Preface

Ralph W. Ellison describes the way a disembodied "ironic, down-home voice" intruded itself upon a story he had been writing and led him into the "self-willed and self-generating piece of fiction" that became Invisible Man ([1952] 1989, intro.). My reading of The Souls of Black Folk (hereafter Souls) originates in a less dramatic experience of this type. I had been working on a collection of essays, psychoanalytic in perspective and loosely united as "narratives of descent." Two essays on Souls were to initiate the journey, which was to continue through Invisible Man and Juneteenth (also by Ellison) and then to Tar Baby, Beloved, and Jazz by Toni Morrison. The line of descent was to be both generational (Du Bois through Ellison to Morrison) and phenomenological (from surface to depth, in each text and in the advance from one to the next). Souls came first, not only because it is first chronologically but also because it establishes themes (e.g., the Veil and its equivalents, twoness of various kinds, voluntary and involuntary sacrifice) that are carried through and elaborated in the other texts.

Initially those essays on Souls had a relatively narrow focus. One of them explored Du Bois’s ambivalence about the enactment of anger, an ambivalence that cuts across and complicates the two-ness of African-American identity. The other was to take up the (perhaps inversely) related theme of death-as-liberation, obtrusive in the later chapters of the text, which could be viewed as consorting with the roughly Platonic aspect of Du Bois’s conception of racial leadership. Both themes, although more obviously the second, can be traced back to the incident with which Du Bois begins Souls; that is, the moment in his New England childhood when a white classmate refused his offer of a visiting-card and he experienced for the first time
both the falling of the Veil and the desire to fly above it. So, more by instinct than by choice, I began the essay on Du Bois’s “Platonism” with an interpretation of that incident. Thereafter, at first without my permission or even awareness, the project became “self-willed and self-generating.” Placing myself as best I could in that schoolroom, I could see the topography of Souls taking form around it—a horizontal plane of racial contestation centered in the problematics of recognition intersected by a vertical plane that could be signified by the idea of renunciation (voluntary and involuntary sacrifice). The vertical plane extended upward through high culture and the self-sacrificing role of the Talented Tenth of black folk, to whom Du Bois assigned the role of racial leadership, to the home over yonder that is so movingly evoked in the Negro hymns and spirituals he named the Sorrow Songs. It extended downward into an abyss of pain, ultimately into the waters of the Middle Passage and the long years of slavery that gave birth to the Sorrow Songs. Still, I wanted to believe that this psychological and topographical view of the text could be contained within the frame I had initially set for it. This was wishful thinking, more precisely a resistance to turning away from the project I had chosen in favor of another one that (so it seemed) had chosen me. For I had already experienced something akin to the interpellation Ellison describes. Souls kept drawing me in, in part because Du Bois’s authorial voice was so plainly audible, in part because a unifying authorial vision became increasing apparent. This combination of voice and vision, once heard and seen, left me feeling my only choice was to give back what had been given and, by so doing, offer my own recognition of Du Bois’s singular achievement. The next steps down my self-defined narrative line would have to wait.

I did not, however, set aside an interest in narrative when turning from the one project to the other, and this for two reasons. First, Souls unfolds as a story about black folk, with its characters, scenes, themes, and plotlines, told in good part as a first-person narration. This is not to deny that it contains and is indeed structured by a well-articulated theory of African-American identity and interracial relations. But Du Bois’s aesthetic intent is unmistakable; and it is fair (if too simple) to say that the social theoretical content of Souls is presented in narrative form—joining in this way the social scientific and imaginative dimensions of its author’s personality. Second, it seemed to me that I could best recognize Du Bois’s twofold, aesthetic and theoretical, achievement by mirroring it; that is, by telling a story about his story.

As must necessarily be the case, I bring my own predispositions and perspectives into this engagement with Souls. As to predispositions, I am personally inclined toward storytelling and, on the theoretical side, toward seeing dialectical Gestalten where others might see less organic phenomena. This latter inclination consorts with a somewhat Cartesian—also Hegelian and Marxian—desire to identify the simple elements out of which complex
unities are constructed. I might even acknowledge that these predispositions bespeak a certain interpretive will to power, a form-imposing impulse that, if unchecked, would be incompatible with recognition freely given. Knowing this about myself, I have accepted the necessity for methodological self-discipline—for a kind of interpretive restraint I have elsewhere characterized as the disciplined suspension of the will to power (Wolfenstein 2000a, chap. 3). I cannot say I am a master of this demanding art, but I am a student of it.

As to perspectives, the most basic is psychoanalytic, in part as a matter of relying on psychoanalytic concepts, even more as a matter of sensibility. This orientation leads me to ask, how does the manifest structure or narrative form of a text both defend against and express underlying aesthetic/affective configurations and pulsations? (I do not answer, however, by indulging in the familiar psychoanalytic tendency of reducing the manifest to the latent.) And it helps to account for the weight I place on the visiting-card incident, on the one hand, and the later and more personal chapters of Souls, on the other. Next, there is the influence of Hegel. Although Du Bois himself was unquestionably conversant with Hegelianism, it did not play a decisive role in his intellectual development. By contrast, Hegelian problematics are integral to my theoretical perspective and played a formative role in my approach to clinical practice. In the present instance, I have used the concepts of recognition and mis-recognition to facilitate a synoptic interpretation of the problem of the color-line; and traces of Hegelian phenomenology can be seen in the psychoanalytic method I employ to explore the “deeper recesses” of the world within the Veil (Souls, p. 5). Finally, I have an involvement with Plato extending back to the earliest days of my intellectual career. This is, one might say, an experience I share with Du Bois, who early on read both the Republic and the Phaedo. Hence it is difficult to resist the temptation of seeing Platonic leanings in his conceptions of culture, leadership, and spiritual life.

Along with the matter of predisposition and perspective, there is also a question of cultural—racial—location. In a conference she organized on “Du Bois and the Scientific Study of Race,” Ange-Marie Hancock rearticulated the notion of the “conscious pariah” made famous by Hannah Arendt (Hancock 2005a; see also Hancock 2005b, pp. 80–82). Such individuals, aware of their outcast status, simultaneously base themselves in it and struggle against the exclusions that define it. They, of necessity and by choice, live on the margins, where identities intersect but the intersections are normatively denied. Affirming that very position, they might serve as a model of democratic empowerment and citizenship. Du Bois, who rejected what he termed the path of revolt and revenge but would not rest from confronting his America with its injustices and exclusions, is paradigmatic of this political and ethical position. Just so, he calls forth a movement from center to margin on the other side of the color-line.
Preface

In the spirit of engagements at the margins, I would add this note. Ethel and Benjamin Schub, the parents of my wife Judy, were friends of Dr. Du Bois and his wife, Shirley Graham Du Bois, during his final, decidedly left-leaning years in this country. Judy herself had the privilege of doing the research for her high school senior thesis on Ghana in Du Bois’s library. I like to imagine myself there, with The Souls of Black Folk open before me. My eyes come to rest on a passage close to the end, in which Du Bois calls the reader’s attention to three gifts of black folk to American life, most of all to the “gift of the Spirit” (Souls, p. 162). I think to myself, The Souls of Black Folk partakes of that Spirit and is just such a gift. How can we fail to be grateful for it?

The late Claudia Tate was notably generous in her response to my first attempts to write about Ellison and Du Bois. My friend Jean Wyatt provided me with an extraordinarily astute, thorough, and sympathetic reading of the manuscript. I am in her debt. Robert Gooding-Williams’ subtle appreciation of Souls, displayed both in his own work and conveyed personally, has helped me to refine my own. Thanks also to Ange-Marie Hancock for her dedication to maintaining the space where it is possible to talk about things that matter; to Michael K. Brown, Brian Walker, and Frederick Lee for taking the time to read and offer comments on the manuscript; to C. Fred Alford and James Glass, for many years of intellectual comradeship; and to Raymond Rocco and Mark Sawyer, for continuing the struggle.

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To Judy I owe more than I can say.

EUGENE VICTOR WOLFENSTEIN

Los Angeles, California
A Gift of the Spirit