

---

## The Polemicist as Artist: W. E. B. Bois' "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others"

Robert Terrill and Michael Leff, *Northwestern University*

---

Virtually from the moment of its publication in 1903, W. E. B. Du Bois' *The Souls of the Black Folk* has exercised a unique, and profound influence upon African-American intellectuals. After reading the book, Jessie Fauset wrote to Du Bois, praising him for voicing "the intricacies of the blind maze of thought and action along which the modern, educated colored man or woman struggles" (Rampersad, 1990, p. 68). John Daniels, a contemporary reviewer, celebrated the book for its "dominant spirituality"; it was, in his judgment, "a poem, a spiritual, not an intellectual offering," and its merit was not that of "a polemic, a transient thing, but that of a poem, a thing permanent" (Gates, 1989, p. xiv). Writing in 1912, James Weldon Johnson asserted that *Souls* was remarkable because, "in depicting the life, the ambitions, the struggles, and the passions of those who are striving to break the narrow limits of tradition," it began to give "the country something new and unknown" about the African-American experience (Gates, p. xiv). In later years, Johnson would recall that the book served as the rallying-point for "black radicals opposing [Booker T.] Washington" (Rampersad, p. 81) and judged that it had exerted 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*" (Gates, p. xiv). William Ferriss, in his *The African Abroad* (1913), referred to *Souls* as "the political Bible of the Negro race" (Gates, p. xiv), and he testified that it "came to me as a bolt from the blue"--an expression in "words of magic beauty of the worth and sacredness of human personality even when clothed in a black skin." In Du Bois, Ferriss discovered "a self-realization of the ideals of his own race" (Gates, pp. xvii-xviii). Among later generations of African-Americans, Langston Hughes reported that his "earliest memories of written words" were "those of Du Bois and the Bible" (Gates, p. xiv), and Henry Louis Gates found in the book "that special exhilarating feeling any reader gets when an author *names* things that the reader has felt very deeply but could not articulate" (Gates, p. xxii).

In drawing back from his own personal response and making a general assessment of the influence of the work, Gates holds that it has served as "a touchstone" for successive generations of black scholars and as "an urtext of the African-American experience" (p. xvii). And this judgment is consistent with the views of most other historians. David Levering Lewis contends that publication of *Souls* was an epochal event "dividing history into a before and after. Like fireworks going off in a cemetery, its fourteen essays were sound and light enlivening the inert and despairing. It was an electrifying manifesto, mobilizing a people for bitter, prolonged struggle to win a place in history" (1993, p. 277). Arnold Rampersad makes the equally strong claim that: "If all of a nation's literature may stem from one book, as Hemingway implied about *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, then it can as accurately be said that all of Afro-American literature of a creative nature has proceeded from Du Bois's comprehensive

statement on the nature of the people in *The Souls of the Black Folk*" (p. 89).

All of these recollections and evaluations not only stress the importance of the book, but they also suggest the unified, almost electrical, effect it has had upon many readers. In one great, comprehensive stroke, Du Bois seems to identify and give voice to a marginalized people; he creates what Gates calls a "narrative voice, a fictionalized 'I'" (p. xviii) that articulates "for the inarticulate insider and for the curious outsider...the cultural particularity of African-Americans" (xviii). Yet, this voice is complex and multi-faceted, and so readers and critics focus upon different dimensions of the book. *Souls* is a "poem", a "spiritual", a literary classic that influences a tradition of "creative" writing. And it is also a "manifesto", a "political bible", a polemic that serves as a "rallying-point" within a specific and heated controversy between African-Americans. The reception of *The Souls of Black Folk*, then, indicates an interesting pattern of unity in diversity; readers note and separate political and aesthetic strands within the text, while they testify to the deeply resonant unity that it conveys.

The diversity of response is hardly surprising, since as Arnold Rampersad has observed, *Souls* is "one of the more curious books of American Literature, a diverse mixture of styles and genres" (p. 69). The book consists of fourteen chapters--thirteen essays and one short story. Nine of the essays reprint or adapt previously published material, and the essays vary greatly both in subject-matter and tone, ranging from a scholarly study of the Freedmen's Bureau to an intensely personal and emotional reflection on the death of the author's son. Equally varied is Du Bois' style, which extends from simplicity to what Rampersad (p. 69) calls an "almost Ciceronian confabulation." On first inspection, the book seems to be a loose collection of occasional pieces, and the problem for critics is to explain how Du Bois could forge such a powerful, unified voice out of so many apparently disparate elements.

In this paper, our inquiry focuses on only one chapter of the book, the essay "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others." This chapter is of the most immediate and direct interest for students of public argumentation, for it is here that Du Bois explicitly develops and justifies a political program. Donald B. Gibson considers it "most arresting chapter of the book" (1989, p. xix), and it is certainly Du Bois' "most controversial" essay (Rampersad, p. 69), and "the key to the book's political intent" (Rampersad, p. 81). Its effect was to make *Souls* "a contemporary bombshell" (Lewis, p. 287). In this polite but strong critique of Booker T. Washington, Du Bois established the argumentative ground for one of the most notable controversies in African-American political history--the "war between Tuskegee Machine and the Talented Tenth" (Lewis, p. 277). And in the process, Du Bois set in motion rhetorical forces that would lead to the Niagara Movement and contribute significantly to the formation of the N.A.A.C.P. Surely, then, "Of Mr.

---

Sally Jackson, editor. *Argumentation and Values: Proceedings of the Ninth SCA/AFA Conference on Argumentation*, pp. 230-236. Annandale, VA: Speech Communication Association, 1995.

Booker T. Washington and Others" occupies a crucial position not only in African-American literature but also in the tradition of American political rhetoric.

Belatedly, scholars in our discipline have begun to recognize the essay and its importance. It now appears with increasing frequency in course reading-lists and in anthologies of public address, where it is often paired with Washington's "Cotton States' Exposition Address." Yet, within our disciplinary literature, we still cannot find a single sustained analysis of the essay, and our present purpose is to make amends for this omission. Our task, however, is complicated by a tension between prominent characteristics of the essay, which reflect the special and unconventional rhetoric of the book as a whole, and the conventional norms for argumentative analysis of political rhetoric.

Following the traditional disciplinary lines of inquiry, a rhetorical critic would stress the immediate historical context, define the issues dividing Du Bois and Washington, and study the essay from within this context. The result would be to isolate the essay from the rest of the book and to offer an analysis that abstracts its argumentative structures and strategies and assesses them in relation to a specific political debate. No doubt, a study of this kind would yield some useful results, but it would almost necessarily slight what we have noted as a special and crucial feature of Du Bois' book--its capacity to merge diverse elements into a unified voice. As Gates has argued, the history of the book's reception indicates its synthetic power: "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... 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" (pp. xiii-xiv). Mindful of this point, we intend to approach the argumentation in "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others" as something embedded within the larger rhetorical movement of the text--as something intimately and inseparably connected with the voice that Du Bois projects. Indeed, in our view, the construction of a distinctive and effective political voice for African-Americans was a central problem in the essay. Under the circumstances Du Bois confronted, what an African-American might argue was a less pressing issue than the question of how an African-American could make a public argument at all. And if we are to understand how Du Bois dealt with this fundamental problem, we must attend to the voice that he enacted within the text as well as to the specific political positions he articulated.

In taking this approach to the text, we need to qualify Rampersad's judgment that "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others" is a rigidly unpoetic" essay (p. 69). Compared to other chapters in *The Souls of Black Folk*, this essay displays a more tightly structured sequence of linear argument and narrative, and it has none of the personal reflections or lyrical expressions that appear elsewhere. Yet, if, for these reasons, the essay might be considered "unpoetic" (or at least "less poetic" than other parts of the book), it hardly seems rigid or inartistic. Between and within its linear units, various recurrent themes loop through the essay, gathering force as they reverberate against one another; thus, for example, there is a subtly repeated contrast between Washington's narrow, single-minded posture and the "double movement" Du Bois describes and enacts. Moreover, Du Bois shifts his perspective agilely from South to North, and in almost rhythmic, chiasmic sequence, back and forth from within the African-American community to the "enviroming" white society. Perhaps even

more striking is the way that Du Bois blends the tonalities of academic inquiry with the rhetoric of advocacy. The essay begins with and sustains the "scholarly narrative posture or radical of presentation" that Stepto (1985, p. 149) finds typical of the book, but it develops into a pointed and controversial criticism of Washington's political program. Indeed, Du Bois uses and conceives "criticism" in several different ways; he not only criticizes Washington's politics, but he offers a seemingly distanced and objective critical account of Washington's rhetorical success, and he includes a rather philosophical disquisition about the role of criticism in a democratic society. In short, then, the essay hardly seems rigid. The coherence of the argumentative structure does not preclude a complex and lively interplay of themes, perspectives, and postures. And, as in the book as a whole, these diverse elements do not seem forced or discordant but are harmonized within the form of the essay and resonate through a single, finely balanced voice. In the interpretation of the essay that follows, we hope to explain how the rhetorical action of the text works to achieve this unity in diversity. But before we can turn to the text, we need to offer a brief account of its historical context.

At the dawn of the twentieth-century, Booker T. Washington was the nation's preeminent black citizen. Working in the Deep South and constrained by the virulent racism of the post-reconstruction era, Washington managed to establish a successful school for industrial education at Tuskegee; and in 1895, he captured national attention through his "Cotton States Exposition Speech"--a masterpiece of rhetorical accommodation. Washington solidified and extended his influence through a network of personal and political alliances that came to be known as the "Tuskegee Machine," and he won support (both financial and political) from northern white philanthropists. In 1901, his reputation was again magnified through his founding of the National Negro Business League and the publication of his widely read and much acclaimed autobiography, *Up From Slavery*.

Meanwhile, Du Bois had embarked on a promising academic career. In 1898, after completing his Ph.D. at Harvard and his impressive sociological monograph, *The Philadelphia Negro*, Du Bois accepted a position at Atlanta University. His duties included, among other things, direction of the "Atlanta University Studies," an annual series devoted to scholarly inquiry into the condition of African-Americans. But the racism he experienced in Atlanta soon led him to reconsider his priorities. Reluctantly, Du Bois concluded that he could not wall himself off "in the ivory tower of race" (Lewis, p. 213). He had once thought that "knowledge based on scientific investigation" was sufficient to combat racism, but he had come to realize that the "cure wasn't simply telling people the truth, it was inducing them to act on the truth" (Lewis, p. 225). Thus, while he did not abandon his commitment to scholarship, Du Bois gradually became a political advocate.

Du Bois' growing reputation as a scholar and his quickening interest in politics, inevitably brought him into contact with the "Wizard of Tuskegee." At first, relations between the two were cooperative and apparently cordial, but the changing political climate within the African-American community soon brought them into conflict (see Lewis, pp. 211-264). Washington, in fact, was a complex man, a shrewd politician, whose motives and actions often were more complicated than they appeared to be. Nevertheless, his public rhetoric was a simple and straightforward blend of the "politics of compromise and the mien of ingratiation" (Lewis, p. 238). Many middle and upper-middle class African-Americans found this stance

uncomfortable and dangerous. Increasingly, they chafed under Washington's presumed leadership. They resented his obsequious posture before white authority and feared the consequences of a policy that accommodated to abridgements of political rights without self-assertive protest against them. By virtue of his background, education, and temperament, Du Bois was drawn into the orbit of this incipient revolt, and in 1901, his review of *Up From Slavery*, published in the *Dial*, "fired the opening salvo" (Lewis, p. 264) in the struggle to challenge Washington's hegemony. This review served as the basis for the essay that appeared two years later in *The Souls of Black Folk*, and the first half of the essay covers the same themes as the review and repeats much of its language verbatim. Nevertheless, "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others" was "honed" and "expanded" to the point that, as Lewis has said, "it was virtually a new piece altogether" (p. 287).

### First Movement: Diagnosis

The essay begins with these remarks:

Easily the most striking thing in the history of the American Negro since 1876 is the ascendancy of Mr. Booker T. Washington. It began at the time when war memories and ideals were rapidly passing; a day of astonishing commercial development was dawning; a sense of doubt and hesitation overtook the freemen's sons,—then it was that his leading began. Mr. Washington came, with a single definite programme, at the psychological moment when the nation was a little ashamed of having bestowed so much sentiment on Negroes, and was concentrating its energies on Dollars (p. 30).<sup>1</sup>

This passage deserves careful attention, since, in compact form, it illustrates the rhetorical precision of Du Bois's prose. In three sentences, Du Bois establishes a tone for the essay, suggests, but does not yet declare, an attitude toward Washington, and prefigures the structure of the first half of the essay.

The opening sentence establishes the author's narrative stance; his perspective is distanced, removed from the moment as it sweeps over a wider historical vista, and his voice is impersonal, academic, clinically diagnostic. From this angle, what strikes Du Bois is not Washington as an agent, as an active leader, but his inert placement along the historical landscape—his emergence is not even an event, but a "thing." The impersonal and indirect construction of the sentence strongly suggests Washington's passivity. Consider how different the force of the sentence would be if it were cast in more active, and perhaps more normal, syntax, so that it would read: "Mr. Booker T. Washington's ascendancy is easily the most striking thing in the history of the American Negro since 1876." In Du Bois's version, however, Washington's name emerges only at the end of the sentence, insulated from the verb by a preposition, and his ascendancy appears less as a force acting in history than as something that simply happened in history. Finally, the temporal frame that Du Bois uses is also rhetorically significant. Washington is viewed from the context of events that have occurred since 1876—that is, since the end of reconstruction and during the era of Jim Crow—a low-point in African-American history. This suggests that his ascendancy as leader corresponds with a regression in the fate of his people.

Passing over the second sentence in our passage for the moment, we note that the third sentence presents Washington as a more active agent. Here his name

appears at the beginning of the sentence and in the nominative case. But the stress falls not on what Washington did, but upon the moment when he came on the scene. He was simply in the right place at the right time, and insofar as he engaged in any independent action, it was to "put forward a single definite programme" that was suited to the circumstances. Washington, then, remains an essentially passive figure; his program reacts to external forces, but does nothing to resist or alter them.

These two sentences anticipate a number of key themes that persist through the essay: that Washington's program is a passive accommodation to external circumstances; that his leadership is rooted in sources outside the African-American community; that it is excessively narrow and single-minded, and that it has a decidedly regressive aspect.

The second sentence also suggests some of these themes, but its most prominent feature is the convoluted syntax; the word order is manipulated so that the sentence is encased by the verb "began"—which refers to Washington's leadership. This long, complex sentence, then, ultimately returns to its point of origin, since Washington's passive but inescapable presence binds it at either end. As we shall discover, the structure of this sentence prefigures the structure of the entire first half of the essay, which circles from and to Washington's hegemonic presence and develops a motif of entrapment.

Having acknowledged Washington's ascendancy, Du Bois next proposes to explain it. He approaches this issue in a distinctively academic voice. Washington's rise to prominence, Du Bois explains, commands attention because "the tale of the methods by which he did this is a fascinating study of human life" (p. 31). The tone here is not that of a political advocate, but of a scholar who finds the subject "fascinating" and who studies it from a distanced perspective so as to understand something about "human life." Except for a few short ironic comments, Du Bois maintains this scholarly voice throughout the first half of the essay, and the reader is invited to approach the text as historical and sociological diagnosis rather than as partisan argument.

As he assesses Washington's methods, Du Bois assumes a stance very like that of a neo-Aristotelian rhetorical critic. His interest focuses on instrumental effect, and the central question is: How did Washington succeed in persuading his audience by accommodating to it? The audience, however, is complex, and in his summary overview, Du Bois indicates its various components: Washington's program "startled and won the applause of the South, it interested and won the admiration of the North; and after a confused murmur of protest, it silenced if it did not convert the Negroes themselves" (p. 31). This technique of dividing and enumerating the parts of a subject is typical of Du Bois (see Rampersad, p. 73), and by giving the text a linear, analytic quality, it strongly reinforces the academic tone of the essay. In the analysis that follows, Du Bois begins with what seems a straight-forward seriatim treatment of his sub-headings.

Concerning the South, Washington's achievement was remarkable, for he had to confront the "well-nigh impossible" task of gaining sympathy from the "various elements compromising" the white community. Yet, he won approval in a single speech—indeed in a single image comparing racial relations to the fingers of a hand. This "Atlanta Compromise," as Du Bois calls it, was the most "notable thing in Washington's career," since its ambiguity allowed both Southern conservatives and radicals to decode

it to their own satisfaction, and it provided Washington with a secure base in his own region.

Concerning the North, Washington had gained place and consideration, where others "less shrewd and tactful" had failed to cross the sectional line. By a "singular insight," he "intuitively grasped the spirit of the age which was dominating the North" and was able to "learn the speech and thought of triumphant commercialism and the ideals of material prosperity" (p. 31).

Following the three-part division that Du Bois had outlined, we would now expect him to account for Washington's persuasive impact within the black community. But Du Bois does not discuss this matter directly--and for reasons that were implicit in his initial formulation. He had asserted that Washington "won the applause of the South" and the "admiration of the North," but his program had "silenced...the Negroes themselves." The earlier suggestion that Washington's leadership was imposed from the outside now becomes more explicit. By narrowing his vision and shaping it into oneness with the vision of his white audience, Washington has become the only "recognized spokesman of his ten million fellows..." (p. 32). The tale of Washington's methods, then, reveals leadership that silences a community through accommodation to forces external to it.

The critical diagnosis of Washington's rhetoric ends with the silence of African-Americans, and the problem Du Bois now confronts is how to generate a critical voice for the black community. He must open a space for criticism of Washington--a basis for an apparently loyal opposition. This task, Du Bois advises his readers, is not to be taken lightly, since "one hesitates to criticize a life which, beginning with so little, has done so much." Nevertheless the time has come to "speak in all sincerity and utter courtesy of the mistakes and shortcomings of Mr. Washington's career" (p. 32).

Such criticism, no matter how sincere or courteous, requires a partisan, argumentative voice that Du Bois has studiously avoided to this point and that he is still not ready to assume. Retaining his professional demeanor, he defers direct criticism of Washington until he has added two more items to his social and historical diagnosis of the situation. First, assuming the role of social theorist, he considers existing criticisms of Washington, finds them inadequate, and sketches the general dimensions of an appropriate form of criticism. Second, assuming the role of historian, Du Bois crosses the veil and studies the African-American tradition in order to place Washington in context and to locate indigenous grounds for opposition to his leadership.

Just as he had reviewed the positive reception of Washington in the Southern, Northern, and African-American communities, so also Du Bois traces the critical response through the same divisions. In both North and South, criticism "has not failed to follow Mr. Washington, yet the prevailing public opinion of the land has been too willing to deliver the solution of a wearisome problem into his hands..." (p. 32). "Among his own people," however, the situation is quite different. There he has "encountered the strongest and most lasting opposition, amounting at times to bitterness, and even today continuing strong and insistent even though largely silenced by the public opinion of the nation" (p. 33).

The difference represented here between these communities is not merely a matter of the breadth or strength of antagonism--there is a more fundamental distinction between criticism and opposition, between publicly voiced opinions and mute sentiments. However they differ in other respects, white Southerners and

Northerners both are free to express critical judgments. But, on the other side of the veil there is no criticism; there is silent opposition. Du Bois's three-fold classification, then, reduces itself to two essential categories--to two worlds separated by race, the one critical and self-determining, the other mute and passive.

Du Bois rounds out this section of the essay with a brief but striking reflection about the function of criticism. "The hushing of criticism of honest opponents," he warns, "is a dangerous thing." It silences and paralyzes those who are well-intentioned, and it incites others "to burst into speech so passionately and intemperately as to lose listeners. Honest and earnest criticism from those whose interests are most nearly touched,--criticism of writers by readers, of government by those governed, of leaders by those who are led--this is the soul of democracy and the safeguard of modern society." If African-Americans fail to break the silence and accede to a leader because of "outer pressure," they gain something palpable. "Yet there is also an irreparable loss,--a loss of that peculiarly valuable education which a group receives when by search and criticism it finds and commissions its own leaders" (p. 33).

This disquisition on criticism strongly emphasizes the extent to which Washington's hegemony limits authentic self-determination within the African-American world. The remedy to this problem is criticism, but not small-minded criticism based in envy or narrow partisanship. Du Bois sets for himself and his fellows a higher standard--criticism that is honest, courteous, and broad, and that serves an instrument of social education. This form of criticism offers the vehicle for developing a vocal but loyal opposition to Washington and for constructive self-assertion. An effective critical voice, however, requires more than an appropriate form; it must also recognize options that exist within the life-world of the community; it must consider alternatives rooted in the history of the people addressed. Washington's monolithic leadership occludes recognition of such alternatives, and thus, Du Bois looks behind and beyond Washington and offers an historical account of the African-American experience in choosing group leaders.

Retaining his detached, analytical voice, Du Bois presents this account as a lesson in social history. The issue of group leadership, Professor Du Bois tells us, raises "the most elementary and the nicest problem of social growth." And the African-American experience is particularly "instructive" because it deals with "the leadership of a group within a group--that curious double movement where real progress may be negative and actual advance may be relative retrogression" (p. 33). At this point, Du Bois enacts the concept he names, for the essay itself becomes double as Du Bois' takes the reader behind veil into the "black world."<sup>2</sup>

Du Bois's history identifies three patterns of African-American leadership, which are categorized in terms of the response to the dominant white society. At one extreme is a "feeling of revolt and revenge," and at the other is "an attempt to adjust all thought and action to the will of the greater group." The middle response is characterized by a "determined effort at self-realization and self-development despite enviroing opinion" (p. 34). These three positions correspond with the three reactions to Washington's leadership that Du Bois had listed earlier: intemperate outburst, silence, and, between them, broad-minded but self-assertive criticism. In the second half of the essay, Du Bois's move from diagnostic critique to political activism depends on the alignment of these two sets of categories.

In both cases, Du Bois affiliates himself with the middle position.

Du Bois's narrative shows a complex but basically progressive development of the three leadership patterns up to 1876. There was, on his account, a general movement from "revenge and revolt" (the sole motive prior to 1750), to assimilation and amalgamation, and then, with the advent of the Abolition movement, to self-assertion and self-development. But the "Revolution of 1876" and the repressive measures that followed in its wake, blunted this progression, and after the death of Douglass and Price, the strategy of self-assertion became decrepit (pp. 35-36).

And then, as at the beginning of the essay, "came the new leader," Washington. In this second coming, Washington remains just as Du Bois had described him at the outset of the essay--a "compromiser between the South, the North, and Negro." And while African-Americans resented "signs of compromise which surrendered their civil and political," the circumstances seemed to offer no alternative. "Thus, by national opinion, the Negroes began to recognize Mr. Washington's leadership; and," Du Bois laments, "the voice of criticism was hushed." Thus, the first half of the essay ends where it begins--with Booker T. Washington reigning over a suppressed and silent Black community.

The significance of the cyclical structure of the first half of the essay is clarified by comparing it with the review of *Up From Slavery* upon which it is based (Du Bois, 1901). The essay repeats most of the material in the review and often uses the same language, but there are two significant differences. First, Du Bois reverses the order of his two main topics in the later version. In the review, he begins with the history of African-American leadership and then describes Washington's reception among whites in the South and North. The piece, therefore, offers an unbroken chronological narrative, and the rise of Washington might seem an organic part of that history. In "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others," Du Bois breaks the narrative; the analysis of Washington's reception, set in the context of post-Reconstruction history, comes first, and then Du Bois offers his account of African-American leadership--a narrative that stretches back to the early eighteenth century. In this revised sequence, Washington appears to be estranged from the organic history of the people he leads. Viewed from the perspective of events coming after the "Revolution of 1876," Washington's ascendancy might seem an advance for African-Americans, but viewed from a broader historical vista, his program seems atavistic--a regression to the point before black leaders advocated self-assertion and self-determination. Equally important, the reversal of topics allows Du Bois to position Washington at either end of the whole historical development; Washington surrounds this section of the essay, and his omnipresence iconically represents the condition of a black community surrounded, suppressed, and silenced by outer forces.

Secondly, the essay contains one entirely new passage--the short but powerful disquisition on the role of criticism in a free society. Set squarely between the analysis of the outer white world and the inner world of black experience, these remarks about criticism as an educational process, an instrument of self-determination, and a safeguard for democracy at once emphasize the distance then existing between the two worlds and suggest a vehicle for reducing this distance. The hushing of criticism is the clearest sign of disempowered and alienated condition of the black community, since a people who lack a critical voice cannot engage in self-determination or participate in a self-governing polity. Implicitly, it follows

that Washington's program of assimilation, his rhetoric of silent acquiescence, cannot resolve the fundamental problem confronting his people. On the other hand, constructive criticism of Washington rooted within the black community and its traditions is an assertive act of self-determination; it breaks the wall of silence, and ultimately it suggests a means of participating in the outer world while retaining the group identity that African-Americans neither can nor should abandon.

Throughout the first half of the essay, Du Bois represents the condition of a black community presently repressed and silenced by external forces. Speaking within this frame, Du Bois refrains from direct criticism and political advocacy, as though this aspect of his voice is hushed by the circumstances it describes. Yet, he takes a perspective and projects a voice that can transcend these limitations at a conceptual level. As a scholar positioned at some distance above the immediate context, he can see and describe things beyond the walls now surrounding his community. In a seemingly dispassionate narrative, he can diagnose Washington's hegemony and identify alternatives to it, since when viewed against the sweep of African-American history, Washington's program seems neither inevitable or unavoidable. The full record includes other, more active, possibilities for the black community. And thoughtful reflection indicates that constructive criticism can serve as the vehicle for realizing these possibilities. Thus, the scholarly voice of the first half of the essay offers the equipment needed for an effective political voice, and in the second half, Du Bois puts this equipment to use. In the unfolding development of the essay, advocacy grows out of diagnosis; narrative gives way to argument.

### Second Movement: Advocacy

Du Bois opens the second half of the essay by plainly asserting a point he had only implied earlier in the essay: "Mr. Washington represents in Negro thought the old attitude of adjustment and submission." A related series of equally pointed assertions follow in rapid sequence: Washington's program has become "a gospel of Work and Money to such an extent as apparently almost completely to overshadow the higher aims of life," and it "practically accepts the alleged inferiority of the Negro races." Washington "withdraws many of the high demands of Negroes as men and as American citizens (p. 36), and he "distinctly asks that black people give up, at least for the present, three things,--First, political power, Second, insistence on civil rights, Third, higher education of Negro youth..." (p. 37).

These three things serve as the basis for a refutational critique of Washington's program and for the alternative that Du Bois advocates. The refutation comes in the form of short, crisp *ad hominem* argumentation. Even if African-Americans accept Washington's goals, they can not achieve them so long as they accept and act on his premises concerning political, social, and educational issues. Washington's position faces what Du Bois' calls a "triple paradox": (1) Washington seeks to make Negro artisans business men and property owners, but lacking the power to defend their rights and to vote, the goal is unattainable "under modern competitive methods; (2) Washington wants to inculcate thrift and self-respect, but he also "counsels a silent submission to civic inferiority such as is bound to sap the manhood of any race in the long run"; and (3) he stresses the role of common schools in industrial training and de-emphasizes higher learning, but the common

schools could not function without teachers educated "in the Negro colleges" (p. 37).

At this point, Du Bois breaks his line of argument and offers some reflections about his stance toward Washington. The "triple paradox of Mr. Washington's position," Du Bois observes, "is the object of attack by two classes of colored Americans." One of these classes represents the old attitude of revolt and revenge, and their criticism may be dismissed, since they offer nothing constructive. The other class dislikes "internal disagreements" and would not make "their just criticism of a useful and earnest man an excuse for a general discharge of venom..." Nevertheless, the issues are so fundamental that representatives of this group can no longer hold their tongues (p. 38). Du Bois, of course, belongs to this second class, which seeks to revivify the tradition of self-determination and self-assertion. The way he positions himself in this passage consistently reflects his earlier, more detached, observations about criticism and African-American history. In confronting Washington's assimilationism, he cannot be silent, but he will not make intemperate outbursts. He offers constructive criticism rather than either of these extremes. Likewise, his political program of self-assertion and self-determination holds to the middle course between submission and revolt. In short, even as he engages in a sharp, clearly political attack against Washington, Du Bois recalls his earlier scholarly voice and attempts to demonstrate that his critical practice consistently enacts the balance and breadth that he had endorsed in theory.

As he closes this reflection, Du Bois turns to the constructive side of his political argument. In substance, his program consists in the assertion of the three things Washington would ask African-Americans to deny: "1. The right to vote. 2. Civic equality. (3) The education of youth according to ability" (p. 38). More significant, perhaps, is the tone that emerges and its implicit contrast to Washington's carefully moderated voice of compromise. Du Bois's direct attacks on Washington represent self-assertion through criticism, and as he articulates them, Du Bois revivifies the African-American tradition of self-assertive protest—a tradition Washington had abandoned. The vitality of that tradition now makes itself apparent in the text. The group for which he speaks, Du Bois asserts, is absolutely certain that the way for a people to gain their reasonable rights is not by voluntarily throwing them away and insisting that they do not want them; that the way for a people to gain respect is not by continually belittling and ridiculing themselves; that, on the contrary, the Negroes must insist continually, in season and out of season, that voting is necessary to modern manhood, that color discrimination is barbarism, and that black boys need education as well as white boys" (p. 39).

Both the tone and direction of Du Bois's argument seem almost to propel him across the veil to a point where he can, and must, criticize the dominant white culture. The critique of Washington centers on his identity with that culture, on his accommodation to its values, interests, and prejudices. Thus, criticism of the one implies criticism of the other, and as the essay draws to its conclusion, Du Bois explicitly develops this connection. The second half of the essay, then, also exhibits a "double movement" between the white and black worlds. But the pattern of movement is chiasmatically reversed; the first half proceeds from the outer world of white culture to the inner world of black experience, while the second begins with a critique of Washington

rooted in the black community and then spirals outward into criticism of the surrounding white society.

Du Bois now argues that broad-minded, balanced criticism is a civic duty necessary for sustaining the larger culture. Thus, if the "thinking classes of American Negroes" fail to voice the legitimate demands of their people, they "shirk a heavy responsibility," not just "to themselves," but also to "the struggling masses," to the "darker races of men whose future depends largely on the American experiment," and especially "to this nation—this common Fatherland" (p. 40). This appeal to the greater good of the nation makes Washington efforts to appease South and North dangerous not just for African-Americans but for the country as a whole. It is because of Washington's dual role as mediator and national black leader that African-Americans have been unable to find the critical voice required for participation in an active democracy, and so long as they are excluded, the American democratic ideal is at hazard. Patriotism and loyalty call upon black men to voice their disagreements with Washington, for they "have no right to sit silently by while the inevitable seeds of destruction are sown for a harvest of disaster to our children, black and white" (p. 40).

It is also the duty of black men to "judge the South discriminatingly"—to praise what is good in the region and "use the same breath" to denounce what is evil. "The South ought to be led," Du Bois argues, "by candid and honest criticism, to assert her better self and do her full duty to the race she has cruelly wronged and is still wronging" (p. 42). At the same time, the South needs this sort of criticism "for the sake of her own white sons and daughters, and the insurance of a robust, healthy mental and moral development" (p. 40).

As Du Bois moves across the veil, he does not enter the white world so completely that he abandons the black. His is not an assimilationist program. Thus, he turns his attention toward both Washington and the white world, and as the essay concludes, criticism of Washington and the white South is advanced by turns, almost in alternating passages. The criticism of the South relies upon a discriminating criticism of Washington, who himself "is especially to be criticized" for his failure to criticize the dominant white culture. But the assessment of Washington must be balanced. "It would be unjust," Du Bois notes, "not to acknowledge that in several instances he has opposed movements in the South which were unjust to Negroes." Yet, "it is equally true" that Washington's "propaganda" promotes only "a dangerous half-truth. The supplementary truths must never be lost sight of" (p. 41).

"The black men of America," Du Bois contends, "have a duty to perform, a duty stern and delicate,—a forward movement to oppose a part of the work of their greatest leader" (p. 42). Here, then, is a refiguring of the "double movement" that Du Bois mentioned at the end of the first section of the essay. Though Washington's leadership has resulted in some actual advance, and in these respects it should be supported, it has also resulted in some relative retrogression, and in these respects it must be criticized. Telling the difference is delicate, and the criticism must be stern.

### Conclusion

In the first half of the essay, Du Bois discusses the function of criticism in abstract terms, but cannot apply it because of Washington's ruling presence—all voices except his have been hushed. Within this frame, with Washington looming on all sides, Du Bois diagnoses the characteristic of Washington's leadership and considers alternatives from

the past, but he cannot offer direct, sharp criticism of Washington's program and an alternative that can compete with it. The rhetorical action of the text, however, moves from diagnosis to advocacy, and in the second half of the essay, Du Bois finds a critical voice that circumvents and challenges Washington's silencing hegemony. The movement from diagnosis to advocacy--from narrative analysis to political argument--develops through an interlocking pattern; the appropriate critical voice, which at first can only be described in abstract terms, because of white control (through Washington) of the black world, is used within the black world to unseat Washington, so that it can be applied to the white world as a vehicle for improving both worlds. This critical program, though it has negative elements, is not primarily negative. It is, instead, an engine for constructive self-determination in a plural world, a mechanism necessary for deliberation within a complex democratic nation.

Du Bois notes in his 1901 review of *Up From Slavery* that Washington's critics are not "unified by any single definite programme" (1901, p. 54). In "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others," Du Bois sketches such a program, but its definite political premises are broad and rather thin, and they are derived from an inversion of key premises implicit in Washington's program. In fact, the contrast with Washington seems less a matter of political premises than of political sensibilities. Against Washington's monolithic and silencing politics of submitting to external forces, Du Bois describes and enacts a politics of critical argument. The unity of Du Bois's program comes from its gathering of voices--from its evocation of the continuously moving, always multiple and complex, process of critical deliberation. Once set in motion, no one can predict or control its outcome, and since it invites rather than hushes opposing voices, the politics of criticism

precludes a monolithic leader or a single, fixed program for a community. Thus, criticism, as Du Bois conceives, not only is the tool to dislodge Washington's hegemony, but is also the fitting alternative to the style and substance of his leadership.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>All references to "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others" will be by page number only to the 1989 Bantam Classics edition of *Souls of the Black Folk*.

<sup>2</sup>See Stepto (1991) for a discussion of the "black world" and the "white world" in *The Souls of Black Folk*.

## References

- Du Bois, W. E. B. (1989). *The souls of black folk*. New York: Bantam Books. (Originally published 1903).
- Du Bois, W. E. B. (1901, July 16). The evolution of Negro leadership [Review of *Up from slavery*]. *The Dial*, pp. 53-55.
- Gates, H. L., Jr. (1989). Introduction: Darkly, as through a veil. In W. E. B. Du Bois, *The souls of black folk* (pp. vii-xxv). New York: Bantam Books.
- Gibson, D. B. (1989). Introduction. In W. E. B. Du Bois, *The souls of black folk* (pp. vii-xxv). New York: Penguin Books.
- Lewis, D. L. (1993). *W. E. B. Du Bois: The biography of a race, 1868-1919*. New York: Henry Holt.
- Rampersad, A. (1990) *The art and imagination of W. E. B. Du Bois*. New York: Schocken Books.
- Stepto, R. B. (1985). The quest of the weary traveler: W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls Of Black Folk*. In W. L. Andrews (Ed.), *Critical essay on W. E. B. Du Bois* (pp. 139-173). Boston: G. K. Hall & Co. (Originally published 1979).
- Stepto, R. B. (1991). *From behind the veil: A study of Afro-American narrative*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.