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**Dickson D.  
Bruce Jr.** W. E. B. Du Bois and the Idea  
of Double Consciousness

**A**s scholars have developed a greater understanding of the importance of African American literature to the American tradition, they have also developed a real appreciation for the critical place of the thought of W. E. B. Du Bois in both that literature and that tradition in the twentieth century. In particular, they have focused on the famous passage from Du Bois's 1897 *Atlantic* magazine essay, "Strivings of the Negro People"—later republished, with revisions, in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903)—in which Du Bois spoke of an African American "double consciousness," a "two-ness" of being "an American, a Negro; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."<sup>1</sup>

Du Bois's use of the idea of double consciousness to characterize issues of race was provocative and unanticipated; however, as has only occasionally been noted and never really pursued, the term itself had a long history by the time Du Bois published his essay in 1897. Du Bois wrote about double consciousness in a way that drew heavily on that history to create a fairly coherent pattern of connotations in both the essay and the later book. The background of meaning which the term evoked would have been familiar to many, if not most, of the educated middle- and upper-class readers of the *Atlantic*, one of the foremost popular journals of letters of the day, and should have contributed much to the understanding of Du Bois's arguments by those readers.

In using the term "double consciousness," Du Bois drew on two main sources. One of these was essentially figurative, a product of European Romanticism and American Transcendentalism. The other, not entirely unrelated and mentioned briefly by historian Arnold Rampersad in his

own analysis of Du Bois's work, was initially medical, carried forward into Du Bois's time by the emerging field of psychology. Here the term "double consciousness" was applied to cases of split personality; by the late nineteenth century, it had come into quite general use not only in professional publications but also in discussions of psychological research published for general audiences as well.<sup>2</sup>

The figurative sources for Du Bois's idea of double consciousness are in some ways the most telling. Although one can identify from nineteenth-century literature several possible precedents for Du Bois's use of the term—from Whittier, for example, or George Eliot—Werner Sollors has described this figurative background as Emersonian, and indeed one of the earliest such occurrences of the term may be found in Emerson's works. In an 1843 essay entitled "The Transcendentalist," a piece he had delivered earlier as a lecture, Emerson employed the term "double consciousness" to refer to a problem in the life of one seeking to take a Transcendental perspective on self and world. Constantly, he wrote, the individual is pulled back from the divine by the demands of daily life. The Transcendentalist knows "moments of illumination," and this makes his situation all the more difficult, because he then sees his life, from the perspective those moments create, as too much dominated by meanness and insignificance. As Emerson wrote, "The worst feature of this double consciousness is, that the two lives, of the understanding and of the soul, which he leads, really show very little relation to each other: one prevails now, all buzz and din; the other prevails then, all infinitude and paradise; and, with the progress of life, the two discover no greater disposition to reconcile themselves." Concerned with different issues, Emerson used the term in a way that was not exactly the same as Du Bois's. But there was more than enough similarity to make Emerson's a useful background to what Du Bois was trying to say.<sup>3</sup>

In Emerson's essay, "double-consciousness" evoked a set of oppositions that had become commonplace in Transcendentalism, and, as other scholars have shown, in Romanticism generally. In the passage itself was a dichotomy between "the understanding" and "the soul," but even that referred to a more general set, all organized around a central division between world and spirit. The double consciousness plaguing the Transcendentalist summarized the downward pull of life in society—including the social forces inhibiting genuine self-realization—and the upward pull of communion with the divine; the apparent chaos of things-as-they-are and the unity of Nature comprehended by universal law; and

the demanding, cold rationality of commercial society and the search for Truth, Beauty, and Goodness—especially Beauty—that ennobled the soul. Human beings, in the world, could not escape its downward pull. The worldly was an essential part of living one's life. The Transcendental double consciousness grew out of an awareness that Nature and the soul were so much more.<sup>4</sup>

A similar set of oppositions was an important part of Du Bois's argument in his "Strivings of the Negro People." Although in the essay Du Bois used "double consciousness" to refer to at least three different issues—including first the real power of white stereotypes in black life and thought and second the double consciousness created by the practical racism that excluded every black American from the mainstream of the society, the double consciousness of being both an American and not an American—by double consciousness Du Bois referred most importantly to an internal conflict in the African American individual between what was "African" and what was "American." It was in terms of this third sense that the figurative background to "double consciousness" gave the term its most obvious support, because for Du Bois the essence of a distinctive African consciousness was its spirituality, a spirituality based in Africa but revealed among African Americans in their folklore, their history of patient suffering, and their faith. In this sense, double consciousness related particularly to Du Bois's efforts to privilege the spiritual in relation to the materialistic, commercial world of white America. "Negro blood has a message for the world," he wrote, and this message, as he had been saying since at least 1888, was of a spiritual sense and a softening influence that black people could bring to a cold and calculating world. What Sherman Paul says of Emerson's stress on the "feminine eye" one may also say of Du Bois's stress on the African soul, that it serves as an alternative to a dominant inability to "see" apart from the possibilities for action and profit, a notion Du Bois played on when, guided by his important figure of the "veil," he described the African American as gifted with a kind of "second sight."<sup>5</sup>

Using "double consciousness" thus placed the African spirituality Du Bois sought to celebrate in connection with a more general body of Romantic ideas and imagery. Du Bois reinforced this connection with a web of allusions and oppositions, allusions drawn from Romanticism as well as from Emersonian Transcendentalism. Some have been noted in the past; others have not. Sollors, for example, has cited the Goethean basis for Du Bois's image of the "two souls warring in one dark body,"

referring back to Faust's anguished cry that "Two souls, alas! reside within my breast, / And each withdraws from, and repels, its brother," a passage that Joel Porte has argued was probably a source for the ideas to which Emerson himself applied the term "double consciousness." Du Bois also contrasted what he described as a black American "hope of a higher synthesis of civilization and humanity" with an alternative search for "reception into charmed social circles of stock-jobbers, pork-packers, and earl-hunters," calling to mind not only the Emersonian distinction between the material and the ideal but also the Emersonian identification of the material with the "buzz and din" of commercial society. Whatever else Du Bois thought of the African character and of its distinctive spirituality, when he spoke of it in terms of double consciousness and embedded it in a web of readily identifiable allusions, he gave it definition in terms of a more general Romantic recognition of the human soul. Converting what had often been a racist or racialist primitivism into a Romantic primitivism, he lent much more weight to his assertion of the possibility of an African message to the world.<sup>6</sup>

Such a conversion was a major source of the appeal of Du Bois's presentation of African spirituality as an alternative to materialism. Far from offering an eccentric "message," African American ideals offered a possible direction for American society that could be appreciated by Du Bois's readers. As such scholars as Karl Miller and Jackson Lears have stressed, in the rapidly industrializing United States of the late nineteenth century there was a real hunger, especially on the part of the middle class, for a revival of the spiritual; there was even, as Miller and Henri Ellenberger have argued, a renewed interest throughout the West in Romantic conceptions of human nature and human possibility, including that positive sense of alienation that Thomas Holt has discussed with regard to Du Bois's ideas. Double consciousness and the collection of Romantic allusions in which it was placed thus helped to give definition to the positive sense of African and African American distinctiveness Du Bois was trying to develop, and to offer in the "African" a kind of alternative to American materialism with which many in an educated readership could sympathize. It is not surprising, then, that when Du Bois gave a still fuller statement of his views in *The Souls of Black Folk* he also elaborated on the same pattern of allusions, even in his attack on the materialism of Booker Washington.<sup>7</sup>

Still, telling as the figurative background to double consciousness may have been, that background was supplemented in important ways by the

psychological sources that gave additional meaning to Du Bois's idea of double consciousness. Despite the work of such scholars as Karl Miller and Henri Ellenberger, there remains an unexplored path between a general concern about duality as an element of European Romanticism and American Transcendentalism, and the work of those medical scientists who developed "double consciousness" as a diagnostic term, one with a well-defined technical meaning by the time Du Bois used it. Again, Arnold Rampersad has noted something of this psychological background to "double consciousness," citing its appearance in Oswald Külpe's 1893 psychology text as well as the use of the idea, if not the term, in *The Principles of Psychology*, written by Du Bois's Harvard mentor William James and published in 1890 at the very time Du Bois was at Harvard. But, in fact, as a medical term "double consciousness" already had a long history by the 1890s, having been the subject of rather extensive experimentation and debate for at least seventy-five years. One cannot really identify with certainty the first use of "double consciousness" in the medical literature. Certainly it came fairly early in the nineteenth century, even antedating Emerson's application of it to Transcendentalism. Its lengthy history of development had great relevance to Du Bois's own use of "double consciousness" in "Strivings of the Negro People."<sup>8</sup>

In 1817, in a New York professional journal called the *Medical Repository*, an account headed "A Double Consciousness, or a Duality of Person in the same Individual" made use of the term in a way that remained fairly constant for psychology through the nineteenth century. The account was of a young woman—later identified as Mary Reynolds—who at about age nineteen fell into a deep sleep from which she awoke with no memory of who she was and with a wholly different personality. A few months later, after again falling into a deep sleep, she awoke as her old self. At the time of the 1817 account, she had periodically alternated selves for a period of about four years. As it turned out, this was to continue for about fifteen or sixteen years in total, until in her mid-thirties she permanently entered the second state. Her two lives were entirely separate; while in one, she had no knowledge or memory of the other. Such utter distinctiveness of the two selves was what made the editors of the *Medical Repository* refer to hers as a case of "double consciousness."<sup>9</sup>

As a result of the Mary Reynolds case, the term "double consciousness" entered into fairly extensive use. For example, Francis Wayland's influential mid-nineteenth-century textbook *Elements of Intellectual Philosophy* treated the concept of double consciousness as part of a general

discussion of consciousness as such and recounted the Mary Reynolds case along with a few others by way of illustration. An 1860 article in *Harper's* also focused on the Reynolds case and on double consciousness as a medical and philosophical issue. As a medical term, then, it was hardly confined to the use of medical professionals.<sup>10</sup>

During the time Du Bois was formulating his ideas of African American distinctiveness, there had been renewed interest in double consciousness as a medical and theoretical issue. Most important for Du Bois was the role of his Harvard mentor William James. James stimulated this interest, not only in his *Principles*—in describing what he called “alternating selves” or “primary and secondary consciousness,” he drew on a body of contemporary French work which had been widely publicized in the United States as well—but also as a result of his own experience about 1890 with a notable American case of double consciousness, that of Ansel Bourne. James’s work with Bourne (whose discoverer, Richard Hodgson, did use “double consciousness” to label the case), as well as the American publication of the French studies on which James drew, occurred at the same time Du Bois’s relationship with James was at its closest. Whether James and Du Bois talked about it at the time is impossible to say, but based on Du Bois’s use of “double consciousness” in his *Atlantic* essay he certainly seems to have known the term’s psychological background, because he used it in ways quite consistent with that background.<sup>11</sup>

The psychological literature of double consciousness looked directly to the issue of distinctiveness as that issue was developed in Du Bois’s essay. Du Bois discussed distinctiveness within a framework provided by several implications that James and others had drawn out, providing an intellectual structure consistent with the general thrust of his argument. For one thing, the psychological idea of double consciousness further reinforced what Du Bois had emphasized as the genuinely alternative character of African American ideals. In the classic cases of double consciousness, the dual personalities were not just different from each other but were inevitably in opposition. Mary Reynolds in her first state was “sedate, sober and pensive”; in her second, “gay and cheerful, extravagantly fond of society, of fun and practical jokes.” Similar contrasts were drawn in other cases. Double consciousness thus entailed a real opposition between the two consciousnesses confined within a single body.<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, as earlier writers had made plain, in classic cases of double consciousness, although the condition itself was clearly abnormal, it could not be said that either personality was more obviously “normal” or func-

tional than the other. In the Reynolds case, for example, commentators noted her intellectual acuity in both states, as well as the fact that, settling permanently in her second state, she nevertheless spent her remaining years as a productive, respectable, and respected member of society. Of another influential case, that of the young French woman Félida X, it was emphasized that she showed both intelligence and a good sense of morality in both states, if a weaker will in her second self.

Such a background of ideas and facts made the concept of double consciousness especially useful to Du Bois, given his desire to develop a positive sense of racial distinctiveness out of a distinctively African heritage. Ideas of race and behavior were problematic in the late nineteenth century. Notions of "culture" and, especially, of anything like cultural relativism were rudimentary and not widespread at the time. "Race" itself carried biological connotations—connotations not entirely absent from Du Bois's discussion—that were troublesome, since biological notions of race served mainly to ground those beliefs concerning black inferiority which were generally accepted by whites. Thus, for good reason, black writers and intellectuals felt real ambivalence about the kinds of ideas about racial distinctiveness Du Bois was trying to portray, however positive they might appear on the surface. Indeed, Du Bois himself showed such ambivalence in other writings from this period.<sup>13</sup>

Because the idea of double consciousness explicitly emphasized the integrity of distinctive states in the individual who was its subject, it helped Du Bois to get around the dilemma his idea of distinctiveness so long had posed. Double consciousness allowed for a sense of distinctiveness that really did entail equality, a sense of distinctiveness that did not imply inferiority. It gave him precisely the vocabulary he needed to make the case he wanted to make. In the absence of any kind of adequate idea of cultural relativism, the idea of double consciousness allowed Du Bois to talk about an African mode of thought and what we would now call a cultural conflict between the African and the American in a way very like that made possible by a notion of relativism. Thus he could base his discussion on a body of psychological knowledge more firmly established during his time, one identifying the possibility of different but equally functional ways of dealing with the world.

None of this was to minimize for him the tragic character of African American life. One of the things his use of the concept did was to imply that if what was distinctive was not to be seen as abnormal, the condition of African Americans—given the roots of double consciousness—was.

Even as the Romantic idea, with its echoes of *Sturm und Drang*, highlighted the difficulty of resolution in the war between incompatible souls, so too the psychological literature stressed its difficulty. All the accounts of double consciousness reported its sufferers' great anguish, their real unhappiness upon becoming aware of their condition, their desire to possess a single individual self.

Du Bois obviously did not break from such a treatment. For him the essence of double consciousness was its problematic character as a symptom of the difficulty that lay in the realization of any true self consciousness, of any sense of self beyond the problematic sense conveyed in the dilemma as such.

Du Bois did propose a kind of resolution, at least for that double consciousness of "African" and "American" selves. It was, he wrote, for the African American "to merge his double self into a better and truer self," losing "neither of the older selves." If the dilemma was known to the Romantics and the psychologists alike, Du Bois's rhetoric of resolution drew with special clarity on the medical background. Du Bois's mentor William James had speculated on the possibility of a real cure for alternating consciousness involving not the victory of one over the other but a process whereby "the dissociated systems came together," resulting in a third, new Self, "different from the other two, but knowing their objects together." Francis Wayland, in his earlier text, had cited a case of just such a cure of "double consciousness," one in which a young woman's recovery was marked by "the blending together of the knowledge acquired in [her] separate conditions," a blending succeeded by a process in which the two consciousnesses "became more and more identified until the testimony of consciousness became uninterrupted and then the abnormal state vanished altogether." Mary Reynolds's settling in her second state was not a cure; she often mourned for what she had lost with her initial self. Cure came in synthesis, which Wayland and later James believed to be possible.<sup>14</sup>

Du Bois himself was not entirely certain about the possibility of such a synthesis. The *Atlantic* essay in particular leaves the question open, focusing more on the problem than on any possibility for its resolution. One reason for this may have been that Du Bois was attempting a rhetorical synthesis of his own, one that was not easy to accomplish, between two key senses of double consciousness—the one created by racism; the other, by conflicting perspectives on life—never really distinguishing between them himself. The key difference between the two was a ques-

tion of will. The merging of African and American selves was, or at least could be, an act of will, and Du Bois so treated it. The merging of selves created by American racism was not. By treating the distinction loosely, Du Bois may have been hoping to make the latter seem more manageable, an aspect of a more general duality. But, as the *Atlantic* essay itself indicates, the resolution was one Du Bois himself had not fully worked out, and neither the Emersonian nor the psychological literature, despite the optimism of the latter, gave him much of a guide for how to do it.

One cannot know for certain how familiar Du Bois was with all the background on double consciousness either from literary or medical sources. His use of the term suggests that he was familiar with both; there is no compelling evidence that he sought to be closer to or more consistent with one or the other. Instead, when he talked about double consciousness, Du Bois was using a term that set up a variety of connotations for the educated reader, thus making an effort to give his readers a reference point on the basis of which to understand the tragedy of racism, especially for the self-conscious individual, and also to appreciate his own program for a new definition of what it meant to be black in America. The continuing influence of his work suggests the extent to which he succeeded.

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## Notes

- 1 W.E.B. Du Bois, "Strivings of the Negro People," *Atlantic* 80 (August 1897): 194; Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; rpt., New York: Penguin, 1989), 5.
- 2 Arnold Rampersad, *The Art and Imagination of W.E.B. Du Bois* (1976; rpt., New York: Schocken, 1990), 74.
- 3 John Greenleaf Whittier, "Among the Hills," in *The Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, 7 vols. (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1892), 1:274; George Eliot, "The Lifted Veil," in *The Complete Works of George Eliot*, 20 vols. (Boston: Colonial Press, n.d.) 20:281, 313; Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1986), 249. See also Sollors, "Of Mules and Mares in a Land of Difference; or, Quadrupeds All?" *American Quarterly* 42 (1990): 182; and Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Transcendentalist," in *The Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: Modern Library, 1940), 100.
- 4 Masao Miyoshi, *The Divided Self: A Perspective on the Literature of the Victorians* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1969), esp. chap. 2; Karl Miller,

- Doubles: Studies in Literary History* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1985), 21. Whittier's use of the term, which occurred in 1869, very much captured this Emersonian sense.
- 5 Du Bois, "Strivings," 194, 195; Sherman Paul, *Emerson's Angle of Vision: Man and Nature in American Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1952), 76–77; see Nathan Huggins, "W. E. B. Du Bois and Heroes," *Amerikastudien* 34 (1989): 172–73. Wilson Moses notes the "feminine aestheticism" of the tradition of a romanticized imagery of Africa on which Du Bois drew, in his article "The Poetics of Ethiopianism: W. E. B. Du Bois and Literary Black Nationalism," *American Literature* 47 (1975): 415. It was to describe a kind of "second sight," one might note, that Eliot used the term in her story with the interesting title "The Lifted Veil."
  - 6 Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe, *Faust*, trans. Bayard Taylor (New York: Arden, n.d.), 68; Sollors, "Of Mules and Mares," 182; Joel Porte, "Emerson, Thoreau, and the Double Consciousness," *New England Quarterly* 41 (1968): 41, 50; Du Bois, "Strivings," 197; Emerson, *Selected Writings*, 100. Du Bois's stress on an African spirituality was, of course, far from new in itself, and may be tied to what George Fredrickson has labeled "Romantic racialism," originating with the abolitionists, or what Wilson Moses has described as "Ethiopianism." See George Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817–1914* (New York: Harper, 1971), 103; Moses, "The Poetics of Ethiopianism," 411–26 *passim*.
  - 7 Miller, *Doubles*, especially 221; Henri F. Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious: The History and Evolution of Dynamic Psychiatry* (New York: Basic Books, 1970), 278ff.; T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880–1920* (New York: Pantheon, 1981), chap. 1; Thomas Holt, "The Political Uses of Alienation: W. E. B. Du Bois on Politics, Race, and Culture, 1903–1940," *American Quarterly* 42 (1990): 301–23; Du Bois, *Souls*, e.g., 38, 43.
  - 8 Miller, *Doubles*, 241ff.; Ellenberger, *Discovery of the Unconscious*, 166.
  - 9 Samuel L. Mitchell, "A Double Consciousness, or a Duality of Person in the same Individual," *Medical Repository* n.s. 3 (1817): 185–86; William S. Plumer, "Mary Reynolds: A Case of Double Consciousness," *Harper's* 20 (May 1860): 807–12.
  - 10 Francis Wayland, *The Elements of Intellectual Philosophy* (Boston: Phillips, Sampson, 1855), 115, 423–26; Plumer, "Mary Reynolds," *passim*.
  - 11 William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, 2 vols. (1890; rpt., New York: Dover, 1950), 1:393. For an example of the French work, see Alfred Binet, "Proof of Double Consciousness in Hysterical Individuals," *Open Court* 3 (1889): 1739–41. On Bourne, see Ellenberger, *Discovery of the Unconscious*, 134–35, 177n.
  - 12 Plumer, "Mary Reynolds," 808; J. Elliotson, "Dual Consciousness," *Cornhill* 35 (1877): 90–91.

- 13 On Du Bois's ideas about race as a concept, see Anthony Appiah, "The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race," in "*Race, Writing, and Difference*," ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1986), 27–29.
- 14 Du Bois, "Strivings," 195; James, *Principles*, 1:399; Wayland, *Elements*, 115–16.