

RALPH ELLISON,  
EXISTENTIALISM AND THE BLUES

A critical moment in the saga of Antoine Roquentin, the protagonist of Sartre's *Nausea* (1938), occurs when he is «plunged in a horrible ecstasy,» as the truth about the Nausea becomes painfully revealed. Roquentin's *bildung* has led him to realize the root principles which make up the core of Sartrean existentialist philosophy: «The essential thing is contingency [...]. To exist is simply *to be there*.» Rather than signaling the giddiness of freedom, this realization translates into despair, for men «are *superfluous*, that is to say, amorphous, vague and sad.»<sup>1</sup>

To end the novel on this refrain would be tragic; a problem without a solution. Thus, in the closing pages of this ceaselessly philosophical novel, Sartre trumpets the initial blast of an existentialist resolution. Evaluating the sad contours of his life, Roquentin finally begins to hear — perhaps for the first time — the melody and words of a «jazz» song. He begins to feel: «A glorious little suffering has just been born, an exemplary suffering.» (174) The liberating words to the song begin to intrude past the Nausea, through

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<sup>1</sup> Sartre, *Nausea* trans. Hayden Carruth (New York: New Directions, 1959), p. 131. Hereafter, citations will appear in the text.

the depths of Nothingness: «Some of these days/You'll miss me, honey.» (175)

The song plunges Roquentin into a reverie about the presumed identities of the songwriter and the singer. The songwriter he imagines to be a Jewish man, «clean-shaven American with thick black eyebrows» living in New York City, while the singer must be a «Negress.» Through their art, the Negress and the Jew are «saved»; as much as possible «they have washed themselves of the sin of existing.» And in turn, Roquentin, by listening to this music of creation, comes to feel «Something I didn't know any more: a sort of joy.» (176-77) Perhaps now, armed with a sense that one just might, through the energy of creation, be able to «justify» one's existence, the image of Roquentin at the dock of absurdity fades from view, as he determines to act to create himself.

Jean-Paul Sartre was, without realizing it, the first to link together the blues and existentialism. While the ontology may be appropriate, the specific references are not. One imagines that marvelous character of Ralph Ellison's «The Little Man at Chehaw Station» reading Sartre's riff on the blues and laughing at how he managed to get it quite so right, yet so wrong. The Little Man is the Ellisonian trickster, the American autodidact, always lurking behind the scenes, ready to pounce upon unwarranted pretension or sloppy artistry.<sup>2</sup> Ellison's Little Man would call out to Sartre to get his facts straight, especially if this Frenchman intends to mess with the blues. After all, the writer of «Some of These Days» was an African-American comedian and vaudevillian named Shelton Brooks. The singer in the recording that Sartre references was

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<sup>2</sup> Ellison, «The Little Man at Chehaw Station,» *Going to the Territory* (New York: Vintage, 1995), pp. 3-38. Hereafter citations to this book will be in the text as *Going*.

almost certainly not a Negress but a Jewish woman, Sophie Tucker, known as the «Last of the Red Hot Mamas,» who made the number her signature song in 1910.<sup>3</sup>

Ralph Ellison, far more knowledgeably than Sartre, has spoken and written about the connection between existentialism and the blues, both in his essays and in his own fiction. «There is an existential tradition within American Negro life and, of course,» states Ellison, «that comes out of the blues and spirituals.» For Ellison this nexus, while important in literary and emotional terms, is dangerous when applied with too heavy a beat in art and philosophy. When writers like Richard Wright engage in the «boot-legging of philosophy» into fiction, they fail as artists and rarely succeed as philosophers.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, when Sartre writes philosophy into his novels, or intends his novels to be exemplifications of his philosophical formulations, the artistry suffers accordingly, and didacticism predominates. Yet, according to Ellison, existentialist themes are the stuff of all great literature.

In the novel *Invisible Man* (1952) and in the many interviews and essays collected in the seminal volumes, *Shadow and Act* (1964) and *Going to the Territory* (1986), Ellison views the blues and existentialism as complementary forms of expression: one can hear music in existentialist philosophy and read philosophy in the music of the blues. The philosophy of blues music expresses the existential realities of everyday life. While blues are the specific vernacular expression of African-Americans, — rooted in the

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<sup>3</sup> Arnold Shaw, *Black Popular Music in America* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1986), p. 86, p. 128; *The Negro in Music and Art*, compiler, Lindsay Patterson (New York: Publishers Inc., 1969), p. 126.

<sup>4</sup> Alan Geller, «An Interview with Ralph Ellison,» *The Black American Writer: Fiction*, ed. C.W.E. Bigsby (DeLand, FL:Everett/Edwards, 1969), v. 1, p. 167.



experiences of the middle passage, slavery, the lost hopes of reconstruction, and the great migration to the north — the content of the music should not be seen as confined to African-American concerns alone. Indeed, blues narratives are rarely explicit about racism. More commonly, the blues center around problems with love, estrangement, and loneliness. They are about the sadness of love gone cold, of living without hope, and of the treacheries that life offers. These conditions are not overcome by metaphysical speculations — as is the case in Sartre — but through the celebration of the reality of the pain and its transcendence through irony.

The blues, as Albert Murray emphasizes, must be understood by more than their lyrical content. In fact, the words of blues songs are often so mumbled and muttered as to be incomprehensible. Yet in the familiar pounding rhythms of the blues can be found a secular form of salvation and release (only momentary) that gushes forth in the ecstasy of the dance, the bump and grind of liberation. The blues enthusiast dances both with and against the devil.<sup>5</sup> As Ellison has expressed it: «The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing it from a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism.»<sup>6</sup> In

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<sup>5</sup> Excellent on the blues is Albert Murray, *Stomping the Blues* (New York: Vintage, 1976); Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: U. of Chicago P., 1984); Paul Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning: Meaning in the Blues* (1960) (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 1990). A reading of the blues stressing it as autonomous black music is offered in LeRoi Jones, *Blues People* (New York: William Morrow, 1963 ).

<sup>6</sup> Ellison, «Richard Wright's Blues,» (1945), *Shadow and Act* (New York: Vintage, 1995), pp. 78-9. Hereafter citations to this book will appear in the text as *Shadow*.



words that might apply with cunning veracity in the *Invisible Man*, Ellison notes that «As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically.» (*Shadow*, 79)

The relationship between the blues and existentialism, a subject that has not been adequately treated, rests upon both abstract affinities and specific circumstances. First, for African-Americans, existentialism's vocabulary of dread, absurdity, and death capture the tempo of their experience, both in the Jim Crow South and in the migration to the northern states. Second, for Ellison, the use of existentialist terminology, as employed in the interviews and essays, provided him with a certain cultural capital, an imprimatur of being in a conversation with a European philosophical and literary movement. Since the languages of existentialism and the blues are marked by common themes, this rummaging around in traditions allowed Ellison to avoid being reduced to his worst nightmare: a writer of black protest fiction. Existentialism allowed him to be seen as grappling with the human condition. Conversely, the centrality of a blues idiom in his work granted him a powerful voice which was rooted in the experience and day-to-day realities of the black community. Third, the turn to existentialism on the part of Ellison, no less than Richard Wright, was a matter of historical circumstance, related to their break with the literary politics of the Communist movement in the United States in the 1930s and 1940s. Out of this break with party discipline and theory, Ellison gravitated not only toward existentialism, but a form of existentialist heroism where the individual, rather than the race or class, became, albeit with certain limitations, the lonely possessor of responsibility for his fate.

Ellison's work and thought are dominated by a will to artistry in his desire to master and to mix diverse traditions. In this sense, he is at one with such modernist masters as

James Joyce and Pablo Picasso.<sup>7</sup> Existentialism and the blues become tools that Ellison employs to capture African-American particularity and to universalize, both through subject and art, so that his work will express (as Roquentin could only dream about) «man's triumph over chaos.» (*Shadow*, 22) Ellison understood that «The human condition varies for each and every writer just as it does for each and every individual. Each must live within the isolation of his own senses, dreams, and memories; each must die his own death. For the writer the problem is to project his own conception eloquently and artistically. Like all good artists, he stakes his talent against the world.» (*Going*, 275)

In many interviews and essays Ellison has been almost too forthcoming in acknowledging the specifics of his literary ancestors. When pressed about the blues folklore that informs so much of *Invisible Man*, Ellison responds that obviously he is attuned to the African-American tradition. His musical background in the blues and jazz is immense, and he can easily wax nostalgic in remembering the blues energy of his fellow Oklahoman Jimmy Rushing. The African-American blues tradition is mediated and transformed by Ellison into a different art form by its dialogue with European modernism. After all, notes Ellison, thanks to the influence of T.S. Eliot and James Joyce, he became «conscious of the literary value of my folk inheritance.» (*Shadow*, 58) A strange road to travel, through Joyce to one's roots in the blues. But Ellison's memory here, while perhaps faulty, is important in suggesting a conversation between cultural forms.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> On jazz as the exemplar of modernism, see the intriguing essay by Berndt Ostendorf, «Anthropology, Modernism, and Jazz,» *Ralph Ellison: Modern Critical Views*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publ., 1986), pp. 145-72. Also, Alfred Appel, Jr., «Pops Art: Louis Armstrong, Race, and the Power of Song,» *New Republic* (Aug. 21 and 28, 1995), pp. 31-8.

<sup>8</sup> William Lyne, «The Signifying Modernist: Ralph Ellison and the Limits of the Double Consciousness,» *PMLA* 107 (March, 1992), pp. 319-30.

In the same vein, writing in the *Partisan Review* (1958), Ellison acknowledged the complexity of his background, in part, as a ploy to avoid confinement within any single tradition: «My cultural background, like that of most Americans, is dual (my middle name, sadly enough, is Waldo).» (*Shadow*, 58) Here is Ellison in his trickster, ironic mode. Admitting that he is both African-American and American, especially blessed (or cursed by the odd name, rather than the legacy) of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Thus, like Emerson, Ralph Waldo Ellison is alternately drawing on traditions while also setting himself up as one of the rank of Poets, who — in the words of Emerson — «are thus liberating gods, they are free, and they make free.»<sup>9</sup> Or, in a later formulation by André Malraux, as quoted approvingly by Ellison: «All poetry implies the destruction of the relationship between things that seems obvious to us in favor of particular relationships imposed by the poet.» (*Going*, 43)

The celebration of freedom, Emersonian or existential, is a critical component in the work of Ralph Ellison. An existential emphasis on freedom helped to define Ellison's art and thought during his artistic apprenticeship in the 1930s. At this time — well before Sartre and Camus had become the sentinels of an existentialist sensibility in America — Ellison was, as he recalled, already «aware of Kierkegaard and Unamuno.» Yet more than anyone else, André Malraux became associated, in Ellison's mind, with existentialism. Ellison was powerfully drawn to Malraux and the heroic ideal. (*Going*, 43) Ellison found in Malraux a dual hero, both as an actively creative writer and as an actor on the stage of history. He transformed the Malrauxian ideal of heroism into the stuff of art and everyday life. In interviews given over a

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<sup>9</sup> Emerson, «The Poet,» (1844), *Essays: First and Second Series* (New York: The Library of America, 1990), p. 232.



thirty year period, Ellison often returned to lessons learned from existentialism in Malraux.<sup>10</sup> Finally, Ellison's friend, novelist and blues critic Albert Murray has further documented the fascination with Malraux and existential heroism that was intimately connected with African-American blues:

Andre Malraux might well have been referring to the blues and the function of blues musicians when he described the human condition in terms of ever-impending chaos and declared that each victory of the artist represents a triumph of man over his fate. That he was addressing himself to fundamental implications of heroism is clear enough.<sup>11</sup>

Ellison was one among a number of important African-American writers in the late 1930s and early 1940s to be attracted by existentialist heroism. Most famously, Ellison's literary mentor Richard Wright came to see in the existentialist fascination with extreme situations, with the creation of moral values, and with the lonely individual's struggle for artistic creation, a philosophical language that resembled his own long term concerns. For years Wright immersed himself in the phenomenology of Heidegger and Husserl, and in conversation with French existentialists, before capturing some of their philosophical concerns in *The*

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<sup>10</sup> Ellison noted that «if I were to identify myself as an existentialist writer, then it would be existentialism in terms of Andre Malraux rather than Sartre. It would be in terms of Unamuno, let's say, without the religious framework, rather than Camus's emphasis.» Ellison did not elaborate on these choices of literary ancestors, but they are perhaps a function of those writers he encountered in his most formative years. The remarks are in Geller, «An Interview with Ralph Ellison,» *cit.*, pp. 159-60.

<sup>11</sup> Murray, *Stomping the Blues*, *cit.*, p. 42.

*Outsider* (1953).<sup>12</sup> As critic Irving Howe perceptively realized (and the same could be said for Ellison), «Wright was an existentialist long before he heard the name for he was committed to the literature of extreme situations both through the pressures of his rage and the gasping hope of an ultimate catharsis.»<sup>13</sup> One might add that Wright, along with Ellison, was predisposed to existentialism because the African-American was daily confronted with extreme situations, with circumstances that were alienating and absurd in racist America. This sense of the African-American living *in extremis*, under a constantly enforced sentence of death, could be brought to a dangerous boil, as in Norman Mailer's «The White Negro» (1957).<sup>14</sup> Yet Ellison never dwelled exclusively on such extremist interpretations of admittedly extreme situations, unless they were juiced with comic irony. Presented in realistic fashion, such situations tended, as in Wright's fiction, to become sociological stereotypes, exercises in one-dimensional victimology, or in the case of Mailer, into an infantile and romantic white projection onto black life.

Some critics find the existentialism theme and the heroism of the struggle for self-definition and individual artistry to be both politically naive and counterproductive. The extreme situation, the necessity of choice, and the presence of death, almost always filtered through the actions of the individualistic hero, were the elements in Malraux's

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<sup>12</sup> For a positive reappraisal of Wright's *The Outsider* and the context for his existential turn, see Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and the Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard U.P., 1993), pp. 146-85; Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright* (Urbana: U. of Illinois P., 1993), p. 376.

<sup>13</sup> Howe, «Black Boys and Native Sons,» *Dissent* 10 (Autumn, 1963), p. 356.

<sup>14</sup> On Mailer's essay and the context for this turn to hipsterism, see my essay, «The Photographer in the Beat-Hipster Idiom: Robert Frank's *The Americans*,» *American Studies* 26 (Spring, 1985), pp. 19-34.

existentialism that enthused Ellison and expressed themselves in his fiction and criticism. Recently critic Jerry Gafio Watts has taken Ellison to task for being «obsessed with the issue of individual freedom.» Watts claims that Ellisonian existentialism prioritizes the individual over the community, strips away the historically specific and enduring context of racism, and ultimately undermines group solidarity. Thus, in Watts' analysis, Ellison has become stuck «too deeply into the quagmire of bourgeois liberty.»<sup>15</sup> This criticism, it should be noted, is hardly new. Irving Howe in a famous essay, «Black Boys and Native Sons» (1963), raised similar complaints about Ellison as a novelist who, while blessed with imaginative brilliance, was guilty of presenting a vision of heroic individualism that «is a moral and psychological impossibility, for plight and protest are inseparable from that experience.»<sup>16</sup>

At the heart of such criticisms of Ellison, existentialism, and the heroic individual is the question of what constitutes the cultural work of fiction. How deeply implicated must the novel be in both representing the constraints of social reality and in the process of transforming that reality? Such criticisms of existentialist, alienated individualism have long been current, even after Sartre's celebrated turn to Marxist analysis. To be sure, in an age when the social construction of the self is taken for granted, Ellison's individualism seems anachronistic at best. However, at the same time, in an age when essentialisms based upon group racial identities abound, Ellisonian individualism might appear as a useful corrective to the diminution of the individual into the

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<sup>15</sup> Watts, *Heroism & the Black Intellectual: Ralph Ellison, Politics, and Afro-American Intellectual Life* (Chapel Hill: U. of North Carolina P., 1994), p. 55, p. 57.

<sup>16</sup> Howe, «Black Boys and Native Sons,» *cit.*, p. 363.



collective. Ellison's fiction does work as cultural critique. Ellison was as much on target as any writer in capturing the daily indignities, large and small, that confronted blacks. By placing them in a comic, absurd narrative, he actually succeeded in presenting the inhumanity more powerfully than in the numbingly realistic style of Wright. Ellison does not negate collective struggle against racism and inequality, but his inclination is clearly away from such strategies as the only viable solutions. His is the discourse of rebellion rather than revolution. This preference is both a product of Ellison's own ingrained blues, individualistic ethos, and a function of his own experiences with collectivist thinking and politics.

For both Richard Wright, and to a lesser degree Ellison, existentialism was invaluable as a counterweight to the domination of communism and fellow traveling in African-American intellectual life in the period from the 1930s through the early 1950s. The jury is still out on the influence and value of communist agitation among African Americans. The latest historical literature indicates that the Communist Party (CP) did play a yeoman role in supporting black civil rights and in organizing African American workers, no matter what the directives on the national and international level from the Comintern.<sup>17</sup> The influence of the CP on African American intellectuals is probably less distinguished. While the CP did offer, as Watts notes, an institutional framework for African-American intellectuals to come into contact with committed and successful white writers and a variety of party organs in which to publish, it did have a deadening effect on

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<sup>17</sup> For a very harsh analysis of the function of the CP in black life, see the brilliantly polemical work by Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual: From Its Origins to the Present* (New York: William Morrow, 1967). More favorable is Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Great Depression* (Urbana: U. of Illinois P., 1983).

the quality of writing. Membership and commitment had a price; the writer, especially the African-American artist, was supposed to represent «his people» in a politically useful, artistically determined manner. Deviations from this version of socialist realism (an earlier form of political correctness) enacted penalties: ranging from warnings about deviationism to expulsion from the party, which meant the ending of literary friendships and closed publishing connections.

Existentialism, for Ellison and Wright, made it easier for them to see themselves as heroic individuals, chaffing against party directives but still committed to literature and social change. Ellison spoke of how the Communist Party «sneered» at Wright's «intellectuality [...] and dismissed his concern with literature and culture as an affectation.» Ellison, referring to himself as «a true outsider,» claimed to be «amused by this comedy of misperception» which may have stood him in good stead when he moved away from the orbit of the party and was confronted with party-inspired reviews of his book. (*Shadow*, 202) Thus, Lloyd Brown excoriated Ellison's *Invisible Man* for its «one-man-against-the-world theme» as not only partial but part of «the anti-Communist lie that Ellison tells» in a novel that «is profoundly anti-Negro.»<sup>18</sup>

The existentialist ideal, when reified, certainly does suggest an ahistorical and acontextual understanding. But in practice such has rarely been the case. Existentialist politics and fiction, no less than philosophy, pride themselves on anti-abstractionism, on a close connection with the rhythms of reality. More importantly, the existentialistic ethos and concern with human freedom is always limited, quite contrary to bourgeois ideals of progress, by its heavy dose of tragedy and limitation. Responsibility, not self aggrandizement, is the

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<sup>18</sup> Brown, «The Deep Pit», *Masses and Mainstream*, 5 (June, 1952), pp. 62-4.

keynote of existentialist freedom. And in precisely this manner, does existentialism bear a striking resemblance to the blues. As critic Houston A. Baker, Jr. notes,

the blues offer a language that connotes a world of transience, instability, hard luck, brutalizing work, lost love, minimal security, and enduring human wit and resourcefulness in the face of disaster.<sup>19</sup>

Existential and blues themes commingle to good effect within the text of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Early in the novel we can see forebodings of these critical references. The opening scenes of the underground man, living in his subterranean place, obviously echo one of the principal texts of the existentialist tradition, Dostoevsky's *The Underground Man*.<sup>20</sup> What defines *Invisible Man* as an existentialist novel is how Ellison narrates the sum of his protagonist's life experiences in such a way as to arrive at the shock of recognition, at which point the Invisible Man realizes that he must create values and assert an identity. Thus much of the problem of identity, as experienced by the Invisible Man, is about not being able to make choices in an existentialist sense, and then with a failure to perceive the heavy weight of responsibility that comes out of a knowledge of limitations. The Invisible Man is constantly baffled and battered, without comprehension, as if he were experiencing someone else's fate. When he finally derives some insight into the absurd nature of existence, both his own and that of others, the Invisible Man is able to leave his den of hibernation. He will not be shielded from suffering (racist, economic, or otherwise) but he will be chastened, but not into quietistic submission.

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<sup>19</sup> Baker, *Blues*, *cit.*, p. 188.

<sup>20</sup> Joseph Frank, «Ralph Ellison and a Literary 'Ancestor,': Dostoevski,» in *Speaking For You: The Vision of Ralph Ellison*, ed. Kimberly W. Benston (Washington, D.C.: Howard U.P., 1987), pp. 231-44.



Rather he will be blessed with a perspective on the choices that he confronts and makes.

*Invisible Man* is a novel about racism and blackness that manages also to be about the human condition. While many of the episodes are directly connected to the dance between white racism and black compliance, many events can also be read as symbolic of the human condition, of shared experiences that daily confront all men. In effect, Ellison's blues novel about the existential dilemma is rendered in a black idiom, but it knowingly intends to speak to all; thus the last words intoned by the entombed Invisible Man are: «Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?»<sup>21</sup>

A blues refrain opens up the novel in a very important manner. In the prologue, the Invisible Man announces his desire to hear at one time «five recordings of Louis Armstrong playing and singing «What Did I Do to Be So Black and Blue.» (1929) For the Invisible Man, Armstrong is an artist of distinction «because he's made poetry out of being invisible. I think it must be because he's unaware that he *is* invisible.» The narrator goes on to explain that what grants power to Armstrong's music is that out of this invisibility comes «a slightly different sense of time, you're never quite on the beat.» This being ahead or behind the beat allows one to «slip into the breaks and look around. That's what you hear vaguely in Louis' music.» (*Invisible*, 7-8)

But that is precisely what you hear in Ellison, as he invokes and plays on Armstrong's music. First, the reference here is to a particular Armstrong recording, and an unusual one at that. Much of the lyrics, as sung by Armstrong in «What Did I Do to Be So Black and Blue?» are slurred, as if

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<sup>21</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: The Modern Library, 1992), p. 572. Hereafter references to this book will appear in the text as *Invisible*.

to maintain invisibility, given the volatile nature of the song itself. As with most blues numbers this work expresses suffering, poverty and isolation: «empty beds,» «ain't got a friend.» But in its emphasis on color, the song challenges, since Armstrong can clearly be heard to sing, «My only sin is in my skin/ What did I do, to be so black and blue?» The double signification here is powerfully rendered, as the idiomatic expression of being bruised — black and blue — comes to reflect the nature of a musical form (the blues) and the suffering of a particular race (the black).

Taking his cue from Armstrong's blues, the initial chapter of the novel is about the Invisible Man at the Battle Royal.<sup>22</sup> At this stage in his intellectual development, the Invisible Man is blind to the reality of the world; he is a mere cipher of expectations, uttering memorized lines that belonged to Booker T. Washington and the psychology of racial uplift. But the lines become absurd in the setting of the novel. The Invisible Man finds himself summoned to address the town's leading white citizens. But before he can deliver his oration, the Invisible Man is thrown in with rougher black boys who are put through a number of exercises in absurdity and degradation, ranging from attempting to hit one another while blindfolded to being forced to gaze upon a naked blond woman, to being told to dive for coins that sit upon an electrified surface. Surviving these indignities, the Invisible Man, now literally black and blue from the battle, gets to recite his speech, all the while swallowing his own blood. The blood that he swallows is, of course, symbolic of the blood of his race, and of the pain that it has endured at the hands of

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<sup>22</sup> For an excellent analysis of this chapter, see John S. Wright, «The Conscious Hero and the Rites of Man: Ellison's War,» in *New Essays on Invisible Man*, ed. Robert O'Meally (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1988), pp. 157-86.

the white man. The reward for such acquiescence appears, at first, to be unproblematic. The Invisible Man receives a fancy leather briefcase and a scholarship to attend the local black college. «I was so moved that I could hardly express my thanks. A rope [perhaps an ironic reference to lynching] of bloody saliva forming a shape like an undiscovered continent drooled upon the leather and I wiped it quickly away. I felt an importance that I had never dreamed.» (*Invisible*, 32) These hard won objects figure later in the novel, when the Invisible Man, during the Harlem Riot, «escapes» into a sewer. Now, surrounded by absolute blackness, the Invisible Man tries to burn both his possessions (his high school diploma) and his illusions so that he may, at last, find true illumination.

The blues and an existentialist perspective are found throughout the *Invisible Man*. In a well-known analysis, critic Houston A. Baker, Jr. shows how the chapter dealing with Trueblood is an extended blues refrain, brimming with recognition of the weaknesses of the flesh, allusions to castration, the acceptance of tragic responsibility, and not a small dose of jiving for financial benefit. Trueblood, a sharecropper, had impregnated his daughter one cold night, when she joined him and his wife to sleep in the warmth of a single bed. During intercourse, Trueblood is both a willing participant and a victim of circumstance. In any case, Trueblood, in his own manner, comes to take responsibility for what has transpired and fashions the experience into an extended blues meditation. Most importantly, the blues connects with an existential recognition of the acceptance of one's fate and the implications of one's acts. As Trueblood recounts it: «All I know is I *ends up* singin' the blues. I sings me some blues that night ain't never been sang before, and while I'm singin' them blues I makes up my mind that I ain't nobody but myself and ain't nothing I can do but let whatever happen, happen. I made up my mind that I was goin' back home and face» the wife and daughter. (*Invisible*, 66) Thus,



Trueblood accepts his fate *and* his responsibility to family. This is the mark of the individualistic heroism of everyday life that Ellison admired.

To sing the blues, one must wrestle with the heavy burden of consciousness. Throughout much of the narrative, the Invisible Man cannot sing the blues because he lacks the ability to penetrate the veil of convention, to comprehend the absurdity of his condition. He arrives in New York City full of confidence that a letter from his college president will procure employment for him so that he can earn sufficient funds to return to school, now that his scholarship has been rescinded. Alas, the letter written by President Bledsoe is painfully unfavorable, intended to deny any chance of employment for the Invisible Man. But with the sealed letter, and a dangerously trusting nature, he dutifully and ignorantly makes the rounds with his «letter of recommendation.»

Just before learning the actual nature of the letter's content, the Invisible Man happens to meet someone named Peter Wheatstraw (there was, actually, a blues singer named Peetie Wheatstraw). Like so many of the African Americans in the novel, Wheatstraw appears to be insane because he is without illusions. But knowledge must be wrested out of life, it cannot be simply communicated (another theme in the novel; think here of the grandfather's deathbed words). Wheatstraw engages the Invisible Man with questions flavored with Southern humor and blues language. Wheatstraw pushes a cart full of architectural plans. Intrigued, the Invisible Man asks Wheatstraw where he got them and why he carries them around. Wheatstraw explains that «Plenty of these [plans] ain't never been used, you know,» and that «Folks is always making plans and changing 'em.» (*Invisible*, 172) The Invisible Man, thinking of the letter of recommendation that he carries, responds with the ardor of the uninitiated that «You have to stick to the plan.» (*Invisible*, 172) That, as he will soon find out, is the essence of the

problem and part of a more profound problem, that of realizing what is regularly offered as the truth is, in fact, bogus. Indeed, the Invisible Man has the text in front of him at every moment, but he is unable or unwilling to read it. In addition to the problem of failing to read what is in front of him, the Invisible Man has difficulty hearing what is said to him: «You're going too fast,» complains the Invisible Man. In response, Wheatstraw, in the signifying language that Henry Louis Gates, Jr.<sup>23</sup> finds so central to African American discourse, states: «Okay, I'm slowing down. I'll verse you but I won't curse you — My name is Peter Wheatstraw, I'm the Devil's only son-in-law, so roll'em!» (*Invisible*, 172-73)

In his excellent analysis of the Wheatstraw episode, Pancho Savery notes that Wheatstraw was actually known as the «Devil's Son-in-Law.» For Savery the identity of Wheatstraw as a blues singer is less important than what both he and Trueblood represent through the blues — the continuity of the black tradition.<sup>24</sup> They attest, through their songs, the reality of American racism and human suffering as well as possible responses to this human condition. The blues images and characters that populate the novel, then, are designed to establish a tradition (of acknowledgment and resistance) and to presage the coming to knowledge and the self-fashioning of identity on the part of the Invisible Man.

What will be the form of knowledge and identity assumed by the Invisible Man? It is at this point that existentialism and the blues assert themselves most forcefully in the novel. Prior to self-knowledge it is necessary for the

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<sup>23</sup> Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford U.P., 1988).

<sup>24</sup> Savery, «'Not like an arrow, but a boomerang': Ellison's Existential Blues,» *Approaches to Teaching Ellison's Invisible Man*, eds. Susan Resneck Parr and Pancho Savery (New York: The Modern Language Association, 1989), p. 70.

Invisible Man to come into contact with a parody of the purely existential man, someone who generally goes by the name of Rinehart. In some ways reminiscent of the hipster figure later adored by Mailer, Rinehart is described variously as protean, chaotic, a phantom lover, a man of multiple, ever shifting identities. In the process of describing Rinehart, the Invisible Man suddenly comes to enlightenment about himself and the nature of the world. Rinehart, the Invisible Man finds,

was a broad man, a man of parts who got around. Rinehart the rounder. It was true as I was true. His world was possibility and he knew it. He was years ahead of me and I was a fool. I must have been crazy and blind. The world in which we lived was without boundaries. A vast seething, hot world of fluidity, and Rine the rascal was at home. Perhaps *only* Rine the rascal was at home in it. It was unbelievable, but perhaps only the unbelievable could be believed. Perhaps the truth was always a lie.» (*Invisible*, 490)

Aware of the nature of the world at last, the Invisible Man is brought to consciousness by the individual who exults in challenging its boundaries. Rinehart thrives on the chaos of creation. As in the gospel line, «I was blind but now I see,» the Invisible Man is blessed with second sight. But what he sees, about himself and the world, is not fully satisfying.

There is, to be sure, a certain sense of comfort in invisibility, in ripping off the power company for continuous illumination; but the bright lights are, of course, also blinding. Rinehart does not have an identity problem, paradoxically, because he does not have an identity. He is protean energy personified; he thrives on chaos, but to what end? He may never burn out but he also cannot feel any warmth. In hibernation, the Invisible Man, like Rinehart, is without any social allegiances. The problem that confronts the Invisible Man is an existential one: what identity will he choose to



present to the world, knowing full well that the world is indifferent to him?

Freedom, then, is a state of becoming, a coming to awareness of the essential absurdity and alienation confronted by man as being-in-the-world. The story of the Invisible Man is a blues number, reflecting in comic and ironic fashion, on this developing self-knowledge. If the episodes that confront the Invisible Man are different in style from those that enmesh Roquentin, both characters are groping to the same essential end, attempting to fashion a plan of action in the face of Nothingness. But freedom, existentially considered, is not without costs. Absolute freedom, as Ellison makes clear in the character of Rinehart, is tantamount to blind fury. Freedom requires that once the clouds of illusion dissipate, hopelessness and inactivity need not follow. That would only constitute one piece of the puzzle of life: knowledge without a commitment to activity in the face of absurdity is not, from Ellison's existentialist perspective, a heroic response. Instead, at that point, from the depths of blues and existential despair, comes the responsibility to act, to claim in some small manner responsibility for one's existence. Ellison thus transforms data drawn from the blues cultural tradition into a philosophical statement that places ultimate responsibility — artistic and otherwise — in the hands of the individual. In roundabout fashion, then, Ellison's Invisible Man is offered the opportunity to be the Malrauxean, existential hero. This turning point occurs when the Invisible Man announces his intention to end his hibernation. «Perhaps that's my greatest social crime, I've overstayed my hibernation, since there's a possibility that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play.» (*Invisible*, 572)