce's novel *Ulysses*. Readers of DuBois' *Autobiography* will likely conclude, however, that DuBois clearly speaks not to himself but to posterity.

DuBois' choice of "soliloquy" to categorize his work reflects the political realities of 1960 more than it does a specific literary form. At the time DuBois finished writing his autobiography, he had been unfairly persecuted by the American government, many of his well-educated African-American friends had deserted him, and DuBois lived, essentially in exile, in the newly independent nation of Ghana. Thus, DuBois had reasons for thinking that he was talking primarily to himself. He may well have wondered who, in the United States at least, would ever read his autobiography.

Deepening the possibility that few Americans might see or read his final autobiographical statement is the fact of its first publication not in English but in a 518-page edition in Russian printed in Moscow. When the *Autobiography* finally appeared, posthumously, in English in 1968, it was published by International Publishers, a publishing house well-known for its Marxist and Soviet-oriented books. In 1991, the *Autobiography* enjoyed its eleventh printing, but it nonetheless remains today the least read of DuBois' autobiographical works (i.e., *The Souls of Black Folk*, *Darkwater*, *Dusk of Dawn*, and the *Autobiography*).

There are several reasons why DuBois' *Autobiography* still creates controversy in the United States. First, DuBois enthusiastically endorses a radical, communist political perspective that many liberal and conservative Americans find unacceptable. Second, DuBois levels stinging criticism at middle-class African-Americans who in DuBois' view value their own economic security more highly than the worldwide struggle for racial equality and freedom of expression. Third, DuBois praises the former Soviet Union for its opposition to organized religion. Finally, DuBois transcends his previous, sharp critiques of whites, placing him at odds with separatist and some pluralist African-American scholars who are more comfortable with DuBois' earlier views. Despite these objections, and many readers will not credit them as objections, W.E.B. DuBois' *Autobiography* is an engaging exposition in which DuBois joins his critics directly and usually with fairness, recounts his failures with dignity and humility, expounds his views with clarity and reason, and shares his hopes for our collective future with courage, conviction, and convivial good wishes.

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