THE POETIC IN DU BOIS'S SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

The Poetic In Du Bois's Sociological Imagination by Kimya Nuru Dennis & Rutledge M. Dennis
Song: Harry Belafonte – My Lord What a Mornin'

Poetry and the literary world were deeply etched in the social and sociological world of W.E.B. Du Bois. Although his use of the narrative vividly expressed the feelings and urgency with which he explained and expressed his opposition to racial and class injustices, poetry and the poetic narrative were helpful agents in helping him to not only make his point, but to engage in the poetics and the literary world as means to not only re-enforce issues pertinent to social justice and all forms of inequality, but to have the injustices, exclusions, and emotional and physical mistreatments highlighted in poems and poetic narratives made the examples both more poignant and more damning.

To assert the coupling of the poetic and the sociological may seem like a contradiction, for in Du Bois's case, we know that as a young sociologist he sought to insert a keen level of the scientific procedure into sociology, especially toward the study of race, class, and ethnicity, since most of the early studies in these areas were not only unscientific, but largely biased, and strongly grounded in, old folk tales and historical assumptions detached from social realities. But there was another side of Du Bois: the poet and literary practitioner. Thus, accompanying his desire to write and analyze as a social scientist, or as a humanist-scientist, was a companion idea to express sociological themes, ideas, and values, poetically, via his poems and lyrical narratives and the poems of others.

This brief overview provides a glimpse into Du Bois's literary and poetic strategies as he explores, sociologically, the life, worlds, and the historical and contemporary experiences of Black Americans. The literary and poetic strategies are seen in full force in The Souls of Black Folk, for each chapter is prefaced by a segment of a poem by a noted poet, and the segments selected are congruent with the theme of each chapter. Chapter One, Of our Spiritual Strivings, highlights the poetry of Arthur Symons with a passage which reads, O water, voice of my heart, crying in the sand; all night long crying with a mournful cry. A few examples will illustrate the connection Du Bois made between the theme of the chapter and the poem selected to illustrate this connection.

Chapter - Of Booker T. Washington and Others
Lord Byron- From birth to death enslaved; in word, in deed unmanned

Chapter – Of the Wings of Atalanta
John Whittier-O black boy of Atlanta! But half was spoken

Throughout the book there are chapter headings and snippets from the poetry of Omar Khayyam, The Song of Solomon (I am black but comely, O ye daughters of Jerusalem), and Black Spiritual (I walk through the churchyard, To lay this body down), but the most poignant and profound segment of the association between a chapter heading and the poem to correspond with the chapter was the chapter Of the Passing of the First-Born, the death of Du Bois's first child. For this chapter Du Bois selected a segment of a poem by Arthur Swinburne:

O sister, sister, thy first begotten
The hands that cling and the feet that follow, The voice of
the child's blood crying yet,

Who hast remembered me? Who hath forgotten?

Du Bois continued interspersing his narratives with the poetic images supportive of the narratives, as is illustrated in The Negro, published in 1915. This book is closely connected to African historiography as

exemplified by the three poems cited: Homer sings of a black man, “a reverend herald”; a poem by Stone depicting the capture of Africans during the slave trade; the poem by Miller-Behold! The Sphinx is Africa-The bond of silence is upon her. Darkwater, published in 1920, opens a new phase of Du Bois’s poetic sociological imagination, for here Du Bois opens the doors of his personal poetic and literary imagination by interspersing his own poems with his sociological narratives. The book opens with The Credo, a long poem, a Du Boisian statement of pride of race, lineage, and self. But the Credo also asserts a statement by Du Bois that challenges the idea of his atheism:” I believe in God, who made of one blood all nations that on earth do dwell.”

Also included in Darkwater, the poem-pageantry, A Litany at Atlanta, A Hymn to the People, The Riddle of the Sphinx, and Children of the Moon. These poems-pageants often had the format and substance of Du Bois’s 1913 work, The Star of Ethiopia, a pageant of the history of the Black Race, enacted and produced only once for a large audience.

Extensive use of poetry continued to be incorporated into Du Bois’s scholarly works, this time into his massive study of the reconstruction, Black Reconstruction in America-1860-1880. It was almost a return to the format of The Souls of Black folk. Poems and literary images accompanied the narratives, almost as if painting a literary picture to enhance the descriptive narrative. In a way, the accompanying poems and narratives give artistic life and grounded meaning to the narratives, complementing them, but sharpening, and heightening their meaning. It is remarkable to follow the extent to which Du Bois sought to match narratives to poems. Here are a few examples of the narrative/poem connections.

Chapter/Poet Poem

The Black Worker-Poet-Leslie P. Hill:
Dark, Shackeled knights of labor, clinging still Amidst a universal wreck of faith

The White Worker-Percy Bysshe Shelley
Have ye leisure, comfort, calm, Shelter, food, love’s gentle balm?

The Planter-James Rorty
Not spring; from us no agony of birth, Is asked or needed

The General Strike-Civil War song
Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord

The selection of the poems to match chapters in Black Reconstruction parallels the choices Du Bois made in selecting the poems to illustrate the chapters in The Souls of Black Folk. Both books represented a radical departure from what whites knew and thought about the true history, values and thoughts of the United States. For this reason, Du Bois chose the poems of radical, and off-the beaten-track poets to illustrate the chapters. Among the Europeans he chose the radical and revolutionary poets Percy Bysshe Shelley, Lord Byron, Oscar Wilde, and Schiller. Among Black Americans he chose the works of Leslie P. Hill, Jessie Fauset, L.S. Olliver, A.W. Thomas, and James Weldon Johnson. Among white Americans, he selected the works Ralph Waldo Emerson, George Sterling, William Rose Benet, and Fannie Stearns Davis.

In Du Bois’s autobiography, Dust of Dawn (1940), only two poems are cited: A poem by Roscoe Jamison on the role of Black soldiers during World War II “These truly are the Brave, These men cast aside…,” and the poem by Countee Cullen: “What is Africa to me?” In his autobiography, Du Bois declares that he is not a communist and writes with disapproval of the idea. However, by the time he writes The World and Africa (1946), there is clearly a shift in this direction coupled with a deepening focus on Africa. To state the case for Africa and African freedom and liberation, Du Bois quotes from poems by Swinburne, Emerson, and Kipling (Epitaph of the “White Man’s Burden”), and Langston Hughes’s “I’ve Known Rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins.” It is also in this book that Du Bois delineates his concept of the Sociological Imagination (261):

I dream of a world of infinite and invaluable variety; not in the laws of gravity or atomic weights, but in human variety in height and weight, color and skin, hair and nose and lip. But more especially and far above and beyond this, in a realm of true freedom: in thought and dream, fantasy and imagination.

In the chapter, The Land of the Burnt Faces (132), Du Bois quotes the Prophet Isaiah's appeal to Ethiopia and uses texts from Numbers, Chronicles, Psalms, Amos, Genesis, Kings, Jeremiah, and Daniel to buttress the case for Africa. That Africa was more than a topic to be analyzed and discussed becomes clear in the chapter, The White Masters of the World, when Du Bois declares (42):

I hate them, O I hate them well
I hate them, Christ, as I hate hell
If I were God, I'd sound their knell, This day.

Finally, there is poetry in the last two books written by Du Bois. First, there is In Battle for Peace (1952), the book which explains how and why the American government sought to convict him of being an "unregistered foreign agent" for Russia during the Cold War. Du Bois was indicted but not convicted in 1950-51. It is here that he speaks of his great disappointment that many did not support him, especially the many he knew professionally, and the organizations he worked over the years to support. Between his narrative, he quotes a poem from Countee Cullen: "men raised a mountain in your path…," a passage from his own poem, "Black Man's Music," with the lines, "…And breaking down all bars of prejudice and pride, There it remains…" He also cites his long poem, "A world of war," and words from his poem read at the University of London, with the first two lines reading: "Save us, world-spirit, from our lesser selves! Grant us that war and hatred cease." Finally, the book ends with a quote by Percy Shelley in which the first two lines are: "to suffer woes which Hope think infinite; to forgive wrongs darker than death or night…."

Finally, the posthumously published Autobiography (1968) restates the stories and incidents from many of Du Bois's previously published works. The only poetry cited are the poems of his grandfather (A single soul, one! Of all I know or ever knew…), one by Goethe: "Thou shalt forego, shalt do without," and the one he composed:

Africa Awake, put on the beautiful robes of Pan-Africa socialism You have
nothing to lose but your chains
You have a continent to regain!
You have freedom and human dignity to attain!

After this brief survey of Du Bois's use of poetry to complement his narrative writings, we can see clearly how he incorporates the images and perspectives from theses into his own writings and how and why we may view Du Bois's writings as examples of "poetic prose." It is this Poetic Prose which characterizes Du Bois's writing style that separates his style from the extremely formalistic writing style we've all learned as the proper style acceptable in our profession. The poetic prose writings of Du Bois, seen throughout The Souls of Black Folk, Darkwater, and parts of Black Reconstruction, can be illustrated by the lilting and rhythmic turn of phrases and the choice of words.

Excellent examples of Du Bois's poetic prose are found in the very first chapter of The Souls of Black Folk:

Emancipation was the key to a promised land of sweeter beauty than ever stretched before the eyes of wearied Israelites…in his tears and curses the God he implored had freedom in his right hand. At last it came, suddenly, fearfully, like a dream. With one wild carnival of blood and passion came the message… (p.18)

The shades of the prison-house closed round about us all: walls strait and stubborn to the whitest, but

relentlessly narrow, tall, and unscalable to sons of night who must plod darkly on in resignation, or beat unavailing palms against the stone, or steadily, half hopelessly, watch the streak of blue above.

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