The Eve of the Harlem Renaissance

W. E. B. DuBois (I)

Hisao Kishimoto

I am the smoke king,
I am black.
I am swinging in the sky.
I am ringing worlds on high:
I am the thought of the throbbing mills,
I am the soul toil kills.
I am the ripple of trading rills.
Up I'm curling from the sod,
I am whirling home to God.
I am the smoke king,
I am black.

from “The Song of the Smoke”
by W.E.B. DuBois

I

Almost forty years had passed since the Harlem Renaissance when William Edward Burghardt DuBois died in Accra, Ghana on August 27, 1963, the day before the great March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. He was ninety-five years old. During his long life, his activities were both wide-ranging and profound in their impact, lending

* DuBois wrote his second novel, Dark Princess, in 1928, but it will not be treated here as the title of this article signifies.
credibility to the claim of Abraham Chapman that “in many respects, W.E.B. DuBois is the intellectual father of modern Negro cultural development. His figure looms large as writer, editor, scholar, educator, historian, sociologist and student of Africa.” His career is described fully in his Autobiography (1960) and autobiographical Dusk of Dawn (1940). A brief biography based on his Autobiography follows.

DuBois was born on February 23, 1868 in Great Barrington, a little town in western Massachusetts in the Housatonic Valley which is flanked by the Berkshire mountains. His community belonged to the Dutch Hudson Valley rather than to Puritan New England. His mother Mary Burghardt, whose ancestors were a group of African Negroes in West Africa, was rather small with smooth brown skin, lovely eyes, and curly hair. His father, Alfred DuBois, was a black and, however, he had a blood from French Huguenotes with good looks and white skin. Shortly after DuBois’ birth, his father went east to Connecticut and never returned to Great Barrington. His mother seldom mentioned his father so he did not know where or when his father died. He and his mother lived with his grandfather Burghardt until he was about five when his grandfather died. His mother then had a paralytic stroke from which she never entirely recovered.

There are aspects of his early life worth mentioning. The first is that in his town blacks were few in number. “In Great Barrington there were perhaps 25, certainly not more than 50, colored folk in a population of 5000.” To be sure, the color line was manifest and yet not absolutely drawn and so DuBois had no experience of segregation or color discrimination except, sometimes, the Irish called him “Nigger” or tried to attack him. One of the reasons was that most of the blacks had some white blood from unions several generations past.
The second is that he could receive an education. He was educated from the age of six to sixteen in the town's public school. He was seldom absent or tardy. He studied hard believing his mother's words that "There was no real discrimination on account of color—it was all a matter of ability and hard work." He was poor so that he was eager to eke out his income doing various jobs such as splitting kindling, mowing lawns and doing chores. Occasionally he sent weekly letters to a black weekly, *New York Age*, and also sold copies. On the whole, he spent a relatively happy youth in New England.

II

He graduated from high school in 1884 and was the only black student in his class. In the fall his mother died, leaving him orphaned without any property and without any relative to support his further education. He wanted to go to Harvard University. However, his high school was below the standard of Harvard's entrance requirements. Fortunately, Mr. Painter, a congregational minister whose son was his class mate during his high school days furnished him with $25 a year for the duration of his college course. He decided to attend Fisk University where he experienced real black life. Upon reaching Fisk he said, "I was thrilled to be for the first time among so many people of my own color or rather of such various and such extraordinary colors, which I had only glimpsed before, but who it seemed were bound to me by new and exciting eternal ties. Never before had I seen young men so self-assured and who gave themselves such airs, and colored men at that; and above all for the first time I saw beautiful girls... but at Fisk the never-to-be-forgotten marvel of that first supper came with me opposite two of the most beautiful beings God
ever revealed to the eyes of 17. He was able to make many friends there.  

The college curriculum was limited but excellent. The excellent and earnest teaching, the small college classes and the absence of distraction enabled him to institute and develop his program for freedom and progress for blacks. His hitherto egocentric world was replaced with a world centering on his race in America.

Another beneficial influence of Fisk University was that it shaped and enhanced his appreciation of music. Professor Spence, the great Greek scholar, had organized the Mozart Society, a group of all the talented singers in the school. DuBois, a member of the society, sang the Hallelujah Chorus at commencement every year in a sea of faces of every color. He also enjoyed listening to the music of the Fisk Jubilee Singers. The result of his Fisk interlude is that the scope of his life was broadened, centering on a group of educated blacks who, with their knowledge and experience, would lead the black masses.

Although Fisk University was a good college for DuBois, it was small and limited in equipment, laboratories and books; it was not a university. DuBois, who wanted the most and best in organized learning, entered Harvard University in 1888 as a junior. There he was able to deepen his understanding the meaning of the universe and fulfill his desire to study philosophy. According to his Autobiography, "Harvard University in 1888 was a great institution of learning. It was 236 years old and on its governing board were Alexander Agassiz, Phillip Brooks, Henry Cabot Lodge and Charles Francis Adams; and a John Quincy Adams, but not the ex-President. Charles William Eliot, a gentleman by training and a scholar by broad study and travel, was president. Among its teachers emeriti were Oliver Wendell Holmes
and James Russell Lowell. Among the active teachers were Francis Child, Charles Eliot Norton, Charles Dunbar, Justin Winsor and John Trowbridge; William Goodwin, Frank Taussig, Nathaniel Shaler, George Palmer, William James, Francis Peabody, Josiah Royce, Barrett Wendell, Edward Channing, and Albbert Bushnell Hart. A young instructor who arrived in 1890 was George Santayana. Seldom, if ever, has any American university had such a galaxy of great men and fine teachers as Harvard in the decade between 1885 and 1895.

Attending Harvard in its greatest day, he was very content, though isolated in a completely black, self-sufficient provincial world. Although there were very few blacks at Harvard at that time, he ignored the white world as much as possible except to ask for the tuteledge of teachers and freedom to use the laboratory and library.

In June 1890, DuBois received his bachelor’s degree in Philosophy from Harvard cum laude. He was one of the five graduating students selected to speak at commencement and this speech was introduced in various magazines such as Kate Field’s Washington, Boston Herald, and The New York Nation. According to DuBois, a Harvard professor wrote in Kate Field’s Washington that “the colored orator of the commencement stage, made a ten-strike. It is agreed upon by all the people I have seen that he was the star of the occasion. His paper was on ‘Jefferson Davis,’ and you would have been surprised to hear a colored man deal with him so generously.”

Taking his professor William James’ advice that “there is not much chance for anyone earning a living as a philosopher,” to heart, as a graduate student he changed his major to sociology, the science of human action. In 1892 he received a Master of Arts degree and was rewarded his fellowship for the year 1891-92, when he spent preparing
his doctor's thesis on the suppression of the slave trade in America.

DuBois decided to receive further education in Europe and as German universities had the best reputation of universities of the day, he was determined to study in Germany. In 1892 he managed to get the recommendation of Mr. Hayes, the man responsible for establishing the Slater Fund for the education of Negroes which had been established in 1882. The Slater Fund Board awarded him a fellowship of $750 to study abroad for one year with the possibility of the fellowship being renewed for a second year.

III

In 1892 DuBois crossed the ocean on a small Dutch ship. Everything he saw was new and astonishing for him. He writes in his Autobiography that "I saw the Wartburg and Berlin (sic.); I made the Hartzreise and climbed the Brocken; I saw the Hansa towns and the cities and dorfs of South Germany; I saw the Alps at Berne, the Cathedral at Milan, Florence, Rome, Venice, Vienna, and Pest; I looked on the boundaries of Russia; and I sat in Paris and London. On mountain and valley, in home and school, I met men and women as I had never met them before. Slowly they became, not white folks, but folks. The unity beneath all life clutched me. I was not less fanatically a Negro, but 'Negro' meant a greater, broader sense of humanity and world fellowship. I felt myself standing, not against the world, but simply against American narrowness and color prejudice, with the greater, finer world at my back. In Germany in 1892, I found myself on the outside of the American world, looking in. With me were white folk—students, acquaintances, teachers—who viewed the scene with me. They did not always pause to regard me as a curiosity, or
something sub-human; I was just a man of the somewhat priviledged student rank, with whom they were glad to meet and talk over the world; particularly, the past of the world whence I came... So too in brave old Eisenach, beneath the shadow of Luther's Wartburg, I spent a happy holiday in a home where university training and German home-making left no room for American color prejudice. From this unhampered social intermingling with Europeans of education and manners, I emerged from the extremes in life of my racial provincialism. I became more human; learned the place of 'Wine, Women, and Song'; I ceased to hate or suspect people simply because they belonged to one race or color; and above all I began to understand the real meaning of scientific research and the dim outline of methods of employing its technique and its results in the new social sciences for the settlement of the Negro problems in America.

In the Fall DuBois went to Berlin where he registered in the university. Fortunately, he met several of the great leaders of the developing social science: Gustav Schmoller and Adolf Wargner in seminar courses as well as Heinrich von Treitsche and Max Weber. Moreover, the many chances to travel all over Europe. His perspective even broader. He returned to the United States, "nigger" hating America, at 26 years of age. At that time he had only two dollars plus his fare home to the Berkshires in his pocket.

IV

After finishing his education in Berlin and getting a Ph. D from Harvard, he became a professor of Greek and Latin at Wilberforce University. He also held positions at University of Pennsylvania and Atlanta University while he organized the Niagara Movement and the
N.A.A.C.P. and became the founder and editor of various magazines: *The Moon, The Horizon, The Crisis*, etc. Here I'd like to focus on his character and thought.

In addition to being blessed with ability, DuBois was fortunate to have had his mother's advice. As he became older "ability and will" became very important for him. He also realized that he had a lot of good fortune. "I began to realize how much of what I had called Will and Ability was sheer Luck! Suppose my good mother had preferred a steady income from my child labor rather than bank on the precarious dividend of my higher training? Suppose that pompous old village judge, whose dignity we often ruffled and whose apples we stole, had had his way and sent me while a child to a 'reform' school to learn a 'trade.' Suppose Principal Hosmer had been born with no faith in "darkies," and instead of sending me to college had had me taught carpentry and the making of tin pans? Suppose I had missed a Harvard scholarship? Suppose the Slater Board had then, as now, distinct ideas as to where the education of Negroes should stop? Suppose and suppose!"

DuBois is often described as arrogant, egoistic, proud, difficult, stern; his image is a forbidding one. Basically this stems from his attitude that "from childhood I tried to be honest; I did not mean to take anything which did not belong to me. I told the truth even when there was no call for the telling and when silence would have been golden. I did not usually speak in malice but often blurted out the truth when the story was incomplete and was therefore as seemed to me wrong (sic.)." The point is that this kind of attitude is, in general, impossible as a black at that time. Fortunately he grew up in comparatively free circumstances, and in order to make the best use of...
his character, he chose the scholastic life which led him to Europe, where the liberal atmosphere that prevailed before World War I both suited and developed his character. It is inevitable that he presented an egoistic, proud, difficult, and stern aspect to others; he was too honest.

In 1903 DuBois published *The Soul of Black Folk* in which he criticized the thought of Booker T. Washington who emphasized “Thrift, Patience, and Industrial Training” for the masses. DuBois was a free thinker, and his thought about the “Talented Tenth” reflect this. He insisted that “The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men. The problem of education, then, among Negroes must first of all deal with the Talented Tenth; it is the problem of developing the Best of this race that they may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst, in their own and other races. Now the training of men is a difficult and intricate task. Its technique is a matter for educational experts, but its object is for the vision of seers. If we make money the object of man-training, we shall develop money-makers but not necessarily men; if we make technical skill the object of education, we may possess artisans but not, in nature, men. Men we shall have only as we make manhood the object of the work of the schools—intelligence, broad sympathy, knowledge of the world that was and is, and of the relation of men to it—this is the curriculum of that Higher Education, which must underlie true life. On this foundation we may build bread winning, skill of hand and quickness of brain, with never a fear lest the child and man mistake the means of living for the object of life. If this be true—and who can deny it—three tasks lay before me; first to show from the past that the Talented Tenth as they have risen among
American Negroes have been worthy of leadership; secondly, to show how these men may be educated and developed; and thirdly, to show their relation to the Negro problem.”

In 1905 DuBois and his Harvard friend, William Monroe Trotter, organized the Niagara Movement, which consisted of militant black intellectuals from 14 states. However, a controversy between DuBois and Washington underlied the movement. DuBois said that “there was first of all the ideological controversy. I believed in the higher education of a Talented Tenth who through their knowledge of modern culture could guide the American Negro into a higher civilization. I knew that without this the Negro would have to accept white leadership, and that such leadership could not always be trusted to guide this group into self-realization and to its highest cultural possibilities. Mr. Washington, on the other hand, believed that the Negro as an efficient worker could gain wealth and that eventually through his ownership of capital he would be able to achieve a recognized place in American culture and could then educate his children as he might wish and develop their possibilities. For this reason he proposed to put the emphasis at present upon training in the skilled trades and encouragement in industry and common labor.”

DuBois explains the opposition that arose against the movement: “Then came a new and surprising turn to the whole situation which in the end quite changed my life. In the early summer of 1905, Mr. Washington went to Boston and arranged to speak in a colored church to colored people—a thing which he did not often do in the North. Trotter and Forbes, editors of the Guardian, determined to heckle him and make him answer publicly certain questions with regard to his attitude toward voting and education. William H. Lewis, a colored
lawyer whom I myself had introduced to Mr. Washington, had charge
of the meeting, and the result was a disturbance magnified by the
newspapers into a 'riot,' which resulted in the arrest of Mr. Trotter.
Finally he served a term in jail.”

As a result of this incident fifty-nine colored men from 17 different
states eventually signed a petition for a meeting near Buffalo, New
York during the week of July 9, 1905. The outcome was that Niagara
Movement was incorporated January 31, 1906, in the District of Colum-
bia. The Movement raised a furor of the most disconcerting criticism.
DuBois was accused of acting from motives of envy of a great leader,
Washington, and of being ashamed of the fact he was a member of
the Negro race. Unfortunately, the downfall of the movement was
foreshadowed at its inception because it was too militant and idealistic
for the time and there were no funds or permanent organization. The
Niagara Movement became the historical predecessor of the N.A.A.C.P.
It was organized in 1909 and absorbed most of the member of the
Niagara Movement. Its goal was to obtain civil right for blacks.

In 1961 DuBois joined the Communist Party in the United States.
His motive was very clearly stated in his letter of application for
membership. In the same year he left for Ghana at the invitation
of President Nkrumah. He took up residence there and then in 1963
obtained citizenship of Ghana. On August 27 of the same year he
died there. His body was laid to rest with full military honors at a
spot fifty yeards from the pounding surf, beside the wall of the Castle,
the residence of President of Ghana.

V

DuBois’ first novel, *The Quest of Silver Fleece*, was published in 1911.
It is a three-part story about Blessed Alwyn and Zora Cresswell living in the southern cotton belt. The first part is about the romance of Bles and Zora, the setting for which is a black school and a nearby swamp. Bles, who from Georgia, goes to Tooms County, Alabama, to Miss Smith’s school for blacks. On the way to the school he meets a half-clothed girl with a primitive beauty, Zora, who is the daughter of a conjure woman, Elispeth, living at the swamp.

Under the guidance of Miss Smith and Miss Mary Taylor, Bles grows up and love begins to bud between him and Zora. He teaches her letters and recommends that she enters the school. She doesn’t like school; however, because of Bles’ persuasion she tries to learn and in an effort to save for school she plants cotton at the swamp. Together Bles and she clear the swamp, plow it, and plant the cotton seeds; Elispeth puts a spell on them wishing a good harvest.

In spite of Miss Smith and Miss Taylor’s efforts, the effect of education on Zora is minimal. She continually steals and tells lies. Her cotton crop flourishes, however. One day after meeting Zora, Bles meets Miss Taylor at the gate of the school. When she sees him she says, “Bles have you absolutely no shame?” Bles braces himself, raises his head proudly, and says, “I am going to marry her; it is no crime.”19 She is scandalized. “Can it be, Bles Alwyn, that you didn’t know the sort of girl she is?”20 That shocks him great deal. He rushes into the swamp shouting “It’s a lie! It’s a damned lie!”21 He tries to ask Zora about his teacher’s accusations and she confesses that “I began running away, and they hunted me through the swamp ... I thought you know, and I thought that—that purity was just wanting to be pure.”22 Bles is too confused to forgive her and they part.
When Christmas comes, black men take their cotton to their masters. Zora also takes her cotton to Colonel Cresswell, Miss Taylor's fiancé's father. Although it is excellent cotton he only give her a receipt, deducting her lent and rations for five year's back debt. She realizes the injustice of the caste system and resolves to find some way out of her miserable situation.

Mrs. Vanderpool, a millionaire friend of the Cresswells wants to hire a maid because her French maid left her. Since Bles' leaving and Elspeth's death, Zora has been in great straits. In order to make her way she accepts the job on the recommendation of Miss Smith and the persuasion of Mrs. Vanderpool who tries to make her a lady.

The second part of the novel is about the political activities of Bles and his defeat. Bles who left the Alabama swamp and with high marks on the civil service examination, meets Senator Smith through the introduction of Miss Smith, his sister, in Washington. With the help of Senator Smith he gets a position as a clerk in the treasury. At the Senator's office Bles meets Miss Caroline Wynn, a school teacher who gets him involved in political matters. Miss Wynn, who is attracted by Bles' personality, especially his frankness and modesty, makes him a public speaker for the Republican Party at the request of Senator Smith. For that Senator Smith guarantees Bles the position of Register of the Treasury. At first, Bles' speeches gather larger and larger crowds and he becomes the central figure of black mass-meetings in various cities. However, Sam Stillings, his campaign partner and one-time servant of Cresswell, wants to get Bles' postion. Miss Wynn makes a deal with Senator Smith to oust Bles from his position.

Meanwhile, Zora who has been receiving training from Mrs. Vander-
pool visits various places with Mrs. Vanderpool. Mrs. Vanderpool has straightened Zora's hair, given her fine clothes to wear, taught her to read books, to think, to listen to music, and so on. Zora's work for Mrs. Vanderpool is minimal so she devotes almost all of her time to widening her world, eventually coming to the conclusion that after learning a lot she will go back to the South to work for her people. With the help of Mr. and Mrs. Vanderpool in secret, Zora tries to support Bles in his effort to become the Register of the Treasury. Although she sends him encouraging letters everyday he overlooks them and finally fails to get the position. Concurrently, Mr. Vanderpool is appointed ambassador to France and so Zora decides to leave Mrs. Vanderpool and go back to the South.

The third part of the novel is about the problems of Southern cotton farming. Miss Smith waits for Zora's return to the school where she will work. The school, however, is in a financial crisis. Zora remembers having received a check from Mrs. Vanderpool and upon carefully examining it is shocked to find that a check from Mrs. Vanderpool, it is for ten thousand dollars. With five thousand dollars she plans to buy the swamp to help black farmers and the school. She makes a contract with Colonel Cresswell that she will pay a thousand dollars in cash and the rest in crops and organizes black sharecroppers into a cooperative settlement.

When Bles comes back to the school and joins them, Zora is extremely happy. Meanwhile Colonel Cresswell uses various dishonest means in a vain attempt to destroy the school and the settlement. Bles, who is in charge of purchases for the school and the tenants goes to buy supplies from Colonel Cresswell. The Colonel tries to sell supplies for twice their price; he even pressures the town's merchant
to do the same.

When harvest time comes, the colonel tries to take two thirds of their crop. Zora gets angry with this maltreatment and brings the matter into the court where she fights the colonel without a lawyer. In the end, the legality of Zora's contract is proven and she wins the suit. However, catastrophe strikes suddenly. A Toomsvill mob, agitated by John Taylor and the colonel, tries to attack the school. The tension becomes high among the members of the school and black tenants. Finally, a mob comes to the school shouting and whispering "Let's rush through and fire the house." But, in the ensuing confusion some members of the mob mistake other members for armed blacks. This causes a panic and most of the mob rushes pellmell toward town.

Three months after this event, Colonel Cresswell becomes ill. He tells Mary, who has come back to the South after her relationship with her husband, Harry Cresswell, is estranged, "I've made my will ... one hundred thousand dollars for you ... two hundred thousand dollars and this house ... some money (to Emma, his black grandchild) ..."23) Soon after, he dies.

Mary thinks that to marry Bles to Emma will be the best possible solution between Bles and Zora. Emma agrees gladly to her proposal, while Zora accepts it glumly. However, Bles, though he seem to love Emma, can't accept it and tells Zora she is "the best woman in all the world ..." In the last scene, Zora, who once refused Bles' proposal, sobs, in a deep voice: "Will you—marry me, Bles?"24 (The extended discussions of The Quest of Silver Fleece will be treated in the next number.)

Notes
2) Ibid., p. 358.


4) According to his *Autobiography*, after he entered high school, he began to feel the pressure of the "Veil of Color."


6) Ibid., p. 107.

7) Among his schoolmates was Maggie Murray who later became the third wife of Booker T. Washington and survived him.

8) Jubilee Singers—A Black American group of spirituals. The group was organized in 1871 to make fund-raising tours for the newly established Fisk University at Nashville, Tennessee. George L. White (1838–95), the school's music teacher, chose nine singers and a pianist from his well-trained student choir of former slaves; before the group was disbanded in 1880 it had toured the northern USA, performed at Boston's World Peace Jubilee (1872) and at White House, sang for Queen Victoria and toured Great Britain and Europe. The funds the group collected made possible the continued existence of the university and the construction of two buildings there. (*The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, vol. 9. ed., Stanley Sadie, Macmillan Publishers Limited, 1980).


10) Ibid., p. 147.


12) Ibid., pp. 156–160.

13) Ibid., p. 183.

14) Ibid., p. 277.


17) Ibid., p. 248.

18) On this first day of October, 1961, I am applying for admission to membership in the Communist Party of the United States. I have been long and slow in coming to this conclusion, but at last my mind is settled. In college I heard the name of Karl Marx, but read none of his works nor
heard them explained. At the University of Berlin, I heard much of those thinkers who had definitively answered the theories of Marx, but again we did not study what Marx himself had said .... I joined the Socialist Party in 1911. I knew then nothing of practical Socialist Politics and in the campaign of 1912, I found myself unwilling to Vote the Socialist ticket, but advised Negroes to Vote for Wilson. This was contrary to Socialist Party rules and consequently I resigned from the Socialist Party .... I praised the racial attitudes of the Communists, but opposed their tactics in the case of the Scottsboro boys and their advocacy of a Negro state. At the same time I began to study Karl Marx and the Communists .... Finally in 1926, I began a new effort: I visited Communist lands. I went to the Soviet Union in 1926, 1936, 1949 and 1959; I saw the nation develop .... Today I have reached a firm conclusion: Capitalism cannot reform itself; it is doomed to self-destruction .... Communism—the effort to give all men what they need and to ask of each the best they can contribute—this is the only way of human life .... (The Seventh Son, op. cit., pp. 721-722).

20) Ibid., p. 167.
21) Ibid., p. 168.
22) Ibid., p. 170.
23) Ibid., p. 428.
24) Ibid., p. 434.