



# **“Ancestors” and “Relatives”: Ralph Ellison’s Family Romance from Invisible Man to Three Days Before the Shooting**

Kamila Louadj

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**ECOLE DOCTORALE CULTURES ET SOCIÉTÉ**

**“Ancestors” and “Relatives”: Ralph Ellison's Family Romance from  
*Invisible Man* to *Three Days Before the Shooting***

**DISSERTATION**

Presented to the University of Paris-Est in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of Doctor of “Littératures et Civilisations Anglaises”

Presented by: **Kamila LOUADJ**

Supervisor: **Professor William DOW**

**Jury:**

FEITH Michel:	Rapporteur
SYLVANISE Frédéric:	Rapporteur
LIENARD Marie:	Examineur
ROCCHI Jean-Paul:	Examineur

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## Résumé

Ma thèse explore la problématique de l'ancestralité littéraire chez l'auteur Afro-Américain, Ralph Ellison.

La notion même d'ancestralité et de filiation littéraire est problématique pour les auteurs Afro-Américains, dans la mesure où la rupture dans la tradition culturelle provoquée par l'esclavage, rend impossible toute reconstitution d'une filiation généalogique au sens habituel du terme. Par conséquent, fonder une antériorité déterminée par la succession des générations devient impératif pour les auteurs Afro-Américains qui entreprennent une quête généalogique dont le but est d'établir une légitimité littéraire à travers une filiation qui ne saurait être que reconstruite. Or la perception identitaire et généalogique - au sens littéraire - de Ralph Ellison apparaît comme un paradoxe sans précédent dans la littérature Afro-Américaine. En effet, l'auteur revendique le droit pour un auteur de pouvoir choisir ses ancêtres en précisant que ceux-ci ne sauraient être imposés par une appartenance raciale. En conséquence, Ellison se réclame des écrivains Américains blancs et de certains auteurs Européens – notamment André Malraux – et, en apparence du moins, exclut ses prédécesseurs noirs de son ascendance littéraire.

**Mots clés:** Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, Hemingway, littérature afro-américaine, ancestralité, influence.

## Abstract

My dissertation, explores what I call Ralph Ellison's literary "family romance." I investigate how Ellison's concern with identity politics and novelistic achievement, and his engagement with the ideal of democracy and integration informed his selection of literary patrilineage and lead him to reverse the trope of literary lineage by claiming descent from European and white American literary predecessors whom he names his "ancestors," and by underplaying the influence of his African American forebears whom he names "relatives." I demonstrate that the ground on which Ellison reverses the trope of literary kinship relates to his view of literature as inherently integrationist. Ellison, through his non-fiction and the polyphony of allusions in *Invisible Man* and his posthumous novel *Three Days Before the Shooting*, constructs a personal literary tradition and enters into a revisionist dialogue with two chosen ancestors, Ernest Hemingway and Andre Malraux and one relative Richard Wright. I argue that Ellison's chosen ancestors provided him with models of form that he used to re-inscribe or subvert models of content presented by both his ancestors and his relatives, and that Ellison embodies these influences by indulging in a "stylization"<sup>1</sup> of the texts of both sources wherein he criticizes their representation of the African American and of his experience, through the use of the multiple strategies of signifying such as literary allusion, rewriting, signifying, repetition with variation, parody and pastiche.

**Keywords:** Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, Hemingway, African American literature,

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<sup>1</sup>

Stylization is Bakhtin's term for literary dialogism where two or more styles alluding to other writers coexist within a text. I will expand on Bakhtin's theories in the first chapter.

literary ancestry, influence.

## **Acknowledgement**

All praise be to Allah, Soubhanahu Waa Taalah, Who taught us what we knew not, for His sustenance toward the completion of this dissertation. I seek His protection and guidance always.

I acknowledge with thanks my greatest intellectual debt to my supervisor, Professor William Dow, whose mentorship and critical reading inform this dissertation; who has shown unwavering enthusiasm and support, and has extended practical help and moral encouragement far beyond the call of duty. I especially thank him for his constant faith in my intellectual capabilities in moments of great self-doubt. Whatever achievement this dissertation displays is largely due to his involvement.

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I have had the extreme privilege and the unique gift of being able to do my research at the Library of Congress and to have all of the world's intellectual treasures at my fingertips, as the recipient of a scholarship from the Ecole Doctorale Cultures et Société of the University of Paris-Est. So I am thankful for this substantial financial aid which allowed me to gather the original material for this dissertation.

I would like to thank Professor John Callahan, the literary executor of Ralph Ellison's estate for his intellectual generosity and for his granting me access to Ralph Ellison's Papers at the Library of Congress and for his gracious permission to cite unpublished materials from the archives for academic purpose only. I am grateful to him, Marc Conner, and Adam Bradley for welcoming me as an Ellison scholar when I had just started my research, and for sharing information. For their help with navigating the archive at the Library of Congress and their extreme kindness, professionalism and dedication to scholars, I am especially grateful to the librarians Lewis Wyman, Jennifer Bratholve and Bruce Kirby. My special thanks should also go to Eric Frasier, Senior Reference Librarian at the Rare Books Division of the Library of Congress.

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I have been blessed with my family's loving and unfailing support. I thank you all.

### **Dedication**

To my beloved mother Aziza Louadj, whose loving presence, wisdom and spirit-lifting smile are the light of my life.

To my late beloved hero father Saadi Louadj, whose loss fractured my heart beyond recovery, who showed so much pride for even the smallest of my achievements. I would have loved for him to see this one.

To my brothers and sisters, nephews and nieces, I love you.

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Every book is a quotation; and every house is a quotation out of all forests, and mines, and stone quarries; and every man is a quotation from all his ancestors. And this grasping inventor puts all nations under contribution.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

In spite of a persistent fiction, we never write on a blank page, but always on one that has already been written on.

Michel de Certeau

The main source of any novel is other novels

Ralph Ellison

## Introduction

My dissertation, “Ancestors” and “Relatives”: Ralph Ellison's Family Romance from *Invisible Man* to *Three Days before the Shooting*,<sup>2</sup> explores the concept of literary ancestry and lineage in the works of a contemporary African American writer, Ralph Ellison (1914-1994).

Ellison reverses the trope of literary lineage in his non-fiction writings by claiming descent from European and white American literary predecessors whom he names his “ancestors,” and by underplaying the influence of his African American forebears whom he names “relatives.”<sup>3</sup> The nineteenth century novelists whom Ellison greatly admired – Mark Twain, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Herman Melville, Fyodor Dostoevsky – the Modernists T. S. Eliot, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, and the French politician and novelist André Malraux, are all identified by Ellison as “ancestors,” while Langston Hughes and Richard Wright are relegated to the position of “relatives.”

In the effort to elucidate what I call Ellison's “literary family romance,” I employ a methodology that incorporates archival work in Ralph Ellison's personal papers housed at the Library of Congress – heretofore unavailable resources – and close readings with the attempt to bring a comprehensive understanding of Ellison's *reconstructed* ancestry. I investigate how Ellison's concern with identity politics and novelistic achievement, and his engagement with the ideal of democracy and integration informed his selection of literary patrilineage; and how through his non-fiction and the polyphony of allusions in

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<sup>2</sup> Hereafter referred to as TDBS.

<sup>3</sup> Ellison invests the terms 'Ancestors' and 'Relatives' with personal meaning that I will detail below.

*Invisible Man* and in his posthumous novel on which he kept laboring for over forty years, *TDBS*, Ellison constructs a personal literary tradition. Ellison's naming writers from whom he learned his trade appears to aim less at listing his influences than at bringing them and himself together in the free republic of letters where he is free to posit himself as "individual, as member of the collectivity and as a link in the chain of tradition."<sup>4</sup> Although he makes this distinction between "relatives" and "ancestors", Ellison is not a racial essentialist. The ground on which he reverses the trope of literary kinship relates to his view of literature as inherently integrationist. "That's how you make the new," he says, "by putting something else with what you've got. And I'm unashamedly an American integrationist."<sup>5</sup> *Invisible Man* and the manuscript of the second novel are the fictional site for Ellison's enacting his view of the integrative nature of literature that he professes in his non-fiction works. The very fact that Ellison weaves into the texture of the novel a set of canonical Western texts and black text as subtexts with an intent to revise their themes and styles speaks to his lifelong fight against segregation at all levels of American life, including the segregation of the word.<sup>6</sup>

I have chosen to focus on Ernest Hemingway and Andre Malraux as representative of Ellison's chosen 'ancestors', and Richard Wright as a representative of his 'relatives' for several reasons. Hemingway and Malraux feature most prominently in Ellison's pantheon of ancestors, for they were both models of larger-than-life writers. They led adventurous lives, fought in the Spanish Civil war, in the second World War,

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<sup>4</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, 1964), 234.

<sup>5</sup> Maryemma Graham and Amritjit Singh, eds., *Conversations with Ralph Ellison* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1995), 235.

<sup>6</sup> I'm paraphrasing Ellison's words in "Twentieth-Century fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity," in Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, 1964).



took part in the liberation of Paris,<sup>7</sup> and above all, they wrote successful novels that explore the nature of heroic transcendence of destiny. Most obviously, Ellison's vexed relationship to Richard Wright after an almost two-decade friendship and collaboration motivated my choice for tracing his influence on Ellison and the reasons of Ellison's ambivalent denial of it. Finally, I have selected Percival Everett from among several writers who now claim Ellison as an ancestor after discovering Everett's dense web of allusions in his novels *Erasure* (2001) and *glyph* (1999), and his short story "The Appropriation of Cultures" (1996) that form a call-and-response relationship to Ellison's texts.

Although a few critics have mentioned the connection between Ellison and Hemingway, only Robert O'Meally devoted an article, "The Rules of Magic", to this relationship. After recalling Ellison's self-proclaiming affinity for Hemingway, O'Meally points out the importance of Hemingway's characters as models of resilience and heroic struggle in front of life's toughness and absurdity, which Ellison connects with the spirit of the blues. For O'Meally, the Invisible Man is "a brown skin cousin of Nick Adams straining toward manhood in a world full of the blues."<sup>8</sup>

As to Malraux's influence, except for Barbara Foley, most critics mention it only in passing. As the title of her book *Wrestling with the Left: The Making of Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man* indicates, Foley has set out, in a rich but somehow reductive interpretation, to dig up the traces of Ellison's involvement with the left – which she links to Malraux's influence – that she believes he tried to systematically cover over the years during the red-

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<sup>7</sup> I show in chapter five that Malraux's participation in this liberation is most dubious.

<sup>8</sup> Kimberley Benston, ed., *Speaking for You: The Vision of Ralph Ellison* (Washington DC: Howard University Press, 1987), 255.

baiting era of the '40s and '50s when America was obsessed with rooting out communists' "un-American activities."

Despite the importance of the writers I examine in this thesis to Ellison, no book length criticism has yet been undertaken that thoroughly examines how Ellison is able to bring these writers with him in a closed circuit<sup>9</sup> where he circulates like a free electron and garners even more energy as he collides with the major proponents of the European and American traditions. Since Ellison published nothing in the form of a novel after *Invisible Man*, it has not been possible to reassess his stand towards his predecessors. The fairly recent opening to scholars of Ellison's personal papers at the Library of Congress, which include a huge material: drafts and notes for published and unpublished works and correspondence, shed a new light on his genuine feeling about his predecessors, more often than not at odds with what he expressed publicly in his interviews.

My research in Ellison's archives at the Library of Congress offered me an invaluable insight into the process of composition of Ellison's both novels and provided me with some clues towards understanding how significant it was for Ellison to step out of the black "jug" that circumscribed the creativity of black writers. For, choosing his ancestors appropriately makes all the difference for a minority writer in that it defines what he is allowed to write, how he writes it and by whose standards he is assessed. Therefore, the choice of ancestors requires, as Ellison has it, some "mother-wit". Ellison's wit lies not only in reclaiming a heritage that is not his in a direct line of descent, but in what he has been able to do with the legacy, as demonstrated in his masterpiece *Invisible*

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<sup>9</sup> My metaphor for Ellison's notion of universal artistic heritage and his ability to bridge the gap between the two traditions and engage in a dialogue with both.

*Man* and *TDBS* and in revisions of his predecessors' texts, be they white or black.

I argue that Ellison's chosen ancestors provided him with models of form that he used to re-inscribe or subvert models of content presented by both his ancestors and his relatives. I hope to demonstrate that Ellison embodies these influences by indulging in a “stylization”<sup>10</sup> of the texts of both sources wherein he criticizes their representation of the African American and of his experience, through the use of the multiple strategies of signifying such as literary allusion, rewriting, signifying, repetition with variation, parody and pastiche. Finally I will discuss how Ellison has succeeded in “integrating” himself into the free republic of letters, and how he is in his turn being claimed as an ancestor by a wide number of contemporary writers such as Charles Johnson and Percival Everett among many others.

I want to begin by clarifying my choice of the term 'African American' to designate Americans of African descent. Robert Stepto argues in *From Behind The Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative* (1991), that the double term “African American” conveys a sense of “dominion, homeland, [both words] in equal measure,”<sup>11</sup> hence the “current preference for [it] over Afro-American or Black American.”<sup>12</sup> Honoring this preference, in my own argumentation in this thesis I use 'African American', especially as Stepto's idea of “equal measure” in its two sides is relevant to Ellison's double literary allegiance and his struggle to maintain in harmony the equally strong appeal of “my mixed racial heritage and my pluralistic cultural background.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Stylization is Bakhtin's term for literary dialogism where two or more styles alluding to other writers coexist within a text. I will expand on Bakhtin's theories in the first chapter.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Stepto, *From Behind The Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative* (University of Illinois Press, 1979), xiv.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv.

<sup>13</sup> Maryemma Graham and Amritjit Singh, eds., *Conversations with Ralph Ellison* (Jackson: UP of

The term “Negro,” much to my reluctance, often appears in quotations in this dissertation. Although in contemporary usage, the term is deeply offensive, reflecting racial prejudice, it was widely used up to the late sixties even by African Americans themselves, including Ellison who sees it as carrying a historical weight and significance: “[the word] has acquired specific cultural content.” Spelling it “with a capital 'N' ” was “one of the most important early victories of my own people in their fight for self-definition.”<sup>14</sup>

I will also give an explanation about the signifiers “ancestors” and “relatives,” as Ellison endows them with a personal meaning by semantically redefining that which they usually signify in genealogy, thus closely linking them to the Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky's model of literary inheritance. Finally, I will clarify the way I intend to use such a semantically and psycho-analytically charged phrase as “family romance.”

Theorists of literary influence agree that the agon between influence and originality goes back to the dawn of human writing. Indeed, 2000 B.C., an Egyptian scribe, Khakheperresneb, who had no Homer or Shakespeare to cast a shadow on his creativity, carved in a stone his anxiety over his belatedness: “Would I had phrases that are not known, utterances that are strange, in new language that has not been used, free from repetition, not an utterance that has grown stale, which men of old have spoken.”<sup>15</sup>

When discussing literary tradition or literary ancestry, we usually assume that there exists a direct line of descent in the long chain of writers of the same ethnic group or the same literary movement or genre. So that, for example, an African American writer is

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Mississippi, 1995), 207.

<sup>14</sup> John F. Callahan, ed., *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison* (New York: Random House, 1995), 295.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Walter Jackson Bate, *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet* (Harvard University Press, 1970), 4.

assumed to locate himself in the lineage of other African American writers that preceded him and shun the White/mainstream American tradition, for it is a “terrifying attempt to build an identity based on what one isn't and on whom one can hold back.”<sup>16</sup> However, this is a misconception of the way influence, confluence or literary “swerve” – to use one of Harold Bloom's key terms – work. As the Russian literary critic Yury Tynyanov asserts in his study of Dostoyevsky's early influences, there is no “definite straight line [of descent] which unites a younger representative of a well-known literary branch with an elder ... no continuation of a straight line, there is rather a departure, a repulsion from a known point, – in short, a struggle. ... Representatives of [a tradition] ... simply bypass each other, negating each other or paying each other homage.”<sup>17</sup> Tynyanov brings into focus here the never-ceasing dialectic process within the artist's contending literary influences and the negotiation between his allegiance to his own culture and a rebellion against the paralyzing influence of its representative 'fathers', until he is able to attain that harmonious, unified artistic self that Robert Penn Warren calls “osmosis of being.”<sup>18</sup>

Like Tynyanov, several other literary theorists have always exhibited a fascination with prior influences on writers, and they have looked into the way the latter negotiate their quest for originality with the inescapable and often conflictual influence of their predecessors. For the Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky, for example, “the history of

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<sup>16</sup> David Roediger, *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness: Essays on Race, Class and Politics* (New York: Verso, 1994), 13.

<sup>17</sup> Yury Tynyanov, “Dostoyevsky and Gogol: Towards a Theory of Parody. Part I: Stylization and Parody,” in *Dostoevsky and Gogol: Texts and Criticism*, ed. Priscilla Meyer and Stephen Rudy (Michigan: Ardis, 1979), 101.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Penn Warren, “Knowledge and the Image of Man,” *Sewanee Review*, Winter 1955, 186.

Warren was one of Ellison's close friends. He articulated his idea of “osmosis of being” as this: “continual and intimate interpenetration, an inevitable osmosis of being, which in the end does not deny, but affirms, [] identity.”

literature progresses along a broken path.”<sup>19</sup> so that literary descent is avuncular not paternal. He asserts:

If we were to arrange all of the literary saints canonized since the seventeenth through the twentieth century along one line, we would still fail to produce a single line of descent that might allow us to trace the history of literary form among prose writers, Tolstoy quite obviously did not take his cue from Turgenev or from Gogol, while Chekhov, most certainly, did not have his origin in Tolstoy.<sup>20</sup>

For Shklovsky, the real point of “these ruptures in literary history” is that “the legacy that is passed on from one literary generation to the next *moves not from father to son but from uncle to nephew*.”<sup>21</sup> (italics added) Shklovsky explains moves in literature by the fact that within a given epoch coexist several literary traditions except that one of them “represents a canonized crest in its evolution” while the others live in the margin, “in a state of obscurity;”<sup>22</sup> “When a new line of development breaks in” on the canonical stream/tradition, the latter is “dethroned, pushed aside from its dominant position on the crest, [but] it continues to move forward.”<sup>23</sup> In other words, he envisions literary inheritance as discontinuous with writers exercising the choice of selecting as ancestors the greatest writers from preceding generations who are not in their direct line of descent but rather belong to an adjacent canonical strand that is more often than not antithetical to the one represented by the figure of their “father,” and artistically more appealing. To negotiate all the often crippling influences upon them and attain their originality, writers choose portions of their literary legacy which they alter in keeping with their own artistic

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<sup>19</sup> Viktor Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose*, Trans. Benjamin Sheer (Champaign & London: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990), 189.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 190.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 190.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 190.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 190.

sensibility.

Shklovsky's theory evokes another most notorious theory of such struggles and anxieties over the influence of literary forefathers as a complex family model, namely Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973). For Bloom also, a new generation of writers always engages in wrestling with the authority and priority of its precursors in their quest for originality. It is this eternal quest for a personal voice, for breaking into the canon, that leads to the agonistic relationships between the writer and the haunting literary paternal figure which he tries to overcome by 'misreading'<sup>24</sup> him.

Ralph Ellison ignited a huge controversy by short-circuiting his black predecessors and by defiantly naming as literary ancestors writers from the European and white American literary traditions. The legitimacy of his claims was questioned, debated or altogether denied by both white progressive intellectuals like Irving Howe and black nationalists like Larry Neal, Addison Gayle and Amiri Baraka,<sup>25</sup> among many others, who regarded it as elitist aestheticism and betrayal to his race. As if this were not enough to incur the wrath of the above critics, Ellison denied having been influenced by any of his black predecessors, including Richard Wright under whose aegis he published his first review and wrote his first short story.

On this question of literary ascendance, Ellison responds directly, although with a personal “swerve” to Shklovsky's uncle-nephew model of literary ancestry. Ellison rejects the idea that “culture is transmitted through the genes,”<sup>26</sup> and he sees that the notion “of an intellectual or artistic succession based upon color or racial background is

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<sup>24</sup> I will offer a more detailed account of this theory in the first chapter of this thesis.

<sup>25</sup> They are the most important proponents of the Black arts Movement and of this current of Ellison's criticism. They all decried Ellison's adoption of a white lineage and white aesthetics.

<sup>26</sup> John F. Callahan, ed., *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison* (New York: Random House, 1995), 291.

no less absurd than one based upon a common religious background.”<sup>27</sup> Therefore, as he unrelentingly evinces through his book of essays *Shadow and Act*, his sense of literary kinship is grounded in the conviction that “Negro writers do not and cannot descend from Negroes, but from writers.”<sup>28</sup> Ellison's appropriation of Shklovsky's theory of literary lineage, as amply evidenced below, is no coincidence. Ellison certainly had a thorough knowledge of Russian literature and literary theories. He taught Russian literature at Bard College in New York from the spring of 1958 to 1961.<sup>29</sup> Worthy of mention here is also his acknowledged debt to Dostoevsky whose *Notes From Underground* (1864) served as a model for *Invisible Man* : “my character was inspired by the narrator of *Notes from Underground*, ” wrote Ellison to Stanley Edgar Hyman on May 29, 1970.<sup>30</sup>

When dealing with Ellison's literary genealogy, the best place to start is with his essay, “The world and the Jug”, in which he states, addressing Irving Howe, his unorthodox definition of ancestry and expands upon his formative influences, thus setting the groundwork for critical inquiry. His statement is unprecedented in that in this essay, Ellison contrasts the two words that I borrow for the title of my thesis, “ancestors” and “relatives,” to signify an unusual distinction between his literary predecessors:

I point out that while one can do nothing about choosing one's relatives, one can, as artist, choose one's “ancestors.” Wright was in this sense a ‘relative,’ Hemingway an ‘ancestor’. Langston Hughes, whose work I knew in grade school, was a ‘relative’; Eliot ... and Malraux and Dostoevsky and Faulkner, were ‘ancestors. If you please or don't please!<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 173.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Kimberly Benston, Ed., *Speaking for You: The Vision of Ralph Ellison* (Washington DC: Howard University Press, 1987), 47.

<sup>29</sup> Ralph Ellison Papers, Library of Congress, Box I: 17/ folder 4.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., Box I: 51/ folder 14.

<sup>31</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, (New York: Random House, 1964), 140.



What Ellison is saying is that, while he cannot help but be associated with his black “relatives” with whom he shares the same black experience, and whose texts therefore provide primarily models of content and theme, it is the white predecessors that he deliberately selects as 'ancestors' because they impose themselves on his artistry, by providing models of style for shaping his black experience.

It is quite clear from the quotations above that literature cannot be segregated for Ellison. His argument seems to echo the Modernists’ “Art for Art’s Sake” credo, – although Ellison sees that all art is inherently political as I discuss in chapter two – a possible corollary of which might be that a writer should be free to choose as his models those of his predecessors who best fit into his own sense of literary aesthetics, regardless of their political difference. Houston Baker in *The Journey Back* (1980), argues that Ellison's conviction is that “the imaginative realm is one of transcendental value.”<sup>32</sup> Throughout his essays and lectures Ellison evinced this and maintained a black writer’s right to tap into the canon in its entirety which he feels is his “by right of birth” :

“My point is that the Negro American writer is also an heir of the human experience which is literature, and this might well be more important to him than his living folk tradition ... Negro American folk tradition constitutes a valuable source for literature, but for the novelist, of any cultural or racial identity, his form is his greatest freedom and his insights are where he finds them.”<sup>33</sup>

Ellison's use of the metaphor of “ancestors” and “relatives” reifies this idea that literary transmission is neither necessarily direct nor exclusive, – as far as he is concerned, at least<sup>34</sup> – and that one inherits his intellectual background from multiple and

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<sup>32</sup> Houston A. Baker, *The Journey Back: Issues in Black Literature and Criticism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 69.

<sup>33</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, 1964), 58.

<sup>34</sup> Black women writers, like Alice Walker for example, rather claim descent from other black women writers as a way of legitimating and empowering their own incursion in the mined field of literature

adjacent streams: “Writers as artists are sons of many fathers, or at least the sons of many writers' *styles*.”<sup>35</sup> Ellison echoes Shklovsky's idea that literal lineage and literary lineage seldom if ever coincide in the history of literature, but he “swerves” from him as I mentioned earlier, as Ellison takes a step further and recasts Shklovsky's uncles from whom one inherits as *real* ancestors.

### **Family romance**

Ralph Ellison uses as an epigraph to *Invisible Man* a passage from T. S. Eliot's play *Family Reunion* which resonates with Freud's text 'Family Romance'.<sup>36</sup> Freud coined the phrase to describe the neurotic's fantasy of having mysterious, richer or more powerful real parents than his actual ones, which stems from a desire to change his family or social circumstances. Freud starts his definition of the 'Family Romance' as:

The liberation of an individual, as he grows up, from the authority of his parents is one of the most necessary though one of the most painful results brought about by the course of his development (...) Indeed, the whole progress of society rests upon the opposition between successive generations (...) For a small child his parents are at first the only authority and the source of all belief.<sup>37</sup>

Then the fantasy takes over and the neurotic begins to imagine that the flawed adults and siblings he lives with are not his real family; that he is of grandiose descent. Freud argues that this fantasy is what allows the neurotic to release himself from the psychological obligation to love or resemble his family, and to define the latter as people whom he can

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that was while-male-dominated. An instance of this is Walker's resurrecting of Zora Neale Hurston's texts and her claiming her as an ancestor, precisely as a way of overcoming her 'anxiety of authorship' over Flannery O'Connor's influence.

<sup>35</sup> Maryemma Graham and Amritjit Singh, eds., *Conversations with Ralph Ellison* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1995), 319.

<sup>36</sup> This concept first appeared in a 1909 article by Freud, “the neurotic's family romance,” later included as a chapter in Freud's disciple Otto Rank's *The myth of the Birth of the Hero*.

<sup>37</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume IX, ed., John Strachey (Vintage Classics, 2001), 237.

allow himself to embrace or reject. “Estrangement from his parents,” Freud says, “might be described as ‘the neurotic's family romance’,” who “becomes engaged in the task of getting free from the parents of whom he now has a low opinion and of replacing them by others, who, as a rule, are of higher social standing.”<sup>38</sup> For Freud, the neurotic subject is therefore that who constructs a family romance; who seeks liberation from the parental authority and claims an exogamic lineage. Translating this theory to the field of literature, Harold Bloom claims that “Most poets – like most men – suffer some versions of the family romance as they struggle to define their most advantageous relation to their precursor and their muse.”<sup>39</sup>

As Ellison’s counterintuitive Exogamic literary adoptions appear as a perfect illustration of this thesis, we might be tempted to read Ellison's stance and his novel *Invisible Man* as a literary Family Romance in the Freudian psychoanalytical sense as defined above, with its implied inherent powerlessness of the subject before his neurosis, which I feel does not adequately apply to the very conscious way Ellison chooses his literary connections. I resist this reading and rather use the term in a more psychoanalytically neutral way, namely as *a trope for cross-racial literary connections* which reflect Ellison's integrative imagination. I follow in this many literary critics who now use Freud's term 'family romance' in a way that barely retains any of Freud's original psychoanalytical elements of the concept.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume IX, ed. John Strachey (Vintage Classics, 2001), 238.

<sup>39</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 62.

<sup>40</sup> Christine van Boheemen, in *The Novel as Family Romance: Language, Gender, and Authority from Fielding to Joyce* (New York: Ithaca, 1987) for example, uses the concept of 'family romance' to discuss how patriarchal authority informs Fielding's *Tom Jones*, Dickens's *Bleak House* and Joyce's *Ulysses* and how they construct otherness which van Boheemen perceives as essentially feminine.

In this sense, my reading might rather take advantage of another of Freud's statements, that he developed in his "Creative Writers and Day-dreaming," on artistic creation as an antidote to and a corrective of a defective/unjust social system: "We may lay it down that a happy person never phantasies, only an unsatisfied one. The motive forces of phantasies are unsatisfied wishes, and every single phantasy is the fulfillment of a wish, a correction of unsatisfying reality."<sup>41</sup>

Therefore, my use of the phrase "family romance" does not mean to suggest that Ellison's paradigm of literary ancestry results from a neurotic fantasy, as formulated by Freud's theory, that would be rooted in a dissatisfaction with his actual lineage. If dissatisfaction there is, then it is with what I call the "literary Jim Crow", that is the confining of artistic imagination within the actual experience of an individual as defined and limited by race or social circumstances. Rather than an unconscious warped myth of origins, I read Ellison's "literary family romance" as a formulation of his artistic subjectivity; as a creative impulse to transcend racial boundaries, to re-imagine a literary family unhinged from any restrictive notion of nationality, race or religion, and ultimately to bring to the American tradition as a whole his unique perspective of the African American experience. Ellison's ancestry claim, as I see it, is in no way an attempt to denigrate his African American heritage as symbolized by his "relatives."

### **Methodology**

This dissertation is divided into six chapters. The first chapter "Theoretical framework" outlines my theoretical perspective which relies on such critical concepts as

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<sup>41</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Creative Writers and Day-dreaming" in Peter Gay, *The Freud Reader* (London: Vintage, 1995), 439.

signifyin(g) developed by Henry Louis Gates, Bakhtin's Dialogism and Carnivalization and Bloom's anxiety of influence. I will make use of these theories throughout my thesis to discuss the multi-dimensional intertextuality and dialogical narration in Ralph Ellison's text.

The second chapter "Historical and cultural Background" sets out the context of the African American text by surveying the various historical and cultural dimensions of its roots. After a brief discussion of the major biographical facts about Ellison that had a significant influence on his writing and worldview, I trace the influence of the legacy of slavery and the slave narrative in *Invisible Man* and *TDBS*. Finally I discuss African American artists' negotiation between Modernist creeds and black folklore and their confrontation of what I call the "dilemma of tradition." This survey is necessary for understanding the radical change that Ellison's novel brought into the scene that was mainly dominated by protest genre.

Chapter three, "Stepping out of the jug: Ralph Ellison and the anxiety of Wright's influence", considers Ellison's overt rejection of the influence of his "relatives" through the example of Richard Wright. I argue that Ellison's anxiety toward Wright's influence began as an imitation of the latter's style in his early short fiction before culminating in Ellison's "re-writing" of *Native Son* in *Invisible Man*, which illustrates Ellison's attainment of his own "strength," as Bloom calls the transcendence over precursors.

In chapter four I examine Ellison's ambivalent relationship with Ernest Hemingway. Although the story of this connection is familiar to Ellison scholars, I argue that the tremendous influence Hemingway exerted on Ellison in terms of style during his formative years as a writer, has yet to receive the exploration that it deserves. I undertake

this exploration through close textual comparisons of Hemingway's and Ellison's texts and archival research in Ellison's personal papers. I also argue that the anxiety that Hemingway may have generated in Ellison has less to do with a sense of "belatedness" than with Hemingway's representation of black characters in his texts and his moral blindness to racism that drew a harsh criticism from Ellison to the point of name-calling, especially in his correspondence with his friend Albert Murray and personal archival unpublished notes.

Chapter five is concerned with one of the most important influences in Ralph Ellison's claimed literary lineage, the French novelist and statesman Andre Malraux. Malraux served as a model in his ability to transform himself through artistic creation, to the point that, I would suggest, Malraux was his own best fiction. He also provided Ellison with an insight into contemporary European thought, especially through his particular version of existentialism in its humanistic rather than pessimistic aspect that he depicts in *Man's Fate* (1934) and *Man's Hope* (1938). I also argue that embracing Malraux and his idea of *metamorphosis*, as he calls artistic transcendence, was for Ellison a way of circumventing more crippling influences that hit very close to home like Wright's and Hemingway's.

In chapter six, my research comes full circle in that it considers Ellison himself as an ancestor who is being claimed by his literary children. After a brief section that reassesses Ellison's literary reputation after the posthumous publication of the manuscript of his second novel and of Arnold Rampersad's biography of Ellison, I examine the way Percival Everett engages with Ellison through a personal interview. Then I move to a comparison of Everett's short story "The Appropriation of Cultures" and Ellison's "In a

Strange Country,” which display strong structural and thematic similarities. Finally, I will examine how Everett answers the major questions of the black artist's identity and his responsibility posed by Ellison, through the comparison of his novels *Erasure* and *Glyph* to *Invisible Man*.

As a way of ending this introduction, I should perhaps stress the fact that my argument concerning literary influences on Ellison is not intended to be inscribed in the continuity of that sort of influence studies that belittle any African American artist's achievement by tracing it back to White masters or Black fathers. I have in mind a humorous exchange between Ellison and Ishmael Reed during a 1977 interview conducted by Reed, Quincy Troupe, and Steve Cannon, where Reed remarks about critics' tendency to trace Black writers' achievement back to white sources: “We received the same kind of treatment in the *Saturday Review* article in which they gave everybody a master, saying that certain people were influenced by so-and-so. At least, I got a WASP. You know, everybody's got a slavemaster.”<sup>42</sup> Obviously amused, Ellison asks, “Who did you get?” “William Burroughs, he's my ‘master’,” replies Reed. Ellison's punch line: “Well, the first time I met you, you and Burroughs were together. [Laughter]” Ellison's famous quarrel with Irving Howe and Edgar Hyman is one example of his criticism of such determinism and prescription in aesthetic affiliation, particularly when the latter is imposed on the basis of racial categories. His early formative influences simply initiated Ellison, who was majoring in music, to the craft of writing. My profound, wishful desire is ultimately to show the extent to which Ellison

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<sup>42</sup> Maryemma Graham and Amritjit Singh, eds., *Conversations with Ralph Ellison* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1995), 360.

transfigured what he learned in such a personal and original way.



## **Chapter 1**

### **Theoretical Framework**

This chapter discusses the theories that articulate the African American literary discourse, intertextuality, and literary influence. It gives an overview of the theoretical framework within which I analyze the corpus of the authors selected for this study of influence as well as the rationale behind my use of these approaches. I rely on such critical concepts as Signifyin(g) developed by Henry Louis Gates, Bakhtin's Dialogism and Carnivalization and Harold bloom's anxiety of influence.

My choice of relying on multiple literary theories offers a broader framework for interpretation. Gates's theory mainly focuses on the way black texts relate to other black texts in either motivated or unmotivated Signifyin(g), and he overlooks the psychopoetic element involved in literary influence, and which is adequately supplemented by Bloom's theory of the anxiety of influence. Bloom's idea of the struggle with a literary father figure can account for Ellison's ambivalent relationship to Richard Wright and also to Hemingway. Although Gates's signifying is built heavily on Bakhtin's parody and dialogism, I will return to Bakhtin mainly for his concept of carnivalization in literature. Therefore the combination of these theories helps to elucidate my argument about the cooperations and contentions within Ellison's family romance.

In my search for a comprehensive theoretical approach, I wish also to supplement these theories with Ellison's own theoretical discourse by looking at his fiction and non-

fiction as an often overlooked source of theory that illuminates the interplay of black folk tradition and Western aesthetics in general and the relationship between himself and his literary forebears in particular. Ellison's critical essays open up new ways for analyzing African American literature as indissociable from American literature as a whole and not as an expression of a monolithic black experience.

### **1. Intertextuality**

An intertextual approach is relevant to my analysis of the way Ralph Ellison creates a dialogue with Richard Wright, Hemingway and Malraux through literary allusions that exhibit the intertextual presence of all these writers, among others he names as influences but who are outside of the scope of this thesis.

My use of intertextuality and the way literary influences are played out in Ellison's texts is rooted, quite purposefully, in Henry Louis Gates's theory of "Signifyin(g)" that takes into consideration the particularities of black writers' complex cultural and literary heritage and describes black texts as "palimpsests in which the uppermost inscription is a commentary on the one beneath it, which the reader (or audience) can know only by reading through the commentary that obscures it in the very process of evaluating."<sup>43</sup> So, in this sense, Signifyin(g) always implies intertextual relations. Although I will be discussing at length the theory of Signifyin(g), I want to give if only briefly an idea of what intertextuality is since this key concept predates Gates' Signifyin(g) even as both are rooted in Bakhtin's notion of dialogism.

Julia Kristeva coined the word "intertextuality" in 1967, in her study of Bakhtin,

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<sup>43</sup> Gary Saul Morson, *The Boundaries of Genre: Dostoevsky's Diary of a Writer and the Traditions of Literary Utopia* (University of Texas Press, 1981). Quoted in Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 50.

“Bakhtin, le mot, le dialogue et le roman,” that first appeared in *Critique*, and later included in *Séméiotikè, Recherche pour une Sémanalyse* (1969). Drawing on the Bakhtinian notion that the words we use are always “already inhabited”<sup>44</sup> by others' voices, Kristeva explains: “Le mot littéraire,” as envisaged by Bakhtin, “n'est pas un point (un sens fixe) mais un croisement de surfaces textuelles, un dialogue de plusieurs écritures: de l'écrivain, du destinataire (ou du personnage), du contexte culturel actuel ou antérieur. [il] se construit comme mosaïque de citations, il est absorption et transformation d'un autre texte.”<sup>45</sup> In other words, she sees society and history as texts that are incorporated into and filtered through texts by means of Intertextuality. Roland Barthes elaborates on this in “The Theory of the Text,” stressing also the import of the cultural substratum:

Any text is an intertext; other texts are present in it, at varying levels, in more or less recognizable forms: the texts of the previous and surrounding culture. Any text is a new tissue of past citations. Bits of codes, formulae, rhythmic models, fragments of social languages, etc., pass into the text and are redistributed within it.<sup>46</sup>

But in addition, Barthes provides a view of a text not only always infiltrated by prior texts but also becoming the site of a dialogue and/or a struggle: “[A] text is ... a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, *blend* and *clash*. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture.”<sup>47</sup> It is important to note that intertextuality is often a result of authorial intent,

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<sup>44</sup> Michail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and Trans. Caryl Emerson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 202.

<sup>45</sup> J. Kristeva, *Séméiotikè: Recherche sur une Sémanalyse* (Paris: Editions Seuil, 1969), 145.

<sup>46</sup> Roland Barthes, “The Theory of the Text,” in *Untying the Text: A Post-Structural Reader*, ed. Robert Young (Boston: Routledge, 1981), 39.

<sup>47</sup> Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 146.

for, the author deliberately brings other texts into his own to pay homage to them or to subvert them. But it can also be the unconscious effect of the influence of other texts on the writer's psyche. This is directly applicable to Ellison's encyclopedic literary allusions in *Invisible Man* and *Three days before the Shooting*, from classics, religion and visual arts, to sermons, jazz, blues and folklore.

The notion of intertextuality with its focus on the interplay and interrelation of texts, means that one can find not only the influence of a precursor on a writer, but also the way the latter influences his precursor's text and causes the reader to reinterpret it in a fundamentally different way. Having read *Invisible Man* before reading Wright's *Native Son*, I was intrigued to notice that I was filtering the latter's text through Ellison's, thus adding shades of meaning that I would not have found otherwise.

## 2. Signifying

The theory of "Signifyin(g)" was developed by Gates Jr. in his book *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism*. Through Signifyin(g),<sup>48</sup> a term he borrows from the Black vernacular, Gates articulates a theoretical discourse on African American texts that takes its roots from the signifying monkey tales of African-American folklore and the Yoruba Trickster figure Esu Elegbara. In African American culture, 'Signifyin(g)' relates to the rhetorical practice of disguising his real intentions that a weaker or powerless person uses to outwit a more powerful one. This strategy of masking and trickery integral to African American verbal

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<sup>48</sup> To differentiate between the black signifier "Signifyin(g)" which represents a concept distinct from that concept represented by the Standard English signifier, "signification," Gates places the white signifier in lower case, and the black signifier in upper case with a bracketed (g). "the bracketed g enables me to connote the fact that this word... is spoken by black people without the final g as 'Signifyin'... The absent (g) is a figure for the Signifyin(g) black difference. He adds that to revise this signifier is to "critique the nature of (white) meaning itself." (*The Signifying Monkey*, 46-47)

rheterics both in literature and in society is a survivalist strategy that aims at containing the violence of White power during slavery and Jim Crow, and also at subverting white cultural authority. Arguing with Edgar Hyman in “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke,” about the trickster as an African American archetype, Ellison comments on Louis Armstrong's emphasizing the “physicality of his music with sweat, spittle and facial distortions,”<sup>49</sup> as a magical mask, a “clownish license” that allows him to subversively take “liberties with kings, queens and presidents.”<sup>50</sup> This is because he is aware of, Ellison affirms, “that which cannot gain authority from tradition may borrow it with a mask.”<sup>51</sup> In other words, manipulating appearances and camouflaging intentions for that whose position is rigidly codified by the essentializing American tradition and history is one way of usurping this tradition and the social privileges based on it, thus gaining control over his own identity. Ellison even contends that this politics of survival has informed history at the national level and the national character: “America is a land of masking jokers. We wear the mask for purposes of aggression as well as for defense, when we are projecting the future and preserving the past.”<sup>52</sup> In the Golden Day episode, the vet doctor reminds the Invisible Man that he is “hidden right out in the open ... and that's your opportunity.”<sup>53</sup> Hence, when he emerges from his hole, the Invisible Man recognizes that “although it is most often rather wearing on the nerves ... it is sometimes advantageous to be unseen.”<sup>54</sup> Ellison also plays his part of a masking

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<sup>49</sup> John F. Callahan, ed., *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison* (New York: Random House, 1995), 109.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>51</sup> John F. Callahan, *op. Cit.*, 109.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>53</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 152.

<sup>54</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 1.

joker when he reduces his middle name Waldo to a “mysterious W”<sup>55</sup> that signifies upon the power of his namesake Ralph Waldo Emerson by silencing the onomastic reference. The reason he offers in his essay “Hidden Name and Complex Fate” underwrites again the idea of a mask as protection: “We must learn to wear our names within all the noise and confusion of the environment in which we find ourselves. They must become our masks and our shields and the containers of all those values and traditions which we learn and/or imagine as being the meaning of our familial past.”<sup>56</sup> In short, the motives *hidden* behind the mask are as numerous as the ambiguities the mask conceals.

According to Gates, the “Monkey’s language of Signifyin(g) functions as a metaphor for formal revision, or intertextuality within the Afro American literary tradition,”<sup>57</sup> and it appears mainly in the form of parody and/or pastiche in relation to white texts and black texts. Gates further explains Signifyin(g) as “a strategy of black figurative language use,”<sup>58</sup> which “allow[s] – through the manipulation of these classic black figures of Signification – the black person to move freely between two discursive universes,” traversing “the boundary between the white linguistic realm and the black.”<sup>59</sup> An example of this splendid Signifyin(g) is Ellison’s personal anecdote with his music professor Hazel Harrison that I discuss in chapter two, that signifies upon the white critics tendency to circumscribe the subject matter and the form of African American literature within racial lines of descent. Another example is Ellison’s Signifyin(g) upon Amiri Baraka’s sociological approach to the study of the blues in

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<sup>55</sup> John F. Callahan, *op. Cit.*, 197.

<sup>56</sup> John F. Callahan, *op. Cit.*, 191.

<sup>57</sup> Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989 ), xxi.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>59</sup> Henry Louis Gates, *op. Cit.*, 75.

*Blues People*, in his review published in the *New York Review of Books*: “The tremendous burden of sociology which Jones would place upon this body of music,” writes Ellison, “is enough to give even the blues the blues.”<sup>60</sup> Ellison astutely follows this piece of Signifyin(g) that uses the antanaclassis (blues/blues) with a personal definition of Signifyin(g) that highlights this verbal performance:

Mrs. Lydia Maria Child, a leading member of the American Anti-Slavery Society, published a paper entitled: An Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans Called Africans. ... her title sounds like a fine bit of contemporary ironic signifying – “signifying” here meaning, in the unwritten dictionary of American Negro usage ‘rhetorical understatements.’<sup>61</sup>

Ellison's emphasis on the “unwritten dictionary of American Negro usage” relates to Gates's Signifying Monkey who “dwell[s] in this space between two linguistic domains.”<sup>62</sup> We also clearly hear the same allusion to the traditional practice of signifying when Ellison responds to Howe in “The World and the Jug”: “there is also an American Negro tradition which teaches one to deflect racial provocation and to master and contain pain.”<sup>63</sup>

Gates classifies Signifyin(g) into two categories: motivated and unmotivated – that is, non-disparaging – Signifyin(g). These are two modes of literary revision that, according to Gates, are at work in black texts. Gates likens unmotivated signifying to pastiche and referencing in a non-antagonistic way the texts of predecessors: “Literary Signification, then, is similar to parody and pastiche, wherein parody corresponds to what I call motivated Signification while pastiche would correspond roughly to

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<sup>60</sup> John F. Callahan, *op. Cit.*, 279.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 279.

<sup>62</sup> Henry Louis Gates, *op. Cit.*, 105.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

unmotivated Signification [...] by which I mean not the absence of a profound intention but the absence of a negative critique.”<sup>64</sup> Through literary allusions, the artist creates a pastiche that “recapitulate[s] the very tradition out of which he grew and from which he descend[s].”<sup>65</sup> But motivated signifying is like parody, and in the black literary tradition, it aims to “redress an imbalance of power, to clear a space, rhetorically. To achieve occupancy in that desired space.”<sup>66</sup> Through his distinction of *ancestors* and *relatives*, which I correlate with Gates's *motivated* and *unmotivated* Signifyin(g), Ellison appears as the “Signifying Modernist”<sup>67</sup> *par excellence*, in his ability to carve out a space for himself in the American tradition as a whole. Unmotivated Signifyin(g), for instance, applies more fittingly to the relation between Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Malraux's fiction and ideas, while it is the former that certainly holds when we consider Ellison's constant engagement with Richard Wright's *Native Son*.

Gates' account of the complex intertextuality in the African American literary tradition is condensed in the following quotation:

[...] three elements tend to be involved in the relationship of ancestry. These elements include texts that provide models of form, texts that provide models of substance and the text at hand. The text at hand helps to determine how we read or conceive the shape of a literary tradition. Several of the canonical texts in the Afro-American tradition seem to be related to other black texts primarily in terms of substance or content, whereas they seem to be related to Western texts in terms of forms.<sup>68</sup>

Ellison's literary family romance in which he names his black predecessors as relatives

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<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, xxvi-xxvii.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.* 134.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 134-35.

<sup>67</sup> William Lyne, “The Signifying Modernist: Ralph Ellison and the Limits of the Double Consciousness”, *PMLA*, vol. 107, No. 2 (March 1992), pp. 318-330.

<sup>68</sup> Henry Louis Gates, *op. Cit.*, 122.



as opposed to his white ancestors echoes also in Gates's distinction between influence of form and influence of substance. In other words, the black writer uses the “language of the tradition ... and its ostensible subject matter, the Black Experience,”<sup>69</sup> but signifies on his predecessors' texts by revising the tropes at work in the “received textual tradition,” thereby creating a space for his own worldview and aesthetics.

### **3. Bakhtin's double-voiced discourse**

#### **3.1 Black doublevoicedness**

Michail Bakhtin's theories have been invoked in discussions of African American literature, for they offer a suitable theoretical perspective for discussing the duality of African American texts. In this connection, I am mainly interested in Gates's idea of the “double-voicedness” of Signifyin(g). Gates's theory builds heavily on Bakhtin's concepts of “double-voiced” discourse, Dialogism, Carnivalization, and hidden polemic, up to his classification of verbal appropriation into “active-double voiced words,” and “passive-double voiced words,” which perfectly correlate with Gates's “motivated” and “unmotivated” Signifyin(g). In Gates's words, Signifyin(g) is “black double voicedness... [that] always entails formal revision and intertextual relation.”<sup>70</sup>

Bakhtin's ideas and concepts are elaborated in his works *Dialogic Imagination*, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics and Rabelais and his World*. Bakhtin explains “double-voiced” discourse as a case in which the text being revised is heard simultaneously with the subsequent text. He considers such a discourse as the

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<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

“quintessential expression of dialogicality”<sup>71</sup>:

An author can make use of another person's word for his own purpose by inserting a semantic orientation into a word which already has – and retains – its own orientation ... Then two semantic orientations, two voices are present in a single word.<sup>72</sup>

In other words, a double-voiced utterance contains not only the object of the utterance but also another existing discourse by another speaker on this object. Gates argues that black texts are inherently “double-voiced,” because they rely on both black and white literary antecedents, and employ “modes of figuration”<sup>73</sup> taken from Western and Black vernacular traditions. The signifying text engages in a semantic appropriation that “decolonizes” a word and doubles its meaning. The word is the author's but it is also borrowed, and here lies the dialogic feature of the double-voiced word. According to Gary Morson, what Bakhtin implies precisely is that “[t]he audience of a double-voiced word is therefore meant to hear both a version of the original utterance as the embodiment of its speaker's point of view (or “semantic position” *and* the second speaker's evaluation of the utterance from a different point of view.”<sup>74</sup> This is similar to the function that Ellison assigns to the vernacular:

I see the vernacular as a dynamic *process* in which the most refined styles from the past are continually merged with the play-it-by-eye-and-by-ear improvisations which we invent in our efforts to control our environment and entertain ourselves. And this not only in language and literature, but in architecture and cuisine, in music, costume, and dance, and in tools and technology. In it the styles and techniques of the past are adjusted to the needs of the present, and in its

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<sup>71</sup> Lynne Pearce, *Reading Dialogics* (London: Edward Arnold, 1994), 52.

<sup>72</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin 1994, *op. Cit.*, 156.

<sup>73</sup> Henry Louis Gates, *op. Cit.*, xxiii.

<sup>74</sup> Gary Saul Morson, *Boundaries of Genre: Dostoevsky's Diary of a Writer and the Traditions of Literary Utopia* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1981), 108.

integrative action the high styles of the past are democratized.<sup>75</sup>

Ellison considers the vernacular in literature to be the genuinely American process in which improvisation and creative fusion of styles and traditions are the driving forces, and which is capable of comprehending the essence of life itself.

The relevance of Bakhtin's theories to the analysis of African American literature are foregrounded by several other literary theorists including the feminist critic Mae Henderson who uses his views of dialogism and social dialects as a model for her exploration of "Speaking in Tongues" or the "simultaneity of discourse"<sup>76</sup> in black women's texts which she sees as engaged in a dialogue with both the mainstream hegemonic culture and the black culture. The integration of the double heritage of the African American literature which draws on both white and black discourse is the essential feature that makes it double-voiced: African American texts "occupy spaces in at least two traditions: a European or American literary tradition, and ... [the] black tradition. The 'heritage' of each black text written in a Western language is, then, a double heritage, two-toned, as it were."<sup>77</sup> In other words, the African American writer uses the English language both to express his own sensibility and to signify upon the form and the content of Western texts. Therefore his texts dwells in both the African American tradition and the Western literary tradition.

Ellison was very much concerned with the way ideologies conflict within a single, double-voiced utterance. When Ellison tells us, in his polemic with Irving Howe, that "the question of how the 'sociology of his existence' presses upon a Negro writer's

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<sup>75</sup> John F. Callahan, *op. Cit.*, 612.

<sup>76</sup> Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics and The Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition." in *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: NAL, 1990), 117.

<sup>77</sup> Henry Louis Gates, *op. Cit.*, 4.

work depends upon how much of his life the individual writer is able to transform into art,”<sup>78</sup> Ellison is pointing to the way “values emerging from Negro experience”<sup>79</sup> enter into a dialogic play with other discourses to produce an African American double-voiced discourse, both at the formal and content levels. He is also resisting/Signifyin(g) on the Euro-American critical discourse, mainly New Critics and Structuralists, who want a text divorced from its author, “protest is [not] antithetical to art,”<sup>80</sup> claims Ellison. This again reinforces my conviction as to the relevance of Signifyin(g), with its embedded Bakhtinian concepts of double-voicedness and carnivalization, as a theoretical framework.

Bakhtin identifies three subcategories of a “double-voiced” discourse: stylization, parody and hidden polemic, but he remarks that his categorization “far from exhausts all the possible examples of double-voiced discourse, or all the possible means of orienting toward another’s discourse.”<sup>81</sup> Stylization and parody are “passive forms” while hidden polemics is an “active” form of double-voiced discourse.

In Bakhtin's words, stylization “is an artistic representation of another’s linguistic style, it is an artistic image of another’s language.”<sup>82</sup> A writer appropriates the recognizable style and tone of another and “objectifies” them for his own purposes. His intentions remain in agreement with the assimilated discourse but in the process he casts “a slight shadow of objectification over it.”<sup>83</sup> The resulting double-voiced discourse is a

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<sup>78</sup> John F. Callahan, *op. Cit.*, 159.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>80</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, 1964), 173.

<sup>81</sup> Michail Bakhtin 1994, *op. Cit.*, 198-99.

<sup>82</sup> Michail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 362.

<sup>83</sup> Michail Bakhtin 1981, *op. Cit.*, 362.

*stylization* of the original one.

Parody, on the other hand, Bakhtin says, must be distinguished from stylization since it has a semantic intention directly opposed to or incongruous with another's discourse:

[In parody] as in stylization, the author employs the speech of another, but, in contradistinction to stylization, he introduces into that other speech an intention which is directly opposed to the original one. The second voice, having lodged in the other speech, clashes antagonistically with the original, host voice and forces it to serve directly opposite aims. Speech becomes a battlefield for opposing intentions ... Parody allows considerable variety: one can parody another's style as style, or parody another's socially typical or individually characteristic manner of observing, thinking, and speaking. Furthermore, the depth of parody may vary: one can limit parody to the forms that make up the verbal software, but one can also parody even the deepest principles of the other speech act.<sup>84</sup>

In both Stylization and parody, the original discourse is "both lexically and grammatically invoked"<sup>85</sup> in the double-voiced discourse. Gates asserts Signifyin(g) "is fundamentally related to Bakhtin's definitions of parody and hidden polemic."<sup>86</sup>

The third type of double-voiced discourse, hidden polemic, is by far the most polemical in that it challenges and subverts another's discourse often without articulating it in the text.

In a hidden polemic ... , a polemical blow is struck at the other's discourse on the same theme, at the other's statement about the same object. A word, directed toward its referential object, clashes with another's word within the very object itself [...] the other's words actively influence the author's speech, forcing it to

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<sup>84</sup> Michael Bakhtin, "Discourse Topology in Prose," in Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska Eds. *Reading in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971) 186-187.

<sup>85</sup> Patricia Waugh, *Literary Theory and Criticism: An Oxford Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 228.

<sup>86</sup> Henry Louis Gates, *op. Cit.*, 111.

alter itself accordingly under their influence and initiative.<sup>187</sup>

Hidden polemic is revealed in the kind of linguistic restraint that we use when we are aware of the hostile views embedded in the other's utterance. The control that we exert on our own utterance and the way we formulate our ideas is the result of the profound influence of the other's speech. In "Discourse Typology in Prose", Bakhtin elaborates on how hidden polemic actually functions within a text:

[T]he other speech act remains outside the bounds of the author's speech but is implied or alluded to in that speech. The other speech act is not reproduced with a new intention, but shapes the author's speech while remaining outside its boundaries. Such is the nature of discourse in the hidden polemic ... the authors discourse is oriented toward its referential object, as in any other discourse, but at the same time each assertion about that object is constructed in such a way that, besides its referential meaning, the author's discourse brings a polemical attack to bear against another speech act, another assertion, on the same topic. Here one utterance focused on its referential object clashes with another utterance on the grounds of the referent itself. That other utterance is not reproduced; it is understood only in its import.<sup>88</sup>

The recurring referent in African American literature is the Black experience, and in their "successive attempts to create a new narrative space"<sup>89</sup> for representing it, African American texts clash "on the ground of the referent itself."<sup>90</sup> It is imperative to note here that in African American texts, parody and hidden polemic can occur simultaneously when the parodied discourse has "a certain strength and depth, which allows it to "[ring] out more actively" and "[exert] a counterforce against the author's intentions."<sup>91</sup> These two modes complete each other and serve the purpose of criticizing

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<sup>87</sup> Michail Bakhtin 1994, *op. Cit.*, 195-97.

<sup>88</sup> Michael Bakhtin 1971, *op. Cit.*, 87.

<sup>89</sup> Henry Louis Gates, *op. Cit.*, 111.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.* 111.

<sup>91</sup> Michail Bakhtin 1994, *op. Cit.*, 198.

the style or politics or both of both black and white predecessors. Parody appears in Ellison's improvising on Melville's sermon about "the blackness of blackness," that I discuss in the slave narrative section of the second chapter, while the vexed relationship to Richard Wright that is at play in Ellison's comments and in his fiction is an illustration of the "hidden polemic" that I explore in more detail in the chapter devoted to the exploration of Richard Wright's influence.

### 3.2 Ellison's stylization of Dostoevsky and Henry James

As to stylization, these two brief examples illustrate Ellison's use of it. For the thirtieth anniversary edition of *Invisible Man*, Ellison wrote a retrospective introduction in which he mentioned Dostoevsky's and Henry James's thoughts and styles as having played a significant role in channeling his own during the inception of his novel. As I said in the introduction, Ellison was familiar with and loved Dostoevsky's work. He says that as a way of "providing myself with the widest field for success or failure, I associated him [Invisible Man] with the narrator of Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*."<sup>92</sup> The anxiety of failure is generated by Ellison's feeling of "belatedness," to use Bloom's words, and his fear not to measure up to his allusion to Dostoevsky. This association, which Ellison confines to the Prologue and the Epilogue, starts in the very first line of *Invisible Man* with the stylization of Dostoevsky's hero's first words: "I am a sick man"<sup>93</sup>, which Ellison's hero echoes with "I am an invisible man."<sup>94</sup> What Ellison does here is not an imitation but a "repetition with a difference" as Gates calls it, or a Bakhtinian stylization, since he appropriates Dostoevsky's

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<sup>92</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), xv.

<sup>93</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, Trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage, 1993), 1.

<sup>94</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 3.

“recognizable style and tone” and “objectifies” them for his own purpose. Besides in *Invisible Man*'s Prologue and Epilogue, where the narrator apostrophizes the reader, we hear the same petulant tone and sneer as Dostoevsky's underground man, making it impossible not to notice the echoes of Dostoevsky's text. As Joseph Frank remarks,

The form of *Invisible Man*, as an ideological novel, is essentially the same as that of *Notes from Underground*, though Ellison's work is conceived on a much larger scale. Each major sequence dramatizes the confrontation between the Invisible Man and some type of social or cultural trap. ... Similarly, each of the two episodes in Dostoevsky's work unmasks the morally detrimental consequences of the two dominating ideologies that, because of the force of European ideas on the Russian psyche, had ensnared the Russian intelligentsia.<sup>95</sup>

Ellison stylizes Dostoevsky's tone and style and his concern with ideological and cultural struggles in Russia by adapting them to the African American's struggle within the American white society and by giving them a much wider scope. This is because what Dostoevsky resists is ethical utilitarianism<sup>96</sup> and utopian socialism, while the powers that Ellison's narrator is trying to overthrow are the remnants of the shackles of slavery and Jim Crow. This is why it becomes necessary for him to literally retreat from this society, while the retreat of Dostoevsky's hero is only symbolic.

As to Ellison's stylization of James, the very idea of prefacing *Invisible Man*, in the same way that James himself wrote prefaces for the New York Edition of his novels, later collected as *The Art of the Novel*, shows in itself this signifying at work. Ellison plays his riffs on James by allusively titling one of his essays in *Shadow and Act*, “The Art of Fiction.” Like Henry James, he was very interested in the craft of the novel, and

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<sup>95</sup> Kimberly Benston, ed. *Speaking for You: The Vision of Ralph Ellison* (Washington, DC: Howard UP, 1987), 233.

<sup>96</sup> A theory which holds that an ethical action's value is determined by its consequences.



his reading, on Richard Wright's recommendation<sup>97</sup>, of James's Prefaces was crucial in the development of his consciousness as a novelist. "More than any other novelist in American history" argues William Rice, "Ellison attempted to explain the art of the novel, and thereby to locate himself as a novelist in what he considered to be the tradition of the American novel."<sup>98</sup> Ellison's introduction is crafted like James's prefaces, as "the story of a story."<sup>99</sup> It takes on Jamesian overtones when Ellison reminisces the genesis of *Invisible Man* and the process and circumstances that surrounded its composition; when he complains about the novel's "most willful, most self-generating" aspect that often puzzled him as he was struggling to find a "catalyst for the wild mixture of elements that went into the evolving fiction,"<sup>100</sup> that echoes James's account of *The Ambassadors* which developed "as an independent particle."<sup>101</sup> Ellison's ambition, like James's, was "to elucidate and to appropriate for the critical intellect the substance and principle of his career as an artist."<sup>102</sup> Ellison signifies also on James's obsession with structural matters such as "misplaced middles," "intentions never entertained," and how to represent things "under strong compression and in brief and subordinate terms."<sup>103</sup> But, Ellison, though never losing sight of the form of his novel, is more concerned with "revealing the human universals hidden within the plight of one who was both black and American," and with providing his hero:

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<sup>97</sup> Ellison said in *Shadow and Act* on page 15: "[Wright] guided me to Henry James and to Conrad's prefaces."

<sup>98</sup> William Rice, *Ralph Ellison and the Politics of the Novel* (Lexington Books, 2003), 58.

<sup>99</sup> R. P. Blackmur, "Introduction to The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces" in Henry James, *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934), iii.

<sup>100</sup> Ralph Ellison, "Introduction," in *Invisible Man*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), xix.

<sup>101</sup> Henry James, *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934), 307.

<sup>102</sup> R. P. Blackmur, *op. Cit.*, iii.

<sup>103</sup> Henry James, *op. Cit.*, 94-100.

with something of a worldview, give him a consciousness in which serious philosophical questions could be raised, provide him with a range of diction that could play upon the richness of our readily shared vernacular speech and construct a plot that would bring him in contact with a variety of American types as they operated on various levels of society, ... to reveal the human complexity which stereotypes are intended to conceal.<sup>104</sup>

The result is that in the end, the reader becomes conscious of his shared humanity with Ellison's character. In staging a stylization of James's prefaces in his discussion of how *Invisible Man* came into existence, Ellison ultimately firmly places it and himself within the tradition that is represented by Henry James not only as a novelist but also as a critic of the art of the novel.

#### 4 Bakhtin's Carnivalization

We wear the mask  
that grins and lies,  
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes, –  
This debt we pay to human guile; ...  
We wear the Mask!  
Paul Lawrence Dunbar

Bakhtin's concept of the *carnivalesque* or *carnival laughter* that he developed in his book *Rabelais and His World* (1984), originates in his research on medieval carnivals where he observes that social hierarchies were suspended or literally reversed and lowly people were given license, for a limited time, to act out as if there were no social boundaries between them and the aristocracy:

The suspension of hierarchical precedence during carnival time was of particular significance. Rank was especially evident in official feasts . . . it was a consecration of inequality. On the contrary all were considered equal during carnival. This temporary suspension, both real and ideal, of hierarchical rank,

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<sup>104</sup> Ralph Ellison, "Introduction" *op. Cit.*, xviii.

created during carnival time a special type of communication impossible in everyday life. This led to the creation of special kinds of marketplace speech and gestures, frank and free, permitting no distance between those who came into contact with each other and liberating them from norms of etiquette and decency imposed at other times.<sup>105</sup>

In the Middle Ages and early Renaissance, the ruling classes constituted by the Royalty and the Church were considered as the embodiment of God's authority on earth and as a sacred pivot of the world. At the margin of these ecclesiastical and secular authorities dwells folk culture that is embodied in popular rituals, carnivals, the comic shows of the market place and what Bakhtin calls the “Billingsgate genres” of curses, oaths, and market place speech. These two worlds are held apart by a highly restrictive and oppressive power that was imposed over the lives of ordinary people to avoid their profanation of the sacredness of the officialdom. However, once a year during the carnival, the two worlds intermingle without any distinction of age, social or religious status. Lowly people masquerade in official costumes, sometimes purposefully turned inside out, elect their own kings, queens and bishops. Costumes, masks and scatological manners and language with references to kingdom and abbeys provide a carnivalesque reversal of status, thus parodying the authorities. The carnival turns the world into a topsy-turvy place with no boundaries, no prohibition of any sort for as long as the carnival lasted.

Bakhtin envisions carnival as “syncretic pageantry of a ritualistic sort.”<sup>106</sup>

However, we must not overlook the fact that this social ritual is officially allowed “but

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<sup>105</sup> Michail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, Trans. Helen Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 10.

<sup>106</sup> Michail Bakhtin 1994, *op. Cit.*, 122.

shaped according to a certain pattern of play,”<sup>107</sup> and it is meant to relieve people of the pressure of official rule, thus acting as a “safety valve” that exorcizes fears and anger of the lowly against the authority, before reverting to the normal order of law and decency. As John Clarke have argued “comic inversions work reciprocally; they both loosen and reinforce the established social hierarchy.”<sup>108</sup> Its role, therefore, is “to sublimate and defuse the social tensions that might lead to genuine subversion.”<sup>109</sup> Here, I want to appeal to Ellison's profound critical insight into this matter when he looks at humor as a way of negotiating the latent violence of American life, “for when Americans can no longer laugh at each other, they have to fight one another.”<sup>110</sup> It is significant that the origin of the word Carnival is the Latin “carnem levare” which means “remove meat” and refers to “Lent”, the pious period of Easter during which no meat is allowed. Before the beginning of the fasting and prayer of Lent, people were allowed to indulge in festivities of all sorts, consume excessive quantities of meat and drinks, which made the coming austerity days more bearable. As Bakhtin says:

As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions... Rank was especially evident during official feasts; everyone was expected to appear in the full regalia of his calling, rank and merits and to take the place corresponding to his position. It was a consecration of inequality. On the contrary, all were

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<sup>107</sup> Michail Bakhtin 1984, *op. Cit.*, 7.

<sup>108</sup> John R. Clarke, *Looking at Laughter: Humor, Power, and Transgression in Roman* ( University of California Press, 2007), 8.

(Other critics argue that the transgressions are not totally circumscribed by the authorities and the carnival spirit ultimately fosters effective rebellion.)

<sup>109</sup> M. Keith Booker, *Techniques of Subversion in Modern Literature: Transgression, Abjection, and the carnivalesque* (The University of Florida Press, 1991), 6.

<sup>110</sup> Ralph Ellison, “Address to the Harvard College Alumni, Class of 1949”, in John F. Callahan, *op. Cit.*, 429.

considered equal during carnival.<sup>111</sup>

This ritualistic release of otherwise silenced voices played against the authoritative voices can be viewed, as Keith Booker argues, as the social manifestation of Bakhtin's concept of literary heteroglossia:

[T]he Bakhtinian carnival [has] representatives from different social and political strata thrust together in the same physical and social space in such a way that normal hierarchies and class distinctions are rendered ineffective, or at least unstable. This juxtaposition of various voices allows for a polyphonic dialogue that highlights the differences among social groups and generally calls into question the assumptions that would hold certain groups to be ascendant over others.<sup>112</sup>

Bakhtin derives a whole theoretical framework for analyzing the literary process he calls carnivalization of literature, whereby elements of folk culture and of the ritualistic celebrations of the carnival are absorbed by the novel. The practices of carnival entered literature as strategies for subverting authorial discourse and cultural hegemony, and the term carnivalization of literature has been widely used by literary critics to comment on texts in which the world/social order seems temporarily “turned upside down,” and “turned inside out.”<sup>113</sup> Bakhtin finds these aspects at work in *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel*, two novels by François Rabelais whom Bakhtin considers as the supreme master of the carnivalesque. Bakhtin calls “carnivalization of literature” Rabelais's bringing down in his texts, of all that was held sacred by the church and the aristocracy, through his masterly transposition of the grotesque images and symbols of carnival feasts into literary imagery. In so doing Rabelais brought to perfection “the literature of parody.” Bakhtin calls this mode of writing that characterize carnivalized literature as

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<sup>111</sup> Michail Bakhtin 1984, *op. Cit.*, 10.

<sup>112</sup> M. Keith Booker, *op. Cit.*, 34.

<sup>113</sup> Michail Bakhtin, 1984, *op. Cit.*, 370.

“grotesque realism.” He argues that “the essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity.”<sup>114</sup> Rabelais's novel displays, according to Bakhtin, “a special carnivalesque, marketplace style of expression,” “frank and free” from “norms of etiquette and decency,” full of “clowns and fools, giants, dwarfs, and jugglers,” that all “belong to one culture of folk carnival humor.”<sup>115</sup>

In the same way as ordinary people during carnival masquerade as kings, princes and bishops with the intent of degrading and mocking those in power by representing themselves as the authority, carnivalization in literature seeks to question and subvert the canonical, monological and authoritative discourse by breaking into it and infusing in it “marketplace” words that fracture the hegemonic discourse.

#### **4.1 Ellison's “Extravagance of laughter” and “Laughing barrels”**

Ellison's essay “An Extravagance of Laughter,” (1985), is fraught with carnivalesque tones, and echoes Bakhtin's carnival laughter especially with Ellison's use of the metaphor of mask, masking and laughter as camouflage. The terms that Ellison uses through this essay evoke the carnivalization of literature and the function of carnival laughter as an alternate response to a distressing reality of life in the South where “a concern with preserving ... slavocracy was an obsession which found facile expression in word and deed.”<sup>116</sup>

This essay, claims Ellison, is written as an *apology* to Erskine Caldwell, on the

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<sup>114</sup> Michail Bakhtin, 1984, *op. Cit.*, 19-20.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>116</sup> John F. Callahan, *op. Cit.*, 639.

occasion of Caldwell's eightieth birthday. Ellison says he is apologizing for an outburst of laughter while he was watching with Langston Hughes – “an old hero and new-found friend,” – Jack Kirkland's adaptation of Caldwell's novel *Tobacco Road* (1931) at the Forrest Theatre. The time was 1936, and Ellison had freshly arrived to New York after studying for three years at Tuskegee.

It is easy to notice Ellison's play on the ambiguity, or “double-voicedness” of the word “apology.”<sup>117</sup> For, *Tobacco Road* was a “comedy of the grotesque”, and as such, it “was *designed* and intended to evoke laughter,”<sup>118</sup> says Ellison. (italics original) Therefore Ellison should not have to apologize for laughing. Yet, one hears the irony beneath his adding that the laughter “came at the expense of Caldwell's most famous work of comedy.”<sup>119</sup> The word “apology” then, evokes less an expression of repent for an offense, than one of Plato's Socratic dialogues, the “*Apology of Socrates*” in which Socrates defends himself in his trial for atheism and corruption by Athens, not by apologizing but by re-affirming his opinions. “An Extravagance of Laughter,” with Ellison's reminiscences of actual events and conversations of his youth framed as several brief stories, is decidedly structured like the “Apology of Socrates” and in the Socratic method, to use Bakhtin's words, “of dialogically revealing the truth and the external form ... framed by a story.”<sup>120</sup> Like Socrates who repeatedly claims to the Athenians: “I am going to tell you whence the prejudice against me has arisen,”<sup>121</sup> Ellison uses in his apology-essay, a provocative and irreverent tone that is reminiscent

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<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 613.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 613.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 613.

<sup>120</sup> Michail Bakhtin 1994, *op. Cit.*, 109.

<sup>121</sup> *Apology of Socrates*, [<https://sites.ualberta.ca/~egarvin/assets/plato-apology.pdf>], 7.

of Socrates's self-defense speech and the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, to enquire into the nature of the prejudice against black people and on the significance of and connection between laughter, power and wisdom. It took Ellison fifty years to ponder the far-reaching significance of "the Caldwell-inspired wisdom"<sup>122</sup> of his laughter "which erupted from that incongruous juxtaposition of mirth and quaking."<sup>123</sup> Ellison's words "mirth and quaking" allude to Baudelaire's "De l'Essence du Rire," and evinces Ellison's awareness of all the theories about the causes and functions of laughter. Baudelaire writes: "Le sage ne rit qu'en tremblant," which Ellison inaccurately translates as "The wise man never laughs but trembles,"<sup>124</sup> while "The wise man laughs in trembling" or "the wise man trembles even as he laughs," would be more accurate. Baudelaire discusses the idea that laughter springs from narcissism and from a feeling of being superior to someone that is laughed at; as it is also of satanic inspiration in the sense that it is a sign of frivolity and it induces us to mock that which is sacred, thus making us akin to the devil. Therefore, because he fears blasphemy and divine wrath, the wise man laughs but in trembling. However, Ellison departs from the theological overtones of Baudelaire's too restrictive analysis and assigns to laughter:

a disguised form of philosophical instruction, especially when it allows to glimpse the animal instincts operating beneath the surface of our affectations. For by allowing us to laugh at that which is normally unlaughable, comedy [*Tobacco Road*] provides an otherwise unavailable clarification of vision that calms the trammy trembling which ensues whenever we pierce the veil of conventions that guard us from the basic absurdity of the human condition.<sup>125</sup>

The "absurdity of the human condition" on the stage of Caldwell's *Tobacco Road* that

<sup>122</sup> John F. Callahan, *op. Cit.*, 613.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 613.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 613.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 613-14.



provoked Ellison's uncontrollable laughter was the “horsing” scene in which a choreography of savage sexual intercourse among poor whites, Ellie-May and Lov, was performed, with animal sounds of passion, while the girl's father Jeeter Lester and the other Lesters intently looked on. The scene seems to exemplify for Ellison, very much the stereotypical unrestrained libido usually attributed to African Americans who are said to be unable to control their sexual instincts: “[Caldwell] placed the yokelike anti-negro stereotype upon the necks of whites, and his audience reacted with a shock of recognition.”<sup>126</sup>

What brought Ellison's paroxysm of laughter was not so much the bestiality of the scene but its carnivalesque quality as one of those moments, says Ellison, where “the world of appearances is *turned upside down*, and in my case Caldwell's comedy plunged me quite unexpectedly into the deepest levels of a most American realms of the absurd.”<sup>127</sup> The Lester family in their grotesquerie appeared to Ellison as “a heap of whiteness gone to waste ... a gross caricature of anything that was viable in the idea of white superiority.”<sup>128</sup> Caldwell's caricatures of whites suddenly revived for Ellison elements of “the conflict that I was having with my Southern experience.”<sup>129</sup> Ellison's use of the words “turned upside down” and “caricature” hint to carnivalization.

Ellison's laughter became even more devastating as he was reminded of the Southern social ritual of “laughing barrels.” According to Ellison, the sound of black laughter generated so much anxiety to whites, and the white control over black people's voices was so pervasive in some Southern towns that they were not allowed to express

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<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 652.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 613-14.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 658.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 658.

that genuine aspect of humanity in public, and a totally zany device, the “Laughing barrel,” was put in public places to “contain” black laughter, to keep any inadvertent African American burst of laughter from being heard by *delicate* white ears:

Negro freedom of expression was so restricted that its public square was marked by a series of huge whitewashed barrels labeled FOR COLORED, and into which any Negro who felt a laugh coming on was forced, pro bono publico, to thrust his boisterous head.<sup>130</sup>

However, the spectacle of a black person laughing his head off in a barrel must seem even more mysterious and disturbing, for, Ellison continues:

When seen laughing with their heads stuck in a barrel and standing, as it were, upside down upon the turbulent air, Negroes appeared to be taken over by a form of schizophrenia which left them even more psychically frazzled than whites regarded them as being by nature [ . . . ] It appeared that in addition to reacting to whatever ignorant, harebrained notion had set him off in the first place, the Negro was apt to double up with a second gale of laughter, triggered, apparently, by his own mental image of himself laughing at himself laughing upside down. It was, all whites agreed, another of the many Negro mysteries with which it was their lot to contend, but whatever its true cause, it was *most disturbing to a white observer*.<sup>131</sup> (my emphasis).

Ellison further remarks that this practice of putting “laughing barrels” in public squares, horrifying in its cruelty and ludicrousness, “played upon the themes of racial conflict, social freedom and the blackness of Negro laughter.”<sup>132</sup> The barrels were considered as a civic necessity, “an *elegant* solution of what whites regarded as a most grievous and inelegant problem,”<sup>133</sup> especially on Market days, when the public square “teemed with

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<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 653.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 652.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 639.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 656.

whites and blacks in their separate but-equal-fashions.”<sup>134</sup> Then the uproar from the laughing barrels can be “so loud and raucous that it shook up the whites' fierce faith in the stability of their most cherished traditions.”<sup>135</sup>

Black laughter was viewed as a form of insanity since, Ellison observes, “in light of their social status and past condition of servitude [black people] were regarded as having absolutely *nothing* in their daily experience which could possibly inspire *rational* laughter. Yet, Negroes continued, much as one side of me was doing, to laugh.”<sup>136</sup> The Bakhtinian carnival laughter becomes evident here as well when Ellison adds “They laughed ... while negotiating the public square, an area graced by its proud military statue, its civil war cannon and pyramid of cannon balls, which was especially off limits to all forms of negro profanation.”<sup>137</sup> Profanation, says Bakhtin, is a “whole system of carnivalistic debasing and bringing down to earth, ... [of] playing with the symbols of higher authority.”<sup>138</sup> African Americans' laughter “degrades and materializes,”<sup>139</sup> therefore it aims at desecrating the public square that is “off limits” for them and profanating the symbols of authority like military statues, and war cannons.

Ellison uses the “laughing barrel” anecdote as a subtext to elaborate on how laughter can be turned into what he calls “buggy jiving,” that is a political act that foils the social order and subverts white dominance:

a Negro laughing in a laughing barrel simply *turned the world upside down* and *inside out*. In so doing he *in-verted* (and thus *sub-verted*) tradition, and thus the

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<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 656.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 656.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 650.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 650.

<sup>138</sup> Michail Bakhtin 1994, *op. cit.*, 123-125.

<sup>139</sup> Michail Bakhtin 1984, *op. Cit.*, 19.

preordained and cherished scheme of Southern racial relationships was blasted asunder. Therefore, it was feared that if such unhappy instances of interracial laughter occurred with any frequency, it would create a crisis in which social order would be fatally undermined by something as unpolitical as a bunch of Negroes with their laughing heads stuck into the interiors of a batch of old white-washed whiskey barrels.<sup>140</sup> (Ellison's emphasis)

Ellison characterizes his own laughter at the theatre as “the disgraceful loss of self-control being exhibited by a young Negro ... who was so gross as to demonstrate his social unacceptability by violating a whole *encyclopedia of codes* that regulated proper conduct no less in the theater than in society at large.”<sup>141</sup> (Ellison's emphasis)

While I wheezed and choked with laughter, my disgusted self dramatized its cool detachment by noting that things were getting so out of control that Northern white folk in balcony and loge were not catching fire and beginning to howl and cheer.<sup>142</sup>

#### **4.2 “Blues-toned” laughter**

One of Ellison's memories about his early days in New York that are also triggered by this extravagant laughter at the theatre is particularly relevant here and shows that as Ellison says, “one had to be on guard” and ready to fend off racial prejudice with irreverent laughter, because “reminders of the South could spring up from behind the most unlikely facades.”<sup>143</sup> That was precisely what happened to Ellison when, looking for a work of T. S. Eliot in a bookstore, he ran into a racist “City College student” and exchanged with him about the author. In the course of the conversation, Ellison expressed his embarrassment for having once misinterpreted a poetic trope, using the expression “And was my face red.” The white student immediately reacted in

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<sup>140</sup> John F. Callahan, *op. cit.*, 654.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 650.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 654.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 626.

a way that slapped Ellison “into a conscious awareness” of his place:

“What do you mean by 'red' ?” he said, impaling me upon the point of his smirking stare.” “What you *really* mean is 'ashes of roses'!”<sup>144</sup>

Then the student burst into laughter, and although deeply hurt, Ellison joined in the laughter to “buffer the pain.” However, the two laughs are of different quality and different intent:

while he laughed in bright major chords I responded darkly in minor-sevenths and flatted-fifths, and I doubted that he was attuned to the deeper source of our inharmonic harmony. How could he know that when a child in Oklahoma, I had played with members of his far-flung tribe and thus learned ... the hoary formulae with which to make him squirm?<sup>145</sup>

The white's laughter is one of a delusional triumphant superiority, while Ellison responds with a “blues-toned laughter,”<sup>146</sup> as “irreverent as a honky-tonk trumpet,”<sup>147</sup> a kind of meta-laughter that derides and exposes the hoax beneath the assumption of white superiority.

It is no wonder that Ellison who was majoring in music at Tuskegee, would qualify these laughs using music metaphors like “minor sevenths” and “flatted-fifths,” essential to the blues aesthetic, that correspond to “worrying” notes from major to minor. “The use of minor cords and flattened notes,” writes the American transdisciplinary theorist Michael Shapiro, “reflects the blues's politically-oriented aesthetic as an implicit critical commentary on the structures of dominance articulated in the self-confident use of major cords and clear confident (unworried) notes.”<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 626.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 626.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 482.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 482.

<sup>148</sup> Michael J. Shapiro, *Studies in Trans-disciplinary Method: After the Aesthetic Turn* (New York:

Flatted-fifths which is also called “the devil's interval” or “the devil's cord” for its dissonant sound, is a recognizable blues form which relies on worrying notes. When, under the spell of a reefer, the Invisible Man listens to Louis Armstrong’s “What Did I Do to Be So Black and Blue,” he hears the blues notes transformed into a “lyrical beam of sound,” in which “the unheard sounds came through and each melodic line ... said its piece and waited patiently for the other voices to speak.”<sup>149</sup> The blues, says Ellison, “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 from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism.”<sup>150</sup> The culmination of laughter into blues aesthetics in Ellison's account of this bookshop episode exemplifies perfectly what Ellison describes as “racial cruelty transformed by ... homeopathic laughter.”<sup>151</sup>

Towards the end of “Extravagance of Laughter,” Ellison hails Caldwell as a “mighty destroyer of laughing barrels.”<sup>152</sup> His salutary shock wave of laughter set in motion by the vicarious experience of watching “the outrageous antics of a group of Southern whites,” played a great role, as Ellison acknowledges it, in “my emotional and intellectual development.”<sup>153</sup> The diction that Ellison invokes in all the selected passages in discussing his blues-toned laughter – “wheezed,” “choked,” “so out of control,” “proper conduct” “social acceptability,” “violating,” “turned the world upside down and inside out,” “in-verted,” “sub-verted” – evinces his awareness of the

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Routledge, 2013), 57.

<sup>149</sup> Ralph Ellison, “Introduction,” *op. cit.*, 8.

<sup>150</sup> John F. Callahan, *op. cit.*, 129.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 635.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 658.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, 613.

transgressive property of laughter and also of the Bakhtinian theories of the carnival laughter. The bodily distortions and convulsions generated by the violence of his laughter are akin to the grotesque body manifestations that characterize carnivalesque literature.

## **5. Harold Bloom's Anxiety of influence**

In addition to Gates's theory of Signifyin(g), and Bakhtin's Dialogism, I intend to analyze the influences on Ellison within the framework of psychopoetics as developed by the theorist of influence Harold Bloom in *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973) and *A Map of Misreading* (1975), which he contends, “should help us to read more accurately any group of past poets who were contemporary with one another.”<sup>154</sup> My attempt is to clarify the often conflictual legacies of Ernest Hemingway and Richard Wright whose reverberations in Ellison's fiction and non-fiction are haunting and pervasive.

Bloom explores the psychology of literary influence and advances the commonsensical notion that a poet is influenced by his reading of predecessors; this influence generates a feeling of belatedness that leads to an existential anxiety that whatever the belated poet wants to say has already been said in a perfect way by the old masters. The poet protects his creative impulse and overcomes the crippling influence of this powerful ‘ancestor’ by ‘misprision’, an unconscious misreading and misunderstanding of the precursor’s tropes and language. Bloom argues that only strong poets are able to transcend this anxiety of influence; weaker ones become imitative flatterers:

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<sup>154</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 11.

*Poetic Influence when it involves two strong, authentic poets,))always proceeds by a misreading of the prior poet, an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation. The history of fruitful poetic influence, which is to say the main tradition of Western poetry since the Renaissance, is a history of anxiety and self-saving caricature, of distortion, of perverse, willful revisionism without which modern poetry as such could not exist.*<sup>155</sup> (author's italics)

According to Bloom the ambivalent relationship to literary precursors is analogous to the Freudian mechanisms of defense called Oedipus complex, whereby the son perceives his father at the same time as a threat and as a perfect model to emulate. His fear of this powerful and castrating figure of the father leads him to commit a symbolic patricide as an act of self-assertion. In literature the Oedipal archetype is invoked in instances of conflict between father and son, especially when the son has to confront a powerful father figure in order to extricate himself from his shadow and prove his worth. Bloom translates this paradigm into the field of literary influence by giving the complex relationship a poet has with his predecessors an Oedipal slant. Bloom argues that the belated poet experiences anxiety not measure up to this powerful poetic father and be “castrated”, that is his deficiency will be exposed if his text reeks of the influence of the precursor. Bloom contends that poets fight for originality or what he terms “their initial chance alone” : “the relations between poets [are] cases akin to what Freud called the family romance, and [are] chapters in the history of modern revisionism”<sup>156</sup>

The central argument to Bloom's book is that “poetic history” is “indistinguishable from poetic influence, and that “strong poets make ... history by

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<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.



misreading one another, so as to clear imaginative space for themselves.”<sup>157</sup> In other words, literary history entails studying the ways in which poets and writers of a given generation misread their predecessors in order to affirm their own originality. A poet, claims Bloom is crippled by “the exhaustions of being a late-comer”<sup>158</sup> in “a tradition grown too wealthy to need anything more.”<sup>159</sup> and the “fear that no proper work remains for him to perform.”<sup>160</sup>

The considerable weakness of Bloom's oedipal model of literary generational transmission, like Shklovsky's, is that it excludes minorities and “everything that does not belong to a heroic battle between (male) literary giants,”<sup>161</sup> thus constructing inaccurate literary models for changes in literary history. As observed by Michael Gluzman, women writers are systematically excluded from both Bloom's and Shklovsky's literary models; “although they use family models for the description of literary history, they both exclude women from the one place patriarchy has traditionally reserved for them: the family.”<sup>162</sup> Besides, Bloom translates the phrase “to author,” to mean, “to father” with the gender restrictions that are inherent in such translation. In other words, Bloom's paradigm recognizes authorial power to men and denies it to women.

Feminist theorists Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar claim that Bloom's model of literary creation was misogynistic, and they challenge the relevance of his concept of

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<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>161</sup> Michael Gluzman, “The Exclusion of Women from Hebrew Literary History,” in *Prooftexts* 11:3 (1991): 264.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.* 264.

“anxiety of influence” to the study of influence among women writers. They posit that the woman author rather experiences “anxiety of authorship,” which Gilbert and Gubar define as “a radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a ‘precursor’ the act of writing will isolate or destroy her.”<sup>163</sup> This anxiety results from the belief in “the patriarchal authority of art,” and because the woman writer senses that the literary tradition is bequeathed “not from one woman to another, but from the stern literary ‘fathers’ of patriarchy to all their ‘inferiorized’ female descendants.”<sup>164</sup> While Bloom’s male author experiences anxiety about gaining an original voice that is distinct from his predecessor’s and engage in an oedipal authorial duel in order to subvert his precursor’s authority – the duel between Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and Richard Wright’s *Native Son* is one such battle – the female writer strives to just plain find a voice and a role model that proves that literary creativity is not an exclusively male prerogative.

However, this theory suits well my analysis of the relationships between Ellison and his predecessors, Wright and Hemingway but, interestingly, not his relationship with Malraux, at least not before the publication of *Invisible Man*.<sup>165</sup> Ellison as an artist is way too complex as to fit into an either or framework of literary analysis in relation to

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<sup>163</sup> Susan Gilbert and Sandra Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984 ) 23.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>165</sup> Ellison’s mild criticism of Malraux started around 1957 in his correspondence with Albert Murray.

his precursors. Indeed, while his vexed comments on Wright seem to betray an anxiety of influence, his appraisal of Malraux appears as a blatant challenge to Bloom's theory that, if a poet is to be more than a mere shadow of his precursor, he must engage in a slaying of his strong poetic fathers in the tradition.

The names that Bloom uses to define the six tropes by means of which a poet deviates or swerves from his predecessor and that Bloom calls "revisionary ratios" sound mysteriously kabalistic: "Clinamen", "Tessera," "Kenosis," "Daemonization," "Askesis" and "Apophrades." These describe the different strategies the "tormented" poet employs to not only avoid the influence of a precursor but also to cover his knowledge of and misreading of the influencing source.

Clinamen means "swerve," or poetic misprision proper. The swerve acknowledges the presence of the prior author and makes use of the available source but bends it to his own views. The strong poet, according to Bloom follows in the precursor's path up to a certain point, then swerves from him insisting that it is precisely at that point that his predecessor has gone astray. He then proceeds to correct what he defines as the ancestor's shortcomings. That's how a belated poet is able to overcome the stifling power of his predecessor, by misreading and misinterpreting him.

The second revisionary ratio is "tessera"<sup>166</sup> which is completion and antithesis. Bloom has taken the term from ancient mystery cults where it means a token of recognition. Tessera is an antithetical completion of the predecessor's text which is seen as "truncated" and the poet posits himself as the one who is able to make it whole

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<sup>166</sup> In ancient mystery cults, *tessera*, which consists in fitting together the two halves of a piece of pottery, is used as a token of recognition among the initiates.

according to his own imagination. It is again an act of misprision even as the poet retains the precursor's terms and sometimes his worldview:

[I]n this sense of a completing link, the *tessera* represents any later poet's attempt to persuade himself (and us) that the precursor's Word would be worn out if not redeemed as a newly fulfilled and enlarged Word of the ephebe.... In the *tessera*, the later poet provides what his imagination tells him would complete the otherwise 'truncated' precursor...a completion that is ...misprision.<sup>167</sup>

"Kenosis" is a greek term for "emptying," which implies that the poet empties himself out of the poetic inspiration of the precursor: it "is a breaking device similar to the defense mechanisms our psyches employ against repetition compulsions; kenosis then is a movement toward discontinuity with the precursor."<sup>168</sup> in other words, the belated poet, in an act of divergence from the precursor, consciously and deliberately removes from his work all traces of the identified influence of a source text.

Daemonization (or the Counter-Sublime) is the revisionary impulse whereby "The later poet opens himself to what he believes to be a power in the parent-poem that does not belong to the parent proper, but to a range of being just beyond that precursor. He does this in his own poem, by so stationing its relation to the parent poem as to generalize away the uniqueness of the earlier work."<sup>169</sup> In other words the belated poet taps into the original source that inspired the precursor. Thus the power and originality of the latter is "explained away," and the poet's anxiety is eased through the belief that he *and* his precursor got their inspiration from a source greater than them both.

Bloom sees "Askesis" as "a movement of self-purgation," a cleansing of influence, whereby the poet applies a sort of morpho-semantic filter that consciously, as

<sup>167</sup> Harold Bloom 1973, *op. cit.*, 66-67.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

in Kenosis, exhausts from the text any combination of words that he fears he encountered in others' texts. While the three first revisionary ratios allow for, respectively, swerving, completing, or modifying the influencing text, Askesis operate a complete purging of the sources.

Apophrades, "or the return of the dead," is taken from:

the Athenian dismal or unlucky days upon which the dead returned to re-inhabit the houses in which they had lived. The later poet, holds his own poem so open again to the precursor's work that ... the uncanny effect is that the new poem's achievement makes it seem to us, not as though the precursor were writing it, but as if the later poet himself had written the precursor's characteristic work.<sup>170</sup>

In other words, The later poet shows his strength through consciously engaging the work of the precursor, rather than merely undergoing his influence. The later poet has so overpowered the precursor that he ultimately creates the "uncanny effect" of having authored even the precursor's text.

These are then the coordinates that form the basis of the Bloomian theory of literary influence. Bloom states that the swerve "is necessarily the central working concept of the theory of Poetic Influence, for what divides each poet from his Poetic Father is an instance of creative revisionism."<sup>171</sup> Although Bloom's theory of misprision is mainly concerned with poetry, his concepts can usefully be appropriated for examining the relationship between writers of literature in general. Bloom argues "Influence, as I conceive it, means that there are no texts, but only relationships between texts,"<sup>172</sup> and in this he joins Kristeva, Bakhtin and Gates as to the inter-dependancy of texts. Appropriately, Ralph Ellison's engagement with Richard Wright and to a certain

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<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>172</sup> Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 3.

extent of Hemingway, follows along the Bloomian revisionary process of creative act. In order to substantiate the case, I will provide further explanation of the ratios in terms of specific textual analysis, as needed, in the chapters devoted to these influences.

I will make use of the surveyed theories throughout my thesis to discuss the multi-dimensional intertextuality and dialogical narration in Ralph Ellison's text. By blending the Western and the African American traditions he claims to be heir to, Ellison is able to generate a dialogical discourse that firmly places him at the center of the literary scene rather than on its margins.

## Chapter 2

### Historical and Cultural Background

I am a negro and was born some time during the war in Elbert County, Ga., ... My mother was not married when I was born, and *I never knew who my father was*.<sup>173</sup>

My eyes are light blue, my hair is light brown, my features are undeniably Nordic, *my skin is white*; yet in my veins run a few drops of Negro blood. Therefore, in America, *I am a negro*.<sup>174</sup>

I am an invisible man. [...] I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me.  
Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*.

This chapter sets out the context of the African American text in general and Ellison's in particular, by surveying the various historical, cultural and literary backgrounds that shaped it in form and in content. After a brief reminder of the major facts and events in Ellison's life that fostered his view of literary ancestry, I discuss first a major stage in the development of African American literature that has had a discernible influence on its contemporary texts, that is the slave narrative, then I turn to

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Anonymous, "The New Slavery in the South: An Autobiography by a Georgia Negro Peon." <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/negpeon/negpeon.html>

<sup>174</sup> Anonymous, "White but Black: A Document on the Race Problem," *Century Magazine* 109 (Feb 1925): 498. Library of Congress, Newspaper and Current Periodical Reading Room.

the discussion of African American writers' negotiation between Modernist creeds of artistic achievement and black folklore and their confrontation of and response to the often conflicting influences and demands on their writings which I call the “dilemma of tradition.”

Roland Barthes urges us to carefully look at the “background” of texts in order to bring to the surface subtextual meanings: “There are those who want a text (art, painting) without a shadow ... but this is to want a text without fecundity, without productivity, a sterile fact. The text needs its shadow: this shadow is *a bit* of ideology, *a bit* of representation, *a bit* of subject: ghosts, pockets, traces, necessary clouds.”<sup>175</sup> Similarly, what Michael Bakhtin calls the “dialogic orientation” postulates that meaning is always context-produced. This survey is therefore necessary for understanding the radical change that Ellison's *Invisible Man* brought onto the scene that was mainly dominated by protest genre. Ellison's aesthetics cross historical, cultural, and literary boundaries by juxtaposing modernist narrative techniques like the mythical method,<sup>176</sup> the use of symbolism, and of stream of consciousness with the black folk tradition in a dialogical way, thereby producing a uniquely African American modernist novel that provides an alternative way of representing the black experience.

### **1. Some facts about Ellison's life**

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<sup>175</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, Trans. Richard Miller (Hill & Wang: New York, 1973), 32.

<sup>176</sup> The term “mythical method”, was coined by T.S Eliot in his review “Ulysses, Order and Myth” (1923) of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Eliot describes the mythical method as “a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history.” the “continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity,” allows for a more structured narrative insofar as the myth provides a way of comprehending religious and social complexities. This method has a conceptual similarity to intertextuality and it is also closely related to Eliot's perception of tradition. Eliot's “The Waste Land,” which heavily influenced Ellison, offers a perfect illustration of the method in its depiction of the modern society through the lens of myths and archetypes.



Ralph Ellison once admitted that one writes out of “one's own experience”<sup>177</sup> and that writing was a process “through which I make a good part of my own experience meaningful.”<sup>178</sup> Ellison's place of birth and his name were both incredibly auspicious; and the fact that he studied at Tuskegee and worked for the Federal Writers's Project in his apprenticeship years, all deeply informed and sensitized his writing. Those accumulative facts about his life influenced Ellison's fierce rejection of racial boundaries.

### **1.1 Geography is fate**

Being born in the young frontier state of Oklahoma in 1914, had a tremendous impact on Ellison's artistic ambitions. Throughout his essays, Ellison endows his birthplace with mythical possibilities for freedom and hope that would shape his Renaissance-man spirit. In the title essay of his book *Going to the Territory* (1979), Ellison very pointedly quotes his favorite Heraclitus sentence that “geography is fate,” if only for the Mason-Dixon Line which taught slaves the relationship between geography and freedom. Although his grand-parents had been slaves, Ellison had a tremendous faith in the individual possibilities fostered by the frontier spirit. He describes Oklahoma as that territory where “freedom was... to be found in the West of the old Indian Territory.”<sup>179</sup> He relates how “the Territory had been a sanctuary for runaway slaves who sought there the protection of the Five Great Indian Nations”<sup>180</sup>; how post-Reconstruction African Americans repeated the freedom movement westward begun “by runaway slaves and by the Negroes who accompanied the Indian tribes along the death march... The Trail of

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<sup>177</sup> John F. Callahan, ed., *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison* (New York: Random House, 1995), 158.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 797.

<sup>179</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Going to the Territory* (New York: Random House, 1986), 131.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

Tears... initiated by Andrew Jackson,”<sup>181</sup> and later recorded lyrically by Bessie Smith in a song Ellison loved so much: “Goin’ to the Nation, Going to the Terr’or.”<sup>182</sup> Most important for Ellison who had a profound respect for Mark Twain, was his awareness that his birthplace was the Territory<sup>183</sup> Huck Finn had “got to light out for”<sup>184</sup> as a last refuge, and where time and again Ellison is “going to” in his essays. The rhetoric that Ellison deploys in relation to his birthplace ultimately and very consciously<sup>185</sup> constructs Ellison as a literary frontiersman, who breaks the racial boundaries imposed on African American artists.

In his 1964 introduction to *Shadow and Act*, Ellison invokes his childhood and his adolescence and he asserts that he grew up thinking of himself and his friends as “Renaissance Men”:

[W]e felt ... that we were supposed to be whoever we would and could be and do anything and everything which other boys did, and do it better”. ... [We] were exploring an idea of human versatility and possibility which went against the barbs or over the palings of almost every fence which those who controlled social and political power had erected to restrict our roles in the life of the country. ... We fabricated our own heroes and ideals ... with an outrageous and irreverent sense of freedom .... We were ... members of a wild, free outlaw tribe which transcended the category of race.... we were Americans born into the forty-sixth state, and thus, into the context of Negro-American post Civil War history, 'frontiersmen'. ”<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> The “tribes” were the Cherokees of Georgia who fought with Andrew Jackson at the Battle of New Orleans. Jackson refused to allow them to remain in Georgia. One quarter, 4,000, died on their way to Oklahoma.

<sup>182</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Going to the Territory*, *op. cit.*, 131.

<sup>183</sup> Oklahoma was Indian Territory and was admitted as a State into the Union in 1907.

<sup>184</sup> Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 369.

<sup>185</sup> “I’m a highly conscious writer,” Ellison once told Allen Geller in an interview following a lecture he gave at McGill University on “The Novel and the American Experience.” in Maryemma Graham and Amritjit Singh, eds., *Conversations with Ralph Ellison* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1995), 72.

<sup>186</sup> John F. Callahan, ed., *The Collected Essays*, *op. cit.*, xv.

Ellison's statement is remarkably self-assertive. By appropriating the national symbol of the frontier, the archetypal space of white American freedom, Ellison inscribes himself into the narrative of the frontier and claims as his birthright its spirit of discovery and conquest which came to foster in him an artistic consciousness unrestrained by his racial background.

## **1.2 The magic of naming**

One of Ellison's early life anecdotes that forged in him an integrative imagination relates to his name. Ellison was only three when his father died and he asserts that he discovered only after "I began to write and work with words," that his father used to tell family: "I'm raising this boy to be a poet."<sup>187</sup> Very much aware, as Ellison says, of the "suggestive power of names and the magic involved in naming,"<sup>188</sup> Ellison's father named his son "Ralph Waldo," clearly hoping to see him follow in the footsteps of his namesake, the 19<sup>th</sup> Century transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson. In most cultures, a surname is usually inherited by the son from the father or from the father's father. By naming his son after Emerson, Ellison's father placed him in the lineage of this white poet and thinker, thus suggesting that the western literary heritage represented by Emerson was something that Ellison could claim. As a boy, Ellison was not aware of the potential held in his name which only caused him great embarrassment, since adults used to "invariably repeat my first two names and then to my great annoyance, they'd add 'Emerson' ... while I had fantasies of blue murder."<sup>189</sup> Arguably, it must have weighed heavily on Ellison's psyche to have as bestower of one's name, the

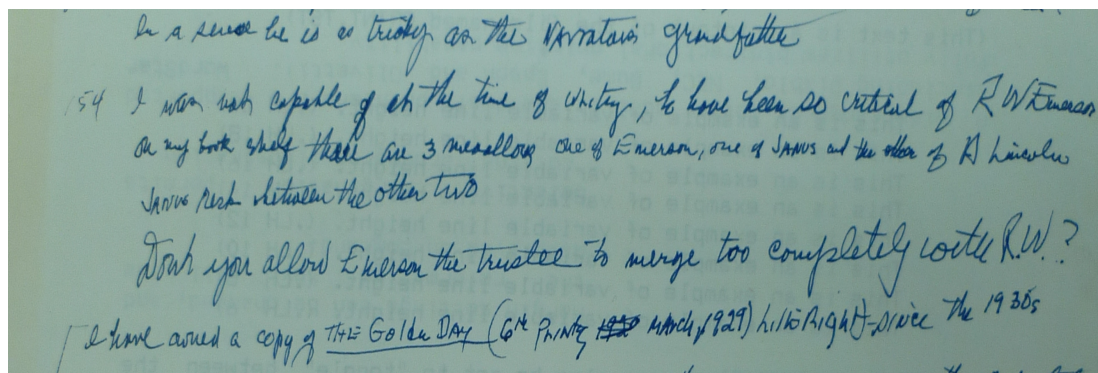
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<sup>187</sup> Maryemma Graham and Amritjit Singh, eds., *Conversations with Ralph Ellison* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1995), 273.

<sup>188</sup> John F. Callahan, ed., *The Collected Essays*, *op. cit.*, 194.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

man who wrote in 1840, that “The negro must be very old, & belongs to the *fossil formations*. What right has he to be intruding into the late & civil daylight of the dynasty of the Caucasians & Saxons? It is plain that so inferior a race must perish shortly like the poor indians.”<sup>190</sup> (Emphasis mine.) In one of his unpublished notes he prepared for a letter of inquiry from somebody about *Invisible Man*, Ellison writes “I was not capable at the time of unity, I have been so critical of R W Emerson on my bookshelf there are 3 [] one of Emerson, one of Janus and the other of A. Lincoln. Janus rests between the other two.”<sup>191</sup>



In a sense he is as tricky as the Narrator's grandfather

54 I was not capable of at the time of unity, to have been so critical of R W Emerson  
On my book shelf there are 3 mesallous one of Emerson, one of Janus and the other of A. Lincoln  
Janus rests between the other two

Don't you allow Emerson the trustee to merge too completely with R.W.?

I have owned a copy of THE Golden Day (6th Printing ~~1929~~ March 1929) h/16 Right since the 1930s

It comes as no surprise that in school, Ellison says he decided to disarm the overwhelming reference by reducing his middle name to an innocuous “W”, while avoiding Emerson's works “like the plague.” For, as he explains in his essay “Hidden Name and Complex Fate:” “to embrace uncritically values which are extended to us by others is to reject the validity, even the sacredness, of our own experience.”<sup>192</sup> Only later, he says, when he started to envision himself as a writer could he come to terms with his name and namesake and realize “I cannot escape the obligation of attempting to

<sup>190</sup> R. W. Emerson, *Emerson in His Journals* ed. Joel Porte (Harvard University Press, 1982), 245.

<sup>191</sup> Ralph Ellison Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Box I: 66/ Folder 10.

<sup>192</sup> John F. Callahan, ed., *The Collected Essays*, op. cit., 209.

achieve some of the things which he [Emerson] asked of the American writer.”<sup>193</sup> Above all, he aimed to succeed in order to invalidate Emerson's postulate of black inferiority.

That naming is of a paramount importance in Ellison's discovery of a literary vocation as it had a tremendous impact on his self-image and worked the spell of shaping his destiny: “In the dim beginning, before I ever thought consciously of writing, there was my own name, and there was, doubtless, a certain magic in it,”<sup>194</sup> he says. Ellison felt an urgency to fulfill his father's wish and he realized that he “couldn’t afford not to become a writer” since his name constantly “reminds me of my obligations to the man who named me.”<sup>195</sup> This is surely more than just incidental comment. It sounds more like a sense of being overdetermined by the full weight of honoring his father's ambition or promise to make of him a man of letters. Ellison's embracing a career of novelist is inextricably linked to the promise of artistic fulfillment suggested by his poetic name and his commitment to excellence.

This finds echo in *Invisible Man* when the white trustee, Norton, instructs the narrator in Emersonian “self-reliance” and tells him that Emerson “had a hand in your destiny.” Besides his idea of self-reliance and individualism that are alluded to in *Invisible Man*, Emerson's theory of perception as a capacity for integrative imagination that emerges in the landscape passage of his essay “Nature”, is embodied in Ellison's adamant belief in the idea that “American culture is of a whole,”<sup>196</sup> and that as an artist, his worldview must reflect this belief. Indeed we read in Emerson's essay: “There is a property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts,

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<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.

<sup>196</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Going to the Territory*, *op. cit.*, 142.

that is, the poet.”<sup>197</sup> By taking on the mantle of the poet/writer whose heightened artistic vision can “integrate all the parts,” Ellison lays claim to “property in the horizon” of the American literary tradition. The promise of an unlimited world held by literature and the suggestive power of naming might have helped define, if only partly, the course that Ellison set to his career.

### **1.3 Tuskegee**

In this section, I intend to discuss, by substantiating from *Invisible Man*, how Ellison's encounter with academic segregation at Tuskegee, an all-black college, and his animosity towards its founder, Booker T. Washington, who supported the doctrine of “separate but equal,” and who favored industrial training for African Americans, set the seeds for Ellison's rejection of opportunistic black leadership and his adamant struggle for the integration of African Americans as full citizens in America. I show how Ellison carnivalizes Washington's taking pride in racial humility and segregation. However, although Ellison's education at Tuskegee was marred by these racial matters, his extra-curricular readings that the college library made possible, was crucial to Ellison's future career as a novelist.

In the fall of 1933, Ellison, craving education and lacking money, hopped a freight train to Macon County, Alabama, in order to study music at Tuskegee, under the composer William Dawson. It may be appropriate to recall, as an aside, that this was the time the whole South was in great agitation over the Scottsboro Boys' trial in Decatur, Alabama, who were charged with the rape of two white women that allegedly took place while they were hoboing. The trial, comments Ellison, “was a macabre circus”

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<sup>197</sup> R. W. Emerson, *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Harvard University Press, 1971), 9.

that would end up with an “enactment of the gory rite of lynching, that ultimate form of racial victimage.”<sup>198</sup> So Ellison was fully aware of the risks when two railroad bulls<sup>199</sup> armed with revolvers, took him off the train at Decatur with fifty other hoboes and ordered them to line up along the tracks: “I had no idea of what the detectives intended to do with me, but given the atmosphere of the town ... I, too, might well be a sacrificial scapegoat simply because I was of the same race as the accused young men then being prepared for death.”<sup>200</sup> So Ellison ran for his life and never found out what the bulls had in store for him. Yet, he asserts that “the fear, horror and sense of helplessness before legal injustice was most vivid in my mind, and it has so remained”<sup>201</sup> long after he had reached Tuskegee.

His appreciation of Tuskegee was quite mixed as I discovered through one of his personal notes. On August 29, 1933, he jots: “Been at Tuskegee two months. I like it. Beautiful.” However, about a year later, he goes back to the same bit of paper and writes “What a fool I was! June 6, 1934. Youth walked where angels fear to tread. So damned busy reaching for the stars the curbstones flew up to meet my shins.”<sup>202</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> John F. Callahan, ed., *The Collected Essays*, *op. cit.*, 773.

<sup>199</sup> White railroad detectives who were very tough on hoboes especially if they were black.

<sup>200</sup> John F. Callahan, ed., *The Collected Essays*, *op. cit.*, 773.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, 773.

<sup>202</sup> Ralph Ellison Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Box I: 65/ Folder 6.

August 29, 1933  
Been at Tuskegee  
two months  
I like it.  
Beautiful.

June 6, 1934  
What a fool I was!  
Youth well kept (as usual)  
where Angles fear to tread.  
So damned busy reaching  
for the stars the crab  
stones flew up to meet  
my shins

Ralph Ellison Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Box I: 65/ Folder 6.

Tuskegee institute was founded by Washington in 1881 and funded by Northern philanthropic interests which intended it to provide an exclusively industrial and agricultural education to young black people, at the expense of any scientific or liberal arts education. As Ellison says in 1944:

At the end of the Civil War, the North lost interest in the Negro. The conditions for the growth of industrial capitalism had been won and the Negro stood in the way of a return to national solidarity and development of trade relations between the North and the South ... groups of negroes had discovered the effectiveness of protest ... in order to deal with this problem the North ... promoted Negro education in the south ... it built Booker T. Washington into a national spokesman with Tuskegee institute as his seat of power.<sup>203</sup>

The expansion of Tuskegee from one schoolroom for Oklahoman black freedmen to an

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<sup>203</sup> John F. Callahan, ed., *The Collected Essays*, *op. cit.*, 330.



almost 2,300 acres campus<sup>204</sup> of a thousand and a half students came as a result of Washington's considerable compromising with white industrialists and benefactors and Southern politicians. Favoring vocational training might be part of the white supremacists' scheme to keep control of African American labor after the departure of the federal troops from the South in 1877. Another part was the impediment of African Americans' aspirations for full citizenship and social equality by instituting a system of racial subordination called Jim Crow, which enforced by law the segregation of African Americans at virtually all levels of public life in the South. All of this system was consciously or otherwise supported by Washington as epitomized by his well known Atlanta Address (1895), which won him the praise of white politicians. In this address, in front of representatives of both races, he exhorted African Americans to remain "the most patient, faithful, law-abiding and unresentful people that the world had seen." Then he reaffirmed his compliance with a concept of freedom that accommodated a "separate but equal" doctrine purported by Hegel,<sup>205</sup> with his infamous metaphor of the separate five fingers, which denies any claim to social equality: "In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the five fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress."<sup>206</sup> W. E. B. DuBois vigorously opposed Washington's philosophy of education as being self-defeating and short-sighted. He advocated a broader program of higher education for African Americans and encouraged political activism.

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<sup>204</sup> Figures are from NPS, the government National Park Service website: <https://www.nps.gov>

<sup>205</sup> In his review of the spread of Hegelianism in the nineteenth century, Dudley Knowles asserts that "Neither empiricist Britain nor robust, pragmatist America have been immune to the tides of Hegelianism." (Dudley Knowles, *Hegel and the Philosophy of Right* (London: Routledge, 2002), 21)

<sup>206</sup> Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1967), 156.

The analysis below shows one of the many ways in which Tuskegee and its founder have influenced the writing of Ralph Ellison. Through plot and language, Ellison masterfully exploits these elements of African American history in *Invisible Man*, and the failure of the black leaders who “beyond their own special interests, represented white philanthropy, white politicians, business interests.”<sup>207</sup> In a letter, dated November 7, 1982, to his friend Kenneth Burke who sent him a draft of a piece he was to contribute to Kimberly Benston's book of essays *Speaking for You: The Vision of Ralph Ellison* (1987), Ellison corrected Burke's statement that Lucius Brockway, the Invisible Man's boss at the Liberty Paint factory was white, then he went to some length, knowing that this is thirty years after the publication of his novel, to explain why it is important to identify the racial group of Brockway correctly since he is the embodiment of Ellison's criticism of the black leadership of the time. “The narrator,” Ellison writes,

reacts as he does because Brockway symbolizes that type of old Southern Negro who would enforce a pattern of conduct upon the youth that white southerners imposed upon the group as a means of maintaining their form of social order. Such elders drew upon a form of filial authority which grew out of the family and the church and used it to control the group's members and to control their conduct. ... the narrator is confused and angered by Brockway's suspicion and his insistence that his was an important role in the plant's social hierarchy. This reminded the narrator of Bledsoe's assertion of *his* dominant role in that power structure which linked his college to Southern order and Northern philanthropy.<sup>208</sup>

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<sup>207</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, 1964), 18.

<sup>208</sup> Ralph Ellison Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Box I: 22/ Folder 6.

Ralph Ellison  
730 Riverside Drive  
New York, N.Y. 10031

TRUE copy

November 7, 1982

Dear K.B.:

I'm delighted that you are taking time out from your important work in order to give a wider dimension to the Yale boys' project. I'm not in very close touch with them but they seem quite enthusiastic.

The point that I was trying to make in all of the din around the bar the other day had to do with the narrator's encounter in the factory's basement. You write that he gets into a "furious fight with his white boss", but in fact he gets into a fight with his Negro boss, Lucius Brockway. You'll note that Brockway's idiom is Afro-American and that on page 158 his face is likened to a withered black walnut with shrewd, reddish eyes. The narrator reacts as he does because Brockway symbolizes that type of old southern Negro who would enforce a patterns of conduct upon the youth that white southerners imposed upon the group as a means of maintaining their form of social order. Such elders drew upon a form of filial authority which grew out of the family and the church and used it to protect the groups' members and to control their conduct. However their authority rested ultimately upon the white's willingness to use physical force. Thus once a young Negro rejected the filial piety upon which the oldster's authority rested they realized that such authority had little bite. Indeed, it had no more bite than Brockway's false teeth. And in the industrial North, where the religious ties that were a source of in-group order were weakened, it had little bite whatsoever....

~~Coming upon the old guy in the basement after his encounter with Kimbro and the union members, the narrator is confused and angered by Brockway's suspicion and his insistence that his was an important role in the plant's social hierarchy. This reminded the narrator of Bledsoe's assertion of his dominant role in that power structure which linked his college to southern order and northern philanthropy and the narrator had been treated badly by both. Talk about the black dimensions of white power! This probably has little to do with the point toward which you're working, but I thought I'd call it to your attention....Incidentally, both Bledsoe and Brockway have achieved a limited individual transcendence within the limitations of their areas of assertion -- or at least they thought so.~~

As always, it was a pleasure seeing you at the Academy. In fact you're the main reason we try not to miss the meetings, and when you don't show both Fanny and I are disappointed.

Love, Ralph

Ralph Ellison Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Box I: 22/ Folder 6

Incidentally, we recall that the college president, Dr. Bledsoe, revealed to the Invisible

Man after the Trueblood and the Golden Day episodes, that even if the Whites support the college, *he* controls it and threatens that “I’ll have every Negro in the country hanging on tree limbs by morning if it means staying where I am.”<sup>209</sup>

It is interesting to note also Ellison's highly double-voiced reference to a real example of Tuskegee leaders cowardice and betrayal, when the invisible man stirs up the crowd's anger during the speech at the Harlem eviction by sarcastically exhorting them to follow the example of the “great leader whose action was reported in the newspaper ... who when that fugitive escaped from the mob and ran to his school for protection, that wise man who was strong enough to do the legal thing, the law-abiding thing, to turn him over to the forces of law and order ...”<sup>210</sup> A voice responds: “Yeah, so they could lynch his ass.” Indeed, in 1932, Tuskegee President Moton was reported to have handed over to a lynching mob, a wounded black sharecropper, Clifford James, who sought refuge in Tuskegee and was denied protection. Like the old couple in *Invisible Man*, Clifford James was protesting his expropriation by the white landowner.

Obviously, the descriptions of the Invisible Man's college are fictional transpositions of Ellison's alma matter and of his firsthand experience there. The motif of the failure of black leadership is introduced through the college Founder who is obviously modeled on Booker T. Washington, in the same way as Dr. Bledsoe appears as a caricature of him. Ellison presents them both as slight variations of the black leader who is more concerned with gaining power than lifting his own people. Until “back in the forties,” Ellison says, “a thick fog of unreality separated the Negro group from its

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<sup>209</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 141.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, 69-70.

leaders.”<sup>211</sup>

Washington's politics of racial accommodation and complacency with the ideology of white supremacy is dramatized by Ellison into the metaphor of the veil and the statue of the Founder – which is identical to Washington's actual statue on the Tuskegee campus - whom the narrator recognizes as “the cold Father symbol,” and whose hands,

outstretched in the gesture of lifting a veil that flutters in hard, metallic folds above the face of a kneeling slave; and I am standing puzzled, unable to decide whether the veil is really being lifted, or lowered more firmly in place; whether I am witnessing a revelation or a more efficient blinding.<sup>212</sup>



Statue of Booker T. Washington “Lifting the veil of ignorance,” on the Tuskegee Campus

The narrator's confusion about whether the Founder was really lifting the veil of ignorance from his people or dropping it down more firmly is resolved when he notices

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<sup>211</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, *op. cit.*, 19.

<sup>212</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, *op. cit.*, 36.

the statue's "empty eyes." Through this symbolism of unseeing eyes, Ellison suggests that the Founder was morally blind to the needs of his people or lacked perception. Another carnivalizing dig is taken at the black leader when, compelled by Bledsoe to leave the college and upon hearing the blind Homer Barbee's sermon in the chapel, the narrator recalls that "A mockingbird trilled a note from where it perched upon the hand of the moonlit Founder, flipping its moon-mad tail above the eternally kneeling slave." The mockingbird and the "eternally kneeling slave" suggest that the Founder/Washington is used by the whites as an instrument to maintain black people in subservience.

Ellison's parody of Washington's politics of racial humility begins with the narrator sarcastically affirming that, in his "pre-invisible days" when he counted on others to spell his identity out for him, "I visualized myself as a potential Booker T. Washington."<sup>213</sup> As one of the ten black youth engaged in the Battle Royal scene, who represented the "Talented Tenth", he says he intended to show that "humility was the secret, indeed, the very essence of progress. (Not that I believed this – how could I, remembering my grandfather? – I only believed that it worked.)"<sup>214</sup>

Besides naming Booker T. Washington, Ellison also alludes to his famous Speech at the Atlanta Cotton States and International Exposition. The narrator is asked to give his valedictorian speech after a terrifying experience where he is forced to participate in a degrading "battle royal" wherein ten young black men, blindfolded, are made to fight each other in a smoker gathering of the town's leading white citizens who

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<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

were yelling “Bring up the shines, gentlemen! Bring up the little shines!”<sup>215</sup>

Everyone fought hysterically. It was complete anarchy. Everybody fought everybody else. No group fought together for long. Two, three, four, fought one, then turned to fight each other, were themselves attacked. Blows landed below the belt and kidney, with the gloves open as well as closed, and with my eye partially opened now there was not so much terror. The boys groped about like blind, cautious crabs crouching to protect their mid-sections, their heads pulled in short against their shoulders, their arms stretched nervously before them, with their fists testing the smoke-filled air like the knobbed feelers of hypersensitive snails. ... The smoke was agonizing and there were no rounds, no bells at three minute intervals to relieve our exhaustion. The room spun round me, a swirl of lights, smoke, sweating bodies surrounded by tense white faces. I bled from both nose and mouth, blood spattering on my chest.<sup>216</sup>

Ellison's language evokes in this scene Rene Girard's idea of “crise sacrificielle,”<sup>217</sup> where complete chaos and disorder reign. The smoke itself adds to the vertigo of the ritualistic atmosphere. Then, the narrator, staggering, sweating, bleeding, his eyes “aglow with a feverish terror from what had happened,”<sup>218</sup> stands before the drunk, laughing white dignitaries to give his speech. He begins by saying he's extolling the wisdom of the “great leader and educator who first spoke these flaming words of wisdom” then regurgitates Washington's speech verbatim:

'A ship lost at sea for many days suddenly sighted a friendly vessel. From the mast of the unfortunate vessel was seen a signal: “Water, water; we die of thirst!” The answer from the friendly vessel came back: “Cast down your bucket where you are.” The captain of the distressed vessel, at last heeding the injunction, cast down his bucket, and it came up full of fresh sparkling water from the mouth of

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<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>217</sup> In *La Violence et le Sacré* (Editions Grasset, 1972), Rene Girard explains how, During what he calls “a sacrificial crisis,” the barriers containing the violence break, and chaos, disorder and blind fighting take hold of everybody.

<sup>218</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, *op. cit.*, 23.



the Amazon River.' And like him I say, and in his words, "To those of my race who depend upon bettering their condition in a foreign land, or who underestimate the importance of cultivating friendly relations with the Southern white man, who is his next-door neighbor, I would say: "Cast down your bucket where you are" – cast it down in making friends in every manly way of the people of all races by whom we are surrounded." <sup>219</sup>

Ellison's parroting Washington's anecdote is parodically double-voiced and a fitting example of Bakhtin's carnivalization. For, Ellison frames this speech with quotation marks but also within two layers of mockery and laughter from the white "town's big shots" to whom the narrator is derisively introduced as someone who "knows more big words than a pocket-sized dictionary,"<sup>220</sup> which was followed by "much applause and laughter." This parodic strategy aims to discredit Washington's speech by shifting attention to the context in which it is repeated. As Saul Morson says in his interpretation of Bakhtin's theories about the function of parodic quotation,

the parodist's ironic quotation marks frame the linguistic form of the original utterance, they also direct attention to the occasion (more accurately the parodist version of the occasion) of its utterance. The parodist thereby aims to reveal the otherwise covert aspects of that occasion, including the unstated motives and assumptions of the speaker.<sup>221</sup>

Ellison parodies using contextual rather than textual change as a pointer to the grounds of the double-voicing. Indeed, through incongruous imagery, he creates a carnivalizing context for Washington's speech. Instead of the Atlanta International Exposition where Washington was given the full attention of the white audience, Ellison's narrator, undergoes first the nightmarish rite of the "battle royal" before he is allowed to speak

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<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>221</sup> Gary Saul Morson, *Boundaries of Genre: Dostoevsky's Diary of a Writer and the Traditions of Literary Utopia* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1981), 113.



while “the men were still talking and laughing until my dry mouth, filling up with blood from the cut almost strangled me.”<sup>222</sup>

The biting irony of this episode lies, of course, in the discrepancy between the claim of the whites to moral superiority and their unrestrained behavior beyond all norms of decency. The narrator relates, “I was shocked to see some of the most important men of the town quite tipsy. They were all there – bankers, lawyers, judges, doctors, fire-chiefs, teachers, merchants. Even one of the more fashionable pastors.”<sup>223</sup> Their hysterical and incongruous laughter brings to mind the “laughing barrels” that I discussed in chapter one. Obviously, those devices would have been put to good use for these whites, Ellison seems to suggest.

The carnivalizing aspect of the scene is evident also in Ellison's use of animal and grotesque body imagery which serve to disclose the most basic instincts under the veil of false claims to morality. The whole scene where the naked blonde is dancing sensuously with the aroused white citizens trying to grab her in the most obscene way, and the black youths caught in a double bind by the whites' threat if they looked and if they did not look, sounds like a carnival. Although dressed in “tuxedos,” the whites are “*wolfing* down the buffet foods,” while sinking their “*beefy* fingers into [the blonde's] soft flesh”; “Chairs went crashing, drinks were spilt, as they ran laughing and howling after her”; A fat merchant “followed her hungrily, his *lips loose* and *drooling*, ... his arms upheld ... like an intoxicated *panda*, wound his belly in an *obscene grind*. The *creature* was completely hypnotized.”<sup>224</sup>

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<sup>222</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, *op. cit.*, 30.

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*, 17-20.

In the “Battle Royal,” episode, Ellison completely displaces Washington's speech and ideas through contextual carnivalizing. He does not quote him “out of context” as much as in “too much context – in a context that the target of parody [Washington] would rather have overlooked.”<sup>225</sup> The narrator concludes, “All had to be said. each memorized nuance [of the speech] considered, rendered.”<sup>226</sup> In this scene Ellison “writes back,”<sup>227</sup> as he himself stages a literary “battle royal” with Washington about the clues to racial equality, which for Ellison can not be achieved through humility. The problematic aspect of Washington's statement about the separate five fingers is not lost to Ellison as evidenced by the Whites' reaction to the Invisible Man's slip of tongue during the speech, when he says “social equality” instead of “social responsibility”:

“The laughter hung smokelike in the sudden stillness. ... They shouted hostile phrases at me.” One of them blared out:

“you sure that about 'equality' was a mistake?”

“Oh, yes, sir,” I said. “I was swallowing blood.”

“Well, ... We mean to do right by you, but you've got to know your place at all times.”<sup>228</sup>

Ellison's criticism of Washington got the lion's share in his dramatization of his time at Tuskegee in *Invisible Man*. However, Ellison remembers fondly some of his teachers, like his English professor Morteza Sprague and his music professor William Dawson. More than anything else, he acknowledges the formative effect of books that were available at the school's library, even as “the schools, weren’t the least bit encouraging” blacks in that direction. Ellison remembers that his occasional run-ins with Dean Alvin Neely had to do with “my being more of an intellectual as against the

<sup>225</sup> Gary Saul Morson, *Boundaries of Genre*, *op. cit.*, 113.

<sup>226</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, *op. cit.*, 30.

<sup>227</sup> To “write back” is a concept used by Bill Ashcroft in his book *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (New York: Routledge, 1989). ‘Writing back’ is the way in which postcolonial writers and texts respond to and engage with colonial literature to resist and correct the myths propagated through literature by the colonizer in order to ground and justify the inferiorization of the colonized.

<sup>228</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, *op. cit.*, 31.

great stress upon the 'trades' as they were called. Neely didn't care for the intellectual type at all. He thought that students should be farmers and he said as much to me, 'you should be out on the ag-side learning something!'"<sup>229</sup> Although Ellison says he received at Tuskegee "an education away from the uses of the imagination," the library was rich enough to offer him the opportunity to read a variety of authors such as T. S. Eliot, Dostoevsky, Joyce, Hemingway, Stein, and Maddox Ford who all opened up for him the world of the imaginary. Ralph Ellison calls himself a "product of the library," – a phrase he applies also to James Baldwin – to explain how reading had forged in him not only a critical mind but also the desire to write and create: "I was [] a music major at Tuskegee, but I was also one who read a lot, who lived in books as well in the sound of music."<sup>230</sup> However, one is left to wonder how reliable this statement is as Ellison would acknowledge in a letter dated April 9, 1953 to Albert Murray that he was "signifying" when,

I used Tuskegee library to point out to the kids at Bennett [college] the kind of freedom that lies available in the South but which is too often ignored. I told them what a wonderful collection of books I found there through a few people's thinking and working not as Negroes but as librarians and scholars and who were building something of value to any human being with the intelligence and curiosity to use it.

Naturally, *I was signifying, man.*"<sup>231</sup> (Emphasis mine.)

This more genuine remark obviously contrasts with Ellison's public pronouncements in which he credits Tuskegee for the richness of its opportunities for education. Yet, the fact remains that Tuskegee, both in its positive and negative aspects, provided material for Ellison's fiction as well a first access to a non-restricted library.

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<sup>229</sup> Robert O'Meally, ed., *Living with Music: Ralph Ellison's Jazz Writing* (Modern library Classics, 2002), 287.

<sup>230</sup> John F. Callahan, ed., *The Collected Essays, op. cit.*, 524.

<sup>231</sup> Ralph Ellison Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Box I: 58/ Folder 2.

## 1.4 The Federal Writers' Project (FWP)

There are strong correlations between the form and material of the personal narratives, children's rhymes and folklore that Ellison collected for the FWP and his fiction. This experience would influence his worldview and the way he would express it in literary form. Arnold Rampersad argues that even if Ellison's work for the FWP “didn't rise to literature,” ultimately, “his exposure to a vast store of information and theorizing, over the years, drastically altered his sense of the past and of human nature and culture itself.”<sup>232</sup>

Upon his return to New York from Dayton, Ohio, in 1938, after the death of his mother, Ellison became associated with the FWP, a branch of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), with the help of Richard Wright. WPA was part of President Roosevelt's ambitious New Deal program to get the United States out of the Great Depression. The Federal Writers' Project employed sixty-five hundred writers in twenty six states, among them were a certain number of African American writers such as Ralph Ellison, Margaret Walker, Zora Neale Hurston and Richard Wright. They were in charge of interviewing people, collecting and recording personal histories.

Ellison describes his involvement with the FWP, from 1938 until 1942, as a “gift of freedom arrived in the guise of a disaster,”<sup>233</sup> for it offered him the possibility to make a living through his cultural work, with a steady paycheck of \$103 a month, and interact with other writers: “That gave me a chance to be a writer,”<sup>234</sup> Ellison said. The project's coordinator, Jerry Mangione, comments on the variety of the group which

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<sup>232</sup> Arnold Rampersad, *Ralph Ellison: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 116.

<sup>233</sup> Mark busby, *Ralph Ellison*, (Twayne Publishers, 1991), 33.

<sup>234</sup> Maryemma Graham and Amritjit Singh, *op. cit.*, 71.

included “lawyers, teachers, librarians, doctors, architects, recent college graduates (among them Studs Terkel, Saul Bellow, Ralph Ellison)” and how the latter “rubbed elbows with published authors such as Conrad Aiken, Edward Dahlberg, Miriam Allen de Ford, Maxwell Bodenheim, Claude McKay, Nelson Algren, Jack Conroy; and with such promising young writers as Richard Wright, Kenneth Rexroth, Norman Macleod, Margaret Walker.”<sup>235</sup>

As a fieldworker, Ellison roamed Harlem's housing projects, streets and playgrounds, collected personal narratives of African-Americans and carried out extensive research for a comprehensive study called “The Negro in New York” that was planned for publication but was never published. This was the beginning of his lifelong engagement with African American folklore. For Ellison, field research for the FWP in collecting folklore, interviewing former slaves, and recording children's rhymes, provided a valuable source material that he was later to use in *Invisible Man*: “I was working for myself as well as for the project, to see what I could pick up.”<sup>236</sup> He also felt that collecting folklore in Harlem “threw me into my own history.”<sup>237</sup> Ellison used his undeniable talent for observation and his sharp ear to render his interviewee's idioms, speech patterns and idiosyncratic ways, and later said that the fieldwork trained him to capture the cadence of black speech and realistically recreate it in *Invisible Man*:

I went into hundreds of apartments and talked to people about folklore and took some of the stuff down. Often I was able to get it on paper by using a kind of Hemingway typography, by using the repetitions. I couldn't quite get the tone of the sounds in, but I could get some of the patterns and get an idea of what it was

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<sup>235</sup> Christine Bold, *The WPA Guides: Mapping America* (University Press of Mississippi, 1999), 20.

<sup>236</sup> Robert O'Meally, *op. cit.*, 281.

<sup>237</sup> Ann Banks, “Interview with R. Ellison” in *First Person America*, (Norton and Company, 1991), xix.

like. One of the things said over and over again by people who have read *Invisible Man* is that they can hear the difference in talk, in the speech patterns between Ras and Tarp. And this is a matter of playing with the rhythms, indicating pronunciation without falling into an attempt at the transcription of dialect.<sup>238</sup>

As Michael Denning notes in *The Cultural Front* (1996), “the writings of the plebeian writers who worked on the projects – Algren, Ellison, Himes, Tomasi, Sincliar, Conroy – embodied a dialectic between fictional invention, autobiographical reflection, and urban fieldwork.”<sup>239</sup> Ellison confirms this in his introduction to *invisible Man*, when he says that “details of old photographs and rhymes and riddles and children’s games, church services and college ceremonies, practical jokes and political activities observed during my prewar days in Harlem”<sup>240</sup> all formed the grist for his fictional mill. An example is Mary Rambo’s warning to the narrator in *Invisible Man* to keep himself from being corrupted by the Big Apple, which obviously originates in one of his interviews for the FWP, “Eddie’ Bar,”<sup>241</sup> on April 30, 1939: “I’m in New York but New York ain’t in me, understand what I mean?”<sup>242</sup>

Another example is the tall-tale of “Sweet-the-Monkey” that a certain Leo Gurley told Ellison in June 14, 1938, on the corner of 135th and Lenox Avenue in Harlem. Sweet-the-Monkey, a sort of trickster whose particularity was that he “could make hisself invisible,” obviously provided Ellison with the motif of invisibility for his novel. Sweet, says Gurley, was “the boldest black sonofabitch ever been down” in Florence, his hometown in South Carolina. Because he was invisible, he could pillage

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<sup>238</sup> John F. Callahan, ed., *The Collected Essays*, *op. cit.*, 394.

<sup>239</sup> Denning, Michael, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Verso: New York, 1996), 228.

<sup>240</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, *op. cit.*, xiii.

<sup>241</sup> Ralph Ellison Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Box I: Folder 19.

<sup>242</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, *op. cit.*, 249.

white folks' stores and houses and "lots a times he just did it to show 'em he could"; and he is smart enough to avoid being caught:

The police would come up and say, "Come on, Sweet," and he'd say, "You all want me?" and they'd put the handcuffs on im and start leading im away. He'd go with em a little piece. Sho, just like he was going. Then all of a sudden he would turn hisself invisible and disappear.<sup>243</sup>

Sweet-the-Monkey is the archetypal figure of the trickster who is able to outwit the white oppressors. It offered Ellison a unifying motif for challenging the imposition of fixed identities and for celebrating the "infinite possibilities" of self-definition. Ellison's character, Rinehart, embodies the shapeshifter whose perpetual camouflage allows him to remain elusive, be everywhere and nowhere, and manipulate people to his own ends. For Morris Dickstein, Rinehart functions as "the novel's version of the malleable, self-fashioned identity that Ellison evokes in his essays, a way of stepping out of imposed roles or shaping them to your needs"<sup>244</sup>

Ellison's experience with FWP was a formidable literary apprenticeship, an integral part of the array of influences that fostered in him the love for African American folklore, and that allowed him to develop a technique of transcribing that authentically captured the African American idiom, and that departed from previous methods of conveying black speech through misspellings.<sup>245</sup>

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<sup>243</sup> Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Federal Writers Project, Box A 721.

<sup>244</sup> Morris Dickstein, *Leopards in the Temple* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 207.

<sup>245</sup> Ann Banks, *op. cit.*, xvii.

FORM C  
TEXT OF INTERVIEW (UNEDITED)

FOLKLORE  
NEW YORK

STATE New York  
NAME OF WORKER Ralph Ellison  
ADDRESS 470 West 150th Street, Manhattan  
DATE June 14th, 1938  
SUBJECT Harlem

I hope to God to kill me if this aint the truth. All you got to do is go down to Florence, South Carolina and ask most anybody you meet and they'll tell you its the truth.

Florence is one of these hard towns on colored folks. You have to stay out of the white folks way; all but Sweet. That the fellow I'm fixing to tell you about. His name was Sweet-the-monkey. I done forgot his real name, I caint remember it. But that was what everybody called him. He wasn't no big guy. He was just bad. My mother and grandmother used to say he was wicked. He was bad allright. He was one sucker who didn't give a dam bout the crackers. Fact is, they go so they stayed out of his way. I caint never remember hear tell of any them crackers bothering that guy. He used to give em trouble all over the place and all they could do about it was to give the rest of us hell.

It was this way: Sweet could make hisself invisible. You don't believe it? Well here's how he done it. Sweet-the-monkey cut open a black cat and took out its heart. Climbed up a tree backwards and cursed God. After that he could do anything. The white folks would wake up in

"Sweet the Monkey," Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Federal Writers Project, Box A 721.

## 2. The slave narrative

The past is never dead; it's not even past.



William Faulkner. *Requiem for a Nun*.

The act of writing requires a constant plunging back into  
the shadow of the past where time hovers ghostlike.  
Ralph Ellison. *Shadow and Act*.

The black presence in America began with slavery and the African American literary tradition began with the slave narrative. The slave narrative aimed to harness public feelings against slavery, but it further evolved into a textual tradition that informs and inflects all African American narratives about race. It inevitably influences and determines not only the literary form and content, but also the audience and reception of subsequent African American texts.

## 2.1 Slavery and literacy

Literary genealogy has always been a sensitive subject for African American writers because it is related to the institution of slavery which, by snatching the African from his native soil, has for ever broken his lineage. Ernest J. Gaines reminds us of the disastrous effect of this dismemberment on the African-American family:

[B]lacks were taken out of Africa and separated traditionally and then physically here in this country ... [W]herever the slave ship docked, families were separated. Mothers were separated from children, husbands from their wives, fathers from their sons, mothers from their daughters ... [T]hey still have not, philosophically speaking, reached each other again.<sup>246</sup>

Frederick Douglass's famous metaphor, "genealogical trees do not flourish among slaves,"<sup>247</sup> might account as a metaphor for the African American literary genealogy as

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<sup>246</sup> Charles Rowell, "This Louisiana Thing That Drives Me: An Interview With Ernest J. Gaines," in John Lowe, *Conversations with Ernest Gaines* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), 87.

<sup>247</sup> Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York: Dover, 1969), 34.  
*My Bondage and My Freedom* published in 1855 is mainly an expansion of Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, which chronicles in greater detail his road from bondage to liberty and

well. For the African American writer born into a lineage emerging from slavery, the notion of ancestry is charged with affects related to this problematic beginning of hi(s)tory. Therefore, it is vital to stress the fact that black literature – arising out of a historical experience in which literacy was proscribed – both plays a role in and reflects the African American struggle for freedom and literary recognition. As Robert Stepto points out in *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro American Literature* (1979), “the genealogy of African American identity is underpinned by the principle that ‘freedom occasions literacy and ... literacy initiates freedom.’”<sup>248</sup> Slave narratives such as Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845) and Henry Bibb's *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave* (1845), while exposing the evil of slavery, also established archetypal hero and patterns of survival within domineering conditions that can all be traced in literary characterizations, rites and myths in the texts of the more creative modern African American writers such as Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, Ishmael Reed and Toni Morrison, to name only a few.

Douglass's trope suggests these writers' anxiety to re-construct a literary lineage and to put up with all the stress and the complexity that is involved in creating within two traditions: the Western and the African American. Stephen Butterfield describes the African American text in general as reflecting “a kind of cultural *schizophrenia*, where the author must somehow discover roots in a country which does not accept him as a

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to becoming an abolitionist, author, and publisher.

<sup>248</sup> Robert Stepto, *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro American Literature* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), x.

human being.”<sup>249</sup> Similarly, Kimberly Benston has splendidly charted what he calls the “genealogical revisionism” of African American literature: “All Afro-American literature may be seen as one vast genealogical poem that attempts to restore continuity to the ruptures or discontinuities imposed by the history of the black presence in America.”<sup>250</sup> In one of his numerous notes, undated but probably jotted during the composition of *Invisible Man*, Ellison also writes: “The discontinuity of African American literature is the result of the discontinuity of African American experience,”<sup>251</sup> thus bringing a link between the historical gash and the texts that attempt to represent it. This sense of dislocation and loss of heritage that plagues the African American narrative can be read right on the first page of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845), where Douglass states “a want of information concerning my own [father] was source of unhappiness to me even during childhood.”<sup>252</sup> Eric Sundquist's comment on Douglass's thwarted genealogy, that he “was born of an act that ... gave him no name or inheritance, and stripped him of the genealogical property of manhood,”<sup>253</sup> epitomizes this impossibility to bring closure to the problem of African American ancestry.

Speaking about the goals of the slave narratives, Bernard Bell argues that,

Slave narratives and black autobiographies provide dramatic personal testimonies of the discovery of racism in the process of secondary acculturation, a process that at

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<sup>249</sup> Stephen Butterfield, *Black Autobiography in America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1974), 94.

<sup>250</sup> Kimberly Benston, *Performing Blackness: Enactments of African-American Modernism* (London: Routledge, 2000), 152.

<sup>251</sup> Ralph Ellison Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Box I: 140.

<sup>252</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass Written by Himself* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1963), 12.

<sup>253</sup> Eric J. Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1993), 94.

same point frustrates individuals in their efforts to realize their potential wholeness, unity, or balance as black people and American citizens, compelling them to turn primarily to their ethnic group for protection and direction. Within the aborted social energy into cultural energy and expression. Over a long period this process of acculturation has settled in the deep consciousness of the individuals who went through it as both self-protective and compensatory cultural behavior, the double-consciousness that Afro-American novelists, sometimes self-consciously but often unconsciously, illumine for readers.<sup>254</sup>

The slaves wrote their narratives primarily to demonstrate their “humanity.” Their efforts tended towards proving that black people “possessed the requisite degrees of reason and wit to create literature ... [to prove] that they could indeed write.”<sup>255</sup> In Gates's words, far from being a mere skill, literacy “was a commodity [slaves] were forced to trade for their humanity.”<sup>256</sup> As Gates has argued, European philosophers of Enlightenment such as Hegel<sup>257</sup> and Hume, posited that literacy was the ultimate means to gauge humanity since man's ability for reasoning (as reflected in literacy) was the ultimate means of asserting their difference from animals. Henceforth, illiteracy,

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<sup>254</sup> Bernard W. Bell, *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* (Amherst, The University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), 9.

<sup>255</sup> H. L. Gates, Jr. & McKay, “From Phillis Wheatley to Toni Morrison: The flowering of African-American Literature,” *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, 14, 1996/1997, pp. 95-100, 95.

<sup>256</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Charles T. Davis, Eds., *The Slave's Narrative* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), xxviii.

<sup>257</sup> Hegel, in *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* (1813), on page 177, considered that the lack of a written tradition among Africans is a sign of their inferiority, as is the absence of a collective history: “Africa is no historical part of the world.” “The characteristic feature of the negroes is that their consciousness has not yet reached an awareness of any substantial subjectivity. The negro is an example of animal man in all his savagery and lawlessness,... nothing consonant with humanity is to be found in his character.”

David Hume, for his part, inscribing racial hierarchy in nature, similarly writes in his essay “Of National Characters,”: I am apt to suspect the negroes ... to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white. [...] No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences... Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen, in so many countries and ages, if nature had not made an original distinction between these breeds of men. Not to mention our colonies, there are Negro slaves dispersed all over Europe, of which none ever discovered any symptoms of ingenuity. ( “Of National Characters,” 33)

discursively constructed as an *incapacity* for literacy, was the basis of the argument for the slave's sub humanity. Becoming literate, as Gates asserts, was for the slaves the most powerful way of debunking any assertion about their inhumanity.

Slaveowners generally proscribed literacy to slaves to maintain the asymmetrical master/slave relation, as Douglass reports from his former master, Captain Auld: "Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world ... it would forever unfit him to be a slave."<sup>258</sup> The straightforward implication Douglass is able to perceive in this statement is the connection between knowledge and power and that "the white man's power to enslave the black man" relies on the denial of literacy. From that moment on, he "understood the pathway from slavery to freedom, ... [which] served to inspire me with a desire and determination to learn."<sup>259</sup>

Although he alludes to Douglass as "a great man", and an example for the Invisible Man of "how magical it was that he [Douglass] had talked his way from slavery to a government ministry, and so swiftly,"<sup>260</sup> Ellison questions the validity of the claim to literacy as proof of humanity inherent in the slave narrative, asserting that:

it's futile to argue our humanity with those who willfully refuse to recognize it, when art can reveal on its own terms more truth while providing pleasure, insight and for the negro leaders at least, affirmation and a sense of direction. We must assert our sense of values, beginning with the given and the irrevocable, with the question of heroism and slavery.<sup>261</sup>

## **2.2 Theme and imagery of slavery in *Invisible Man***

Henry Louis Gates in his introduction to *The Slave's Narrative* (1985), claims

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<sup>258</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Narrative*, *op. cit.*, 274-5.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*, 372.

<sup>261</sup> Maryemma Graham and Amritjit Singh, *op. cit.*, 118-119.

that *Invisible Man* “embodies and transcends almost two centuries of repeated black narrative strategies ... first employed in the slave narrative.”<sup>262</sup> Yvonne Fonteneau confirms this link in the chain of narratives back to the slave narrative: “anyone who has read *Invisible Man* finds that, whether intentional or not, the “slave narrative” as strategy is in place as “prologue” to *Invisible Man*. To subject and text, the slave narrative is essential to our understanding of how the protagonist recreates himself.”<sup>263</sup> In other words, it is by putting the narrator within the canvas of history that Ellison is able to endow his narrative with deeper meaning. From the onset, Ellison situates his *Invisible Man* within the history of slavery: the protagonist defines the year in which he is narrating his memoir with reference to the emancipation proclamation: “I am not ashamed of my grand-parents for having been slaves. I am only ashamed of myself for having at one time been ashamed. About eighty-five years ago they were told that they were free.”<sup>264</sup>

Ellison also ties the African American novel to the problematic beginning of America in his essay “Society, Morality, and the Novel,” by echoing the Book of Genesis and thus implying that the worm of slavery was already in the apple: “In the beginning was not only the word but the contradiction of the word ... in this lies the novel's flexibility and its ability to transcend the bounds of class and nation, its endless possibilities of mutation.”<sup>265</sup> In other words, in the inception of the American nation lays what Ellison calls “the word”, the Constitution, an idealistic document which guaranties

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<sup>262</sup> Henry Louis Gates, *The Slave's Narrative*, *op. cit.*, xix.

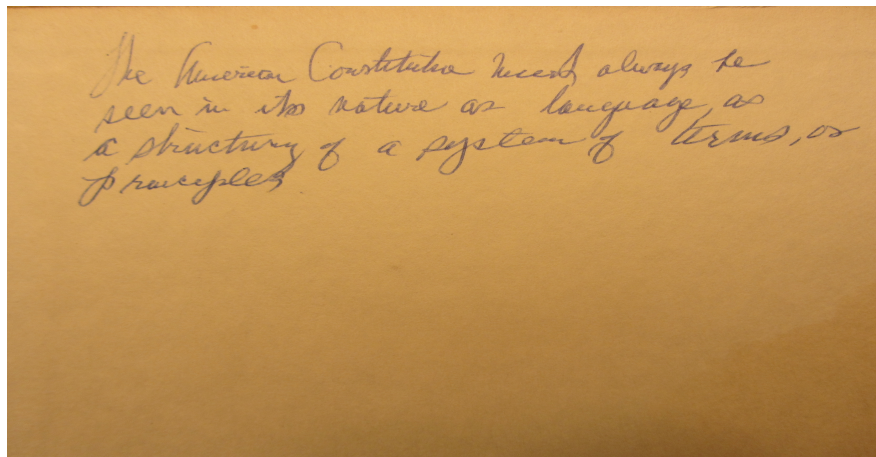
<sup>263</sup> Yvonne Fonteneau, “Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*: A Critical Reevaluation” *World Literature Today* 64.3 1990, 409.

<sup>264</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, *op. cit.*, 15.

<sup>265</sup> John F. Callahan, ed., *The Collected Essays*, *op. cit.*, 698.

the “inalienable” rights of all men to life, freedom and equality; but also “the contradiction of the word,” slavery, which deprived a segment of mankind of these inalienable rights.

After the horrific middle passage, the African Americans found themselves in a land caught in the absurdity of this contradiction. While claiming the highest ideals of democracy as set in the Constitution, the country has designed laws that define African Americans as subhumans, therefore liable to become property. My archival research in Ellison's papers reveals an Ellison utterly obsessed with the discrepancy between America's ideals and its deeds and with the need to “affirm the principles.” In a longhand note inserted in his copy of Kenneth Burke's *The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology*, Ellison scribbled “The American Constitution need always be seen in its nature as language, as a structuring of a system of terms or principles.”<sup>266</sup>



Ralph Ellison's Room, Library of Congress, Rare Books and Manuscript Division, A/VII/3.

The drafters of the Constitution probably agonized over the *constitution* of the words, that is the appropriate language that would allow an oxymoron like “all men are

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<sup>266</sup> Ralph Ellison's Room, Library of Congress, Rare Books and Manuscript Division, A/VII/3.  
Note on a scrap paper inserted in Kenneth Burke's *The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology*.

created equal” and the reality of slavery to virtually exist within the same page. Indeed the wealth of circumlocution that the founding fathers deployed in the Constitution makes that, as Frederick Douglass once commented, when slavery is abolished, “not a sentence or syllable of the Constitution need be altered.”<sup>267</sup> Indeed the word slave and slaveowner never appear but are instead carefully replaced respectively with “person held to service or labour,” and “the party to whom such service or labour may be due.” In one of his archival notes again, during the composition of *Three Days Before the Shooting*, Ellison scribbled on an envelop dated February 5, 1965, that African Americans “must build upon the novel as the Civil Rights movement builds upon the constitution.”<sup>268</sup> In other words, the function of the novel is to affirm the principles and to show how they can be perverted, “say yes” and “say no,” to use Ellison's words in *Invisible Man*. The African American text is called upon to make sense of America's chaos of contradictions and ultimately bring reality “into sharp and significant focus.”<sup>269</sup> As Malraux, quoted admiringly by Ellison, says, “All poetry implies the destruction of the relationship between things that seems obvious to us in favor of particular relationships imposed by the poet.”<sup>270</sup>

Ellison acknowledges black people's rich culture that developed and endured during slavery as an unescapable and valuable material for a novelist: “Through the very process of slavery,” he says, “came the building of the United States ... I can't take

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<sup>267</sup> Frederick Douglass, “Address for the Promotion of Colored Enlistments,” July 6, 1863, in Philip S. Foner, ed., *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass* (New York: International Publishers, 1950), vol. 3, 365.

<sup>268</sup> Ralph Ellison Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Box I: 138/ Folder 2.

<sup>269</sup> John F. Callahan, ed., *The Collected Essays*, *op. cit.*, 698.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*, 698.

“toute poésie implique la destruction du rapport qui nous semble évident entre les choses au bénéfice de rapports particuliers imposés par le poète.” *Partisan Review*, vol. 22 1955, 164.



this lightly or be impressed by those who cannot see its importance; it is important to *me*.”<sup>271</sup> In one of his undated unpublished notes, Ellison writes:

The slave system created a whole superstructure above the necessity for freedom. It was necessary to avoid punishment, to adjust oneself to the oppressive situation, to lighten ones[sic] labor, it was necessary to accept a new god to appease. These were the necessities which created the dance, the spirituals, the folk tales, the chants, work songs, kid rhymes ... they created the slave revolt and the underground railroad, all inspired by the drum of freedom and each a step in the direction of transforming the dream into reality. Freedom is the recognition of necessity.”<sup>272</sup>

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<sup>271</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, *op. cit.*, 173.

<sup>272</sup> Ralph Ellison Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Box I: 138/ Folder 5.

We do not mean here to deny the evidence to the fact that attempts were made to deliberately stamp out the African cultural patterns, especially those, such as the "talking drum" which could communicate <sup>news of</sup> and <sup>and</sup> which constituted a threat to the slave system; it is merely to point out that

art is the product of emotion and that the emotions are formed by the economic situation. With their situation so changed the slaves no longer had need for many of the old patterns. These were dropped <sup>or</sup> modified to the extent that they were useful in harnessing the new emotions in the effort <sup>the necessity to be free from bondage,</sup> to meet the ~~new~~ basic necessity/<sup>and</sup> thrust upon them by slavery.

~~Time necessity was freedom from bondage necessity~~

The slave system created a whole superstructure <sup>above</sup> ~~even~~ the necessity for freedom. When it was necessary to avoid punishment, to adjust oneself to the oppressive situation, to lighten <sup>ones</sup> ~~the~~ labor, it was necessary to accept a new god to appease. These were the necessities which created the dance, the spirituals, the folk tales, the chants, work songs and <sup>they</sup> ~~by~~ <sup>as</sup> ~~it~~ created the slave revolts, <sup>the</sup> ~~the~~ underground railroad, all inspired by the dream of freedom and each a step in the direction of transforming <sup>the dream</sup> ~~it~~ into reality.

Freedom is the recognition of necessity and Negro cultural forms are steps in the direction of that recognition which led ~~from~~ <sup>religious</sup> ~~the~~ <sup>concept</sup> of freedom in heaven, to the first impulsive and instinctive actions which marked the blending of myth and reality that <sup>became</sup> ~~was~~ the Underground Railroad <sup>and</sup> ~~the~~ realistic, organized system of escape, <sup>which was</sup> ~~the~~ <sup>possessing</sup> its own preachers and philosophers, <sup>the</sup> ~~the~~ Abolitionist movement.

Ralph Ellison Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Box I: 138/ Folder 5

For Ellison, the possibilities for the writer, of "the slave songs, blues, folk ballads" are "infinitely suggestive." Some of them "have named human situations so well that a whole corps of writers could not exhaust their universality. For instance,

here's an old slave verse":

Ole Aunt Dinah, she's just like me  
She work so hard she want to be free  
But ole Aunt Dinah's gittin' kinda ole  
She's afraid to go to Canada on account of the cold.  
Ole Uncle Jack, now he's a mighty "good nigger"  
You tell him that you want to be free for a fac'  
Next thing you know they done stripped the skin off your back.  
Now ole Uncle Ned, he want to be free  
He found his way north by the moss on the tree  
He cross that river floating in a tub  
The patateroller give him a mighty close rub.<sup>273</sup>

Ellison reckons that these lyrics may seem "crude", but "in it you have three universal attitudes toward the problem of freedom. You can refine it and sketch in the psychological subtleties and historical and philosophical allusions, action and whatnot, but I don't think its basic definition can be exhausted. Perhaps some genius could do as much with it as Mann has done with the Joseph story."<sup>274</sup>

The resounding experience of slavery haunts *Invisible Man*. The novel is a "narrative of ascent,"<sup>275</sup> a South-to-North journey that is, according to Ellison "so basic to Afro-American experience," that it appears as an archetype in African American literature. To support this argument, I want to quote here again Butterfield in relation to the pattern of the slave narrative: "the slave narrative's basic pattern, it will be remembered, was an escape from South to North as well as a movement up the social

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<sup>273</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, *op. cit.*, 173.

<sup>274</sup> Maryemma Graham and Amritjit Singh, *op. cit.*, 10.

<sup>275</sup> Robert Stepto, *op. cit.*, 67.

Stepto characterizes a narrative of ascent as one which displays the "requisite features or tropes of any ritualized journey [North] ... in Afro-American narratives. ... this perilous assertion of mobility ... assumes the properties of an ascension ritual."

scale from the status of slave to that of respected, educated citizen and vanguard of black politics and culture.”<sup>276</sup>

In a 1977 interview with Ellison, “The Essential Ellison,” Steve Canon remarked that the whole sequence of events in *Invisible Man* reads like a slave narrative.<sup>277</sup> Whether Ellison consciously borrowed the techniques of the genre is not certain as his response was that the similarities with his novel are “coincidental,” in the sense that, in so far as “experience tends to mold itself into certain repetitive patterns,” certain symbols, themes, and imagery from the slave narrative material are bound to “emerge from ... my sense of experience as shaped by history and my familiarity with literature,” and because “one’s sense of group experience comes first.”<sup>278</sup> Telling “our individual stories” amounts for Ellison to becoming “aware of our *general* story,” (emphasis original) That is why, he says, “the movement from the South to North became a basic pattern for my novel.”<sup>279</sup>

The connection with the slave narrative was more readily acknowledged by Ellison in an earlier interview for *The Paris Review* in 1954: “the narrator’s development is one through blackness to light; that is, from ignorance to enlightenment: invisibility to visibility. He leaves the South and goes North; this ... is always the road to freedom – the movement upward.”<sup>280</sup> In the same way, his leaving his underground hole for the surface can also be read as a reification of the same motif.

Once in the North, the narrator is constantly reminded of all the paraphernalia

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<sup>276</sup> Stephen Butterfield, *op. cit.*, 130-31.

<sup>277</sup> Maryemma Graham and Amritjit Singh, eds., *op. cit.*, 372.

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.*, 372.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*, 372.

<sup>280</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

that was used to keep blacks under control during chattel slavery days. These objects are of heavy symbolic meaning. Brother Tarp gives the narrator a leg chain bearing the marks of the struggle that was necessary to break it open, symbolically suggesting the hardship faced in rising up from slavery.

“I’d like to pass it on to you, son. There,” he said, handing it to me. “Funny thing to give somebody, but I think it’s got a heap of signifying wrapped up in it and it might help you remember what we’re really fighting against.

I took it in my hand, a thick, dark, oily piece of filed steel that had been twisted open and forced partly back into place, on which I saw marks that might have been made by the blade of a hatchet. It was such a link as I had seen on Bledsoe’s desk, only while that one had been smooth, Tarp’s bore the marks of haste and violence, looking as though it had been attacked and conquered before it stubbornly yielded.

I felt that Brother Tarp’s gesture in offering it was of some deeply felt significance which I was compelled to respect. Something, perhaps, like a man passing on to his son his own father’s watch, which the son accepted not because he wanted the old-fashioned time-piece for itself, but because of the overtones of unstated seriousness and solemnity of the paternal gesture which at once joined him with his ancestors, marked a high point of his present, and promised a concreteness to his nebulous and chaotic future.<sup>281</sup>

The narrator reads Brother Tarp’s gesture as a father-to-son gift that is meant to remind him of hi(s)story and heritage, and to point to the direction of his future actions. The college president, Dr Bledsoe, also possesses a leg shackle, albeit lustrous, and Ellison jotted a note for himself that points to the difference in the signification of the two shackles: “Bledsoe uses his chain link as decorous/decor, while Tarp uses his as a trophy/trope.”<sup>282</sup> Bledsoe brandishes the chain in front of the narrator while threatening him with punishment for having driven the white benefactor, Mr. Norton, to incestuous

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<sup>281</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, *op. cit.*, 379.

<sup>282</sup> Ralph Ellison Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Box I: 66/ Folder 10.

Trueblood's shack and then to the Golden Day:

“I gave you an opportunity to serve one of our best white friends, a man who could make your fortune. But in return you dragged the entire race into the slime!”

Suddenly he reached for something beneath a pile of papers, an old leg shackle from slavery which he proudly called a “symbol of our progress.”

“You've got to be disciplined, boy,” he said.

Bledsoe's polished shackle symbolizes his servility to Whites in order to gain their favor as well as his abuse of power and his participation in keeping the narrator in “his place.”

Bledsoe is the epitome of what Ellison calls the H.N.I.C. (Head Nigger in Charge) who would have “every Negro in the country hanging on tree limbs by morning if it means staying where I am.”<sup>283</sup> I concur with Robert Stepto that another symbolic meaning in Ellison's use of the leg shackle might point to the literary anguish that the slave narrative generates in black writers: “Bledsoe's smooth and closed shackle is a trope for inherited, and to a degree, imposed narrative forms in the tradition (of which Douglass's and Du Bois's forms are the dominant forms), and that Tarp's rudely opened shackle symbolizes both the release from these forms and the new form which is *Invisible Man*.”<sup>284</sup> This anxiety might explain Ellison's attempt to underplay the impact of the slave narrative tropes in *Invisible Man* in his 1977 interview with Steve Canon. In other words, for Ellison, stepping outside of the shackles of the experience of slavery goes first and foremost through the mastery of literary form.

When the narrator seeking employment and weighted with what he thinks is a letter of recommendation from Dr. Bledsoe, enters the white trustee's house, Mr. Emerson, he marvels at the museum-like aspect of the house, which he then proceeds to

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<sup>283</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, *op. cit.*, 41.

<sup>284</sup> Robert Stepto, *op. cit.*, 190.

compare with the painful relics, remnants of his heritage of slavery displayed at the museum of his college and which haunt his collective memory:

Beyond the door it was like a museum. I had entered a large reception room decorated with cool tropical colors... I looked around the room, amazed. There were paintings, bronzes, tapestries, all beautifully arranged... I looked across to a lighted case of Chinese design which held delicate-looking statues of horses and birds, small vases and bowls, each set upon a carved wooden base. The room was quiet as a tomb – until suddenly there was a savage beating of wings and I looked toward the window to see an eruption of color, as though a gale had whipped up a bundle of brightly colored rags. It was an aviary of tropical birds set near one of the broad windows, through which, as the clapping of wings settled down, I could see two ships plying far out upon the greenish bay below.

These folks are the Kings of the Earth! There was nothing like this at the college museum - or anywhere else that I had ever been. I recalled only a few cracked *relics from slavery times: an iron pot, an ancient bell, a set of ankle-irons and links of chain, a primitive loom, a spinning wheel, a gourd for drinking, an ugly ebony African god that seemed to sneer (presented to the school by some traveling millionaire), a leather whip with copper brads, a branding iron with the double letter MM.*<sup>285</sup>

Though he has “seldom seem them,” and “avoided the glass case in which they rested,” the narrator remembers vividly these relics, but prefers to focus his memory rather on “the early days after the Civil War.”<sup>286</sup> History is present for Ralph Waldo Ellison and moves “not like an arrow but a boomerang,”<sup>287</sup> while Ralph Waldo Emerson can afford to regard it as worthless: “Why should we import *rags and relics* into the new hour, Nature abhors the old, and old age seems the only disease.”<sup>288</sup> Apart from alluding to the structure of *Invisible Man*, it is in the sense of an ever-present history when it comes to

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<sup>285</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, *op. cit.*, 178.

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>287</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>288</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Collected Works*, *op. cit.*, 188.

the race question, that Ellison says “the end is in the beginning and lies far ahead”<sup>289</sup>; and that he alludes approvingly to Faulkner's statement about the unpastness of the past: “What is commonly assumed to be past history is actually as much a part of the living present as William Faulkner insisted. Furtive, implacable and tricky, it inspires both the observer and the scene observed, artifacts, manners and atmosphere and it speaks even when no one wills to listen.”<sup>290</sup>

Like the narrator who enters the fictional Emerson's house, Ellison seeks to place *Invisible Man* and himself and the part of the American history that he represents, in the American ‘house’ of Fiction, beside Emerson. Indeed, the imagery of caged birds, ships and emblems of slavery indicate Ellison's attempt to place himself in the “boomerang” of history and his signifyin(g) upon Emerson's “self-reliance.” Ellison parodies his advocacy of self-expression and fidelity to the true self in a world controlled by restrictive racial ideology. The Invisible Man can obviously not be a champion of self-reliance within a power structure that renders him (un)visible and denies him economic opportunity and racial equality.

This section of *Invisible Man* refers specifically to Emerson but using an ambiguous, double-voiced discourse which ultimately blurs the boundaries between the textual Mr. Emerson and the transcendental thinker. Young Emerson reveals to the Invisible Man that Bledsoe's letter to Mr. Emerson is in fact a terrible 'joke' that is meant to “Keep This Nigger Boy Running.”<sup>291</sup> Ellison's narrator, on his way back to his room in Men's House, continues this dramatic ambiguousness in a soliloquy,

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<sup>289</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, *op. cit.*, 6.

<sup>290</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii.

<sup>291</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.



Perhaps it was a test of my good will and faith—But that’s a lie, I thought. It’s a lie and you know it’s a lie. I had seen the letter and it had practically ordered me killed. By slow degrees. . .

“My dear Mr. Emerson,” I said aloud. “The Robin bearing this letter is a former student. Please hope him to death, and keep him running. Your most humble and obedient servant, A. H. Bledsoe . . .”

Sure, that’s the way it was, I thought, a short, concise verbal *coup de grace*, straight to the nape of the neck. And Emerson would write in reply? Sure: “Dear Bled, have met Robin and shaved tail. Signed, Emerson.”<sup>292</sup> (Original ellipses and emphasis)

When Emerson Jr. further tells him that “With us it’s still Jim and Huck Finn.... I’m afraid my father considers me one of the unspeakables ... I’m Huckleberry, you see ....”<sup>293</sup> he is establishing his racial superiority and a clear hierarchy of authority by using Mark Twain’s<sup>294</sup> model of white-slave relationship, while eluding his homoerotic interest in the narrator.<sup>295</sup> For if young Emerson visualizes himself as Huck Finn, Ellison’s protagonist is by force the runaway slave “Nigger Jim.” As Ralph Ellison argues, Twain portrays “Nigger Jim” as an ignorant and superstitious slave and “fitted him into the outlines of the minstrel tradition,”<sup>296</sup> a “submissive ... entertainer ... robbed of both his subjectivity and ... masculinity.”<sup>297</sup>

Emerson Jr./Huck Finn had a “strange interest in his eyes” for the Invisible

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<sup>292</sup> *Ibid.*, 190-91.

<sup>293</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

<sup>294</sup> Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Chatto & Windus, 1884).

<sup>295</sup> For a discussion of homoerotic allusions in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, see Leslie Fiedler’s “Come Back to the Raft Ag’in, Huck Honey!” in *An End to Innocence* (Beacon Press, 1955), pp.142-51. This essay first appeared in the *Partisan Review* in 1948 and was hugely controversial. Fiedler’s core thesis is that at the heart of nineteenth-century American literature, and well into the early twentieth century is a topos of the “mutual love of a white man and a colored” – Ishmael and Queequeg, Natty Bumppo and Chingachgook, Huck and Jim – which springs from the white American’s longing for “acceptance at the breast he has most utterly offended.”

<sup>296</sup> John F. Callahan, ed., *The Collected Essays*, *op. cit.*, 104.

<sup>297</sup> Brandt, Stefan L. *The Culture of Corporeality: Aesthetic Experience and the Embodiment of America, 1945-1960* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2007), 312.

Man/Nigger Jim; his focus on his body rather than his brilliant academic performance: “You have the build [of an athlete],” he said, looking me up and down”; his hardly concealed offer to “throw off the mask of custom and manners that insulate man from man, and converse in naked honesty and frankness”<sup>298</sup>; and finally his invitation to the “Club Calamus,”<sup>299</sup> where he has “rendezvous [with] writers, artists and all kinds of celebrities,”<sup>300</sup> altogether underwrite the hidden motives lurking sometimes beneath white liberals' interest and the black body as Whites' property in the modern form of slavery.

### 2.3 Parody of Melville's *Benito Cereno* and the slave narrative

I want to develop here an alternative reading of Ellison's quoting of Herman Melville in the epigraph of *Invisible Man* as an instance of Ellison's parody or motivated Signifyin(g) on Melville *and* the slave narrative, a sort of double parody. A common convention of the slave narrative is that it is always op-ted by a white text that serves the purpose of authenticating the authorship and the veracity of the experience that is being told in the autobiography. When Phillis Weatley's volume of poems appeared in London in 1773, it had no less than eighteen white “authenticating documents” “from the most respectable Characters in Boston” to attest to the slave narrator's “examined” ability for authorship. Similarly, Even though Douglass's *Narrative* bears his name, it had to be prefaced by William Lloyd Garrison: “Mr. Douglass has frankly disclosed the place of his birth, the names of those who claimed ownership in his body and soul, and

<sup>298</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, *op. cit.*, 182-83.

<sup>299</sup> A reference to Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. Apart from Whitman and Huck and Jim, the scene alludes also to Freud's *Totem and Taboo*.

<sup>300</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, *op. cit.*, 183.

the names also of those who committed the crimes which he has alleged against them. His statement, therefore, may easily be disproved, if they are untrue.”<sup>301</sup> The authors of the slaves narratives had no choice also in accepting the editing of their narratives as a necessary step before exposing it to the often hostile audience. The aim is to deflect any rejection of the authenticity of authorship by the proponents of slavery who would use a flawed grammar or an ill-formed narrative to argue for the primitivity and absence of reasoning of the blacks thus underpinning their inhumanity and justifying their enslavement. Yet, all these prefaces, postfaces and white paratexts in actuality framed, contained, or silenced the black voice. I argue that it is this shadowing of the black text that Ellison sets to subvert by himself casting a shadow on the white canonical texts that have so far framed and controlled the black voice.

Ellison starts *Invisible Man* with a quotation from Melville's *Benito Cereno* which is a story about a slave rebellion aboard a slave ship, the San Dominick, and whose ethical ambivalence can lend to different interpretations. Melville's views on blacks or slavery are frustratingly scarce and ambiguous and this ambiguity is reflected in his portrayal of the black characters as particularly violent, merciless and duplicitous in *Benito Cereno*. His terrible experience as a captive of the Typee cannibals,<sup>302</sup> and his witnessing of their rituals and behaviors, may have shaped, if only partly, his perspective and his characterization.

Although there is no consensus between scholars as to whether Captain Delano is a voice for Melville's racial opinions, *Benito Cereno* is undoubtedly a narrative of a

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<sup>301</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Narrative*, *op. cit.*, 8.

<sup>302</sup> Giles Gunn, *A Historical Guide to Herman Melville* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 180.

master and slave struggle. Joseph Young very pointedly argues in his book *Race and the Foundation of Knowledge* (2006) that the text can be read against the Hegelian proslavery dialectics, in which “the slave, figuratively inscribed within the ontology of ‘the other,’ is the cowardly paradigmatic opposite of the audacious master.”<sup>303</sup> According to Young, *Benito Cereno* dethrones the assumption of white superiority and the slave's lack of intelligence inherent in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), by depicting Babo's outwitting the white masters and leading a slave revolt. Indeed, Babo is capable of “composing his own discourse and becoming a force in his own fate.”<sup>304</sup> Although this argument has some validity, Melville's narrative seems to me unable to effect this “reversal of racialization of history”<sup>305</sup> till the end; it does not resign itself to cast Babo as “the master of [his] fate,”<sup>306</sup> as he faces an appalling fate at the end of the story with his public humiliation and execution: “Some months after, dragged to the gibbet at the tail of a mule, ... the body was burned to ashes, ... the head ... fixed on a pole in the plaza.”<sup>307</sup> So much for the commitment to morality and ethics that Ellison praises in nineteenth century American literature.

Contrary to Joseph Young, Bruce Franklin, examining religious symbolism in *Benito Cereno*, argues that it is Captain Cereno who is depicted in a messianic light: “there are several shadowy hints that the relationship between Cereno and Babo is like that between Christ and Judas,”<sup>308</sup> and Babo is the “body servant” who is zealous and

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<sup>303</sup> Joseph Young and Jana Evans Braziel. Eds. *Race and the Foundations of Knowledge: Cultural Amnesia and the Academy* (Urbana and Chicago: Illinois UP, 2006), 94.

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>305</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>306</sup> I'm using here a line from William Ernest Henley's poem “Invictus” written in 1875.

<sup>307</sup> Herman Melville, *Benito Cereno* (Boston: Wyn Kelley, 2008), 91.

<sup>308</sup> Franklin H. Bruce, “‘Apparent Symbol of Despotism’: Melville's *Benito Cereno*.” *New England Quarterly* 34 (1961), 475.

apparently pleased to serve his master whom he betrays under the guise of friendship:

Sometimes the Negro gave his master his arm, or took his handkerchief out of his pocket for him; performing these and similar offices with the affectionate zeal which transmutes into something filial or fraternal acts in themselves but menial; and which has gained for the negro the repute of making the most pleasing body servant in the world; one, too, whom a master need be on no stiffly superiors terms with, but may treat with familiar trust.<sup>309</sup>

Melville's description fits Babo into the stereotype of the "good nigger," deprived of what Ellison calls "human complexity," which as I substantiate below, Ellison's sharp sense of the intricacies and ambiguities of the racist discourse would not let go unsigned upon. Franklin's interpretation of Cereno as a Christ figure relies upon Cereno and Delano's exchange on their way to Lima after Delano annihilated the slave revolt. Cereno's words to Delano, "you were with me all day; stood with me, sat with me, talked with me, looked at me, ate with me, drank with me,"<sup>310</sup> echo what Christ allegedly said to his disciples after his resurrection. Therefore, for Franklin, it is Cereno that emerges from the narrative as the hero.

Babo is not really *seen* in this Melville's novella and is given only a sketchy description with animalistic associations: "[Delano] took to negroes ... just as other men to Newfoundland dogs."<sup>311</sup> In *The Confidence Man*, Melville reiterates the same African American/Newfoundland dog kind of comparison: "In the forward part of the boat, not the least attractive object, for a time, was a grotesque negro cripple, ... cut down to the stature of a *Newfoundland dog*; his knotted black fleece and *good-natured*, honest black face rubbing against the upper part of people's thighs."<sup>312</sup> (Emphasis mine.) Melville's

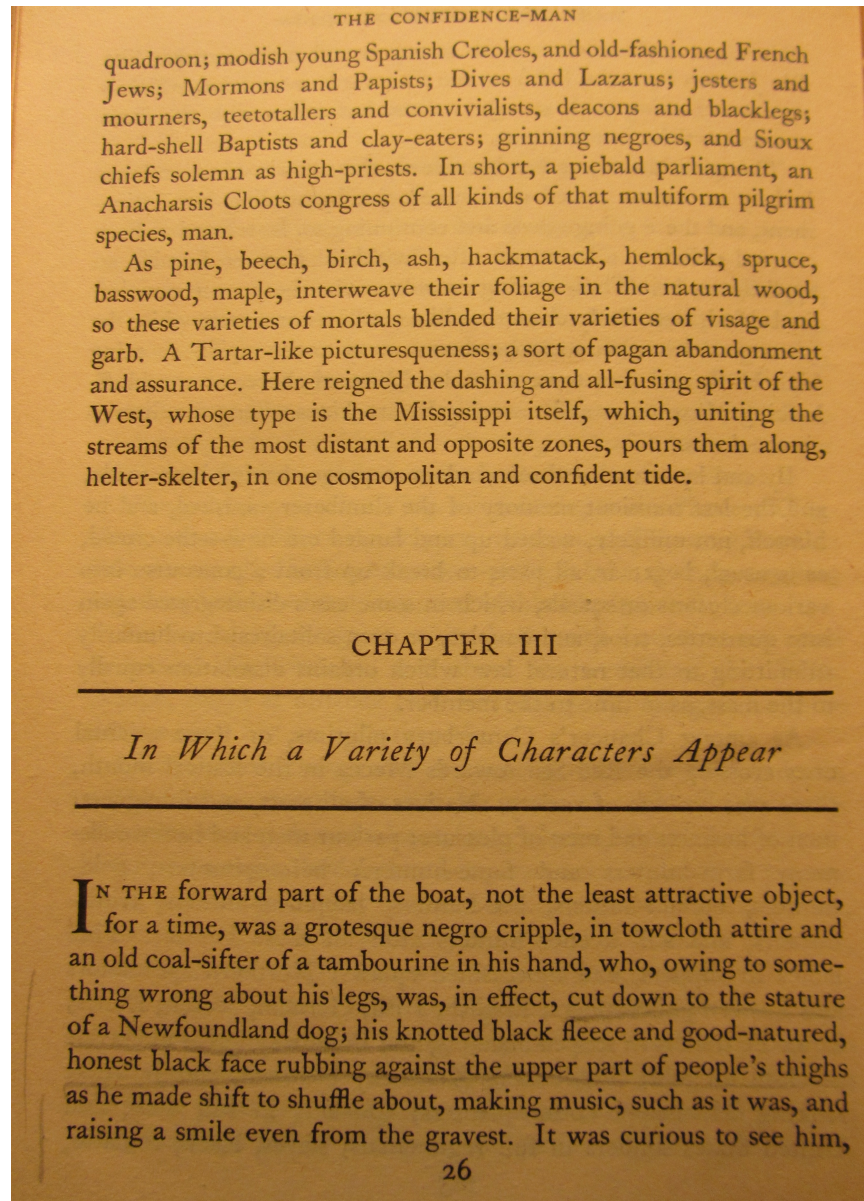
<sup>309</sup> Herman Melville, *Benito Cereno*, *op. cit.*, 41-42.

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>311</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>312</sup> Herman Melville, *The Confidence Man: His Masquerade* (New York: Literary Classics of the United

(dog)ged will to liken African Americans to that big but benign and passive race of dogs was certainly not to Ellison's liking since he underlined the above quoted paragraph in his copy of Melville's novels with bold, wrathful lines.



Page from Herman Melville's *The Confidence Man: His Masquerade*

States, 1984), 26.

Consulted in Ralph Ellison's Room, Library of Congress, Rare Books and Manuscript Division, Ellison's Room, A/VIII/4.

in R. Ellison's Room, A/VIII/4, Rare Books and Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

By referring to Babo as a “Newfoundland dog,” the narrative, as Nicole Waligora-Davis argues, “marks off a liberal descriptive and representational excess that simultaneously renders the black body concealed and hypervisible.”<sup>313</sup> This oxymoron is what the narrator of Ellison's *Invisible Man* revolts against in his prologue:

I am an invisible man... I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves or figments of their imagination, indeed, *everything and anything except me*.<sup>314</sup>

This brief discussion of the stereotypical characterization of the black body as a shadow in Melville's *Benito Cereno* aims at contextualizing the passage from an exchange between Cereno and Delano toward the end of Melville's narrative that Ellison pointedly quotes and *amputates* in his epigraph:

“You are saved,” cried Captain Delano, more and more astonished and pained;  
“you are saved: what has cast such a shadow upon you?”

The answer by Captain Cereno in Melville's text is: “The Negro.” This casts blacks as an evil shadow over the white man's innocence. However, Ellison truncates the quotation and lets the question hang in silence, hence epitomizing the *invisibility* of “the Negro,” and very adequately setting the stage for Ellison's *Invisible Man*. This strategic amputation as it magnifies the “shadow” of the “negro” that has engulfed America, also recasts Ellison's text that follows, *Invisible Man*, as his answer; a text that intends to

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<sup>313</sup> Nicole Waligora-Davis, *Sanctuary: African Americans and Empire* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 65.

<sup>314</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, *op. cit.*, 3.

assert/insert itself in this exchange; a shadow that obviates the white “father-paratext.” It suggests Ellison's ultimate subversion and appropriation of the seal of authentication that was the preserve of the white/master text, and at the same time his criticism of what Alan Nadel calls “American blindness masked as American optimism,”<sup>315</sup> at work in *Benito Cereno*. While the rebellious black crew remains silent for the most part of Melville's novella, Captain Cereno and Captain Delano deploy a language which is forceful and willfully ambiguous as an agent of control over the rebellious slaves. However, their language sounds ironic because of their moral blindness. *Benito Cereno* is a tale of “Shadows present, foreshadowing deeper shadows to come.”<sup>316</sup> The word shadow is repeated more than twenty times in *Invisible Man* in various situations in which the protagonist is “bumped against by those of poor vision. Or again, you often doubt if you really exist. You wonder whether you aren't simply a phantom in other people's minds.”<sup>317</sup> Captain Delano's blindness is his inability to imagine the slave-mutiny leader, Babo, as a thinking subject, a “thinker-tinker.” The Invisible Man says in the prologue,

Though invisible, I am in the great American tradition of tinkers. That makes me kin to Ford, Edison and Franklin. *Call me*, since I have a theory and a concept, a “thinker-tinker.”<sup>318</sup>

The extended allusion to Melville's famous beginning “Call me Ishmael” also announces *Invisible Man*'s “epic scope,” while also pointing to the extended signifying on/entering in the text of *Moby Dick*. Interestingly enough, Ishmael's accidentally

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<sup>315</sup> Alan Nadel, *Invisible Criticism: Ralph Ellison and the American Canon* (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1988), 105.

<sup>316</sup> Herman Melville, *Benito Cereno*, *op. cit.*, 1.

<sup>317</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, *op. cit.*, 3.

<sup>318</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.



entering a black church in New Bedford that he has mistaken for an inn called “the Trap,” and where he hears a sermon about “*the blackness of darkness*”, can be correlated with the Invisible Man’s hallucination of listening to a homily about “the blackness of blackness” during the narrator’s drug-induced reveries. When he approaches the church, Ishmael hearing a loud voice inside, pushed the door:

It seemed the great black parliament sitting in Tophet. A hundred black faces turned round in their rows to peer; and beyond a black angel of doom was beating a book in the pulpit. It was a negro church; and the preacher’s text was about the *blackness of darkness*, and the weeping and wailing and teeth-gnashing there. Ha, Ishmael, muttered I, backing out, wretched entertainment at the sign of ‘The Trap!’<sup>319</sup>

However, as Melville’s Ishmael quickly backs out, the reader is not given the opportunity to hear the sermon in Melville’s text. Ellison appropriates Melville’s authority over the scene by forcing Ishmael and the reader to re-enter the black “Tophet” and hear the black preacher’s response to the inherent contradictions and ambiguities of any text on blackness and narratives of beginning. It is this absent sermon “on the blackness of blackness” that Ellison writes, riffs and signifies upon in *Invisible Man*, in the articulated voice of a fire-and-brimstone black preacher:

“*Brothers and sisters, my text this morning is the 'Blackness of Blackness.'*”  
*And a congregation of voices answered: “That blackness is most black, brother, most black ...”*  
*“In the beginning . . .”....*  
*. . . there was blackness . . .”*  
*“ . . . and the sun . . .” ....*  
*“ . . . was bloody red . . .” ....*  
*“Now black is . . .” the preacher shouted.*  
*“Bloody . . .”*  
*“I said black is . . .”....*  
*“ . . . an' black ain't . . .”*  
*“Red, Lawd, red: He said it's red!”*  
*“Amen, brother . . .”*

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<sup>319</sup> Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* (New York: Norton, 1967), 18.

"Black will git you . . ."  
 "Yes, it will . . ."  
 "... an' black won't . . ." ...  
 "It do . . ." ...  
 "... an' it don't." ...  
 "... It'll put you, glory, glory, Oh my Lawd, in the WHALE'S BELLY."  
 "... an' make you tempt . . ."  
 "Good God a-mighty!"  
 "Old Aunt Nelly!"  
 "Black will make you . . ."  
 "... or black will un-make you."<sup>320</sup> (All emphasis in original)

This sermon epitomizes an extraordinary lyrical example of call-and-response practice that demystifies any predetermined assignment of value to the white myth of origin by reversing it to *blackness as beginning*. Kimberly Benston describes this sermon as "a dialogic site-ing":

[T]he sermon works by differential tensions, defining the ever-shifting "scene" of African-American language as dialectical: "In the beginning" was the sign of the End, the bloody sun of Revelations (cf. Rev. 6:12); black will and it won't; love enfolds hate; laughter echoes moan – a doubleness experienced both rhetorically (won't/don't) and dramatically (the "ivory" whiteness-of-whiteness calls for the preacher's "black" response).<sup>321</sup>

Ellison stylizes and parodies Melville's text in *Moby Dick* about the meaning of "blackness" as "profound" and "awful" and the "whiteness of whiteness" as having a "fluid identity."<sup>322</sup> Ellison proclaims that blackness precedes whiteness and was the color of the universe: "*In the beginning ... At the very start,... there was blackness ...*" Thus Ellison establishes blackness as epistemically foundational by basing his sermon of "the blackness of blackness" on Genesis while Melville's biblical text on "the *blackness of darkness*," where there is "weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth"

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<sup>320</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, *op. cit.*, 9-10.

<sup>321</sup> Kimberly Benston, "Performing Blackness," *op. cit.*, 170-71.

<sup>322</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

comes from the book of Jude in the New Testament. This sermon is in my view more pragmatic than religious in that it is more concerned, to use Kenneth Burke's words, with "the way we use our words about God on each other."<sup>323</sup> When Ellison says that "*black is ... an' black ain't ...*", "*It do . . .*" ... "*. . . an' it don't,*" he is clearly set to disrupt racial ontologies through the ambiguity and duality of his phrases, as he invites us to ponder the instability of the very terms we use to signify or construct racial identity.

Considering the religiously secular tone/intent of the sermon and knowing that Ellison was a very skilled professional photographer and therefore familiar with colors, I argue that Ellison plays here on the physical property of light called additive color system, which begins with black and produces a whole range of color shades when lights of various wavelengths are added in given proportions. Besides, when Ellison says that "*black is ... an' black ain't ...*", he is also referring very pragmatically to the fact that it is blackness and not whiteness which is an absence of color.

Coming to the symbolic meaning of blackness and whiteness, Ellison's preacher says that it is Black that "*will make you . . .*" or "*will un-make you*", thus signifyin(g) on Melville's metaphysical ambiguity on the meaning of whiteness in chapter 42 of *Moby Dick*: "The Whiteness of the Whale," and assigning the same human ambiguity to blackness as well: "while thus constantly parodying Melville, Ellison ultimately invests blackness with the very qualities encompassed by whiteness in *Moby-Dick*."<sup>324</sup>

An expected corollary of Ellison's parody is his turning whiteness throughout *Invisible Man* into a symbol of destruction and unfathomable evil that has to be avoided

<sup>323</sup> Kenneth Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), vi.

<sup>324</sup> Kun Jong Lee, *Reading Race in(to) the American Renaissance: A Study of Race in Emerson, Whitman, Melville and Ellison* (Austin: University of Texas at Austin, 1992), 241.

as much as “strange dogs in rabid weather.”<sup>325</sup> In the Golden Day episode, the narrator is horrified to find himself in close contact with the fainting white trustee Norton who is referred to by the vets as a “lyncher of souls”<sup>326</sup> :

Suddenly a mass of whiteness was looming two inches from my eyes; it was only his face but I felt a shudder of nameless horror. I had never been so close to a white person before. In a panic I struggled to get away. With his eyes closed he seemed more threatening than with them open. He was like a formless white death, suddenly appeared before me, a death which had been there all the time and which had now revealed itself in the madness of the Golden Day ... I clamped my mouth shut, aware for the first time that the shrill sound was coming from my own throat ... “He's only a man. Remember that. He's only a man!”<sup>327</sup>

The description of the Mr. Norton as a “mass of whiteness” in its formlessness and indefiniteness recalls the white whale as a sign of “motiveless malignancy.”<sup>328</sup>

Although the assumption of authorial intent is not a prerequisite for making sense of a narrative, Melville, with his ambivalent color symbolism, appears “in his American fashion, unsure about what he really did feel.”<sup>329</sup> Edward Stone's ironic assessment of Melville also points to this ambiguity: “A democrat ... a lover of mankind of whatever color ... and a racist.”<sup>330</sup> Ellison's virtuoso signifyin(g) in the epigraph is double: it parodies the tradition of the white endorsement of black texts, while announcing his intention to signify upon Melville's novella by illuminating the “shadow” and revealing the Black presence both in text and in America, the great white whale.

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<sup>325</sup> John F. Callahan, ed., *The Collected Essays*, op. cit., 636.

<sup>326</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, op. cit., 92.

<sup>327</sup> *Ibid.*, 84-85.

<sup>328</sup> John F. Callahan, ed., *The Collected Essays*, op. cit., 636.

<sup>329</sup> Edward Margolies, “Melville and Blacks.” *CLA* 18.3 (1975): 364-373. 365.

<sup>330</sup> Edward Stone, “The Whiteness of the Whale.” *CLA* 18.3 (1975): 348-363. 349.

### 3. “Black Is . . . And Black Ain’t”: The dilemma of tradition

#### 3.1 The African-American double heritage

The question of ancestry is fraught with tensions and paradox for African American writers since, their ancestors being “brought to the New World in chains,” they always find their quest for origin “answered in the delineation of kidnaping and terror.”<sup>331</sup> The brutal severance of all familial roots through multiple sell into slavery left them bereft of ancestral legitimacy and identity. Even their names were replaced by those of their masters and their languages by that of the white oppressors. In the manuscript of his second novel, Ellison recounts the African American horrendous experience in the voice of Reverend Daddy Hickman, and in no less than eight pages of a wonderful prose full of death and resurrection imagery and biblical references:

[In] floating coffins, and don't you youngsters forget it! ... they brought us up onto this land in chains ... they set us to toiling... they took the white fleece of the cotton and the sweetness of the sugar cane and made them bloody with our toil... they left us without names ... And they scattered us around this land.... divided and divided and divided us again like a gambler shuffling and cutting a deck of cards;

They cut out our tongues...

...They left us speechless...

...They cut out our tongues...

...Lord, they left us without words...

They scattered our tongues in this land like seed ...

...And left us without language

They took away our talking drums ...

Drums like a conscience ... that knew right from wrong. ...

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<sup>331</sup> Houston Baker, *The Journey Back: Issues in Black Literature and Criticism* (University of Chicago Press, 1980), 2.

Drums that told us *our* time and told us where we were...

They left us drumless. ...

Aaaaaah! Eyeless, tongueless, drumless, danceless, ashes...

motherless, fatherless, brotherless, sisterless, powerless ...<sup>332</sup>

(emphasis and ellipses original.)

Because of these endless ruptures that Ellison enumerates, the African American has to recreate his identity by relying on his American environment and on the Western civilization and culture, while clinging to that part of his ancestral culture that has heroically survived slavery and has been preserved in folklore, religious sermons and songs. The dilemma for African Americans arises from the fact that the ideals of freedom and democracy they fully embrace are those of the oppressor who Jim-Crows them. The means of expressing those ideals are also the language and the literature of the oppressor which silence and construct African Americans as subhumans.

The double legacy that Africans Americans are born into is the foundation of what W.E.B. DuBois terms “double consciousness.” That is the psychological burden of trying to reconcile:

two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings [...] two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly

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<sup>332</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Three Days Before the Shooting*, eds. John F. Callahan and Adam Bradley (New York: The Modern Library), 317-320.

in his face.”<sup>333</sup>

This Janus-like posture stems from the pull between a Western aesthetics and black folk culture and politics. This double bind, with the underlying issue of race, weighs heavily on “the creation and criticism of African American literature and culture,”<sup>334</sup> asserts Houston Baker Jr. “Any black person in the United States,” he adds, “who has aspired to the status of poet, singer, painter or novelist has found him or herself confronted, automatically, by a tortuous psychological maze that begins with race.”<sup>335</sup> Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, Ralph Ellison, Ishmael Reed, Ernest Gaines, Alice Walker, to name only a few, all grappled each in his own way, with the difficulties of identification and association across the racial line. Alice walker for example, speaking about her anxiety-ridden relationship to Flannery O'Connor, and although she admires “the magic, the wit and the mystery of her writing,” she asserts that as a black person one “cannot identify with [her], ... no matter how much one admires [her], ... if one allows history to impinge on one’s reading pleasure.”<sup>336</sup> Therefore, whether to claim descent from black or white predecessors; how to remain consistent if one chooses to acknowledge both – as Ellison does by openly claiming descent from Western literary fathers in his quest for individual artistic self-affirmation – is a tug of war that characterizes, indeed, the works of the African American writer whose culture is grounded in this complex double tradition. Consequently, the text he produces is, as Henry Louis Gates Jr. writes, a “mulatto text with complex double [...] literary

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<sup>333</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*. (New York: Penguin Books Ltd, 1989), 3.

<sup>334</sup> Houston Baker Jr., *Afro-American Poetics: Revision of Harlem and the Black Arts Movement* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 92.

<sup>335</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>336</sup> Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1983), 8.

heritages,”<sup>337</sup> that reveals all the stress involved, for the black writer, in creating within two traditions: the western and the African American. Gates further argues: “anyone who analyses black literature must do so as a comparativist, ... because our canonical texts have complex double formal antecedents, the Western and the black.”<sup>338</sup> Ellison highlights the stress involved with this double literary identity when he asserts that although the African American writer was “born to the American tongue and to the language of the Bible and the Constitution ... [which] for better or worse, shaped [his] thought and attitudes,” and he also “inherited a group style originated by ... Negro American [people],” he is nevertheless “cut off from firsthand contact with large areas of the society – especially from those centers where power is translated into ideas and into manners and into values,” and which “would not admit his existence, much less his right to participate or to judge.”<sup>339</sup>

Ellison describes his uncomfortable dualistic position as that of “an African and an American, a member of the family and yet an outsider.”<sup>340</sup> He claims his inheritance of Du Bois's double consciousness when he asserts that, as the African American writer “strains for self-achievement as artist (and here he can only 'integrate' and free himself), he moves toward fulfilling his dual potentialities as Negro and American,”<sup>341</sup> through “the integration of American society on the level of the imagination.”<sup>342</sup> He must “use his imagination to question and penetrate the facade of things.”<sup>343</sup> He has to consciously

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<sup>337</sup> Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, *op. cit.*, 152.

<sup>338</sup> *Ibid.* xxiv.

<sup>339</sup> Maryemma Graham and Amritjit Singh, *op. cit.*, 135.

<sup>340</sup> Ralph Ellison, “Stepchild Fantasy,” *The Saturday Review of Literature* 29 (June 1946): 25-26.

<sup>341</sup> John F. Callahan, ed., *The Collected Essays*, *op. cit.*, 158.

<sup>342</sup> Maryemma Graham and Amritjit Singh, *op. cit.*, 135.

<sup>343</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.



and imaginatively integrate his mixed background as American, and as an African American.

Ellison actually succeeds in transcending this dichotomy not only by blending his folk culture with the western formal esthetics through the use of myth and modern narrative forms, but also through characterization. For example, in *Invisible Man*, Ellison sophisticatedly explores this hyphenated identity in his description of Tod Clifton, the young black leader. Clifton, whose features and character traits bear the “Afro-Anglo-Saxon contours,” clearly indicating signs of hybridity, embodies the hope in a multiracial society:

The young man was moving with an easy Negro stride out of the shadow into the light, and I saw that he was very black and very handsome, and as he advanced mid-distance into the room, that he possessed the chiseled, black-marble features sometimes found on statues in northern museums and alive in southern towns in which the white offspring of house children and the black offspring of yard children bear names, features and character traits as identical as the rifling of bullets fired from a common barrel. And now close up, leaning tall and relaxed, his arms outstretched stiffly upon the table, I saw the broad, taut span of his knuckles upon the dark grain of the wood, the muscular, sweated arms, the curving line of the chest rising to the easy pulsing of his throat, to the square, smooth chin, and saw a small X-shaped patch of adhesive upon the subtly blended, velvet-over-stone, granite-over-bone, Afro-Anglo-Saxon contour of his cheek.<sup>344</sup>

Tod Clifton appear like the perfectly harmonious African American who has acquired American traits while retaining his blackness. He has gotten beyond the Du Boisian “caught in between,” and is able to grasp “true self-consciousness” without renouncing the advantages of the “double-consciousness.” However, the X-shaped patch of adhesive on Tod Clifton's skin, which is later reiterated as “the *cross* of adhesive on the

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<sup>344</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, *op. cit.*, 354.

black skin,” the references to the East and the “lamb,” all suggest that the road to this ideal might be long and arduous.

### 3.2 American/African American dichotomy in academia

The dichotomy between mainstream American and African American literature seems so indelible to academic criticism that it has acquired the permanence of a tautology. More than a century ago, W.E.B. Dubois prophesized in *The Souls of Black Folks* that “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line.”<sup>345</sup> his prophesy has proved accurate even in the realm of academia where the problem of where to draw this line has ever since informed any discussion of American literature. However, while white critics generally make this distinction in terms of the failure of African American literature to measure up to mainstream literary aesthetic standards, African American writers and critics see this dichotomy as necessary since African American literary history has to “carry the burden of representing the discredited but lingering social category of race,”<sup>346</sup> as long as mainstream American literary history “continue[s] to variously account for and ignore the larger significance of African American experience and esthetics.”<sup>347</sup>

In his book, *Chaotic Justice: Rethinking African American Literary History* (2009) – fairly recent which indicates that literary categorization dies hard – John Ernest asserts that the very term “‘African American’ [has] been matters of familiar but increasingly serious and pressing debates.”<sup>348</sup> Hence he asks: “what is African American

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<sup>345</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *op. cit.*, 13.

<sup>346</sup> John Ernest, *Chaotic Justice: Rethinking African American Literary History* (The University of North Caroline Press, 2009), xiv.

<sup>347</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv.

<sup>348</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

about African American literature and why should we identify this as a distinct tradition?”<sup>349</sup> His answer is that the very presence of black caricatures and stereotypes in white texts “highlights the cultural dynamics that have made African American a significant ideological and cultural marker, one still very much needed.”<sup>350</sup> Such caricatures of African Americans are indeed present in such white texts as Faulkner's or Hemingway's which I discuss in chapter four, and earlier texts such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), Joel Chandler Harris's “Uncle Remus” tales (1910), or William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967). About the latter, Ralph Ellison lamented the unwillingness “of the artist to surrender the prejudices of his background,”<sup>351</sup> then he commented dismissively during a panel discussion on the uses of history in fiction: “the novelist should leave history [and historical figures] alone, ... he shouldn't bother them. Don't appropriate the names. Don't move into the historical arena, because you can only be slaughtered there,”<sup>352</sup> he says addressing Styron.

One could argue that the very existence of departments of African American studies stand for an institutionalized form of this dichotomy. Even some African American theorists such as Henry Louis Gates who champions black studies that rely on African American critical paradigms, and Houston Baker, are found guilty of perpetuating such dichotomy. Deconstructionist critic and former chair of the Department of African American Studies at Harvard, Barbara Johnson, for instance, takes issue with Gates in relation to his insistence on the vernacular roots of African

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<sup>349</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>350</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>351</sup> Maryemma Graham and Amritjit Singh, *op. cit.* 137.

<sup>352</sup> “The Uses of History in Fiction,” was a panel discussion with Ralph Ellison, William Styron, Robert Penn Warren, C. Vann Woodward, at the thirty-fourth annual meeting of the Southern Historical Association in New Orleans, 6 November 1968. *Southern Literary Journal*, 1 (spring 1969), 57-90.

American literary tradition and on his use of a binary racial language. Johnson criticizes Gates's use of “black” and “white” adjectives with their implied relation of mutual exclusion as oversimplified racial binarism. She argues:

This binary model is based on two fallacies: the fallacy of positioning the existence of pure, unified, and separate traditions, and the fallacy of spatialisation ..., as if there could really remain such a thing as cultural apartheid, once cultures enter into dialogue, or conflict... Cultures are not containable within boundaries.”<sup>353</sup>

Although Johnson's argument about the permeability of cultural boundaries is valid, her own reading of Gates's theory of the origins of African American tradition is itself also an oversimplification. First, Gates's approach is concerned with both the critical and the literary tradition. Second, he envisions the black critical tradition as basically a two-step process whose very subject is inherently dichotomous : “What I mean by citing these two overworked terms [black and white] is precisely this: how blacks are [demeaned] figures in [white] literature, and also how blacks *figure*, as it were, literature of their own making.”<sup>354</sup> In effect, Gates calls for the necessity for African Americans to critically *figure* their own literature: “We must not succumb ... to the tragic lure of white power, the mistake of accepting the empowering language of white critical theory as “universal”, ... of seeking to master the master's tools.”<sup>355</sup> This being said, Gates recognizes that segregation is “as difficult to maintain in the literary realm as it is in the civic one.”<sup>356</sup> In other words, African American critics should stop being indentured to Western critical paradigms and rather devise a language of criticism based on peculiar

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<sup>353</sup> Houston Baker, ed. *Afro-American literary Study in the 1990s* (The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 42.

<sup>354</sup> Henry Louis Gates, *Loose Canons* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 56.

<sup>355</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>356</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

black culture, thought and language, ie. the black vernacular. In this, he lines with black poets and novelists who have questioned the relevance of the poetic conventions of the western tradition, its imagery and poetic diction. Instead they advocate taking inspiration from the black folklore, the black sermon, and music in order to create an authentic black aesthetic. The poet Dudley Randall, born the same year as Ellison, expresses it very clearly in his poem “Black poet, White critic”:

A critic advises  
not to write on controversial subjects  
like freedom or murder,  
but to treat universal themes  
and timeless symbols  
like the white unicorn  
*A white unicorn?*

The “white unicorn” symbolizes abstract aesthetic beauty removed from the realm of real-world suffering. The whiteness of the unicorn points to pure white literature which excludes the black presence and sensibilities and thus is complacent with racial oppression. Hence, Randall mocks here the idea of transcendent literature that finds currency among white critics, and he underlines the utter irrelevance of Western sophisticated imagery – with whiteness as a symbol of purity – for the expression of the black experience.

For Houston Baker, the question of why we should identify African American literature as distinct seems to be settled once and for all. In *Long Black Song: Essays in Black American Literature and Culture* (1999), Houston Baker argues that “it is to a great extent the culture theorizing of whites that has made for a separate and distinctive black American culture. That is to say, one index of the distinctiveness of black American culture is the extent to which it repudiates the culture theorizing of the white

western world.”<sup>357</sup> According to Baker, white literature, white art, white philosophy, considered by white intellectuals as the best ever produced by humanity, act as “lobotomizing machines,”<sup>358</sup> of the sort that Ellison described in *Invisible Man*, that led “many black men ... to let such an evaluation stand.” Baker makes the hefty claim that black literature at its core can serve as an “index” of repudiation of white Western values, culture and literature. Repudiation, he writes “is characteristic of black American folklore; and this is one of the most important factors in setting black American literature apart from white American literature. ... Black folklore and the black American literary tradition that grew out of it reflect a culture that is distinctive both of white American and of African culture, and therefore neither can provide valid standards by which black American folklore and literature may be judged.”<sup>359</sup> Therefore, according to Baker, the more a text exhibits animosity towards white literature and culture to the extent that it serves as an “index of repudiation,” the most genuine or “blacker” it is. Baker discusses at length the differential characteristics between white and black American literature and culture. “Call it black, Afro-American, negro,” he writes, “the fact remains that there is a fundamental, qualitative difference between it and white American culture.”<sup>360</sup> The three fundamental aspects of this difference are, that “black American culture was developed orally or musically for many years; “black American culture was characterized by a collective ethos;” and finally, one of its “most salient characteristics is an index of repudiation.” he concludes, “each of these aspects

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<sup>357</sup> Houston A. Baker, *Long Black Song: Essays in Black American Literature and Culture* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), 10.

<sup>358</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>359</sup> *Ibid.*, 13-14.

<sup>360</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

helps to distinguish black American from white American culture.”<sup>361</sup> However the three fundamental elements of difference on which Houston Baker bases his argument to label the African American text as “an index of repudiation” fail to account for Jean Toomer's, Alice Walker's, Ishmael Reed's or Ellison's acknowledgement of complex literary connections.

Therefore, like Gates, Houston Baker calls for the necessity to develop African American theory and criticism to reverse the “white manipulation of African American literary self-representation.”<sup>362</sup> To illustrate one such critical manipulation, I want to bring up here Jonathan Baumbach who, in his essay “Nightmare of a Native Son” (1970), says he hesitates to call Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* “a Negro novel, though of course it is written by a Negro and is centrally concerned with the experiences of a Negro.”<sup>363</sup> His hesitation comes, he argues, from the fact that although “the appellation is not [...] inaccurate,”<sup>364</sup> the novel is *surprisingly* “serious.” This statement seems to exemplify the basic tenets, for the white critic, for a distinction between African American literature and mainstream/White American literature. It reiterates as well the commonly held opinion among white critics that the African-American novel is generally not “serious” in that it, again, does not concern itself with universal themes. As novelist David Bradley states rather bluntly in his foreword to William Melvin Kelley's *A Different Drummer*, “American criticism today, remains both segregationist and racist.”<sup>365</sup> Even if not always clearly stated, the value judgment that is attached to

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<sup>361</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>362</sup> Lisa Long, ed., *White Scholars/African American Texts* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 45.

<sup>363</sup> Harold Bloom, Ralph Ellison. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986), 13.

<sup>364</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>365</sup> David Bradley, “Foreword,” *A Different Drummer*, by William Melvin Kelley (New York: Anchor-

racial categorization is undeniably in favor of the mainstream. It is therefore used, as Percival Everett confirms, as a marginalizing tool: “when we call something folk art or when we call something African American literature, the implication is that there’s a mainstream literature against which you must set these things.”<sup>366</sup>

Since Ellison at the same time contests literary categories as a normative concept and makes of the black vernacular and folklore his war horse, it comes as no surprise to see how his take on the issue of racially distinct literary studies is consistent with his uncompromising demand for a full integration of African Americans at all levels of American life while retaining all their cultural specificities. For Ellison, integration does not mean abandoning what he has/is but “adding something new to what you already have.” Ellison objects to black studies as such, as he wrote Hank Wilson, Coordinator of Community Relations Southern Illinois University, on May 18, 1971, who asked him for advice on his thesis project entitled “Toward a Model with Rationale for Black Studies Curriculums”:

“I have never taught Black Studies as such. It is my opinion that disciplines such as history and literature when taught must include Negro American reality but that it cannot be taught separately since it did not evolve separately. Thus, when I teach American literature I include Negro American folklore and the writings of black authors--but always within the context of American literature. This has been my approach since 1945 when I first began lecturing before student and faculty groups.”<sup>367</sup>

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Doubleday, 1989), vii.

<sup>366</sup> Percival Everett, “The Construction of Place, an Interview,” Matthew Dischinger, VGR, Issue: Summer 2015 Volume 91 # 3.

<sup>367</sup> Ralph Ellison Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Box II: Folder 16.



In an unpublished undated draft with longhand corrections, that he probably intended to become an essay, Ellison reflects on an adequate course for students that would also meet African American students' need to know their black heritage: "academic categories may be an adequate source of information at best, not to mention wisdom; and at worst be, so far as U.S. Negroes are concerned, mostly misleading and sometimes downright vicious in effect, if not by design."<sup>368</sup>

Ellison's sense is that the boundary between American mainstream literature and African American literature have fuzzy edges as has, for that matter, any concept that purports to describe any aspect of American experience on either side of the color line in isolation. Ellison puzzles over white America's refusal to acknowledge "the true inter-relatedness of blackness and whiteness."<sup>369</sup> In "What America would Be Like Without Blacks," he asserts that

the spoken idiom of Negro American ... its flexibility, its musicality, its rhythms, freewheeling diction and metaphors, as projected in Negro American folklore, were absorbed by the creators of our great nineteenth-century literature even when the majority of blacks were still enslaved. Mark Twain celebrated it in the prose of huckleberry finn; without the presence of blacks, the book could not have been written. *No Huck and Jim, no American novel as we know it.* For not only is the black man a co-creator of language that Mark Twain raised to the level of literary eloquence, but Jim's condition as American and Huck's commitment to freedom are at the moral center for the novel. "<sup>370</sup>

Ellison seems almost obsessed with this idea of how much is owed to African Americans by the American culture, which he expressed in a less lyrical and more direct way – as he usually did when he made notes to himself - in an undated

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<sup>368</sup> Ralph Ellison Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, OV 2.

<sup>369</sup> John F. Callahan, ed. *The Collected Essays*, *op. cit.*, 109.

<sup>370</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

unpublished draft for a lecture he was to give at the University of Chicago to a predominantly white audience. Ellison jots "... So don't ask yourself whether negroes can master white culture – there ain't no such thing – rather ask yourself, to what extent are you a creation of black or Negro American culture."<sup>371</sup>

As a writer and critic who unrelentingly celebrated cultural pluralism, Ellison would have been pleased to learn that *Invisible Man*, "has enjoyed the enviable status of being viewed as simultaneously a great American novel *and* a great African-American novel,"<sup>372</sup> as Barbara Foley says. However, this assessment emphasizes the fact that the distinction between the two categories is operative today as well, while suggesting the "still embattled position of the minority writer."<sup>373</sup>

The blending and mastery of both traditions implied in Ellison's statements that is required from the African American writer forms the basis of the "Little Man" metaphor in Ellison's essay "The Little Man at Chehaw Station: the African American Artist and his Audience." Ellison recounts a marvelous story of when he was a student at Tuskegee in mid-30s. At the time, he was a trumpeter majoring in music with the ambition of becoming a classical composer<sup>374</sup>. During a recital, he tried to cover his lack of practice with a virtuoso kind of improvisation but the attempt was not a success. His black music professor, Hazel Harrison, with whom he had a sustained friendly relationship, and who, Ellison remarked very pointedly, was a highly respected concert pianist and a friend of such masters of classical music as Sergei Prokofiev, thought he

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<sup>371</sup> Ralph Ellison Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Box I: 174/ Folder 6.

<sup>372</sup> Barbara Foley, "The Ellison Industry", *Symbolism: An International Annual of Critical Aesthetics*, vol. 8. p. 324 (review article of John Callahan's book *Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man: a Casebook*)

<sup>373</sup> *Ibid.*, 324.

<sup>374</sup> The very fact of enlisting in this kind of studies speaks for Ellison's integrative artistic ambition at a time when classical music was considered as an exclusive "white" art form.

performed well short of his capacities and advised him:

You must always play your best, even if it's only in the waiting room at Chehaw Station, because in this country there'll always be a little man hidden behind the stove ... and he'll know the music, and the tradition, and the standards of musicianship required for whatever you set out to perform.<sup>375</sup> (Emphasis original)

Although Henry Louis Gates's reading of this little man as “a trickster figure surfacing when we least expect him, at a crossroads of destiny,”<sup>376</sup> is interesting within the realm of the thesis he develops in *The Signifying Monkey*, the essay can lead to another interpretation of the Little Man as epitomizing America itself, and as Ellison affirms, “the irrepressible movement of American culture toward the integration of its diverse elements.”<sup>377</sup>

The little man is first and foremost an allegory for both the critic and the artist in the contentious debates over race and American literature. Even if Chehaw station, Alabama, is a next to nothing place, Ellison's professor suggests that an artist should always strive to raise the standards of his craft and “play” it as if he is addressing a hidden “connoisseur, critic, trickster”<sup>378</sup> schooled in multiple traditions: the classical, the white and the black aesthetic traditions; schooled in the way they crossed and fertilized one another, in the way, Ellison says: “the diverse elements of our various backgrounds, our heterogeneous pasts, have indeed come together, 'melted' and undergone metamorphosis.”<sup>379</sup> Ellison's characterization of this “connoisseur” resembles the image

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<sup>375</sup> John F. Callahan, ed., *The Collected Essays*, op. cit., 494.

<sup>376</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey*, op. cit., 71.

<sup>377</sup> John F. Callahan, ed., *The Collected Essays*, op. cit., 509.

<sup>378</sup> *Ibid.*, 500.

<sup>379</sup> *Ibid.*, 513.

Emerson gives of the artist, as a “transparent eyeball,”<sup>380</sup> with the “currents of the Universal”<sup>381</sup> art circulating through him, and who perceives the deep unity and harmony of art where “differentiation, alienation and struggle cease.”<sup>382</sup>

However, this harmony in diversity is not easily achieved, unless the individual is ready to tame the chaos of his American dilemma and accept his identity in its fullest sense as Ellison suggests,

We repress an underlying anxiety aroused by the awareness that we are representative not only of one but of several overlapping and constantly shifting social categories, and we stress our affiliation with that segment of the corporate culture which has emerged out of our parents' past – racial, cultural, religious – Grounding our sense of identity in such primary and affect-charged symbols, we seek to avoid the mysteries and pathologies of the democratic process. But that process was designed to overcome the dominance of tradition by promoting an open society in which the individual could achieve his potential unhindered by his ties to the past. Here, theoretically, social categories are open, and the individual is not only considered capable of transforming himself, but is encouraged to do so.

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Ellison affirms that had he brought into the equation the racial identity of the Chehaw man to Miss Harrison, she would have answered that society might “confuse you as to the relationship between culture and race ... but you do not inherit culture and artistic skill through your genes;”<sup>384</sup> that any art is a “personal conquest” that requires the

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<sup>380</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Collected Work*, op. cit., 10.

Emerson, mentioned the idea of the “transparent eyeball” in his essay, “Nature”: “Standing on the bare ground, – my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite spaces, – all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me.” Ellison may have had this metaphor of the transparent eyeball in mind while writing his essay especially as the latter appeared in the journal “The American Scholar” named after Emerson's speech given on August 31, 1837 at the First Parish in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

<sup>381</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>382</sup> J. Heath Atchley, *Encountering the Secular: Philosophical Endeavors in Religion and Culture* (University of Virginia Press, 2009), 96.

<sup>383</sup> John F. Callahan, ed., *The Collected Essays*, op. cit., 507.

<sup>384</sup> *Ibid.*, 518.

individual's quest to “realize and complete himself, ... And that is true wherever the music or art of his choice originates,” echoing in this Ellison's hero, Andre Malraux.

It would be misleading to interpret Ellison's opposition to a separate black curriculum as dismissive of his black folk tradition. As much as he believes in the possibility of art transcending racial difference and becoming universal, Ellison, in my sense, is also aware that the disavowal of difference might have a perverse effect and serve to legitimate white aesthetics over black aesthetics. This is why he hastens to celebrate the importance and the specificities of the African American experience:

Negro folklore, evolving within a larger culture which regarded it as inferior, was an especially courageous expression. It announced the Negro's willingness to trust his own experience, his own sensibilities as to the definition of reality, rather than allow his masters to define these crucial matters for him. His experience is that of America and the West, and is as rich a body of experience as one would find anywhere. We can view it narrowly as something exotic, folksy, or “low-down,” or we may identify ourselves with it and recognize it as an important segment of the larger American experience—not lying at the bottom of it, but intertwined, diffused in its very texture. I can't take this lightly or be impressed by those who cannot see its importance; it is important to *me*.<sup>385</sup> (Emphasis original)

Therefore, he emphasizes the importance of his folk tradition as a crucial part of a larger experience to which he is connected by the very fact of his humanity; and literature as a whole, functions as a mediating realm through which he can shape his experience and his culture into a work of art.

### **3.3 Black nationalists' quarrel with Ellison**

During the late 60s' and the beginning of the 70s', the most virulent attacks which cut deep into Ellison's feelings came from his fellow black writers and critics. In

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<sup>385</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, *op. cit.*, 173.

Avon Kirkland's document, *Ralph Ellison: An American Journey*, black federal judge Henry Wingate, a student at the time, recalls how in 1967, at a reception following the awarding of an honorary doctorate degree to Ellison at Grinnell College in Iowa, an uninvited Black Panther student argued with Ellison that the ending of *Invisible Man* was anti-revolutionary and that he should have made the protagonist confront his oppressors instead of hiding in a cellar. Then, he yelled at Ellison: "You're an Uncle Tom, man." Although extremely hurt, Ellison tried to retain his composure and replied quietly: "I resent being called an Uncle Tom." Then, suddenly he burst into tears, put his head on Wingate's shoulder and said, "I am not an Uncle Tom. Wingate, you tell him. I am not an Uncle Tom. I'm a novelist, not an activist. I think that no one who reads what I write or listens to my lectures can doubt that I am enlisted in the freedom movement."

In 1970, *Black World*, a major journal of the Black Arts Movement, – the artistic branch of Black Power – dedicated an entire issue to berating Ellison. In addition to marxist critic Ernest Kaiser's virulent attack, Clifford Mason decried Ellison's claiming white literary fathers, writing that "the burden that Ellison's genius put on his manhood (and what our racial needs required) was for him to have been a lion sui generis, not an acquiescer posing as a tiger."<sup>386</sup> Mason insists that genuine black literary manhood must stop aping the Western tradition and use "its own references, its own standards, its own rules."<sup>387</sup>

As I hope to have made it clear in my introduction when I clarified my use of the phrase "family romance" for Ellison's literary adoptions, I don't think it fair or arguable

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<sup>386</sup> Clifford Mason, "Ralph Ellison and the Underground Man," *Black World*, December 1970, 21.

<sup>387</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

to reduce Ellison's ambition for artistic achievement by linking it to a mere individual Freudian fantasy. Although this is what Clifford Mason attempts in his article when he laments Ellison's "disabling psychosis":

The amplitudes of Ellison's literary references, ensconced as they were in his mainstream mentality, did not permit this sort of aggressive, black literary independence. All of his validities in his essays, and in effect, in *Invisible Man*, are based on a white substructure. His achievement in the novel should have rendered him free of such a *disabling psychosis*, however. He should have stood against white literary values, not with them, and like W.E.B. Du Bois in history and Alain Locke in cultural art, have set his own standard for the fifties and sixties that would have made him valid for the Seventies as a thinker.<sup>388</sup>

The reference to Du Bois and Alain Locke are related to their statements about the relationship between art and propaganda. As for Du Bois, in his essay "The Criteria of Negro Art," he claims rather dogmatically,

The apostle of Beauty thus becomes the apostle of Truth and Right not by choice but by inner and outer compulsion. Free he is but his freedom is ever bounded by Truth and Justice; ... Thus all Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been always used for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda. But I do care when propaganda is confined to one side while the other is stripped and silent.<sup>389</sup>

Although he unequivocally stresses the tie between ideology and art, anticipating in this the Black Arts Movements of the 60s, DuBois's statement is fraught with a certain complexity when read within the framework of the whole essay. Unlike Kaiser and Mason, he does not see politics as an end in itself but that art should be an expression of

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<sup>388</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>389</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Criteria of Negro Art," *The Crisis*, October 1926.  
[<http://www.webdubois.org/dbCriteriaNArt.html>]

the human ideals that politics struggle for; as a means of expression for people “who believe black blood human, lovable and inspired with new ideals for the world.”<sup>390</sup> This reading is encouraged by the subsequent lines in the same essay:

I remember tonight four beautiful things: The Cathedral at Cologne, a forest in stone, set in light and changing shadow, echoing with sunlight and solemn song; a village of the Veys in West Africa, a little thing of mauve and purple, quiet, lying content and shining in the sun; a black and velvet room where on a throne rests, in old and yellowing marble, the broken curves of the Venus of Milo; a single phrase of music in the Southern South – utter melody, haunting and appealing, suddenly arising out of night and eternity, beneath the moon. Such is Beauty... and yet today the mass of human beings are choked away from it, and their lives distorted and made ugly.<sup>391</sup>

Keith Byerman characterizes this series of artistic descriptions as “at the same time historical and dehistoricized.”<sup>392</sup> Although the works of art described are human artifacts, no mention is made of the human beings who made them. So while this list sets on equal footing African, African American and Western works of art, it also abstracts them from human agency or meaning, thus making them universal. DuBois concludes “I am one who tells the truth and exposes evil and seeks with Beauty and for Beauty to set the world right. That somehow, somewhere eternal and perfect Beauty sits above Truth and Right I can conceive, but here and now in the world in which I work they are for me unseparated and inseparable.”<sup>393</sup> Therefore, for DuBois, an exclusive concern with art and beauty is not wrong in itself, and in this at least he is in accordance with Ellison, but that it is just untimely with regard to the more pressing issues of

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<sup>390</sup> <http://www.webdubois.org/dbCriteriaNArt.html>

<sup>391</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>392</sup> Keith Byerman, *Seizing the word: History, Art, and Self in the Works of W. E. B. DuBois* (University of Georgia Press, 1994), 102.

<sup>393</sup> <http://www.webdubois.org/dbCriteriaNArt.html>



speaking for and achieving justice and equality for African Americans.

In his Afterword “And Shine Swam On” to *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing* (1968), Larry Neal faults Ellison for drawing so heavily on Western literary and philosophical traditions for representing black life, citing the irrelevance of his perspective which is in contradistinction to the “New Breed” of African Americans:

The things that concerned Ellison are interesting to read, but contemporary black youth feels another force in the world today. We know who we are, and we are not invisible, at least not to each other. We are not Kafkaesque creatures stumbling through a white light of confusion and absurdity. The light is black (now, get that!) as are most of the meaningful tendencies in the world.<sup>394</sup>

This is reminiscent of the Harlem Renaissance criticism of Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, which was viewed as an example of what Wright called “a simple literary realism, which seeks to depict the lives of [black] people, devoid of wider social connotations, devoid of nationalist tendencies, devoid of the revolutionary significance.” a sort of “conspicuous ornamentation, the hallmark of achievement.”<sup>395</sup> However, and as a significant glimpse of the divisions and changes within African American intellectuals in their appraisal of Ellison, *Black World* publishes in its 1970 issue, along with Clifford Mason’s and Ernest Kaiser’s essays, Larry Neal’s “Ellison’s Zoot Suit.” The latter is a self-rebuttal in which Neal makes his act of contrition and basically repudiates his former accusations against Ellison and casts him as a prominent cultural nationalist. Neal offers a reassessment of his understanding of Ellison’s politics. First, Neal gives a historical account of the debate over art and ideology, showing

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<sup>394</sup> Larry Neal, “And Shine Swam On,” in *Black fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing*, ed., Amiri Baraka (Black Classic Press, 2007), 78.

<sup>395</sup> Richard Wright, “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” in *African American Literary Theory*, ed. Winston Napier (New York: NYU Press, 2000), 45-53.

Ellison and the proponents of the Black Arts Movement such as Addison Gayle and Amiri Baraka, at opposite ends of the ideological spectrum; then he lumps all the criticism against Ellison as “personal, oversimplified, and often not based on an analysis of the man’s work and ideas. A great deal of the criticism emanates from ideological sources [marxist thought] that most of us today reject.”<sup>396</sup> He warns that the danger when one “overlook[s] the complex dimensions of a man's ideas, character and personality is to do great disservice to the righteous dissemination of knowledge.”<sup>397</sup> Neal also tries to redress some of the damage done to Ellison's reputation by Irving Howe by refuting his charges: “for Ellison, black people did not exhibit a tradition void of hopes, memories and personal attachments. They were, instead, profoundly human and blessed with a strong, spiritually sustaining culture.”<sup>398</sup> At the end of his essay, Larry Neal seems to bow down to Ellison’s adamant refusal to have his art constricted by political dogma: “of all the so called black writers working today, it is Ralph Ellison who is the most engaging,”<sup>399</sup> because with time Neal came to recognize that *Invisible Man* exemplifies the role that he ascribes to art for it is “artistically one of the world's greatest novels; it is also one of the world's most successful “political” novels. It is just that Ellison's politics are ritualistic as opposed to secular. Ellison's manipulation of rhetorical imagery in *Invisible Man* is enough to blow the average politician off the stand.”<sup>400</sup> Neal was flattered when Charles Lowell said that the function of black culture in black art in his poem “Don't Say Goodbye to the Pork-Pie Hat,” reminded him of

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<sup>396</sup> Kimberly Benston, Ed., *Speaking for You: The Vision of Ralph Ellison* (Washington DC: Howard University Press, 1987), 105.

<sup>397</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>398</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>399</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>400</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

Ralph Ellison: "That's a fantastic comparison. Ellison to me is one of the great living artists and writers in the world, so that's a big compliment. I don't think I deserve it. But I learned from Ellison."<sup>401</sup> Neal's essay is a quite long reappraisal of the political and artistic relevance of Ellison. It illustrates the fact that the proponents of the BAM have started to reconsider the value of Ellison's contribution to Black Aesthetics and ultimately to the freedom movement, to which he says he is "enlisted for the duration," through the high standards he set to his art; but it also shows that some of them had finally come to accept what Ellison calls a "division of labor among the members of the tribe," and that the latter's "demands are that I publish more novels."<sup>402</sup> He considers that his part of the debt to the race is to write novels in which he represents, not begs, the humanity of his people. Neal's defense of Ellison stands, it seems to me, as the requisite balance to the emphatic polemics around Ellison's alleged disengagement from black people's struggle and around his self-created literary ascendance.

Ellison lays claim to an imaginative equivalent of the social mobility that characterizes the American society. The desire to step out of the jug of one's past stems from the human longing for transcendence of one's circumstances, yet it can be a source of much anxiety because of the racist ideology, as we see it when the Invisible Man attempts to step into the white man's world. Because he declares unapologetically that his literary identity is inherently and by choice racially hybrid, and he acknowledges the influence of Eliot, Faulkner, Hemingway, Malraux, and Dostoevsky, at a time when black aesthetics was radically delineated by the BAM, Ellison is the target to these

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<sup>401</sup> Charles H. Rowell, "An interview with Larry Neal," *Callaloo*, No. 23 (Winter, 1985), 11-35.

<sup>402</sup> John F. Callahan, ed., *The Collected Essays*, *op. cit.*, 187.

disparaging attacks that label him as an “ascquiescer posing as a tiger” rather than as “a lion sui generis.” The radical creeds applied to the reception of *Invisible Man* obscured the black audience's attention thus diverting it from considering the artistic value of the novel, and concealing the elements of protest artistically woven in it by the author.

#### 3.4 Ellison's gospel of integration: protest through art

At the genesis of Ellison's essay, “The World and the Jug,” that I already referred to in the introduction, lies a fascinating debate between Ellison and the radical Jewish literary critic, Irving Howe, about the African American writer's literary allegiance, his artistic role and the merits of the protest tradition in African American fiction, mainly with reference to Richard Wright. The exchange between Ellison and Howe set the background to and the rationale behind Ellison's literary family romance. Howe's essay “Black Boys and Native Sons” published in 1963 in the literary journal, *Dissent*, set the agenda for the debate. Howe criticized Ellison's statement, on receiving the National Book Award for *Invisible Man*, that he tried “to see America with an awareness of its rich diversity and its almost magical fluidity and freedom.”<sup>403</sup> Irving Howe's scathing criticism of *Invisible Man*, which mocks Ellison's adamant belief in America's “infinite possibilities,” epitomizes the hostile attitude that would permeate the American Left's assessment of Ellison's novel:

Though the unqualified assertion of individuality is at the moment a favorite notion of literary people, it is also a vapid one, for the unfortunate fact remains that to define one's individuality is to stumble over social fences that do not allow one ‘infinite possibilities.’ It is hardly an accident that Ellison's hero does not even attempt to specify those possibilities.<sup>404</sup>

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<sup>403</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>404</sup> Irving Howe, “Review of *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison”, *The Nation*, 10 May 1952. Quoted in Harold Bloom, ed., *Ralph Ellison* (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), 123.

After the appearance of Howe's essay, Ralph Ellison was invited by the journal *New Leader* to write a rejoinder that was finally published as "The World and the Jug."

It's interesting to note that the title of Ellison's essay "The World and the Jug" is in itself a condensed political and literary agenda. Ellison is quoting in it blues lyrics from Bessie Smith's song "Down hearted Blues" that she recorded in 1923:

I got the world in a jug, the stopper's in my hand

I'm gonna hold it until you men come under my command.<sup>405</sup>

This line came to have "signifying" meaning within the black community because it 'signified' upon power. The fact that one could put the world in a small jug suggests that the world is made controllable and that the weak (the blues people) have the power to outwit and subdue the powerful. Buzzy Jackson, in his book on the art and lives of Blues women singers says, talking about Bessie Smith, that she created when she sang those lyrics "an image of a woman literally holding the world and all its problems and contingencies ... this is a song about *control*."<sup>406</sup>

In his essay, Irving Howe analyzes what he assumes should be a literary father-son relationship between Richard Wright and James Baldwin and Ellison. Howe criticizes Ellison and Baldwin for not paying their "filial duty" to Richard Wright by not following in his footsteps in the protest tradition which he thinks is a rational and politically efficient way of depicting black people's suffering. This condescending assignment of a sociological role to the African American novelist infuriates Ellison who counters that a skillful artist transfigures his experience into art. He asks: "How

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<sup>405</sup> The lyrics are available on Youtube.

<sup>406</sup> Buzzy Jackson, *A Bad Woman Feeling Good: Blues and the Women Who Sing Them* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2005), 52.

much, by the way, do we know of Sophocles wounds?"<sup>407</sup> as a response to Irving Howe's wondering:

How could a Negro put pen to paper, how could he so much as think or breathe, without some impulsion to protest, be it harsh or mild, political or private, released or buried? The 'sociology' of his existence formed a constant pressure on his literary work, and not merely in the way this might be true for any writer, but with a pain and ferocity that nothing could remove.<sup>408</sup>

Irving Howe echoes Richard Wright's 1937 essay "Blueprint for Negro Writing," in which Wright set up guidelines for black writers' political agenda. Their works should display, he says, "the highest possible pitch of social consciousness" and "every short story, novel, poem, and play should carry within its lines, implied or explicit, a sense of the oppression of the Negro people."<sup>409</sup> Obviously, for Wright as well as for the critical scholarship of the period, the only sort of novel that was expected and would be welcomed from an African American writer was a novel of social protest. Thirty years later, in continuity with Wright and in the middle of the controversy surrounding Ellison, playwright Ossie Davis, in his essay "The Wonderful World of Law and Order", expresses a similar urge to merge art and activism:

The Negro in this country has to write protest, because he is a protestant. He can't help but be. He cannot accept the situation in which he finds himself, so, therefore, he is driven to scream out against the oppression that surrounds him, that suffocates him ... the protest has been, and still is and must continue to be, loud, bitter, and haranguing."<sup>410</sup>

Howe also blames Ellison for the multiple allusions to icons of the Western canon in

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<sup>407</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, *op. cit.*, 119.

<sup>408</sup> Quoted in, *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>409</sup> Richard Wright, "Blueprint for Negro Writing," in Winston Napier Ed., *African American Literary Theory* (New York: NYU Press, 2000), 66.

<sup>410</sup> Ossie Davis, "The Wonderful World of Law and Order" in Herbert Hill, *Anger, and Beyond: The Negro Writer in the United States* (Harper & Row, 1967), 154.

*Invisible Man*, at the expense of the African American. He points out sarcastically: “the young Ralph Ellison, even while reading these great writers, could not in Macon County, attend the white man's school or movie house.”<sup>411</sup> Ellison rebuts Howe, and accuses him of underplaying “choice and will.” He says:

I rode freight trains to Macon County, Alabama, during the Scottsboro trial because I desired to study with the negro conductor-composer William L. Dawson, who was and probably still is, the greatest classical musician in that part of the country. I had no need to attend a white university when the master I wished to study with was available at Tuskegee.<sup>412</sup>

In this statement, Ellison not only makes the case for black artistic mastery of classical art but also that he himself sought out very consciously the mentorship of artists – be they black or white – for their mastery of the craft and not because he succumbed to a Freudian neurosis of exchanging his blackness for whiteness.

Ellison in his essay takes a special delight in suggesting that Irving Howe was engaged in a sort of renewal of the parable of Ham in Genesis 9. Ham was Noah’s son who was allegedly made into the ancestor of black people because he had seen his father naked and didn't look away. So he incurred the wrath of his father who cursed him for that and turned his skin black. It is worth quoting this passage of Ellison's essay at length because it lends more weight to my argument as it uncovers the symbols and rituals that are at the root of black people's inferiorization and disempowerment:

In his zeal to champion Wright, [Howe] felt it necessary to stage a modern version of the biblical myth of Noah, Ham, Shem and Japheth (based originally, I’m told, on a castration ritual) with first Baldwin and then Ellison acting out the impious role of Ham ... [They are] phonies because, while actually “black boys,” they

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<sup>411</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, *op. cit.*, 135.

<sup>412</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

pretend to be mere American writers trying to react to something of the pluralism of their predicament.

In his myth, Howe takes the roles of both Shem and Japheth, trying mightily (his face turned backward so as not to see what he is veiling) to cover the old man's bare belly, and then becoming Wright's voice from beyond the grave by uttering the curses which Wright was too ironic or too proud to have uttered himself.<sup>413</sup>

It is interesting to note that Ellison uses the biblical parable that returns again to the issue of black ancestry and the myth of blackness as a curse, invented by the Christian religion to morally justify the enslavement of black people, and indicts Irving Howe as unconsciously re-enacting this myth as a critic. Ellison's biblical rhetoric here seeks to debase Howe's questioning of the relevance of Western aesthetics to black writers and of the legitimacy of their claiming it, just because they are "black boys," "descendants" of Ham; Ellison questions as well the idea that the color of his skin should be reflected in his literary allegiance.

But, the most delightful of Ellison's statements are, in my sense, those he makes when he reverts to the vernacular in his personal unpublished notes or his epistolary exchanges with his friend Albert Murray, for, as he wrote Richard Wright in 1953: "I was more myself when writing a letter than at any other time." So, in relation to the issue of racial pigeonholing in art, he wrote Murray on April 9, 1953: "I don't know why those guys want to mess with a contentious mose like me anyway. I done told them I ain't no gentleman, black or white, and I definitely ain't colored when it comes to writing."<sup>414</sup> Thus he affirms that skin color should not be the measure for aesthetic orientation or achievement. To which Murray replies by return mail: "A master is a

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<sup>413</sup> John F. Callahan, ed., *The Collected Essays, op. cit.*, 160.

<sup>414</sup> Ralph Ellison Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Box I: 58/ Folder 2.



goddamned MASTER, man!”<sup>415</sup> (emphasis original)

Ellison adamantly refuses to abide by the polarization of art and ideology and to confine his writing to the protest jug. To signify upon what he sees as an image of black impotence that Irving Howe projects in his essay, Ellison uses ironically this metaphor of a jug for the African American literature, with black writers seemingly trapped inside and unable to reach out to the 'World': “Howe seems to see” black people in “a steel jug” waiting for “some black messiah to come along and blow the cork.”<sup>416</sup> What is involved here goes beyond a mere quarrel over the role of the black writer and the function of art; With a resounding indignation, Ellison claims his independence from racial literary categorization and his revolt against Howe's will to shrink the horizon of artistic possibilities before his eyes:

I recognize no dichotomy between art and protest. Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* is, among other things, a protest against the limitations of nineteenth-century rationalism; *Don Quixote*, *Mans Fate*, *Oedipus Rex*, *The Trial* — all these embody protest even against the limitation of human life itself. If social protest is antithetical to art, what then shall we make of Goya, Dickens, and Twain?<sup>417</sup>

This emphatic argument shows that Ellison is very much eager to erase the racial boundaries that many critics set up by dealing with African American texts as having no relevance to American literature as a whole, and by dismissing it as too parochial and marred by social protest. Epitomizing the hypocritical criticism of the time, Irving Howe claims that there should be “a certain amount of obsession [in African American writing] for the valid portrayal”<sup>418</sup> of Black life, while at the same time faulting Richard

<sup>415</sup> *Ibid.*, Box I: 58/ Folder 2.

<sup>416</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, *op. cit.*, 115.

<sup>417</sup> Maryemma Graham and Amritjit Singh, *op. cit.*, 8.

<sup>418</sup> Irving Howe, “Black Boys and Native Sons,” *Dissent*, Autumn 1963, 357.

Wright for his novel's "crudeness, melodrama, and claustrophobia of vision."<sup>419</sup> This pressure on African American artists is what Houston Baker describes when he affirms that: "under Western eyes, *Race* and *Art* have traditionally been considered dissociated signs, causing the creative person of clear racial designation, ambition or allegiance to find him or herself pinioned on the horns of a ... dilemma."<sup>420</sup> (Emphasis original) Although Ellison's statements do not display this dilemma of art versus racial politics, they are in agreement with Baker's that the problem is in the white critics' way of looking at the black texts; in their slighting African American writers by refusing to apply to their works the same standard of artistic excellence they apply to white texts: "If the Negro, or any other writer, is going to do what is expected of him," claims Ellison, "he's lost the battle before he takes the field."<sup>421</sup> Ellison identifies all the agony that goes into writing as the result of the writer's longing for acceptance, "but it must be acceptance on his own terms."<sup>422</sup> To deflect the idea that "the Negro novelist draws his blackness too tightly around him when he sits down to write," Ellison answers: "that's what the anti-protest critics believe, but perhaps the white reader draws his whiteness around himself when he sits down to read."<sup>423</sup> Ellison describes here the white critics' lack, when reading a black text, of what Frederic Jameson calls "dialectical self-consciousness"<sup>424</sup>, that is, the ability for a critic to be aware of his position in society and in history, and of his ideology that unconsciously and inevitably inform his analysis

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<sup>419</sup> *Ibid.*, 354.

<sup>420</sup> Houston Baker Jr., *Afro-American Poetics*, *op. cit.*, 93.

<sup>421</sup> Maryemma Graham and Amritjit Singh, *op. cit.*, 9.

<sup>422</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>423</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>424</sup> Frederic Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 52.

of a text; aware of the fact that even this awareness is limited by his position, or in Jameson's words "to reckon the position of the observer [critic] into the experiment [analysis]"<sup>425</sup>.

Ellison is very much aware of the limitations racial critical discourse inflicts on black writers, and he is willing to invalidate this discourse by showing that it actually unveils the white critic's prejudice and his anxiety over 'literary miscegenation/integration' more than it shows his interest in a genuine Black Aesthetics.<sup>426</sup>

I see Ellison's quarrel with Howe over ideology and aesthetics and his appropriation of the Western canon as forays into what Pierre Bourdieu calls "le monopole de la légitimité littéraire" (the monopoly of literary legitimacy). In his discussion of the processes of canonization, Pierre Bourdieu provides a model of the field of literature that shows the constraints at work in the processes of artistic creation, particularly the tensions between autonomy and heteronomy. He argues that the literary field is the site for an eternal struggle over the monopoly of literary legitimacy, that is the power to define who is a writer, what and how he is allowed to write and by whose and what standards he is judged:

One of the central stakes in literary rivalries is the monopoly of literary legitimacy, that is, among other things, the monopoly of the power to say with authority who is authorized to call himself a writer, or even to say who is a writer and who has the authority to say who is a writer; or, if you prefer, the monopoly of the *power* of *consecration* of producers [writers] or products [texts]. More precisely, the

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<sup>425</sup> *Ibid.*, 340.

<sup>426</sup> Houston Baker described Black Aesthetics as "a distinctive code for the creation and evaluation of black art." in *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (The University of Chicago, 1984), 74.

struggle between occupants of the two opposite poles of the field of cultural production has at stake the monopoly on the imposition of the legitimate definition of the writer, and it is understandably organized around the opposition between autonomy and heteronomy. As a consequence, if the literary field is universally the site over the definition of the writer, then there is no universal definition of the writer, and analysis never encounters anything but definitions corresponding to a state of the struggle for the imposition of the legitimate definition of the writer.<sup>427</sup> (My translation.)

Ellison denounces the “Olympian authority”<sup>428</sup> of Howe's essay which he thinks is also characteristic of Hannah Arendt's “Reflections on Little Rock.”<sup>429</sup> By writing about Wright, Baldwin, and Ellison that their concern as black writers should not be with aesthetics, Irving Howe sets himself as the bearer of a monopoly of legitimacy on imposing who can lay claim to artistic technique. The critical discourse, says Bourdieu, is “by essence prescriptive or even better, performative;” it allows to disguise as an “analyst's statement” what is but “a claim to the monopoly of literary legitimacy.”<sup>430</sup> The

<sup>427</sup> Bourdieu Pierre, *Les Règles de l'Art: Genèse et Structure du Champ Littéraire*, (Paris: Seuil, 1998), 311.

“Un des enjeux centraux des rivalités littéraires est le monopole de la légitimité littéraire, c'est-à-dire, entre autres choses, le monopole du pouvoir de dire avec autorité qui est autorisé à se dire écrivain ou même à dire qui est écrivain et qui a autorité pour dire qui est écrivain ; ou, si l'on préfère, le monopole du pouvoir de consécration des producteurs ou des produits. Plus précisément, la lutte entre les occupants des deux pôles opposés du champs de production culturelle a pour enjeu le monopole de l'imposition de la définition légitime de l'écrivain, et il est compréhensible qu'elle s'organise autour de l'opposition entre l'autonomie et l'hétéronomie. Il s'ensuit que, s'il est vrai universellement que le champs littéraire est le lieu d'une lutte pour la définition de l'écrivain, il reste qu'il n'est pas de définition universelle de l'écrivain et que l'analyse ne rencontre jamais que des définitions correspondant à un état de la lutte pour l'imposition de la définition légitime de l'écriture.”

<sup>428</sup> John F. Callahan, ed., *The Collected Essays*, *op. cit.*, 156.

<sup>429</sup> In the Winter 1959 issue of *Dissent*, Hannah Arendt published an article entitled “Reflections on Little Rock,” in which she expressed her opposition to the desegregation of schools in Arkansas and in which she charged black parents with exposing their children in an adults' battle. Ellison voiced the most incisive criticism of Arendt's ignorance of black people minds and lives and therefore of her right to express a judgement.

<sup>430</sup> Bourdieu Pierre, *op. cit.*, 310.

“Le discours critique étant par essence normatif ou, mieux, performatif, il permet en outre de donner les airs d'un constat d'analyste à ce qui est en fait une revendication du monopole de la légitimité littéraire à travers l'imposition d'une nouvelle définition de l'écrivain et de la forme romanesque.”

critic, Bourdieu argues persuasively, is the ‘Trojan horse’, who introduces heteronomous constraints into the ‘autonomous’ field of literature. What Bourdieu means by heteronomy is the loss of artistic autonomy through being subjected to external pressures – political, economic ... – that try to shape one's art. Bourdieu's heteronomy/autonomy distinction therefore parallels the African American writer's pull between anesthetic and ideological pursuits: either he commits to ideology which is demanded of him by radicals of the likes of Howe and the Black Arts Movement, or he is considered as a sell out if he succumbs to aesthetics: “the literary work is reduced to the document,” continues Bourdieu, “and when black writers [Americans] are conceded subversive capacity, it is conceded to them on the socio-political not the formal terrain.”<sup>431</sup> (My translation)

It follows from the theoretical discussion above that what is at stake in Ellison's crossing swords with Irving Howe and the rhetorics that he deploys is to usurp the white critic's monopoly on the power to define what constitute good literature by exposing the limitations of Howe's sociological criticism and his sweeping statements that pretend to define black experience and black art: “if you would tell me who I am, at least take the trouble to discover what I have been,”<sup>432</sup> he says, addressing Howe. He adds,

He [Howe] is a man of words and ideas, and since I, too, find my identity in the world of ideas and words, where would I flee? I still endure the nonsense of fools with a certain patience, but when a respected critic distorts my situation in order to feel comfortable in the abstractions he would impose upon American reality, then it is indeed “in accordance with my nature” to protest. Ideas are important in

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<sup>431</sup> ““Voir comme on ne voit jamais”: dialogue entre Pierre Bourdieu et Toni Morrison”, *Vacarme*, Hiver 1998, 58-60.

“On réduit l’œuvre littéraire au document, et lorsqu’on accorde aux écrivains noirs [Américains] une capacité subversive, on la leur accorde sur le terrain socio-politique, pas sur le terrain formel.”

<sup>432</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, *op. cit.*, 115.

themselves, perhaps, but when they are interposed between me and my sense of reality I feel threatened; they are elusive, they move with missile speed and are too often fired from altitudes rising high above the cluttered terrain upon which I struggle. And too often those with a facility for ideas find themselves in the councils of power representing me at the double distance of racial alienation and inexperience.<sup>433</sup>

Ellison here passionately warns about the dangers of abstract ideas and images formed at lofty distance which obscure more than they reveal an Other's experience. That is where the "act" becomes subsumed by the "shadow," to use Ellison's words.

Ellison's writings recurrently dramatize his double commitment to both style and commitment, to the effect that, as Houston Baker argues, Ellison at some moments even "sounds like an ardent social reformer,"<sup>434</sup> as in this passage where, evaluating his task as a novelist, Ellison writes:

People rationalize what they shun or are incapable of dealing with; these superstitions and their rationalizations become ritual as they govern behavior. The rituals become social forms, and it is one of the functions of the artist to recognize them and raise them to the level of Art. ... Take the "Battle Royal" passage in my novel, where the boys are blindfolded and forced to fight each other for the amusement of the white observers. This is a vital part of behavior pattern in the South, which both Negroes and whites thoughtlessly accept. It is a ritual in preservation of caste lines, a keeping of taboo to appease the gods and ward off bad luck. It is also the initiation ritual to which all greenhorns are subjected. This passage states what Negroes will see I did not have to invent; the patterns were already there in society so that all I had to do was present them in a broader context of meaning. In any society there are many rituals of situation which, for the most part, go unquestioned. They can be simple or elaborate, but they are the connective tissue between the work of art and the audience.<sup>435</sup>

The act of writing is for Ellison the political act *par excellence*: "I do feel that books

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<sup>433</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>434</sup> Houston A. Baker, *The Journey Back*, *op. cit.*, 69.

<sup>435</sup> Maryemma Graham and Amritjit Singh, *op. cit.*, 12.

represent socially useful acts,”<sup>436</sup> and writing *Invisible Man* in particular, he writes to a certain Mrs. Turner in 1953, “was an act of social responsibility as well as an attempt at an artistic projection.” This explains why preventing the slaves from learning to read and write was an integral part of the politics of slavery because books are potentially seditious. On February 21 1949, Ellison wrote Edgar Hyman that he was “fighting out the political and final section of my book [*Invisible Man*], all full of doubts and stubbornness, ... [but] I haven't lost sight of my form.”<sup>437</sup> Indeed, the last part of *Invisible Man* itself is ample evidence of Ellison's concern with politics without losing sight of formal excellence. The narrator ends his memoir with:

Here I've set out to throw my anger into the world's face, but now that I've tried to put it all down the old fascination with playing a role returns, and I'm drawn upward again. I'm shaking off the old skin and I'll leave it here in the hole. I'm coming out, no less invisible without it, but coming out nevertheless. And I suppose it's damn well time. Even hibernations can be overdone, ... 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 ...

Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?

Although Ellison never assumed the mantle of a political writer, “his cultural conceptions have extensive political ramifications,”<sup>438</sup> and he remains “politically significant”<sup>439</sup> over the years because as he says, “the protest is there [in *Invisible Man*] not because I was helpless before my racial condition, but because *I* put it there.”<sup>440</sup> (emphasis original) In his claim that form need not be divorced from politics, Ellison echoes Bakhtin's idea that any utterance is inextricably linked to ideology, space and

<sup>436</sup> John F. Callahan, ed., *The Collected Essays*, op. cit., 541.

<sup>437</sup> Stanley Edgar Hyman Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Box 6.

<sup>438</sup> Jerry Gafio Watts, *Heroism and the Black Intellectual* (University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 33.

<sup>439</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>440</sup> John F. Callahan, ed. *The Collected Essays*, op. cit., 183.

time, and therefore, “the study of verbal art can and must overcome the divorce between an abstract 'formal' approach and an equally abstract 'ideological' approach,”<sup>441</sup> least it would forestall “serious consideration of the history of collective life most forcefully suggested by Bakhtin's work.”<sup>442</sup>

Similarly, in his manuscript novel *Three Days Before the Shooting*, Ellison goes back to his favorite theme of writing as symbolic social action. In a half-tragic half-comic and absolutely hilarious narration, he shows how the most banal action can be endowed with a political signification and impact on people so strongly that their perception of others verges on paranoia, as in this scene: the narrator/journalist McIntyre, who witnessed the shooting of race-baiting Senator Bliss/Sunraider, has a heated debate during a gathering at a Washington club with one of his colleagues Sam McGowan, a white supremacist who delivers a long, hyperbolic diatribe the central thesis of which is that: “everything the Nigra *does* is political.”<sup>443</sup> This comment refers to an incident that happened on the Senator's estate involving a successful jazz musician, LeeWillie Minifees. LeeWillie has earned 375.33 Dollars in gigs in Chattanooga, and is driving home in a “gleaming white Cadillac convertible,” when he hears the racist Senator on the radio suggest a legislation be drawn to rename Cadillacs as “coon cages,”<sup>444</sup> because “we have reached the sad state of affairs, ... wherein this fine product of American skill has become so common in Harlem that much of its initial

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<sup>441</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 259.

<sup>442</sup> Michael D. Bristol, *Carnival and Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 1985), 21.

<sup>443</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Three Days Before the Shooting*, *op. cit.*, 53.

<sup>444</sup> Coon is an abbreviation for raccoon. It is also used as an insulting name for a black person who thinks he has made it.



value has been sorely compromised.”<sup>445</sup> Outraged, LeeWillie drives to Sunraider’s home, where the senator is hosting a barbecue, and joins in the barbecue, so to speak, by immolating his own car while urging a white audience, utterly puzzled about the significance of his act, to sing “God Bless America.” This is LeeWillie’s way of protesting against the Senator’s denial to black people the right to own a Cadillac which have become a material symbol of social progress, as Paul Gilroy says: “For African American populations seeking ways out of the lingering shadows of slavery, owning and using automobiles supplied one significant means to measure the distance traveled towards political freedoms and public respect.”<sup>446</sup> Burning a Cadillac on a racist senator’s lawn is certainly nothing if not a political act and McGowan interprets it as a “most portentous gesture.”<sup>447</sup> McGowan warns:

You have to be alert and vigilant against Nigra politics because it can break out in a *thousand* forms ... If you catch a nigra in the wrong section of town after dark, he’s being political, and that’s basic because he’s out of his place. If he talks about moving up North, he’s being political again. Because we know for a fact that the nigras are moving up North in keeping with a long-range plan to seize control of the American Government ... if a nigra joins the Book-of-the-Month Club or the Great Books Program, investigate him, because when nigras get hold of such deals they become more political than *Das Kapital* and the Communist Manifesto put together ... I’ll be damned if he hasn’t made even the Good Book [the Bible] political ... if you catch you a nigra reading that low-down, traitorous, nigra-loving Bill Faulkner and *liking* him, there you have a politically dangerous integrationist nigra!”<sup>448</sup>

Ellison’s satirical and hilarious incursions into McGowan’s distorted and paranoid mind

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<sup>445</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Three Days Before the Shooting*, *op. cit.*, 46.

<sup>446</sup> Paul Gilroy, “Driving While Black,” in Daniel Miller, Ed., *Car Cultures* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2001), 94.

<sup>447</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Three Days Before the Shooting*, *op. cit.*, 45.

<sup>448</sup> *Ibid.*, 53-57.

for over ten pages, in addition to showing a prototypical-pathological southern bigot's racist ranting, aim at driving home the central idea he developed in response to Irving Howe that a political statement need not be explicit to be effective. Ellison's forceful argument in "the World and the Jug" is obviously comforted by the fact that he has already won the struggle over legitimacy by his entry into the canon of American literature, having won the National Book Award and his novel recognized nationwide and abroad as a masterpiece *by all standards*.



## Chapter 3

### Emulating Andre Malraux : The journey from experience to “conscious thought”

“The grandchildren of those who possessed no written literature examine their lives through the eyes of Freud and Marx, Kierkegaard and Kafka, Malraux and Sartre. It explains the nature of a world so fluid and shifting that often within the mind the real and the unreal merge, and the marvelous beckons from behind the same sordid reality that denies its existence.”<sup>449</sup>

M. Malraux has been one of my most profound and *steadying* influences and I owe far more to his *thought*, his *art* and his *example* than I can here express.  
(R. Ellison, letter to Edward Morot-sire, 1969)

One of the most important and the least critically addressed influences in Ralph Ellison's claimed literary lineage is the French novelist and statesman Andre Malraux. The quote above is Ellison's most memorable literary accolade to Malraux. On almost

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John F. Callahan, ed. The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison (New York: Random House, 1995), 322.

every occasion he commented on literary craftsmanship, Ralph Ellison acknowledged his admiration for Malraux who provided him with an insight into contemporary European thought and style through his works. From Ellison's statement above, made in his mature days as a writer and as a man, it is clear that Malraux was both a father as artist and a rôle model for him, especially in his apprenticeship years as a would be writer.

Writing about Malraux is quite intimidating not only because of the impressive body of work that he produced but also because I'm aware that it inevitably entails crossing paths with the bulk of literary criticism that his work generated. Although some of this criticism is more often than not corrosive, most of it is hagiographic, leading Malraux's biographer Olivier Todd to characterize it quite humorously as “la Malrucianite aigüe” (acute Malrucian infection).<sup>450</sup> In a presentation he aptly titles “épidémiologie d'une légende,” Todd lays bare Malraux's mythomania and demonstrates that Malraux's legend rests on unauthentic facts and on his own efforts to make up narratives of himself as the ideal artist-man-of-action which people with puerile admiration for mystifying personalities swallowed wholesale and helped to spread over time. Therefore, navigating this 'infected' body of secondary sources proves to be very complex for a would be scholar who is trying to separate fact from fiction. Malraux himself boldly affirmed about his book *Antimémoires*, recycling the same line used by one of his characters in *Man's Fate*, “Ce n'était ni vrai ni faux, c'était vécu.” (“It was neither true nor false, but what was experienced.”) Consequently, writing about Ellison

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<sup>450</sup> Olivier Todd, *Epidémiologie d'une Légende*. Communication prononcée en séance publique devant l'Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques, 3 Novembre 2003.

Malrucianite: a compound noun formed with the adjective Malrucian and the suffix -ite which denotes an infection.

in relation to Malraux is bound to be even more daunting. Although some critics have mentioned the subject of Malraux as an influence on Ellison, and improbable as it may seem given Ellison's numerous hints to it, no book-length or even essay-length exploration of this literary debt has yet been undertaken. In this chapter I attempt a more thorough examination of the significance of this influence to Ellison's thought and style. I investigate the connection between the two novelists based on biographical facts as gathered through their non-fiction writings and through archival research in Ralph Ellison's papers, as well as I examine the intertextuality between their fiction through the analysis of their aesthetics, politics and philosophy. Rather than a subconscious interplay of references, this intertextuality operates at the level of deliberate quotation and also as a conscious canvas of allusions by Ellison to an adopted literary ancestor.

I will demonstrate that Malraux's theory of art as developed in *The Psychology of Art* (1947) helped Ellison give expression to his African American cultural inheritance and translate his experience into what he calls "conscious thought," into art, which only enables the individual to master his "condition" and conquer the "chaos" of imagination. This influence is also exemplified in Ellison's idea of humanity and existentialism which is similar to Malraux's in that *Invisible Man* is as much concerned with the tragic struggle of humanity and heroic transcendence as is *Man's Fate*. Among these major points I want to make, is first the fact that Ellison's romance with Malraux and his idea of *metamorphosis*, as he calls artistic transcendence, functions as a counterpoint to Richard Wright's influence second, that the theorization about the existential nature of the blues and the artistic potential of folklore that Ellison derived from reading Malraux is truly Ellisonian. Finally, in this chapter I examine the shift that

Ellison operated in his appraisal of Malraux and the way this reversal is embodied in *Three Days Before the Shooting*.

## **1. Review of the criticism on the Malraux-Ellison connection**

Concerning the critical inquiry into this influence, many of Ellison's scholars, despite Ellison's repeated allusions, contented themselves with merely echoing Ellison's own general statements about Malraux without examining how this influence operates in his fiction.

Although Arnold Rampersad screens every aspect of Ellison's private life – what Malraux ironically calls “le misérable tas de petits secrets” – in his “otherwise meticulous”<sup>451</sup> biography, yet, he barely addresses Ellison's novelistic gesture towards Malraux. He comments succinctly that Malraux's books lent by Hughes served as guides for Ellison to operate his turn towards the left in the 30s.<sup>452</sup> Implicit in this assertion is the idea that Ellison was not familiar with the Marxist theory and that Malraux was merely a conveyor of leftist ideology.

It is true that the state of Alabama in the 30's was not the best place to find leftist literature. In July 1935, two leftist writers, Nelson Algren and Jack Conroy travelled to Alabama where the sale and distribution of “seditious” – read red, leftist – literature was forbidden by the law. They were harassed and arrested, then hustled out of the state for displaying copies of the *New Masses* and the *New Republic*, two notorious leftist magazines, at Birmingham city hall.<sup>453</sup> However, Ellison says he had already

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<sup>451</sup> Adam Bradley, *Ralph Ellison in Progress* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2010), 15.

<sup>452</sup> Arnold Rampersad, *Ralph Ellison: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 83.

<sup>453</sup> Douglas Wixson, *Worker-writer in America: Jack Conroy and the tradition of Midwestern Literary Radicalism* (University of Illinois Press, 1998), 409-410.

encountered Marx at Tuskegee before leaving to New York.<sup>454</sup> Once in Harlem, even before reading Malraux, he says he found himself confronted with the psychological and the ideological currents that were operating at the time within the Harlem literati, Freudianism and Marxism.

After resounding the usual litany of the fabled Malraux as a “fearless revolutionary” writer who “challenged French colonialism in Asia,” “joined the revolutionary movement involving Communists, nationalists, and the foreign powers occupying Shanghai,” and “had the command of literary form that such fusions demanded,”<sup>455</sup> Rampersad wonders how could Ellison find “any genuine link between “such epic action in China,” and black American life in which “political resistance typically assumed petty, token or criminal form.”<sup>456</sup> This reductive statement which does not recognize the epic dimension of the African American struggle for democracy, also fails to consider that the point of identification for Ellison is precisely the shared humanity and the universal struggle against oppression which Malraux calls “la condition humaine.”

Rampersad mentions also Ellison's explicit reference to Malraux in his posthumously published short story “the Black Ball,” where the narrator is reading *Man's Fate*. However Rampersad denies the “literariness”<sup>457</sup> of this reference as Ellison, he says, undercuts it by having the narrator say: “I had to give that up.”<sup>458</sup> One is left to wonder about the reason Rampersad sweeps aside the literariness of this allusion to

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<sup>454</sup> Maryemma Graham and Amritjit Singh, eds., *Conversations with Ralph Ellison* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1995), 346.

<sup>455</sup> Arnold Rampersad, *op. cit.*, 119.

<sup>456</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>457</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>458</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Flying Home and Other Stories* (New York: Random House, 1996), 117.



Malraux while Ellison, as I have already pointed out, insists that he is a highly conscious writer and that a symbol or a reference appears in his fiction because *he* put it there. My contention is that Ellison's gesture towards Malraux in "Black Ball" lends to an interesting reading – that will be dealt with later on in this chapter – in conjunction with his early leftist leanings at the time he wrote the story, in the late 30s and beginning of 40s,<sup>459</sup> and his later distrust and disillusionment with it that eventually came to be reflected mainly in the description of the Brotherhood in *Invisible Man*.

Barbara Foley's book *Wresting with the Left: the Making of Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man* (2010), is one of the most illuminating monographs that aimed at historicizing Ellison's *Invisible Man* within the unstable political realities that preceded and followed its publication. However, like Rampersad, Foley considers the Malraux-Ellison connection through the lens of her interest in black radical texts. The major argument that Foley develops in her book is that Ellison was more involved in the left than he would admit to and that Ellison went to great length to cover the extent of his involvement with the left during the red-baiting era. With this in mind, Foley argues that Ellison, in his after-*Invisible-Man* praise of Malraux, rather "emphasized the non-communist features of Malraux's protagonists" and the "largely depoliticized aesthetic theory set forth in *The Psychology of Art*,"<sup>460</sup> to mark his distance from the communist ideology.

Ellison's first biographer, Lawrence Jackson, also mentions Ellison's frequent

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<sup>459</sup> The story draft was undated. But we can infer the period he was working on it from the dates on the letter-heads paper Ellison used.

Ralph Ellison Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Box I:162/ Folder 5.

<sup>460</sup> Barbara Foley, *Wresting with the Left: the Making of Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 88.

tribute to Malraux. Sadly enough, Jackson joins in the chorus of scholars chanting Malraux's heroic involvement in the 1927 communist revolt in China, and his masterful portrayal of the war based on his “firsthand knowledge of the revolution of China.”<sup>461</sup> Jackson offers a critical comment which again is in agreement with Rampersad's and Foley's in linking Ellison's commitment to the leftist ideology in the late thirties to his reading of *Man's Fate*. However, Jackson departs from their views when he points out that what is at the root of Ellison's infatuation with Malraux is not Communism but his humanistic approach to Communism. In *L'Espoir* (1937), translated as *Man's Hope*, which he devoted to the Spanish Civil War, “[Malraux] did not deny the complex human dynamics that prevented communism from prevailing in Spain for the sake of advancing Soviet hegemony.”<sup>462</sup> Malraux's work had influenced Ellison's philosophical thinking and “increased his impatience with the purportedly iron laws of history and human advancement endlessly recited by hard-line Communists.”<sup>463</sup> More interesting, says Jackson, was Malraux's ability to render the Spanish people's capacity for endurance and the “tragic sense of life that enabled the citizens of Spain to survive the devastating horror of the war.”<sup>464</sup>

My own analysis of Ellison's leftist thought via Malraux, that I will develop later on in this chapter, is more in line with Jackson's than with Foley's. I will as well address three aspects of Malraux's influence that have been overlooked by Ellison's scholarship, that is the import of Malraux's ideas on the psychology of creation, of metamorphosis in

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<sup>461</sup> Lawrence Patrick Jackson, *Ralph Ellison: Emergence of Genius* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons. 2002), 169.

<sup>462</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

<sup>463</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

<sup>464</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

art, through which raw experience is transformed into “conscious thought,” of the “Imaginary Museum,” and his own brand of existentialism which opened up Ellison's consciousness to the function of the blues in African American literature and culture.

## **2. The role model?: A few facts about Malraux**

As an important step in understanding Ellison's early admiration for Malraux and his later re-appraisal, it is necessary to have if only a brief snapshot of the important facts and events in Malraux's life that shaped his reputation as a writer and as a statesman.

Malraux always resisted and tried to control biographical studies on him. “Tomber sous le coup d'une biography,” (to fall in the grip of a biography) is Malraux's metaphor for what he calls this “present age delights in unearthing a great man's secrets ... because we like to temper our admiration.”<sup>465</sup> It is not my intention to dig up the dead for the mere pleasure of tempering with Malraux's legend which has undergone a certain erosion over the years through many critical studies and his first wife's autobiography. Rather, I want to point out that Ellison's discovery, over the decades, of Malraux's phoniness may have diminished his heroic stature and lead to Ellison's “signifying” on him in *Three Days Before the Shooting*.

Besides, his tremendous will to power, Malraux's tendency to fabulation and myth-making has now been revealed thanks to some scholars who dare to investigate

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<sup>465</sup> Andre Malraux, *The Voices of Silence/Part III* (Doubleday, 1967), 418-20.

seriously the real life of the great man. “Tout aventurier est né d'un mythomane,”<sup>466</sup> Malraux himself declares. Olivier Todd, confirms: “He [Malraux] had a formidable capacity for mixing up the real, whatever that is, the desirable, the probable, the possible and the imaginary.”<sup>467</sup>

Ellison's “Geography is fate” applies also to Malraux as la Butte Montmartre in which he was born in 1901, was a sort of predestination since this cosmopolitan “arrondissement” of Paris was and still is the privileged place to exchange on politics and art in all its forms. Many writers – Louis Aragon, Francois Mauriac, Max Jacob, Andre Gide ... – and visual artists like van Gogh, Picasso, Matisse, and Auguste Renoir, had their “headquarters” around Montmartre. Unlike Ellison who made it brilliantly through high school and into college, Malraux, by one of those ironies of destiny, was faced with the refusal of the prestigious lycée Condorcet to admit him on the basis that he fared poorly in *French composition* while he was at lycée Turgot in the third 'arrondissement' of Paris.<sup>468</sup> This was one of the most humiliating experiences for the young Malraux. He was 17 then. Disheartened, he dropped out of school.

Although Ellison and Malraux were different in terms of their geographical backgrounds, origins, and experiences, we may recall that Ellison calls himself a “product of the library,” and that reading T. S. Eliot, Dostoevsky, Joyce, Hemingway, Stein, and Maddox Ford and Malraux was crucial for Ellison in his fledging years as a musician and as a would-be writer. After Malraux left school, he started a period of self-instruction where he haunted libraries, reading voraciously not only French writers

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<sup>466</sup> Andre Malraux, *La Voie Royale* (Grasset, 1930), 16.

<sup>467</sup> Olivier Todd to the *New York Times*, May 31, 2001.

<sup>468</sup> Olivier Todd, *Malraux: A Life*, trans. Joseph West (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 14.

like Balzac, Flaubert, Stendhal, Dumas, but got even more interested in Russian writers, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Gogol; and philosophers: Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and Spengler. Reading books was first and foremost an attempt at transcendence for Malraux. It allowed him to escape the confining atmosphere of his strong-willed Italian grandmother and her house in Bondy, a shabby and bland suburb of Paris, where he moved to live with his mother after his parents' divorce.

He had discovered very early the importance of imagination that books make possible. Imagination can help escape from reality and it also has the power to ultimately *change* reality. All those flamboyant names from Balzac to Dostoevsky, opened up for him a world of adventures and sensations inside of fiction - and later on outside of fiction – by giving life to the interior lives of their characters. Malraux says in one of his essays that “L'héritage culturel n'est pas l'ensemble des oeuvres que les hommes doivent respecter mais de celles qui peuvent les aider à vivre”<sup>469</sup> (cultural heritage is not the whole body of works of art that men must respect, it is the ones that can help them live)

It was also through books that Malraux first earned money, by hunting for old and rare books and selling them to René Louis Doyen, a bookseller and publisher on the left bank. In the span time of two years he became so well read and acquired such an encyclopedic knowledge on everything literary, artistic, or philosophical that he was invited and listened to in literary circles in Paris and subjugated his audience.

Although Malraux always insisted in his *Anti-mémoires* that he hated his childhood, there are elements from it that can throw light on his feeling of urgency to

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<sup>469</sup> Andre Malraux, *L'Homme Précaire et la Littérature*, (Gallimard, 1977), 133.

write and which show that he drew heavily on his childhood experience. Malraux was very close to his grandfather, a colorful and spirited character who told fabulous stories and whose tragic and almost ritualistic death fascinated Malraux as a child and which he described as “une mort de vieux viking” (the death of an old viking).<sup>470</sup> The grandfather accidentally, Malraux said, split his own skull with a double-edged axe while splitting wood. Later on in an interview, he changed this version to: “vous savez que mon père et mon grandpère se sont suicidés.”<sup>471</sup> The figure of the grandfather haunts both of his novels *The Royal Way* and *The Walnut Trees of Altenberg*. Malraux said he modeled the hero’s grandfather in *The Royal Way* on his own: “Ce grand père est le mien ... dont j’ai pris les traits plus ressemblants pour le grand-père du héros de *La Voix Royale*.”<sup>472</sup>

Like the Invisible Man's grandfather whose riddle leads the narrator, after much boomeranging, to emerge as a writer of his own journey, Malraux's grandfather's words were to have a huge impact on his destiny. As a child, he remembers vividly his grandfather confiding to him “avoir quatre fils, et pas un seul écrivain! Si l'un deux l’était, je serai le plus heureux des hommes” (to have four sons, and not a single one is a writer! If only one of them were, I would have been the happiest of men)<sup>473</sup>. As a chance, (or will or both) had it, Malraux fulfilled his grandfather's wish. We recall here how Ellison's father's wish to make of him a man of letters also changed the course of his destiny.

The official biography purported by some of Malraux's eternal admirers such as Walter Langlois describe Malraux as a novelist who lives his novels. He tried to follow

<sup>470</sup> Jean Lacouture, *André Malraux: Une vie dans le siècle* (Paris: Seuil, 1973), 11.

<sup>471</sup> Frédéric J. Grover, *Six Entretiens avec André Malraux, 1959-1975* (Gallimard, 1978), 17.

<sup>472</sup> André Malraux, *Antimémoires*, I (Gallimard, 1967), 19.

<sup>473</sup> Pierre Galante, *Malraux* (Presses de la Cité, 1971), 22.

the example of his hero, the British adventurer-writer Lawrence d'Arabie on whose writings he commented at length in his "Lawrence and the Demon of the absolute."<sup>474</sup> In 1934, Malraux led an archeological expedition in Arabia searching for the tomb of the Queen of Saba, and which turned out unsuccessful. He also fought in the Spanish Civil war and was a resistant during second World War. Arrested by the Gestapo and sent to a concentration camp, he managed to escape. However, these "fait d'armes" have aroused a lot of skepticism, as his wife's memoir shed light on Malraux's mythomania and his tendency to romanticize the events of their adventures in Indochina.

The most infamous fact in Malraux's life is undoubtedly his looting of a Khmer temple in Indochina and for which he was sentenced to three years in prison.<sup>475</sup> After having lost all his wife's dowry in speculations, he thought he would make some easy money from selling pieces of art to some American collector. In 1924, he and his wife mounted a supposedly archaeological expedition, with the help of their friend Claude Levasseur, to steal seven statues from the Khmer temple of Banteay Srei. The French colonial administration in indochina got wind of the expedition and arrested all of them. The Royal Way is based on this adventure through the jungle of Indochina.

The phoniness of Malraux's archeological expeditions and the unauthoritative comments on art history did not come to the attention of the American scholars, so that the magazine *Vogue* published an excerpt from Malraux's Antimemoire with an introduction that described him as an "archeologist, art historian, Statesman,

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<sup>474</sup> An article meant to become a biography but which Malraux never completed. Ellison seemed to find this article of particular interest since I found he underlined whole paragraphs and made margin notes.

<sup>475</sup> Anonyme, « Courrier du Cambodge. Un vol de bas-reliefs à Angkor. Les auteurs de ce vol devant le tribunal correctionnel de Pnom Penh », *L'Impartial*, 21 Juillet 1924.

novelist.”<sup>476</sup> Writing to critic Edmond Wilson on October 2, 1933, to thank him for his flattering review of his books in *The New Republic*, Malraux, in spite of all evidence of “le caractère fallacieux de la présence de Malraux a Canton en 1926,”<sup>477</sup> gives an extravagant account of his sojourn in Indochina and Canton:

Je suis allé en Asie à 23 ans, comme chargé de mission archéologique. J'ai alors abandonné l'archéologie, organisé le mouvement Jeune-Annam ; puis suis devenu commissaire du Kuomintang en Indochine et enfin à Canton. [...] Il y avait à Canton en 1927 (ce fut très différent en 1927) singulièrement plus d'aventuriers révolutionnaires que de marxistes.<sup>478</sup>

(“I went to Asia at the age of twenty-three in charge of an archaeological mission. I abandoned archaeology, organized the Jeune Annam movement then became Kuomintang commissar in Indochina and later in Canton.”)

Yet, the man-legend dies hard as French scholars are unwilling to relinquish the myth of Malraux, hero of the Canton rebellion, of the Spanish war, and of the French resistance. In March 2016, in order to see what is the state of the art in Malraux's French criticism, I attended a conference held at the Paris Institut National d'Histoire de l'Art (INHA) that gathered dozens of French intellectuals and scholars who chanted Malraux's “grandeur.” In his intervention, Jérôme Serri, an art critic and former director of FRAC-IDF (Fond Regional d'Art Contemporain d'Ile de France) displayed what I can only characterize as a terminal stage of Malrucianite. After Professor Henri Zerner, a French Harvard scholar and obviously the only heretical voice in this parish, had

<sup>476</sup> *Vogue*, 152. 9 (Nov 15, 1968), 3.

<sup>477</sup> Jean Lacouture writes in *André Malraux: Une vie dans le siècle*, page 100, “la légende d'un André Malraux, militant de la révolution chinoise, héros de l'insurrection de Canton de 1925 (sinon du soulèvement de Shanghai de 1927 [Malraux n'a pas poussé le ridicule à cela]) a la vie dure ... Des auteurs aussi sérieux que Walter Langlois, Janine Mossuz et André Vandegans y ont apporté leur contribution, impressionnés par des demi-confidences, de lourds silence, des allusions, un certain ton d'assurance et des indications fulgurantes qui frémissent d'authenticité ... Quant au professeur Georges Pompidou, c'est lui qui va le plus loin dans la “mystification”: il évalue à quatre ans (1923-1927) la durée du séjour en Asie de Malraux qui lutte à côté de Tchang Kai-chek puis des communistes.”

<sup>478</sup> Edmond Wilson, *The Shores of Light* (Farrar, Straus and Young, 1952), 573.



deplored the fact that Malraux never apologized for his looting of the Khmer temple of Banteay Srei, and had faced the tacit disapproval of the audience for mentioning this infamous episode of Malraux's youth, Jerome Serri took hold of the microphone and tried to justify Malraux's pillage with a misogynistic statement that Malraux would not have disavowed<sup>479</sup>: “Les oeuvre d'art, c'est comme les femmes. Elles appartiennent à ceux qui les aiment,” he says. (“works of art are like women. They belong to those who love them.”) I expected at least a wave of embarrassment to sweep through the room, but no one, not even the women reacted. State of the art of Malraux's French criticism it is. There, I was reminded of that anecdote of the man who attends a moving sermon in a crowded church where everybody is wet-eyed except him. When asked about his insensitiveness, he explains: “I don't belong to this parish.” The biting irony being that Malraux was appointed de Gaulle's minister of culture and patrimony. One understands why the art historian George Duthuit, one of the most acerbic adversaries of Malraux, has published a three volume criticism of Malraux's theories of art, *Le Musée Inimaginable* (1956), where he affirms: “qu'il était temps que quelqu'un consentit enfin à défendre l'art contre son plus redoutable défenseur.”<sup>480</sup> (It was high time that somebody took up

<sup>479</sup> Malraux once told his wife Clara: “Il vaut mieux être ma femme qu'un écrivain de seconde ordre.” (It's better for you to be my wife than a second rate novelist.) in Clara Malraux, *Les Bruits de nos Pas* (Grasset, 1963), 34.

<sup>480</sup> G. Duthuit, *Le Musée Inimaginable* (Paris: José Corti, 1956),  
Duthuit's three volume book is a thorough, rigorous and devastating examination of the blatant historical inaccuracies in Malraux's *Musée Imaginaire* and *Les Voix du Silence*. He also exposed the shallowness and obscurity of his arguments, and his fallacious conclusions. However, this book from one of the most eminent art historians in Malraux's era has never been reprinted since 1956, and only the prestigious Bibliothèque Nationale de France and Sainte Genevieve have it and reproduction is restricted.  
Duthuit's book made for an exciting reading. I was stopped by the following passage, where Duthuit castigates Malraux's hardly veiled ambitions for conquest: “Les mots de conquête, d'annexion, de possession retentissent incessamment dans *Les Voix du Silence* comme d'enfiévrants appels de clairon. Lancez-vous hardiment à l'assaut. Haut les fronts ! De receleurs effarouchés par les rapines pratiquées autour de vous, devenez vous-même pillards. Dans ces terres que vous dévastez, vivaient des peuples industriels et prospères? Qu'importe, puisqu'elles vous servent à fonder un empire.” vol

the burden of defending art against its most dreadful defender.)

Malraux's persona seems to be summed up in the beginning of his biographical fiction – or fictional biography – *The Conquerors* (*Les Conquérants*) (1928). Garine, a power-hungry adventurer, foregrounded by many critics as Malraux's persona,<sup>481</sup> who throws himself in the turmoil of revolutionary China to liberate Canton from the European economic grip with the help of his communist friend Borodine, says: “je veux – tu entends? – une certaine forme de puissance, ou je l'obtiendrai, ou tant pis pour moi.” “Et si c'est manqué je recommencerais, là ou ailleurs.”<sup>482</sup>

### 3. Claiming the ancestor

Ralph Ellison was publicly more than forthcoming about his debt to Malraux in his essays and interviews, albeit more or less superficially. In his interview with John Hersey, “Completion of personality”, Ellison says he fell under the spell of Malraux's influence on the second day of his arrival to New York, during his junior year, in July 1936. In the lobby of the Harlem Annex of YMCA, on 135<sup>th</sup> Street where he had rented a room, he came face to face with Alain Locke, whom he met earlier that year in Tuskegee where he came to visit his concert pianist and music professor, Hazel Harrison. Locke was accompanied by Langston Hughes whom he introduced to Ellison and Ellison recounted this event as a fateful one since Hughes took him immediately up and gave him two of Malraux's novels, *Man's Fate* and *Days of Wrath* (*Le Temps du*

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1, p. 24

(“The words of conquest, annexation, and possession resound incessantly in *Les Voix du Silence* as a feverish clarion call. Rush boldly into the assault. Top the fronts! Instead of receivers frightened by the rapines practiced around you, become yourself plunderers. On these lands that you devastate lived industrious and prosperous peoples? What does it matter, since they serve you to found an empire.”)

<sup>481</sup> See for example Jules Roy, *Mémoires Barbares* (Albin Michel, 1989)

<sup>482</sup> Andre Malraux, *Les Conquérants* (Bernard Grasset, 1949), 65.

*Mépris*) and suggested that he reads them before returning them to a friend of his, the communist Louise Thompson – or to the library, according to another of Ellison's versions of the story.<sup>483</sup> He confided to John Hersey: “I was excited by those books of Malraux's.”<sup>484</sup> Of the importance of reading *Man's Fate*, Ellison told Steve Cannon: “I thought so much of that little Modern Library edition of *Man's Fate* that I had it *bound in leather*. it is the writers whose work has the most impact upon us that are important, not those with whom we congregate publicly.”<sup>485</sup> Much to my despair, I could find no trace of this leather-bound copy of *Man's Fate* in Ellison's Room at the Library of Congress.<sup>486</sup>

Prior to his coming to new York, and while working at the library in Tuskegee during his sophomore year, Ellison says “I became fascinated by the exciting development that were taking place in modern literature”, that is the use of imagery, improvisation, and symbolism, through his discovery of T. S. Eliot. He was also “most impressed by Marxism” as he read Marx and was “intrigued” by Malraux who was “being claimed by the communists.”<sup>487</sup> At that point, his knowledge of Malraux was limited to echoes and footnotes spread here and there in his diverse readings.<sup>488</sup> So

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<sup>483</sup> John F. Callahan, ed. *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison* (New York: Random House, 1995), 811.

<sup>484</sup> Kimberly Benston, Ed., *Speaking for You: The Vision of Ralph Ellison* (Washington DC: Howard University Press, 1987), 301.

<sup>485</sup> Maryemma Graham and Amritjit Singh, *op. cit.*, 124.

<sup>486</sup> Ellison's Room is located in the first floor of the Jefferson building in the Rare books and Manuscripts Division of the Library of Congress. This room holds Ellison's personal library which was donated by his wife Fanny to the Library of Congress.

<sup>487</sup> Maryemma Graham and Amritjit Singh, *op. cit.*, 8.

<sup>488</sup> Ellison's passion for reading is recorded by his friend Albert Murray. As an undergraduate at the Tuskegee Institute, Murray admired Ellison who used to carry a lot of books across campus and his name always appeared on all the library cards for checked-out books from Samuel Richardson to Laurence Sterne, all the way up to Thomas Hardy.

See Charles H. Rowell's Interview with Albert Murray: “An All-Purpose, All-American Literary Intellectual” in *Callaloo*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (Spring, 1997), pp. 399-414.

Ellison felt quite excited and full of expectation about reading Malraux's books.<sup>489</sup> In a letter to Hughes later on that year where he thanks him for sending him Malraux's *Man's Fate* and one of the major works of Marxist criticism of the time by the economist John Strachey, *Literature and Dialectical Materialism*,<sup>490</sup> Ellison writes, "I don't wish to be ignorant of leftist literature any longer."<sup>491</sup> These books were instrumental for Ellison as they marked the beginning of his journey towards a career of a "man of letters." His lifelong friend Albert Murray, recounts that when he visited him in his New York home for the first time in 1942, he was struck by finding a huge portrait of Malraux hanging on the wall in Ellison's study: "When we walked into his place, the first thing I saw when he sat back in his chair, the first thing I saw was the Malraux over his shoulder."<sup>492</sup> Murray's use of the synecdoche here suggests that the presence of Malraux, literally hovered over Ellison's shoulder as he metamorphosed from a would be musician to a writer.

By the time Ellison was contemplating a career of novelist in the late 1930s, – he published his first short story "Afternoon" in 1940,<sup>493</sup> – Malraux was already a widely renowned writer and had won the Prix Goncourt, the equivalent of The National Book Award, in 1933 for his novel *La Condition Humaine* published the same year. After having read this novel following Langston Hughes's advice, Ellison started to meticulously file - and for decades to come - everything that was published by or about

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<sup>489</sup> Maryemma Graham and Amritjit Singh, *cit.*, 292.

<sup>490</sup> J. Strachey applied the "dying culture" theory of the Comintern to assert the esthetic validity of the Marxist theory of art and how the novel can advance the revolutionary cause.

<sup>491</sup> Ralph Ellison Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Box II: 29/ Folder 12.

<sup>492</sup> Roberta S. Maguire, *Conversations with Albert Murray* (University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 86.

<sup>493</sup> Two other stories "The Black Ball" and "A Hard Time Keeping Up" were probably drafted between 1937 and 1938 while Ellison was in Dayton. See Callahan's introduction to *Flying Home*.

Malraux in the United States in relation to his artistic but also his political and private life. Several boxes at the Library of Congress contain Newspaper clippings, a copy of the Time Magazine featuring a profile on Malraux and hailing him as “the World's foremost novelist of revolution and one of the most exciting and provocative of living writers,”<sup>494</sup> Malraux's translated interviews and essays – underlined, annotated, or typed by Ellison – and countless notes that Ellison would jot on scrap papers referring to one or another of Malraux's mostly cryptic statements about art.



Cover of Time Magazine that features Malraux filed by Ellison

In a letter dated November 6, 1984, to John Roche<sup>495</sup> who offered him an

<sup>494</sup> *Time* 32 (Nov. 7, 1938): 59.

<sup>495</sup> Special adviser to Lyndon Johnson and a founder of Americans for Democratic Action.

original score of W. C. Handy's song "Beale Street Blues," Ellison even boasted to own parts of Malraux's manuscripts:

Thank you for the Beale Street Blues. I am absolutely delighted to have it in my collection of precious things, and shall treasure it along with my signed copy of Joyce's *Anna Livia Plurabelle* and parts of manuscripts by Malraux and Silone which Fanny gave me years ago. [] ... It served nevertheless to remind me of how constantly the two streams of culture out of which I come have merged, been transformed, and merged again to bring me influences from distant places.<sup>496</sup>

Ellison in his letter, capitalizes on this anecdote to emphasize his favorite theme: the symbiosis that exists between the two strands of the American culture, and the universal nature of the world's artistic heritage which makes available to him influences from as distant a place as France, in the person of Malraux.

I was able to lay my hand on another reference to these Malraux manuscripts through a letter Walter Langlois wrote to Ellison on Feb 27, 1969.<sup>497</sup> After giving information about the first formal meeting of The Malraux Society of which Ellison was a member and the upcoming conference about Malraux that was to be held at the University of Kentucky, Langlois added a post-scripted longhand note:

I would be very pleased to contact you, particularly since I understand you have a Malraux manuscript. I too am a collector, and I have several minor Malraux manuscripts, and about 25 pages of the original of *Les Conquérants*, plus letters etc. May I look forward to hearing from you?<sup>498</sup>

Langlois was obviously craving to see Ellison's precious manuscripts. He even seems to

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<sup>496</sup> Ralph Ellison Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Box I: 65/ Folder 9.

Despite my thorough research, it has not been possible for me to find these manuscripts in Ellison's Papers nor in his personal library in the Ellison's Room at the Library of Congress. However, they might be in a substantial part of Ellison's items that, according to Eric Frasier, the curator at the Rare Books and Manuscripts Division of the Library of Congress, are not yet catalogued.

<sup>497</sup> Walter Langlois was at the time professor at the university of Kentucky and president of the Malraux Society. Langlois, who must be in his eighties now, did not respond to my request for an interview about this manuscript.

<sup>498</sup> Ralph Ellison Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Box I: 58/ Folder 4.



suggest a sort of quid pro quo by listing his own Malraux treasures. However, Ellison never responded to Langlois's letter, or did not keep a copy of it, though I doubt it, since he systematically made copies of the letters he sent.

File - Malraux Society

February 27, 1969

Dear Mr. Ellison  
~~Dear Mr. Ellison~~,

Please excuse this manner of contacting you, but there is no time to communicate with all of you individually before our gathering in April, and I wanted to give you certain information as soon as possible.

As you will recall, at our New York get-together, we decided to try and schedule the first formal meeting of the Malraux Society to coincide with the 21st University of Kentucky Foreign Language Conference, to be held here in Lexington, April 24-26. Arrangements have now been completed, and the Society will meet on the afternoon of Friday, April 25.

Detailed programs for the entire Conference, together with instructions and information regarding registration, housing, prices, scheduled papers, etc. will be sent to you shortly, but you may be interested to know that --thanks to the interest and exceptional cooperation of several Malraux specialists-- we have been able to organize what promises to be a very interesting program, centered on the Antimemoirs.

The scheduled speakers include Professors Jean Carduner (Michigan), Rev. J.D. Gauthier, S.J. (Boston College), Rima Drell Rock (LSU at New Orleans), and Walter G. Langlois (Kentucky), with Professor Frances Tafoya (Swarthmore) as chairman. We intend to have a general discussion of the book following these papers, but if there are any other members of the Society who would like to make some comments formally, please contact me at your earliest convenience and we will see about arrangements.

I am pleased to announce that we are well along in preparing the first issue of the Malraux Miscellany, the publication of the Society, and with luck it may be ready in time for the April meeting. Further details will be found in the Conference Program, but may I point out that the first issue will contain some unusual Malraux materials, including the text of his "lost" Preface to Méditerranée, of Charles Clément.

As you will remember, a two-year membership in the Malraux Society, which includes a subscription to the Miscellany, costs \$4.00. (Checks, payable to the Malraux Society, may be sent to me, Walter Langlois, French Dept., Univ. of Kentucky, Lexington, Ky., 40506.) Further information about the forthcoming issues of the periodical and about tentative plans for the next meeting of the Society will be found in the Conference program. Furthermore, we will discuss these (and other pertinent matters) during the business portion of the April meeting.

I look forward to seeing you in Lexington shortly.

Cordially,  
*Walter G. Langlois*  
Walter G. Langlois  
(for the Executive Committee)

French Department,  
University of Kentucky,  
Lexington, Ky. 40506  
U.S.A.

p.s. I would be very pleased to contact you, particularly since I understand you have a Malraux manuscript. I too am a collector and I have several minor Malraux manuscripts, and about 25 pages of the original of des Confessions, plus letters, etc. May I look forward to hearing from you?

Sincerely,  
*Mark Benth*

Reproduced from the Collections of the Manuscript Division, Library of Congress

Ellison's encounter with Malraux is almost mythologized through his multiple carefully constructed allusions to it. In his interview with Ishmael Reed and Steve Cannon, Ellison says he was present at a party in New York in February 26, 1937, where Malraux gave a speech to raise funds for the Spanish Loyalists and where Ellison heard the black folk singer Fish Leadbelly perform for the first time. "I had never dreamed that I would be in the presence of Malraux,"<sup>499</sup> he says. Ellison was with Richard Wright, trying to raise money for the short lived magazine *New Challenge* which Wright was trying to edit. Interestingly enough, it is in his essay "Hidden Name and Complex Fate: A Writer's Experience in the United States," in which Ellison discusses the array of influences that shaped his fate, that he reflects back on this occasion, very carefully adding a brick to the narrative of his multiple ancestry. Ellison points out that at the time "I was grappling quite consciously with the art through which I wished to realize myself,"<sup>500</sup> when the two aspects of his influences "art and politics" came into a focus through the catalyzing effect of Malraux:

Art and politics; a great French novelist and a negro folk singer; a young writer who was soon to publish *Uncle Tom's Children*; and I who had barely begun to study his craft. It is such accidents, such fortuitous meetings, which count for so much in our lives. ... [and] which led to my selecting Malraux as a literary "ancestor," whom unlike a relative, the artist is permitted to

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<sup>499</sup> John F. Callahan, ed. *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison* (New York: Random House, 1995), 205.

<sup>500</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.



choose.<sup>501</sup>

Malraux explained with his usual verve why the world should support the Spanish Loyalists who were fighting against the Fascism of Franco and his German and Italian allies, and what the struggle signifies not only for Europeans but also to all the peoples of the world who fight for freedom and man's dignity. Spain showed, on a reduced scale, what was to become of the world in the Second World War: “Les deux idéologies planétaires s'y affrontent à nu, rabattant au passage les cartes des anciennes valeurs et des anciennes oppositions politiques, intellectuelles, religieuses, spirituelles.”<sup>502</sup> Malraux recites the military interventions of his escadrille Espana: “Nous avons détruit l'aérodrome de Séville, [...] Nous avons détruit l'aérodrome de Salamanque,” then he slips into the first person subject: “*J'ai* détruit l'aérodrome d'Avila Olmedo,” thus emphasizing his personal contribution in the bombarding of the fascists' positions. He also retells in his speech, the now famous episode of the crash of his plane in the Sierra de Teruel, which is also dramatized as the climax of *Man's Hope*: “On december 27, one of the planes of my squadron was brought down behind our lines...”<sup>503</sup> No wonder then that Ellison was subjugated by this speech which he first copied by hand then typed.

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<sup>501</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

<sup>502</sup> Pierre Campion, “Ecrire l'événement: L'espoir de Malraux dans la guerre d'Espagne”, *Revue d'Histoire Littéraire de la France*, 2001/4, vol. 101, p. 1233.

<sup>503</sup> Ralph Ellison Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Box I: 192/ Folder 4.



*Murray*  
Speaking before people whose calling is the defense and maintenance of culture, I want my talk to be limited to the function of trying to make you understand why so many Spanish writers and artists are fighting on the side of the loyal Spanish government, why so many foreign artists are today behind the Madrid barricades, why the only one of the great writers of Spain who joined the Fascists, Unamuno, died at Salamamica discarded by them, hopeless and alone.

" On December 27 one of the planes of my squadron was brought down behind our lines. It had fallen very high, at about 2,000 meters above sea level, and snow covered the mountains. In this region there are few villages; it was only after several hours that the peasants arrived and began constructing stretchers for the wounded and a coffin for the dead.

" When all was ready, the decent began. There were no roads, only mule paths. The old peasant women, who in this region almost all have sons in the militia, had decided to accompany the wounded. But it was not only the peasant women. The entire populace followed behind us, coming single file down the narrow mountain path. At each one of the villages through which we passed the people were waiting and each village, when the wounded had passed by, was emptied of its inhabitants. When we reached the first large settlement in the valley, there too the people stood waiting before the low walls of the Spanish town. They gazed in silence at the first wounded--these wounded in the legs; they were used to such things. But when those who had been wounded in the face were carried past--men with flat bandages where their noses should have been; their leather tunics still covered with coagulated blood--then the women and children began to cry. I raised my eyes; the file of peasants extended now from the heights of the mountains to its base--and it was the grandest image of fraternity I have ever encountered: those abandoned villages, that entire people following witnessed

Commenting on this speech, the writer Armand Petitjean says:

Tout ce qu'il [Malraux] dit est intelligent et simple, volontaire et naturel, personnel et humain, neuf et d'expérience. Derrière sa pensée, c'est vrai il y a l'action. Derrière ses images, c'est vrai, la réalité. Ces brancards d'aviateurs tombes sur la montagne, c'est vrai, les villages l'un après l'autre les suivent à la plaine, et ce grand lacet noir en progrès, c'était bien le lien de la fraternité humaine. Ces lueurs tournantes de chevaux de bois, à la foire de valence, qui révèlent à un blessé des yeux qu'il revenait à la vue, c'est vrai. Ce sont celles des révolutions qui s'éteignent ici et Là-bas reprennent. Chevaux de bois de notre dignité d'hommes ... Malraux [avait] donné une idée de la grandeur humaine.<sup>504</sup>

However, not all French intellectuals had the same perception of Malraux's oratory talent. Francois Mauriac for example, ironically notes in his journal:

dès que Malraux ouvre la bouche, son magnétisme faiblit. Non qu'il n'y ait en lui de quoi faire un tribun, et même un grand tribun; mais le littérateur lui coupe le sifflet. Les images qu'il invente, au lieu de réchauffer son coeur, le glacent: elles sont trop compliquées, on y sent la mise au point laborieuse de l'homme de lettres.<sup>505</sup>

Ellison, not having access at that time to the divided opinion about Malraux on the other side of the Atlantic, was as much impressed by Malraux's speech as by what was continuously reported in the American press about Malraux's ability to blend art, politics and adventure. Myra Page in *The Daily Worker* hailed Malraux "a mobilized personality, an intellectual in the best sense of the word, ... writer and active propagandist have become welded into one dynamic whole."<sup>506</sup> In the same journal, Waldo Frank, president of the American Society for Technical Aid to Spanish

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<sup>504</sup> *Nouvelle Revue Française*, 1937, p. 475.

<sup>505</sup> Francois Mauriac, *Journal* 1932-9 (Paris: La Table Ronde, 1947), 293.

<sup>506</sup> "Malraux on Spain", *Sunday Worker*, March 7, 1937, p. 5.

Democracy, wrote: “Andre Malraux has an honorable place among the too scant number of creative writers scattered throughout the world who, by their translation of cosmic and social forces into forms of personal experience, are doing the artist's share in the creating of the new world order.”<sup>507</sup> The Spanish republic cause seemed “a last hope, a last opportunity for an individual to do something in the face of a world gone mad.”<sup>508</sup> A number of American artists among them Hemingway, had already joined the Abraham Lincoln brigade to fight in Spain. So Ellison also attempted to join the brigade. In June, when his friend Langston Hughes left for Spain to cover the war for the *Baltimore Afro-American* newspaper, Ellison applied for a passport but was denied one by the State Department. While his desire to fight in the Spanish Civil War seems unrealistic, it illustrates, of course, Ellison's sympathies with the marginalized and the underdog, but above all, his eagerness to seize the opportunity to follow in the footsteps of Malraux and Hemingway and become an artist-revolutionary in whom art and action coexist harmoniously.

Another way Ellison was emulating Malraux or taking inspiration from him as a role model was his being significantly involved in various organizations, such as the National Council on the Arts and the Federal Writers Project, that worked towards furthering the flourishing of the arts and helping artists. He himself never recognized any antagonism between artistic activity and social concerns: “I haven't been socially inactive,” he told David Carson. Following the example of Malraux, Ellison says he became interested in the ways the government can participate in the arts and in the

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<sup>507</sup> *Sunday Worker*, March 7, 1937, p. 5.

<sup>508</sup> Allen Guttman, “Mechanized Doom: Ernest Hemingway and the American View of the Spanish Civil War,” in *Ernest Hemingway: Critiques of Four Major Novels*, Ed. Carlos Baker (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962), 114.

relationship between its cultural institutions and the artists. Ellison assumes that de Gaulle appointed Malraux Minister of Cultural Affairs precisely because he was an artist and “was always concerned with this [link between cultural institutions and art].” It is obvious that at that time, Ellison was buying all the bouts of legendary deeds and commitment to man's dignity that Malraux disseminated in his works and which his commentators relayed to their readers. Olivier Todd would reveal later on that Malraux's siding with de Gaulle after a notorious devotion to the left was perfectly in accordance with his ambition for power: “Malraux the *ministre d'état*, sitting next to President Charles de Gaulle, gazed on majesty.”<sup>509</sup>

### **3.1 Ellison, Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres**

While examining the quite special place that Malraux had in Ellison's literary life as conveyed through his comments and his personal notes, I was pondering how Ellison came to be known to Malraux in France at a time his novel was not given much attention there.

There is no evidence that the two novelists ever actually talked to each other or even exchanged any correspondence (apart from a letter congratulating Ellison on the medal of Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres). While I am aware of the speculative dimension of my statement, it seems likely that Ellison deliberately avoided a physical encounter with his idol, since their paths should have crossed any time when Ellison was in Paris – in 1954 when he lectured in Salzburg, in 1955 when he went through Paris on his way to Rome, and in October 1956 – or in 1963 when Malraux visited the United States. One would expect, knowing his admiration for Malraux, that Ellison

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<sup>509</sup> Olivier Todd, *Malraux: A Life, op. cit.*, 3.

would have sought to meet him. It is even more disconcerting as Ellison did meet Malraux's wife Clara in the summer of 1957 in Japan, where he went to attend the congress of PEN International, as he writes Murray in 1956: "I met Malraux's wife and became friendly with her and had several conversations with her."<sup>510</sup> She even invited him to visit her the next time he was in Paris. Incidentally, she revealed to Ellison that Malraux modeled his character Kyo in *Man's Fate*, on a Japanese friend of theirs whom she introduced to Ellison. We recall that he was in friendly terms with his other literary ancestor's wife as well, Mary Hemingway. No wonder that Ellison was delighted with Clara's friendship which holds the promise to unravel some of the mysteries of the great Malraux. He confided to Murray, "Clara Malraux is a pleasant woman and I shall look her up, as should you, when I'm in Paris again."<sup>511</sup>

The reputation of Ralph Ellison in France has always verged on an indifferent reverence. Even today, although the literary value of *Invisible Man* may well be recognized by any scholar in France to whom you mention it, the novel is seldom if ever assigned for reading in literature classes in French universities. When the first translation of Ellison's *Invisible Man* appeared in 1954 under the title of *Au delà du regard*,<sup>512</sup> except for one little review, it was met with total critical neglect. In *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*, Wright's biographer Michel Fabre asserts that in the fifties, Richard Wright was the only African American writer to draw attention in French literary circles as the greatest African American novelist, while the publication of Baldwin's *Go Tell it on the Mountain* and Ellison's novel "had gone almost unnoticed

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<sup>510</sup> Ralph Ellison Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Box II: 46/ Folder 2.

<sup>511</sup> *Ibid.*, Box II: 46/ Folder 2.

<sup>512</sup> Michel Chrestien, trans. *Au delà du Regard* (Editions Denoel, 1954).  
The Ellisons met the translator in Paris in 1954.

in Paris,”<sup>513</sup> by French critics and public alike.

As another critic, Jacqueline Covo, has noted<sup>514</sup> the rare early reviews in France that considered the second translation of *Invisible Man* at all when it appeared under the title *Homme Invisible pour qui Chante-tu?* In 1969,<sup>515</sup> did not think much of its technical accomplishment but focused, rather paternalistically, on what they saw as its political content.

Despite this lack of critical “visibility”, the French government decided to grant Ellison an extraordinary honor, the French medal of Chevalier de l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres (Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters). Even this distinction, conferred to Ellison at the behest of Andre Malraux himself, then France's Minister of Cultural Affairs, went almost unnoticed by French intellectuals and did not steer more than a small entry in the periodical “France-Amerique.”<sup>516</sup> This shows that Malraux was well ahead of the French intellectuals and critics in his awareness of the artistic value of *Invisible Man*. Although he could not read or speak English,<sup>517</sup> Malraux was well acquainted with American literature.<sup>518</sup> He was the first to introduce Faulkner's *Sanctuary* – the first of Faulkner's novels to appear in France in 1937 – to the French reader by writing the preface<sup>519</sup> to the novel which he ended with his famous and often quoted sentence, “*Sanctuaire*, c'est l'intrusion de la tragédie grecque dans le roman

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<sup>513</sup> Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright* (William Morrow and company, 1973), xxi.

<sup>514</sup> See *The Blinking Eye: Ralph Waldo Ellison and His American, French, German, and Italian Critics, 1952-1971*.

<sup>515</sup> Edited by the French publishing house Editions, Grasset

<sup>516</sup> *France-Amérique*, 29 March, 1969, p. 12, included a photograph “Ralph Ellison, Chevalier des Arts et Lettres.”

<sup>517</sup> I trust for this Malraux's biographer Jean Lacouture (Malraux: *Une Vie dans le Siècle*, p. 186)

<sup>518</sup> Michel Fabre says he helped to introduce wright to the French reader. See Michel Fabre, *Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*, xxi.

<sup>519</sup> Andre Malraux, Préface à *Sanctuaire* de William Faulkner, Gallimard, N.R.F., 1933, p. II



policier.” “*Sanctuary* is the intrusion of Greek tragedy into the detective novel.”

Knowing that Malraux was an avid reader<sup>520</sup>, it would not be overstating the facts to assume that he read the 1969 translation of *Invisible Man* in French. It is certainly no coincidence that it was by the end of that same year that Ellison was made Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et Lettres.<sup>521</sup> The order was founded by Malraux himself in 1957 and Ellison was the first African American writer to receive the award. The distinction, which is competitive and selective, thereby recognized him as an eminent writer who had contributed significantly to furthering the arts. The letter, sent to Ellison by the French cultural emissary, Edouard Morot-Sir, at the French consulate in New York, said that the honor was “bestowed upon you by the French government and *in particular by Andre Malraux.*” Enclosed was an official letter from Malraux in French which I found in Ralph Ellison's papers carefully slipped inside a sheet protector and which reads:<sup>522</sup>

“Monsieur, j'ai l'honneur de vous faire connaitre que, par arrêté en date de ce jour, vous avez été nommé Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres. J'en suis particulièrement heureux et vous exprime mes félicitations. Veuillez agréer, monsieur, l'assurance de ma considération distinguée.”

The letter read also on the low left side : “Ralph Ellison, Homme de lettres.”

As was the custom, an official ceremony was organized by the Attaché Culturel, Edouard Morot-sir at the cultural services of the French embassy in New York for awarding the medal, and contrary to what is reported in Harold Bloom's critical book on

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<sup>520</sup> His personal library was extremely rich and was the subject of a critical book.

<sup>521</sup> Ralph Ellison Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Box 213/ Folder 6.

<sup>522</sup> *Ibid.*, Box 213/ Folder 6.

Ellison<sup>523</sup>, the presentation, as the photographs in Ellison's papers attest to it<sup>524</sup>, was not made by Malraux himself but by Edouard Morot-sir. Ellison was asked to invite the friends he would like to be present. Right on Morot-sir's invitation-letter that he received, Ellison jotted with a pencil some names among whom were Ernest Gaines, the African American visual artist Romare Bearden, his friend Robert Penn Warren, his music professor from Tuskegee Hazel Harrison, Hemingway's fourth wife Mary, Truman Capote and many other renowned names in the world of arts.<sup>525</sup> The news of the award reverberated back in Oklahoma city, Ellison's hometown, from where he received a letter from a relative signed "SIS", expressing the sender's pride:

This recognition is most appropriate in view of your fine literary contributions. When I recall the humiliations of your childhood, the agonies of your adolescence and the struggles of your youth, I marvel that you reached the place and time where you are now. We all take pride in your accomplishments and we are inordinately pleased at the reflected glory which your fine record brings to our family.<sup>526</sup>

If Ellison described his encounter with Malraux's work, in his early years of literary apprenticeship as a shock effect, it is obvious that the French novelist's discovery of Ellison's novel resulted in no less extraordinary token of appreciation. Ellison was overwhelmed with a sense of pride for being the recipient of this prestigious award which places him among the great writers such as William Faulkner who won it before him. Ellison was then 55, his literary reputation was firmly established as a novelist, – though on a single novel, which is all the more impressive – and as a literary

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<sup>523</sup> Harold Bloom, *Bloom's Bio-critiques: Ralph Ellison* (Chelsea House Publishers, 2003), 45.

<sup>524</sup> Ralph Ellison Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Box 213/ Folder 6.

<sup>525</sup> *Ibid.*, Box 213/ Folder 6.

<sup>526</sup> *Ibid.*, Box 213/ Folder 5.

critic, and he had been the recipient of numerous awards and honorary degrees not the least of which was the National Book Award in 1935. Yet, Malraux's distinction bore a high significance for Ellison because it came at the behest of his proclaimed French literary father. Ellison replied to Morot-sir, expressing what this award meant to him:

“I'm overwhelmed by your letter ... informing me that the Minster of Cultural Affairs of your great country had named me a Chevalier of the Order of Arts and Letters. I take this most unexpected act as a very great honor indeed, and not only as a distinguished consideration from the government of France, but also that my appointment comes at the authority of *one whom I consider among the very first order of novelists*. Since 1936, when I first read *Man's Fate*, *Days of Wrath* and the essays from his *The Psychology of Art* which were then appearing in the American edition of the magazine Verve, M. Malraux has been one of my most profound and steady influences and *I owe far more to his thought, his art and his example than I can here express*. Nevertheless, the fact that such an honor should come to me at this  *juncture* leads me to believe more fervently than ever in the power of art to impose a certain ennobling symmetry upon the lives of men.”<sup>527</sup>

Ellison's last words about art as a marker and vehicle of civilization and its power as a tool for transcending any social or racial limitation or hampering of man's imagination sound an homage to Malraux as they echo Malraux's own words: “L'art c'est le plus court chemin de l'homme à l'homme.”<sup>528</sup> (Art is the shortest path from one man to another).

Here, it is also worth pondering on the word “juncture” in Ellison's reply in order to grasp even more fully the implications this distinction had for Ellison at a time when he was criticized by both white and black critics. Here, for the sake of my

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<sup>527</sup> Letter filed under “awards, citations, and honorary degrees/ Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres,” Box I: 213/ Folder 6.

<sup>528</sup> Andre Malraux, *La Psychologie de l'Art: La Creation Artistique*, Edition Albert Skira, 1948.

argument, I'll return briefly to the idea I discussed in the second chapter, that as a literary figure in the 70s, Ellison was "under siege," to use Adam Bradley's words.<sup>529</sup> White critics grew impatient with his inability to complete a second novel, while black nationalists and esthetes – and some zealous white liberals like Irving Howe – regarded him as a traitor to the black people's cause for his lack of militancy. *Black World*, dedicated an entire issue to berating Ellison. Although it recognized Ellison as one of the most gifted of American writers, it claimed in its introduction that he was "losing his luster among black intellectuals even as he gains in glitter in the white establishment." Following this was an article, written by Ernest Kaiser, who voiced a devastating assessment of the controversial figure Ellison had become and singled out Malraux as one of the pernicious white influences that diverted Ellison from being a voice for his people's struggle:

"To Ellison, Negro life in America is merely a part of the general human condition of Western man to be mastered individually by each negro as a man. He doesn't like the sociological description of the negroes' struggles and suffering in the ghetto, for he thinks that the sociological account reduces the negro and denies his humanity and cultural heritage...

Following *Andre Malraux*, the existentialists, the disillusioned or clever, opportunistic attackers of the left ... who emphasize form as supreme, even determining content, Ellison has become an Establishment writer, an Uncle Tom, an attacker of the sociological formulations of the Black freedom movement, ... a denigrator of the great tradition of black protest writing and, worst of all for himself as a creative artist, *a writer of weak and ineffectual fiction* and essays mostly about himself and how he became an artist...<sup>530</sup>

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<sup>529</sup> Adam Bradley, *op. cit.*, 60.

<sup>530</sup> Ernest Kaiser, "Critical Look at Ellison's Fiction and at Social Literary Criticism by and about the Author." *Black World*, December 1970, p. 95.

Kaiser added that Ellison had developed in this way at the very time black people's struggle for freedom and equality had "reached new heights," and other black writers like James Baldwin, William Melvin Kelley or Margaret Walker were denouncing their people's suffering and delineating its aspirations in their works.

Later in the same issue, Clifford Mason, although he didn't mention Malraux specifically, decried Ellison's encyclopedic references to the Western canon writing that "what may have been incisive in the 50s is cliché in 1970. What might have been an instructive allusion to white writers in the 60s is Tomism in the seventies."<sup>531</sup> It is ironic that Kaiser, being a communist like Malraux, would mention the latter, of all Ellison's claimed white influences, to bring to bear on his argument that Ellison, by following the example of Malraux and by indulging in purely aesthetic pretension, has therefore produced "weak and ineffectual fiction," thus alienating himself from the reality of black life and struggle.

It is no wonder then that Malraux's award to Ellison, coming "at this juncture," alleviated some of the burden put on Ellison's soul by his fellow black writers' lack of appreciation and their labeling his selective adoption of literary ancestors which manifests his aesthetic dispositions and his belief in the universality of art as mere Tomism.

One can only imagine Ellison's sense of triumph when he received the official-looking letter from his French literary mentor. Ellison certainly received the honor as a validation of his craftsmanship and of the legitimacy of his efforts at establishing a

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<sup>531</sup> Quoted in Bradley, *Ralph Ellison in Progress*, *op. cit.*, 58.

literary paternity claim that transcends racial boundaries onto the entire world's canon. For an African American writer longing for universality in his art, this was proof enough to Ellison that he would be able to overcome whatever limitations that had been put on him by his racial background. He had become the embodiment of Malraux's favorite phrase: "art is anti-destiny."

#### **4. Embodying Malraux, the ancestor**

More than his heroic public figure, it is Malraux's philosophical ideas that most influenced Ellison. During his apprenticeship years Malraux was a vehicle for grasping the crucial role which form or aesthetics plays in shaping one's experience into an art that allows for universal identification; into that "concord of sensibilities" that binds humans together through what Malraux calls "la condition humaine."

##### **4.1 *The Psychology of Art*: a matrix of Ellison's thought**

Ralph Ellison gives a tremendous credit to T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* but hardly ever mentions the influence of Eliot's essay "Tradition and the individual talent" on his theoretical thinking about literature. This influence is well-known to Ellison's Scholars. What I argue here is that much of Ellison's theory of literary tradition and craft as formulated throughout his essays in *Shadow and Act* and in his interviews actually derives from Malraux's *The Psychology of Art* which he blends with what he had already learned from Eliot.

Ellison preserved in his files Malraux's articles about art that appeared in the

magazine *Verve* and collected in *The Psychology of Art* – later republished as *Les Voix du Silence*<sup>532</sup> – for which, Ellison says, “I was spending twenty-five dollars a volume,” while “I was walking around with holes in my shoes,”<sup>533</sup> because “trying to grasp his blending of art history, philosophy, and politics was more important than having dry feet.”<sup>534</sup> Malraux's views on the interrelatedness of arts, philosophy and politics were dimmed insightful to Ellison who often mentioned this book as crucial to the development of his awareness of the power of art in bringing an “ennobling symmetry” upon men.

That Malraux's theories about art history in *The Psychology of Art* – described by famous art historian Ernst. H. Gombrich as “delirious romanticism”<sup>535</sup> – were decried do not matter much as does the attitude to life and culture that Ellison is able to derive from them. Summarizing Malraux's theses developed in this volume is a difficult exercise, for his extravagant, dense and elliptical language is anything but scientific or rigorous and thus resists summarization. Yet, I rely on Ellison's own statements about his use of Malraux to define the latter's basic ideas that: art is the only human activity that allows to transcend the absurdity of man's fate; the world's artistic heritage has now

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<sup>532</sup> This volume was criticized by critic and poet Randall Jarrell in his book: *A Sad Heart at the Supermarket*. (New York: Atheneum, 1962), 24-27.

In the chapter devoted to Malraux, satirically titled “The Thunder of Silence,” Jarrell denounces Malraux's book as “a kind of free fantasia on themes from the history of art – still, a successful enough confusion of genres is a new genre – which now stands solitary as Alice.” In “Malraux's world everything is either heroic, ignoble, or irrelevant,” says Jarrell and he fears that the book “will probably have some dreadful descendants.”

<sup>533</sup> Maryemma Graham and Amritjit Singh, *op. cit.*, 364.

<sup>534</sup> Maryemma Graham and Amritjit Singh, *op. cit.*, 364.

<sup>535</sup> Gombrich was the first to challenge Malraux's ideas about art and his famous concept of “musée imaginaire” in an article “André Malraux and the Crisis of Expressionism” published in 1954 in the *Burlington Magazine*. Gombrich characterizes the book as delirious romanticism: “Malraux would prefer to have faith in an illusion, and that is why he makes a panegyric to myth.” The names and images Malraux manipulates “function like the names of the divinities in ancient incantations to reassure the writer more than the reader.”

become a “museum without walls” thanks to the photographic techniques of reproduction which enable access to, and comparison of pieces of art from different civilizations and periods; finally this availability of art enables an artist to build up his own “musée imaginaire,” made up of the world's art which best appeal to his sense of aesthetics.

One of Malraux's *Verve* articles which Ellison read very closely is “Portrayal in the West and the Far East.” The paragraphs that Ellison underlined refer again to man's struggle toward transcending his circumstances, metamorphosing things through art: “Destiny is vanquished to the extent that life is portrayed in terms of art,” Ellison underlined in another page.



against the "sorry scheme of things"—the social consciousness is essentially a consciousness of the autonomy of the outside world.

When man's struggle against this tyranny of circumstance is directed towards remoulding persons or things, its implement is science or activity; when it is directed to the modification of forms—of the relation between men and things—its implement is art.

All art tends so constantly to scale things down to the measure of man or reshape them to the likeness of his dream, and to impose a human meaning on the universe—in short, to vanquish Destiny in the widest sense of that rather evasive word—that all the works of the past, once we read into them a universal reference, strike us as works of art, given the necessary lapse of time. Even bad Gothic is, none the less, authentically Gothic.

The more remote in time a given work, the more the artist is forgotten in the style; Egyptian and medieval sculptors are anonymous. True, we know the names of some Greek artists; yet we first think of a statue as being Greek, before remembering it is the work of, say, Lysippus. We view the works of the past, provided their style is remote enough from ours, as if the style itself were the artist, as if the maker of a Romanesque bas-relief were the Romanesque style—and we say "This is a Romanesque bas-relief" as we say of a picture "This is a Rembrandt".

## II

All discussions of style are hampered by the all-too-persistent notion that there is a sort of neutral or 'colourless' style—a no-man's-land—starting from which authentic styles begin; a mistaken belief that leads to endless confusion. There is no such thing as a neutral manner of painting; there are only the types of painting an artist invents for himself, and types that other artists have invented.

The notion of a neutral style is based on the idea that a living model can be copied without interpretation, without personal expression. No such copy has ever been made. Even in drawing, that notion can be applied only to a small range of subjects: a standing horse seen in profile, for instance—but not to a galloping horse. Can we conceive of the drawing of a rearing horse, facing forward, made in a style which is neither that of some School or other, nor that of an innovator? As far as drawing is concerned, the theory of a neutral style (vaguely associated with the art of drawing profiles) owes much to the silhouette; the neutral style is the bare outline. Actually, such a method of depiction, theoretically absolutely 'pure', would lead not to the work of art but to the 'symbol'. It would stand to the art of drawing in the same relation as that in which the commercial or official style stands to literature.

It is a singular thing that problems of colour are almost always discussed in terms of the colouring of forms. It is

as if a psychology of music were to set out to analyse music in terms of the words which it accompanies. Perhaps the fact that colour, too, may serve the purpose of a sign, independently of form, has helped to create the myth of a neutral style. Told to paint a red curtain, an art-student, after blocking-in the outlines, covers the intervening space with red, just as in an industrial draughtsman's office he would use blue to indicate the steel and iron surfaces on a working plan. The red put on by the student is in no sense expressive—a skilled painter would treat the surface very differently; like the blue, it is a sign, and nothing more.

Outline, and colour used as symbolic tone, are the two media of the sign in painting; as the cast is, though much less obviously, in sculpture. The mere fact that the problems of art are stated in terms not of the sign but of something definitely beyond it, suggests that we have only to clear up the confusion between 'sign' and expression to discern at once the function of the artist and the problems which confront him.

The artist sets out to replace given forms by other forms. Enthrilled by the sights that quicken his emotion and impelled by the very same emotion to destroy them, he is captive not of life but of a style, a method of interpreting the world. And he has to destroy one aspect of it to create another, which, though it is unknown to him, he feels instinctively; he is like the blind man, in the old parable, who can only make his way across the darkness by the light of his own lamp.

Every painter has to reduce all living forms to the two dimensions of his canvas, every sculptor to reduce movement to immobility, every writer to reduce a series of events to a select few; a lapse of hours to moments. All art is a symbol and an act of conquest in the sense that it involves this process of 'reduction'. And the creative artist is less unlike the inventor than might be supposed; to replace a human arm the latter need not invent an artificial limb, the wheel of a wheelbarrow does the work as well. Thus, in order to master life, the artist need not invent a method of reproduction but a technique of significance—a style.

Art springs from nothing else than that: from the fascination of the inapprehensible, and abhorrence of the copy. The still life is not favoured in the early stages of art; the primitive artist is interested in geometrical patterns and in gods. He deals with imitable subjects only later, when he has developed a technique for portraying without copying objects; as when a Dutch painter imparts to a still life the illusion of an eternal moment. Sculpture might have copied an apple to perfection, but has always taken good care not to do so. Even for a medieval labourer or an Egyptian boatman a statue was something more than a stationary man. A *tableau vivant* imitates life better than does a painting or a statue; but the artist's business is not to reproduce but to 'possess' the world.

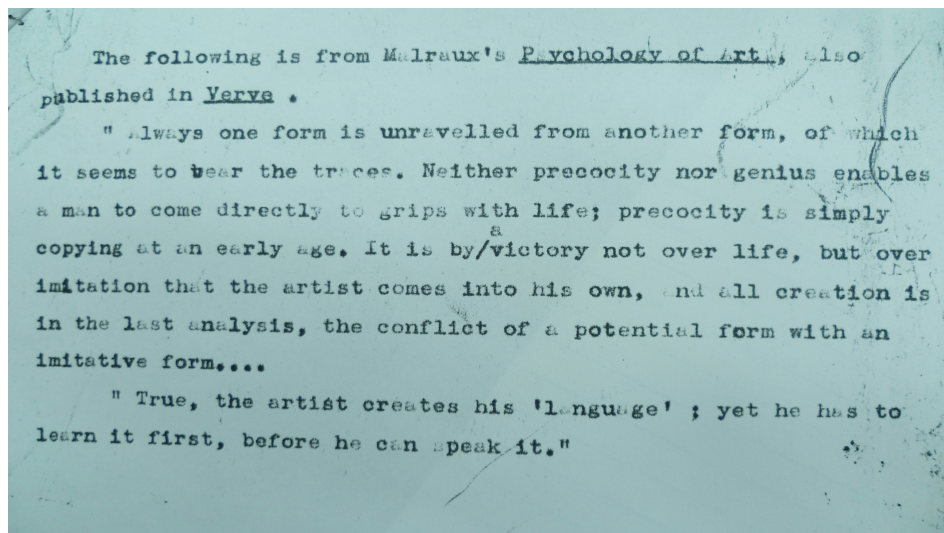
There are certain forms into which men have been delving since all time; for they are inexhaustible. The mystery of

Knowing that his friend Richard Wright also revered Malraux, he wrote him saying that he thought Wright would be interested in some excerpts he selected and typed within his own letter, from Malraux's article "The Christian Form of Expression" which also appeared in *Verve*. He also typed and included a passage from *The Psychology of Art* that reads:

Always one form is unravelled from another form, of which it seems to bear the traces. Neither precocity nor genius enables a man to come directly to grips with life; precocity is simply copying at an early age. It is a victory not over life, but over imitation that the artist comes into his own, and all creation is in the last analysis, the conflict of a potential form with an imitative form. ... True, the artist creates his own 'language'; yet he has first to learn it.<sup>536</sup>

We are reminded here of the habit Ellison developed of copying or typing long passages from Hemingway, Faulkner, or, as he is doing here, from Malraux, as a first step towards learning his "own language."

Ralph Ellison Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Box I: 75 / Folder 5



<sup>536</sup> Ralph Ellison Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Box I: 75 / Folder 5.



Malraux  
Dear Dick:

Here some notes, or rather excerpts from Verve that I was able to copy during the winter. I have them in my note book and thought perhaps you might find them interesting. The title of the article by Malraux was, I believe, THE CHRISTIAN FORM OF EXPRESSION

"Few vocabularies are so charged with overtones of feeling as that of art: as a result, few are so ambiguous. The word 'Gothic' is, so to speak, overwhelmed by Chartres; hearing the word, we conjure up the cathedral. But at Paris, at Amiens and Rheims, thanks to the reconciliation of God and man, a Gothic style had been built supple as plain song and exempt from fear. Its supple rhythm is the very rhythm of Assise and its sculpture boldly faces up the conflicting problems of all Christian art: how to depict God as a man and yet reveal him godhead; how to render the personalities of the saints (I do not mean their 'likeness') - that is to show as actual persons men whom those 'realists' had never seen in the flesh; how to stamp a thousand faces with the hall-mark of the Christian life, yet leave to each its idiosyncracies.

"For the Christian is a problem, a mystery to himself; the mere existence of Good and Evil challenges his introspection. Before Christ art was characterized by the theatrical gesture; after by psychological expressions, acts; the faces and pictures no longer ask; 'what ought I to do?' gives way to 'whom am I?' The introspection takes the place of action.

"Assuredly the greatest discovery of Christian art was its recognition of a truth, not reasoned out but organically felt: that the universal is most effectively expressed through the particular; that the death of 'The man named Callias' brings death home to us more keenly than the death of an 'Everyman'. The Christian world with its wealth of emotions lent itself admirably to such emotions."

While he was leaning his “own language,” and before he discovered Malraux, Ellison had read Eliot at Tuskegee. Eliot's “Tradition and the individual talent” echoes through Ellison’s views about literary tradition and the necessity, in Ellison's words, not to “leapfrog tradition,” but also not to adhere to it uncritically. According to Eliot:

Tradition ... cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labor. It involves the historical sense, ... a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence [which] compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, ... is what makes a writer *traditional* ... and most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity<sup>537</sup>

Ellison expresses his own idea of tradition and individual performance when he says that:

[t]rue jazz is an art of individual assertion within and against the group ... and each solo flight, or improvisation, represents (like the *successive canvases of the painter*) a definition of his identity: as individual, as member of the collectivity and as a link in the chain of tradition. ... jazz finds its very life in an endless improvisation upon traditional materials.<sup>538</sup>

Eliot echoes here, but Ellison replaces the classical references with jazz and visual arts, which points towards the influence of Malraux. Ellison systematically evokes, paraphrases or explicitly quotes from Malraux whenever he discusses the art of fiction or literary tradition in terms of musical metaphors or visual arts. Malraux's literary criticism abounds in analogies between the novelist's craft and the painter's or sculptor's,

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<sup>537</sup> T. S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” *The Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*. Ed. Frank Kermode (Orlando: Harcourt, 1975), 39.

<sup>538</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, 1964), 234.

which are far more to the test of Ellison, the sculptor, the musician, the novelist and the critic. “Arrêtons-nous,” says Malraux in one of such comparisons:

à la métamorphose des relations entre les éléments – à ce que les peintres appellent la Palette. Ils entendent par là le choix des couleurs, et leur rapport relativement constant, souvent gouverné par une corrélation privilégiée: sépia et grenat chez Rembrandt, cendre bleue et jaune de Naples chez Vermeer, etc... Etendons le mot à la littérature qui n'en possède pas l'équivalent: ce serait style, si style ne signifiait aussi écriture. Les éléments de l'oeuvre, intrigue, personnage, affrontements, analyses, atmosphère s'assemblent comme les couleurs. il existe une palette de Dostoievski et une de Stendhal, comme de Rembrandt et de Vermeer.<sup>539</sup>

For Malraux, an artistic creation whatever its medium is ultimately an attempt to transcend the human condition. Consequently all forms of art are inherently related, and parallels can be drawn between one form and another over time and space. This constitutes the “imaginary museum” of the world's art from which the artist draws inspiration and against which he measures himself. Yet, says Malraux, “l'individu s'oppose à la collectivité, mais il s'en nourrit. Et l'important est bien moins de savoir à quoi il s'oppose que ce dont il se nourrit”<sup>540</sup> The imaginary Museum gives modern man: “an expanded awareness of what art is and has been.” Likewise, in the imaginary museum of literature, masterpieces co-exist and the value of each one is revealed through its confrontation to all the others:

This availability enables us to perceive the uniqueness of styles – to see that a masterwork is the crowning achievement of its particular styles and can be recognized only by comparison with other works of the same style rather than by reference to some abstract ideal of perfection and beauty toward which all art is

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<sup>539</sup> Martine de Courcel, ed. “Néocritique” *Malraux, être et dire* (Paris: Plon, 1976), 320.

<sup>540</sup> André Malraux, *Le Temps du mépris* (Paris: Gallimard, 1935), 11.

supposed to strive. . . . Yet, although styles are distinct and discreet, the style of one civilization may communicate with the style of a later one; something the first 'expresses' may 'speak' to the second, which becomes able to 'hear' it. These are the voices of Silence. They become audible only by the action of a 'metamorphosis' through which they may be 'wrestled' from the first by the second and 'annexed' by it.<sup>541</sup>

Malraux says, in his definition of the artist's relationship to the tradition, that the artist “[doit] vouloir accueillir d'un coeur égal tous les héritages du monde.” The following quotation shows how Ellison riffs on Malraux while claiming the diversity of his cultural background; stressing his grasp of the literatures of America and Europe; and placing himself in the tradition through his contribution that effects the “necessary modifications” of reality:

The act of writing requires a constant plunging back into the shadow of the past where time hovers ghostlike. When I began writing in earnest I was forced ... to relate myself consciously and imaginatively to my mixed background as American, as Negro American, and as a Negro from what in its own belated way was a pioneer background. More important and inseparable from this particular effort was the necessity of determining my true relationship to that body of American literature to which I was most attracted and through which, aided by what I could learn from the literatures of Europe, I would find my own voice, and to which I was challenged, by way of achieving myself, to make some small contribution, and to whose composite picture of reality I was obligated to offer some necessary modifications.<sup>542</sup>

As a tool for transcendence, Ellison sees literary imagination as akin to the “Imaginary Museum” which “draws no color line,”<sup>543</sup> and his particular experience and his culture are as valuable gist for artistic treatment:

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<sup>541</sup> W. Frohock, "André Malraux: Last Roundup," *The Massachusetts Review: A Quarterly of Literature, the Arts and Public Affairs* 21 (Sept. 1980) 121-122.

<sup>542</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, *op. cit.*, xix.

<sup>543</sup> *Ibid.*, 258.

For me, at least, in the discontinuities, swiftly changing and diverse American culture, the stability of the Negro American folk tradition became precious as a result of an act of literary discovery. Taken as a whole, its spirituals along with its blues, jazz, and folk tales, it has ... much to tell us of the faith, humor and adaptability to reality necessary in a world which has taken on much of the insecurity and blues-like absurdity known to those who brought it into being. For those who are able to translate its meaning into wider, more precise vocabularies it has much to offer indeed.<sup>544</sup>

We can see how Ellison builds here on Malraux's "Imaginary Museum" as the locus for the world's artistic heritage. It is inherently without walls and it recognizes no confining boundaries between artistic traditions or civilizations for that matter.

Malraux's view of the genesis of an artist can also be traced in Ellison's defining himself as a "product of the library." For Malraux, an artist springs from the body of art that preceded him: "How long does it takes a writer to learn to write with the sound of his own voice!"<sup>545</sup> he rhetorically asks; "Whether an artist begins to paint, write, or compose early or late in life, and however effective his first works may be, always behind them lies the studio, the cathedral, the museum, the library or the concert-hall."<sup>546</sup> Similarly, Ellison advises apprentice writers to read because "it is the reading that makes the writer. ... [and] books are written out of other books just as battle plans are made out of earlier strategies and tactics,"<sup>547</sup> thus emphasizing the conquering aspect of artistic creation.

Ellison's metaphor of the artist's "battle plans" to overcome the influence of their models and develop a style of their own brings us back to Malraux again: "Artists do

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<sup>544</sup> *Ibid.*, 58-59.

<sup>545</sup> A. Malraux, *The Voices of Silence*, trans. Stuart Gilbert, (Princeton University Press, 1953), 280.

<sup>546</sup> *Ibid.*, 315.

<sup>547</sup> Maryemma Graham and Amritjit Singh, *op. cit.*, 199.

not stem from their childhood,” he says, “but from their conflict with the achievements of their predecessors; not from their own formless world, but from their struggle with the forms which others have imposed on life.”<sup>548</sup>

Concerning the imitation of “the work of masters” Malraux writes: “The life stories of great painters show us pastiches as being the starting point of their art, none tells of a transition from the art school to genius without a conflict with some previous genius.”<sup>549</sup> Similarly, Ellison reflected in an unpublished note for a questionnaire sent to him by The Denver Post in 1952, that a tyro black writer's problem is “that of mastering technique, of overcoming his influence so that he doesn't merely imitate, and he has the problem of absorbing the general culture of the novel and of getting his experience and of learning to deal with it imaginatively”<sup>550</sup> Ellison responds also to Malraux when he discusses the genesis of *Invisible Man* in his introduction to the novel: “After the usual apprenticeship of imitation and seeking with delight to examine my experience through the discipline of the novel, I became gradually aware that the forms of so many of the works which impressed me were too restricted to contain the experience which I knew.”<sup>551</sup> Ellison expresses here his will to go beyond his forerunners and not to “follow them slavishly.”<sup>552</sup>

Another point of convergence between Malraux's *Psychology of Art* and Ellison's paradigm of choosing ancestors – which I amply discussed in my introduction – lies in Malraux's declaration that although an artist is born within a tradition which he

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<sup>548</sup> A. Malraux, *The Voices of Silence*, *op. cit.*, 281.

<sup>549</sup> *Ibid.*, 316.

<sup>550</sup> Ralph Ellison Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Box I: 174/ Folder 10.

<sup>551</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, *op. cit.*, 102.

<sup>552</sup> A. Malraux, *The Voices of Silence*, *op. cit.*, 316.



is forced to acknowledge, “he certainly chose his masters,”<sup>553</sup> which also connects Malraux back to Shklovsky’s theory of abrupt generational ruptures in literary history. I was made aware of this connection by Frederic Jameson who says: “It is [Shklovsky’s theory] a model of artistic history not unlike that proposed by Malraux in *The Voices of Silence*, ... formulated in terms of the psychology of creation and the need for each successive generation to react against his own masters.”<sup>554</sup> It is also highly significant that “The World and the Jug,” is introduced with a quotation from Malraux and Malraux’s frame of thought can be traced in every point argued in this essay.

Finally, Malraux is certainly one of those “few mighty, often antagonistic ghosts” of “dead artists” who inhabit Ellison’s heart and “exercise an irresistible fascination.”<sup>555</sup> Malraux’s theory of the artist’s development within a tradition not only served as a matrix to Ellison’s own theoretical thinking about “literature as a whole” and about the artist as a wrestler of form but is also illustrated through Ellison’s own artistic development.

## 4.2 Chaos and Conscious thought

Ellison’s frequent use of Malraux’s favorite words *chaos*, “*conscious thought*,” “*metamorphosis*,” *artist-revolutionary*, *man’s fate*, *anti-destiny*, denotes, as Bakhtin says, that “both the authority of discourse and its internal persuasiveness may be united in a single word – one that is simultaneously authoritative and internally persuasive.”<sup>556</sup>

Referring again to Malraux as a formative influence and to his “fortuitous” meeting

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<sup>553</sup> *Ibid.*, 316.

<sup>554</sup> Frederic Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Formalism*. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1972), 52-3.

<sup>555</sup> A. Malraux, *The Voices of Silence*, trans. Stuart Gilbert, (Princeton University Press, 1953), 317.

<sup>556</sup> Michail Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” in *The Dialogic Imagination*, Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 342.

with him, Ellison comments that it is such “accidents” that shaped his life as a writer by providing a point of entry into the mainstream of literature: “through the act of reading [Malraux] I had become acquainted with other possible selves – freer, more courageous and ingenious and, during the course of the narrative at least, even wise.”<sup>557</sup> I find Bakhtin's insight in how “entirely different possibilities open up” when “someone else's [] discourse is internally persuasive for us and acknowledged by us,”<sup>558</sup> useful here. For, Malraux described heroic actions, exotic places, revolutions, artistic experiences that were broader and far richer and removed from Ellison's own segregated life, but “I never thought they were not for me simply because I happened to be a negro,”<sup>559</sup> says Ellison. At the level of human values and man's capacity to endure and shape his own destiny, Ellison could relate and “make identifications,” for as he says “on the deeper human level, identification can become compelling when the situation is revealed artistically.”<sup>560</sup> It is significant that *Man's Fate* was Ellison's absolute “favorite book” as he tells one of his interviewers.<sup>561</sup> It taught him to stand up on principal, to face a destiny that appears unconquerable, to challenge with determination that which denies one's existence as the narrator of *Invisible Man* advises to “swear to make them recognize you.”<sup>562</sup> So, this novel is one of the core elements of the development of Ellison into a conscious writer.

Like Malraux, Ellison wanted, through the mastery of artistic skill, to be able to

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<sup>557</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, *op. cit.*, xx.

<sup>558</sup> Michail Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” *op. cit.*, 345.

<sup>559</sup> John F. Callahan, ed. *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, *op. cit.*, 65.

<sup>560</sup> Maryemma Graham and Amritjit Singh, *op. cit.*, 9.

<sup>561</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>562</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Random House, 1952), 4.

effectively marshal “the army of [his] thoughts and images,”<sup>563</sup> to allow for these identifications in his fiction. Ellison introduced *Shadow and Act* as “an attempt to transform some of the themes, the problems, the enigmas, the contradictions of character and culture native to my predicament, into what Andre Malraux has described as ‘conscious thought.’”<sup>564</sup> Ellison paraphrases here a line from *L’Espoir* when Garcia answers Scali’s question “qu’est ce qu’un homme peut faire de mieux de sa vie, selon vous?” with “transformer en conscience une expérience aussi large que possible,”<sup>565</sup> which for Ellison stands as a valid definition of the writer’s vocation who must be acutely conscious of the formlessness of raw experience and who wrestles from it his story.

Armed with his mentor’s theories, Ellison started to evaluate the African American experience “out of a broad knowledge of how people of other cultures live, deal with experience and give significance to that experience.”<sup>566</sup> Malraux’s discourse proves, to adapt Bakhtin’s words, “of decisive significance in the evolution of [Ellison’s] *consciousness*: consciousness awakens to independent ideological life precisely in a world of alien discourses surrounding it, and from which it cannot initially separate itself.”<sup>567</sup> Eventually Ellison became interested in not just ideas but in the way these ideas are conveyed through writing technique. Malraux helped him develop a psychological disposition that rendered him more conscious about and receptive to the

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<sup>563</sup> Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*, (Louisiana: State University Press, 1941), 298.

Consulted in R. Ellison’s Room, Library of Congress, Rare Books and Manuscript Division, A/VII/4.

<sup>564</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, *op. cit.*, xix.

<sup>565</sup> Andre Malraux, *L’Espoir*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1937), 397.

<sup>566</sup> Maryemma Graham and Amritjit Singh, *op. cit.*, 364-65.

<sup>567</sup> Michail Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel”, *op. cit.*, 345.

mainstream literature – albeit it excluded him – and to the particularities of his own experience as an African American:

The more I learned of literature in this *conscious* way, the more the details of my background became transformed. I heard undertones in remembered conversations which had escaped me before, local customs took on a more universal meaning, values which I hadn't understood were revealed, some of the people whom I had known were diminished, while others were elevated in stature. More important, I began to see my own possibilities with more objective and in some ways more hopeful eyes.<sup>568</sup>

Through the discipline of literary practice, Ellison says he became able to bring coherence and meaning to the flux and chaos of everyday experience around him. Ellison appropriates here what Malraux says in his preface to *Le Sang noir* by Louis Guilloux, about the power of art and the function of the artist as that of rescuing from oblivion disregarded values and cultures to allow men to see their worthiness and possess their destiny:

Le plus grand art c'est de prendre le chaos du monde et de le transformer en conscience, de permettre aux hommes de posséder leur destin. ... Mais celui qui vient après, c'est de choisir son chaos et de lui donner sa marque, de faire des hommes avec des ombres, et de sauver ce qui peut être sauvé des vies les plus dérisoires en les ensevelissant dans ce qu'elles ignoraient de grand en elles.<sup>569</sup>

It is significant for my argument of the importance of ancestors, as wrestlers of form, over relatives, that Ellison chooses to pay his tribute to Malraux for teaching him how to master the crushing formlessness of painful experience in his essay on Richard Wright, "Richard Wright's Blues." By quoting extensively from Malraux, Ellison seems to measure up what Malraux was able to bring to him in terms of craft that Wright the

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<sup>568</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, *op. cit.*, 160.

<sup>569</sup> Andre Malraux, "Sens de la mort", Preface to Louis Guilloux, *Le Sang noir* (Paris: Club du Meilleur Livre, 1955), 4.

relative, engulfed in the chaos of their shared experience, could not supply. Ellison seems to be pitting Malraux against Wright in his discussion of Wright's failure to take enough distance from his material so that he would not create "his own stereotypes, very often unconsciously, by reading into situations involving Negroes those stock meanings which justify his emotional and economic needs."<sup>570</sup> For Ellison, Wright confronted his destiny, "that combination of forces before which man feels powerless, in terms of a quick and casual violence inflicted upon him by both family and community. His response was likewise violent, and it has been his need to give that violence significance which has shaped his writing."<sup>571</sup> Wright has created Bigger Thomas "through brute force," which reduced him to "a lack of consciousness,"<sup>572</sup> while according to Malraux via Ellison:

The function, the psychology, of artistic selectivity is to eliminate from art those elements of experience which contain no compelling significance, life is as the sea, art a ship in which man conquers life's crushing formlessness, reducing it to a course, a series of swells, tides and wind, 'the organized significance of art,' writes Malraux, "is stronger than all the multiplicity of the world; ... that significance alone enables man to conquer chaos and to master destiny."<sup>573</sup>

Concern with consciousness and conscious thought haunts *Invisible Man*. For example the vet doctor in the Golden Day episode tells Norton and the narrator that he went to France with the Army Medical Corps and remained there "long enough to forget some fundamentals, which I should never have forgotten," and which he knew "through experience, though seldom through conscious thought ..."<sup>574</sup> As to the Invisible Man, he

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<sup>570</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, op. cit., 28.

<sup>571</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>572</sup> Maryemma Graham and Amritjit Singh, op. cit., 139.

<sup>573</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, op. cit., 83.

<sup>574</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, op. cit., 89.

compares his attainment of a state of “conscious thought” about his being manipulated by the Brotherhood to seeing around a corner of his unconscious: “all the incidents of my past, both recognized and ignored, sprang together in my mind in an ironic leap of consciousness that was like looking around a corner.”<sup>575</sup> The narrator indicts Brother Tobitt and the Brotherhood’s program for failing to acknowledge the particularities of “the political consciousness of Harlem” which thrive on “the gin mills and the barber shops and the juke joints and the churches, ... and the beauty parlors on Saturdays when they’re frying hair,” and where “a whole unrecorded history is spoken.”<sup>576</sup> This, he says, is the reality he has been able to perceive and articulate.

Echoing Kierkegaard's – one of Malraux's great influences – “The sickness unto death,” the narrator affirms “all sickness is *not* unto death, nor is invisibility,”<sup>577</sup> thus showing he has transcended sickness and death through his creative act as Ellison himself confirms: “the writing and publication of his experience is an act of self-definition, and an act of some social significance.”<sup>578</sup> He has learned “how the individual functions creatively in society,”<sup>579</sup> through awareness and self-knowledge. Finally, the very fact of writing his memoir is a successful attempt on the part of the Invisible Man at transforming the chaos of his experience, from college to the Battle Royal, the factory, the hospital, the brotherhood and the cellar, into conscious thought, then into an art form.

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<sup>575</sup> *Ibid.*, 503.

<sup>576</sup> *Ibid.*, 460.

<sup>577</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>578</sup> Maryemma Graham and Amritjit Singh, *op. cit.*, 73.

<sup>579</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

### 4.3 The left in “The Black Ball”

“The black ball” is one of Ellison's early unpublished stories which makes an explicit reference to Malraux's *Man Fate*.<sup>580</sup> It is about a Southern young single father who works as a janitor for an apartment building in an unspecified southwestern town and his four-year-old son's initiation into “the old ball game” of race relations in America. John, the first person narrator, is a caring father who does his best to spare his son the realities of skin color divisions. When his son asks him if he is black, as Jackie, the gardener's white son with whom he plays has said, he replies: “Of course not, you’re brown. You know you’re not black.” ... You mustn’t let them kid you, son.” When the child insists to know whether brown is nicer than white, he says: “Some people think so. But American is better than both.” John is constantly anxious about losing his job if his son happens to disturb the building manager, when he plays with his white ball. He is also concerned that a number of his fellow black workers had been dismissed because whites had demanded their jobs. So he is on his guard when a white man “lean and red in the face with the redness that comes from a long diet of certain foods,” asks about his job in a familiar tone and tries to dissipate John's mistrust by offering tobacco and saying with a smile: “Not used to anything like that, are you? ... Fellow like me offering a fellow like you something besides a rope.” John contains his rage over the hardly veiled allusion to lynching and feels he “had to smile,” though he knows that “A smile couldn’t change things between my kind and his.” Finally, the man tells John he is a unionist and gives him a card of invitation to join the building-service union he

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<sup>580</sup> The draft of the story is undated, but we can infer the period Ellison was working on it from the dates on the letter-heads paper he used, that is 1938, in Dayton. Box I:162/ Folder 5.

intends to organize. John is skeptical because he knows that unions do not allow black workers to become members. However, the unionist claims that his union is different, and that he got his hands badly burned by defending a black sharecropper accused of rape in Macon County, Alabama.

At lunch break, John starts reading André Malraux's *Man's Fate*, but the fried hands are still on his mind. John's son is playing outside with his white ball when a white boy snatches it from him and throws it up in the manager's window. The boss threatens to send John "behind the *black* ball" if he sees the boy again around his place. The child thinks the manager has a poor vision since he refers to his ball as *black*. His father explains to him that "in time," he also would play with the black ball. The story ends with John reaching to his pocket to see if he still has the card the unionist gave him and thinking: "Maybe there was a color other than white on the old ball."<sup>581</sup>

"The black ball" is perhaps Ellison's "most subtly crafted and realized"<sup>582</sup> story. Starting from the title, color symbolism, black, white and red, runs like a thread throughout the story. The noun, "black ball" means a negative ballot, therefore it signifies opposition, resistance, and defiance. A significant passage is when the child asks if he will be allowed to play with the "black ball." The black/white ball is a metaphor for the trickster's strategy of survival. Playing the white ball means, in the Invisible Man's grandfather's words "overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open." However, by doing so, the narrator is also playing the "black ball," i.e. resisting.

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<sup>581</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Flying Home and Other Stories* (New York: Random House, 1996), 111-121.

<sup>582</sup> *Ibid.*, xxxiv.



The appearance of the “red” unionist adds to John's anxiety and confusion and points to the deceitful layer that communism brings to the already complicated scheme of things in America, which is amply reflected also in *Invisible Man* through the Brotherhood. We get a measure of John's wariness about the unionist's possible deception in that he does not look at his hands but “at the color draining from his face,” which turns from *red* to white. The white manager who threatens to send John behind the black ball is also “red in the face,” like the unionist. Another hint a union is yet another organization of white control dedicated to white interest, is that John says: “Your damn unions are like everything else in the country – for whites only.” Because of the unionist's characterization and of the color imagery, we are hardly encouraged to see him as representing the black-white comradeship. Besides, the fact that the black sharecropper ends up being lynched and his house burned to ashes, coupled with the fact that it is John and his son who get in trouble while it is actually the white boy who threw the ball and broke the window, further indicate that John might not be ready to take chances. His and his son's lives are at stake if things prove him right.

Rampersad finds the ending inconclusive, “but the narrator,” he argues, is on the verge of joining,” the Communist party, though “the doctrinaire aspect of the story is muted.”<sup>583</sup> For Barbara Foley, the doctrinaire element is blaring. The iodine which John put on his scratched hand implies the “racial division” will be resolved by “the red antibiotic of communism.”<sup>584</sup> I don't concur with these readings which for all their insightful analysis overlook yet one thing: the semantic weight of the word “maybe,”

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<sup>583</sup> Arnold Rampersad, *op. cit.*, 105.

<sup>584</sup> Barbara Foley, *Wresting with the Left: the Making of Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man* (Duke University Press, 2010), 116.

which is in my sense crucial here, in that it expresses less hope than what Ellison calls the “recognition of necessity,”<sup>585</sup> that is the necessity to adapt to and operate within the Thou-shall-nots that structure black people's lives and which Ellison equates with “one-winged flying.”<sup>586</sup> Black people have to constantly “[test] the ground under their feet in the larger world, [and adapt] to life as a game of chance in which the odds are long, the outcome at best in doubt.”<sup>587</sup> Therefore, though alert to being manipulated, they sometimes see the necessity to “play the game but [they] don't believe in it,”<sup>588</sup> as the vet in the Golden Day advises the Invisible Man. When John says that the category American is better than the black or the white, he envisions it as a unifying figure for transcending racial divisions, and there is no hint that it should come through the agency of a union.

Ellison expresses the same political awareness about the left with which he endows John, in his letters to Wright in which commitment by necessity to leftist ideology is foregrounded:

Perhaps he [Chester Himes] accomplished the task of showing the communists what a Negro writer might do if he really started striking back at them; if so, so much the better. *Recently they have been after me to reprint one of my short stories*<sup>589</sup> *in an anthology. I refused, reminding them that in 1942, it was necessary, at the expense of much wrenching of my emotions and intellectual*

<sup>585</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, *op. cit.*, 488.

<sup>586</sup> Ellison says that at those moments when “the recognition of necessity” manifests itself, he reminds himself of the folk tale in which a black man arrives mistakenly in heaven and is issued a pair of wings. However he learns with great surprise that certain earth-like rules require people of his complexion to fly with one wing strapped to their sides. Although surprised, he decides to “forgo complaint and get on with the task of mastering the challenge of one-wing flying,” so that he soon became “the most skillful one-winged flyer ever to have been grounded by heavenly decision.”

In Ralph Ellison, *Going to the Territory* (New York: Random House, 1986), 149.

<sup>587</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Flying Home*, *op. cit.*, xxxiii.

<sup>588</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, *op. cit.*, 100.

<sup>589</sup> Ellison is probably referring to one of the Buster and Riley stories: “Afternoon” (1940), “Mister Toussan,” (1941), or “That I Had the Wings” (1943) which appeared in *New Masses*.

convictions to change the direction of my fictional efforts, and that I could see no reason for swinging back over passed grounds.”<sup>590</sup>

sorry, but he completely misjudged the temper of the present red scare in this country. Perhaps he accomplished the task of showing the communists what a Negro writer might do if he really started striking back at them; if so, so much the better. Recently they have been after me to reprint one of my old short stories in an anthology. I refused, <sup>recently</sup> telling them that in 1942 it was necessary to, at the expense of much wrenching of my ideology and emotions, to change the direction of my fictional efforts, and that I could see no reason for swinging back over passed ground. They answered through a former friend,

Ellison, who had just began his writing career in New York after he met Wright, was struggling to find a way of accommodating his concern with aesthetics and the broader social concerns of African Americans. Although Leftist-oriented publishing organs such as the *Worker* and the *New Masses* offered Ellison as well as other African American writers an opportunity to go into print, Ellison never sought membership in the Communist Party, which Foley did not take into consideration. Unlike other black and white leftist writers who contributed freely to leftist magazines, Ellison demanded to be paid for his reviews, essays and short stories, “precisely because he wanted it to be known that he was not completely committed to it.”<sup>591</sup> In a letter to Richard Wright's biographer Michel Fabre, he asserts that he has always “emphasized the negroes' rather than the worker's point of view. ... there was no way for me to accept the communist notion that workers and negroes were united without a large dose of salts.”<sup>592</sup> He felt “awful that Wright found the facile answers of Marxism before he learned to use

<sup>590</sup> Ralph Ellison Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Box I: 76/ Folder 5. (Feb 1, 1948)

<sup>591</sup> Jerry Gafio Watts, *Heroism and the Black Intellectual: Ralph Ellison, Politics, and Afro-american Political Life* (University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 43.

<sup>592</sup> Michel Fabre, “In Ralph Ellison's Precious Words,” Unpublished manuscript, 1996, 20) quoted in Barbara Foley, *Wresting with the Left*, 3.

literature as a means for discovering the forms of American Negro humanity.”<sup>593</sup> Ellison had more inclination to Malraux's humanistic version of Marxism. It was then through Malraux's lens that he grappled with the relationship between literature and the ideological demands of social realism:

I was seeking to learn and social realism was a highly regarded theory, though I didn't think too much of the so-called proletarian fiction even when I was most impressed by Marxism. I was intrigued by Malraux, who at that time was being claimed by the Communists. I noticed, however, that whenever the heroes of *Man's Fate* regarded their condition during moments of heightened self-consciousness, their thinking was something other than Marxist. Actually they were more profoundly intellectual than their real-life counterparts. Of course, Malraux was more of a humanist than most of the Marxist writers of that period—and also much more of an artist. He was the artist-revolutionary rather than a politician when he wrote *Man's Fate*, and the book lives not because of a political position embraced at the time but because of its larger concern with the tragic struggle of humanity.<sup>594</sup>

Marxism with its denial of the individual's aspirations was not the answer to the problem of African Americans nor was it to Malraux, who in 1934, attended the conference “l'Internationale des Ecrivains en Marche” held in Moscow, which gathered intellectuals from all over the world to discuss the political action of writers. Maximilien Gorki in his speech sought to orient the debate by reminding the attendees of the Stalinian phrase about the writers' task as “les ingénieurs des âmes.” Malraux who sensed from the outset how perilous this phrase was for the independence of the writers, directly reacted to it in his speech, “L'Art est une conquête” :

Si les écrivains sont les ingénieurs des âmes, n'oubliez pas que la plus haute fonction d'un ingénieur c'est d'inventer. l'art n'est pas une soumission. C'est une conquête, la conquête des sentiments et des moyens de les exprimer, une conquête

<sup>593</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, op. cit., 119.

<sup>594</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

sur l'inconscient toujours, sur la logique très souvent.<sup>595</sup>

(“if writers are the engineers of the soul, do not forget that the noblest function of an engineer is to invent. Art is not submission. It is a conquest, a conquest of the unconscious, always; of logic, sometimes.”)<sup>596</sup>

What Malraux's words seem to shun is the implied task that is assigned to the artist to use his art to promote the ideology of the left and mold people's souls. His stand point was that art may serve but should not be subdued to any ideology. Ellison expresses the same idea when he says: “one of the facile ideas which was being encouraged in this country by leftists, especially the Stalinists Communists, was that the writer owed only a second level allegiance to the art through which he found his identity.”<sup>597</sup>

On april 22, 1940, Ellison wrote in a postscript to his letter to Richard Wright: “Am going to Washington D.C. To cover National Negro Congress for NM [*New Masses*]. Will send material when I return.”<sup>598</sup> The Congress Ellison covered was similar to the one Malraux attended and Malraux's words flooded his memory as he entered the Auditorium where the event was to take place:

The auditorium had that overwhelming air usually associated with huge churches, and I remembered what Andre Malraux once said about the factory becoming for the workers what the cathedral was, and that they must come to see in it not ideal gods, but human power struggling against the earth. The building is dedicated to labor. I hoped that what was to happen there during the congress would help bring nearer that transformation of which Malraux wrote.<sup>599</sup>

This account, which abounds in Malraux imagery and terminology, appeared in *New Masses* under the title “A congress Jim Crow didn't attend.” Ellison reports that black

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<sup>595</sup> Andre Malraux, “L'art est une conquête,” *Commune*, 13-14, Septembre-Octobre 1934, P. 69.

<sup>596</sup> One is left to puzzle over Malraux's convoluted expression that juxtaposes a triumph over the chaos of the unconscious and a triumph over logic, whatever that means.

<sup>597</sup> Maryemma Graham and Amritjit Singh, *op. cit.*, 200.

<sup>598</sup> Ralph Ellison Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Box I: 222/ Folder 6.

<sup>599</sup> John F. Callahan, ed. *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison* (New York: Random House, 1995), 11.

people from all around the United States were heading for Washington, “seeking affirmation of their will to freedom, ... yearning for a sense of group unity ... that is conscious of itself, of its strength.” Ellison felt excited by what he saw during that congress as the transformative power of “conscious experience.” he saw “the positive forces of civilization and the best guarantee of America's future” in the faces of those who attended, “whose very presence here means a danger faced and a fear conquered.” This group unity that Ellison described is the assurance of a real transformation, or to use again a Malrucian word a metamorphosis, of the society. Action is no longer a solitary and desperate fate, like Tchen's suicidal attempt at stopping the advance of Chang Kai Check's army. It is efficient and it transcends fear, failure and death itself: “and there in the faces of my people I saw strength.”<sup>600</sup>

Ellison commented on the discourse of one of the speakers, Hank Johnson:

What Johnson did to me is hard to convey. I have seen many of my friends frustrated in their effort to *create themselves*. They are boys full of protest and indignation which has no social outlet. They are unhappy working at jobs they hate, living under restrictions they hate. Hank Johnson was like one of them *transformed*. He is full of indignation, but indignation that has found a direction. When he spoke all the violence that America has made our Negro heritage was flowing from him *transformed* into a will to change a civilization.<sup>601</sup>

Ellison wrote Wright again on his return on 5 November 1940, celebrating not Marxism but the consciousness and human fraternity:

The congress was the most exciting thing to happen to me. I found in it the first real basis for faith in our revolutionary potentialities. I know now that we don't have to worry overmuch about the stupidities of black CP leaders. Some day they will be awakened from their “Marxist” fog by the people who think they are

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<sup>600</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-13.

<sup>601</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

carrying out God's wishes when they fight for freedom.<sup>602</sup>

What Ellison must have felt he was witnessing that day was what Malraux calls “la fraternité combattante” (combative brotherhood), and metamorphosis, the key word that structures this report. “La fraternité combattante” is the most frequently used words in Malraux's novel *Man's Hope*, as if these words encompassed all the human values of justice, equality, dignity, and courage. The fundamental values that are expressed by the peasant Barca in *Man's Hope* who explains that he's bearing arms because “je ne veux pas qu'on me dédaigne. ... L'humiliation, ... c'est pas l'égalité. Ils ont quand même compris quelques choses ces Français avec leur connerie d'inscription sur les mairies, parce que le contraire d'être vexé c'est la fraternité” (“I do not want to be despised ... humiliation ain't equality. The French have understood quite a few things with their inscription on Town halls<sup>603</sup> ...., because what opposes humiliation is brotherhood”). In *Man's Fate*, Kyo would rather die than betray his companions. When König asks him “what do you call dignity?” he answers “the opposite of humiliation.” Arguing with Leroi Jones, Ellison in review of *Blues People* maintained that even if a man loses his freedom, his human dignity remains inalienable: “ “A slave,” writes Leroi Jones, “cannot be a man.” But what, might one ask, of those moments when he feels his metabolism aroused by the rising of the sap in the spring? What of his identity among other slaves? With his wife? And isn't it closer to the truth that far from considering themselves only in terms of that abstraction, “a slave,” the enslaved really thought of themselves as *men* who had been unjustly enslaved?”<sup>604</sup>

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<sup>602</sup> Ralph Ellison Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Box I: 222/ Folder 6.

<sup>603</sup> Reference to the motto of the French Republic «Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité» (Freedom, Equality, Fraternity)

<sup>604</sup> John F. Callahan, *op. cit.*, 284.

Ellison's quarrel with the left is that the African American is reduced to an abstraction, while his mentor challenges him to think that a society is made up of individuals: "Malraux's concern with the individual caught up consciously in a historical situation, a revolutionary situation, provided insights which allowed me to understand certain possibilities in the fictional material around me."<sup>605</sup>

It follows from the discussion above that, given Ellison's feelings about the left as expressed in his letters and personal notes, John, the protagonist of the Black Ball seems unlikely to join a white Southern union. We come back to the symbolic significance of the narrator's reading of *Man's Fate*. This is not in my sense as inconsequential as Rampersad argues. The novel is about a failed revolution. It shows the bloody price that the Shanghai workers paid for their uprising in 1927. Chen, Kyo, and Katow are tragic heroes sacrificed on the altar of communist designs, but whenever these characters "regarded their condition during moments of heightened self-consciousness," says Ellison, their thinking was something other than Marxist," and that "Malraux was more of a humanist ... than a politician when he wrote *Man's Fate*."<sup>606</sup> This places the significance of John's reading *Man's Fate* and our reading "The Black Ball" at the level of ideas and on the need for crucial individual introspection as exemplified in "the existential sense that gives [*Man's Fate*] its deepest life" even when "the Marxist sense intruded upon it!"<sup>607</sup> When John says he is disliked by the manager for being a "damned educated black," he links himself to the particular type of André Malraux's individuals in *Man's Fate*: the intellectual hero. What further encourages to

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<sup>605</sup> *Ibid.*, 805.

<sup>606</sup> Maryemma Graham and Amritjit Singh, *op. cit.*, 8.

<sup>607</sup> Murray Krieger, *The Tragic Vision* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1960), 69.



give full attention to Ellison's allusion to Malraux's novel is the paramount place that Malraux, his characters and his concept of metamorphosis in art are given in *TDBS* which I discuss in the next section.

#### 4.4 The metamorphosis of Malraux into Vannec in *Three Days Before the Shooting*

The allusions to Malraux from *Invisible Man* through *Three Days before the shooting* indicate Ellison's fascination with not only Malraux the novelist but also Malraux the shapeshifter. Even Ellison's autobiographical statements bear the mark of his espousing and digesting Malraux's concept of metamorphosis, as when he describes his plunging into the “great swell of events” of New York in the 30's “through which I gradually transformed myself into a writer.”<sup>608</sup> Book I of *TDBS* is haunted by Malraux. What I intend to discuss in this section is the discursive ways in which Ellison alludes to Malraux and even dramatizes him in *TDBS*, through one of the characters, Vannec, named after the hero of Malraux's novel *The Royal Way* (1930). There is ample indication of Ellison's ambivalence in his appraisal of Malraux through language and also through the changes he made in the drafts to Book I.

Vannec is the character who bears the real biographical resemblance to Malraux, and through whom Malraux reflects on the deep connection between man's fate and the and artistic creation. Vannec formulates Malraux's idea of myth when he says: “Since the artist works essentially to create his own myth, we still need to explain how this myth is transmitted and how the work of art lives.”<sup>609</sup> *The Royal Way* is based on Malraux's expedition to Banteay srei, Indochina, where he tore off several sculptures from a Khmer temple. Similarly, Vannec, young ambitious and penniless, associates

<sup>608</sup> Maryemma Graham and Amritjit Singh, *op. cit.*, 124.

<sup>609</sup> Andre Malraux, *La Voie Royale* (Grasset, 1930), 24.

with Perken, a colonial adventurer who founded a kingdom in the mountains of Laos, whom he meets on a boat during the crossing of the Indian Ocean, to seize sculpture from an unclassified temple and make a fortune by selling them on the art market. Perken's motivation goes beyond money since he acts like the 'white king' who wants to return to his kingdom to defend it against the expansionist foreign powers and the destruction brought by modernity. He also wants to find another adventurer, Grabot, who has disappeared in the jungle while trying to subdue the primitive tribes. After multiple struggles through the jungle, the expedition ends in failure; the sculptures are left to the jungle and the narrative ends with the death of Perken, and with Vannec left alone in a state of disarray. The trial and imprisonment of Malraux are eliminated from the diegesis of the novel, and Vannec presents the path to the Khmer temples known as the "royal way" as his own scientific discovery in order to justify his appropriation of the statues.<sup>610</sup>

Ellison's appropriation of Vannec is unmistakably an homage to Malraux and it evinces his admiration for the protean quality of Malraux's life, what Ellison calls "Rinehartism." The Vannec/Malraux's haunting aura of mystery is enhanced by the fact that Vannec himself is obsessed with a nineteenth century real-life French Rinehart, David de Mayrena (1842-1890), in whose life myth and facts are difficult to disentangle.

The Rinehart spirit which Ellison already embodied through the character of Rinehart in *Invisible Man*, refers to the capacity for self-creation/recreation that is the

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<sup>610</sup> This might explain why criticism hailed Malraux a remarkable archaeologist. Actually, this Khmer route was already known. See André Vandegans, *La Jeunesse littéraire d'André Malraux. Essai sur l'inspiration farfelue* (Paris, Jean-Jacques Pauvert Editeur, 1964), 224-225.

distinguishing mark of Malraux/Vannec and his American counterpart in *TDBS*, senator Adam Sunraider. Rinehart is the trickster *par excellence*, a shapeshifter, a “Spiritual Technologist, Rine the runner and Rine the gambler and Rine the briber and Rine the lover and Rinehart the Reverend.”<sup>611</sup> The Invisible Man reflects on Rinehart with a mixture of awe and fear because:

he could be both mind and heart. ... He was a broad man, a man of parts who got around. Rinehart the rounder. ... His world was possibility and he knew it. He was years ahead of me and I was a fool. ... 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.<sup>612</sup>

When the Invisible Man impersonates Rinehart by wearing black sunglasses and a white hat in his attempt to escape from Ras The Exhorter and the Brotherhood after the Harlem riot, he is fascinated by the infinite possibilities that a protean trickster character offers:

My entire body started to itch, as though I had just been removed from a plaster cast and was unused to the new freedom of movement. ... You could actually make yourself *anew*. The notion was frightening, for now the world seemed to flow before my eyes. All boundaries down, freedom was not only the recognition of necessity, it was the recognition of possibility. And sitting there trembling I caught a brief glimpse of the possibilities posed by Rinehart's multiple personalities and turned away. It was too vast and confusing to contemplate.

Although Ellison never acknowledged it, it is possible to make a parallel between Rinehart and Malraux who is characterized as “one of the most prolific self-inventors of the 20th century,” who created his own “Legend of a Life of Action”<sup>613</sup>; and “the

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<sup>611</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, *op. cit.*, 487.

<sup>612</sup> *Ibid.*, 487.

<sup>613</sup> W.M. Frohock, *André Malraux and the Tragic Imagination* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1952), 20.

succeeding stages of Malraux's dazzling metamorphoses,"<sup>614</sup> from a penniless arriviste to the minster of culture of de Gaulle, certainly embody for Ellison, the protean nature of Malraux.

Indeed the connection of *Invisible Man* with Malraux is evinced in one of Ellison's notes to "Leroy's Journal," an episode which was expunged from the published version of *Invisible Man*. While residing in the Man's House, the protagonist finds the journal of Leroy, a young black man who is attracted to "revolutionary literature," jotted Ellison, and who "Wants to become like Chinese terrorists, dreams of throwing bombs in Senate at Bilbo,<sup>615</sup> Rankin."<sup>616</sup> This brings a link not only to Malraux's novel but to *TDBS* as well since the latter's subject matter is the political assassination of the race-baiting senator Adam Sunraider at the hands of Severin, – who happens to be the son he never knew – a character who bears a strong similitude with Tchen, the young communist who assassins a Kuomintang official in *Man's Fate*. While he was drafting *TDBS*, that he called the "Hickman Novel" at the time, Ellison jotted a note which connects Severin to Tchen: "Chen [] is related to Severin."<sup>617</sup>

The assassination of senator Sunraider is reported from the perspective of a white, Kentucky-born journalist, Welborn McIntyre. Malraux's voice leaps from the first line of Book I when the narrator says he was sitting in the press box of the Senate visitors' gallery, reading "M. Vannec's most unexpected letter," when the shooting occurred, and "it was as though a certain long—forgotten night of violence to which he

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<sup>614</sup> Christopher Hitchens, "'Malraux': One Man's Fate," *New York Times*. 10 April 2005.

<sup>615</sup> The reference is to senators T. G. Bilbo and John E. Rankin, who were staunch white supremacists.

<sup>616</sup> Ralph Ellison Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Box I: 152/ Folder 9.

<sup>617</sup> *Ibid.*, Box I: 141/ Folder 4.

referred had flared from the page and accelerated into chaotic life.”<sup>618</sup>

The sudden shooting and the chaotic events that followed catches the narrator off-guard as he is proudly indulging himself in reading “a piece of correspondence from a distinguished figure as M. Vannec,” the “legendary artist, activist, and French dignitary,” who wears “a silver plate in his skull from a wound suffered fighting in the Resistance,” and who is “famous for raising those profound questions of a political-philosophical nature which upset wise men and ordinary citizens alike.”<sup>619</sup>

Even without the name of Vannec, Malraux is literally conjured on the page by Ellison with the several allusions to the “French intellectual adventurer and Statesman,” which allude unmistakably to Malraux.

McIntyre remembers that he met Vannec twice before receiving his letter. The first encounter was “decidedly mysterious”<sup>620</sup> and took place while he was serving in the Merchant Marine, in France during the Second World War, on a ship that docked in Rouen during the Battle of the Bulge (1944-45). These biographical accounts are not unlike Ellison's own experience in the Merchant Marine during the war. Like Ellison, McIntyre tried to compose a “philosophical novel of wartime adventure,” but abandoned it, feeling that he did not have the experience needed.<sup>621</sup> McIntyre accompanied a shipmate named Severen to a cathedral where a man, obviously a resistant, secretly confers with Severin. But before he left, McIntyre caught a glimpse of “the sharp, amused eyes which looked out of the fatigued face [and] were as reassuring

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<sup>618</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Three Days Before the Shooting*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: Modern Library, 2010), 13.

<sup>619</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>620</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>621</sup> See Arnold Rampersad, *op. cit.*, 184-86.

to me as to Severen.”<sup>622</sup> When he covered M. Vannec's press conference some years after the war, he recognized him as the same mysterious person he met in the cathedral in Rouen.

Now that we have seen the correspondence between Vannec and Malraux, it remains to clarify how Ellison's perception of Malraux as a conflictual ancestor, though subtle, is yet perceptible in Book I, through his discursive criticism of the most inglorious aspect of his life and some of his ideas which the mature Ellison wanted to distance himself from. As a first example, Malraux's imaginary museum and the Khmer colonialist enterprise – which came to Ellison's attention through the books and newspaper articles that he archived in his papers, – is hinted to when Ellison describes Rockmore's house as “a ragtime museum [where] vague objects and artifacts appeared to have been wrenched from their place, time and function and thrown together in [] volatile and insane juxtaposition. ... signs of *disuse* and *decay* were everywhere.”<sup>623</sup>

A second example is that, although McIntyre admits his early fascination with Vannec, who “counts in my estimation of the scheme of things, ... and gave me a sense of plunging suddenly into more important areas of life, of being in contact with one possessing a higher consciousness of the complexity of culture,” he has “long admired M. Vannec from a great distance.”<sup>16</sup> Here, we recall that like McIntyre avoided Vannec, the hero of his youth, Ellison also appears to have kept his distance with Malraux.

While McIntyre is considering in a long soliloquy the possible implication of Vannec in the assassination, he thinks that maybe it is time to “relinquish the last hero

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<sup>622</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Three Days Before the Shooting*, op. cit., 82.

<sup>623</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

of your youth.”<sup>624</sup> This sentence takes on an amplified meaning in relation to Ellison's feeling about Malraux when read in conjunction with an undated note in which Ellison outlined the French episode of Book I,

A young man who is of seemingly favored circumstances undertakes a mission during his wartime work as a seaman to seek out an *internationally known French resistant leader*; finds him, is made unmistakably aware that he is a *spent man*, an *empty man*, a *hull*, an *illusion*. French girl here, she has been mistress of Vannec ... goes to tell him to look at Vannec for what he is – which he has seen on his own but is to troubled with what this implies for his past beliefs to accept it on his own. ... she is intelligent though involved with the same *decay* as Vannec.<sup>625</sup>

Now, we recall also that Ellison met Clara Malraux in 1957, at the time he has started writing TDBS, and had several *conversations* with her. The word “decay” echos the decay that is also experienced through seeing the cluttered museum-like house.

McIntyre's brief biographical account of the protean Frenchman M. Vannec would seem to fit Malraux: “I had peeped into chaos and encountered a hero, and now I could see some of the results. ... I had known of his legend as reported in the press, but the brief personal identification during the war rendered it all the more meaningful to me. I speculated as to the transformations, or, to use a favorite term of one of the more intriguing French writers, the *metamorphosis*, the process, by which he had transformed himself.”<sup>626</sup> Although he takes great satisfaction in “watching [Vannec's] skillful act of impersonation” during the press conference, he notes with relief that “fortunately, some public figures are indeed what they profess to be.”<sup>627</sup>

In other words, for McIntyre, Vannec now stands as an example of Rinehartism

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<sup>624</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>625</sup> Ralph Ellison Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Box I: 140/ Folder 3.

<sup>626</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Three Days Before the Shooting*, *op. cit.*, 87.

<sup>627</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

gone-wrong; and whose “mobility of identity and shifting of purpose”<sup>628</sup> leads him to rethink the validity of the American protean Rinehart, Sunraider. As McIntyre eavesdrops a group of “legislators, reporters, and lobbyists” who were “furiously re-created the Sunraider legend,”<sup>629</sup> he realizes that:

despite the heated blending of fact and fiction, real incident and rumor, cold observation and wild opinion, no one, not even those who ‘knew’ the Senator, seemed to know exactly who he was, nor what to make of him. [...] What was clear is that there is something basically willful, quirky, exasperatingly capricious, and downright questionable about him.<sup>630</sup>

One wonders, had Ellison had the possibility to publicly comment on his hero's mythomania, if it would have been different from McIntyre's assessment of Sunraider.

There is no doubt about Ellison's indebtedness to Malraux. He voiced it in many different ways. However, Ellison seems to be torn between admiration and wariness regarding the two Malrauxs: the Malraux of Ellison's apprenticeship years, seen mainly through his novels and the largely favorable press, and the Malraux of the more mature Ellison. Right after *Invisible Man*, Ellison started to peer into Malraux's mystery and legend. Writing to Albert Murray on May 18, 1956, from the American Academy of Arts and Letters in Rome where he was on a Fellowship, Ellison told Murray:

I Also got Panofsky's *Meaning in the Visual Art* [] which I understand is first class. Also reading Arnheim's *Art and Visual Perception*, and a new Mentor titled *The Painter's Eye* by Maurice Grosser. As you can guess I'm now trying to *dig* where Malraux *dug* his *digging* and as one of the art historians here pointed out to me, a hell of a lot of his stuff ain't French but German, and not just Nietzsche either. I don't know where this will take me, but it's dam interesting.<sup>631</sup>

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<sup>628</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>629</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>630</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>631</sup> Ralph Ellison Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Box I: 46/ Folder 2.



Ellison has come to realize that some of Malraux's ideas were not as original as he thought them to be. That doesn't take anything from Malraux since he was able to transform and radiate part of what he absorbed and he absorbed "a hell of a lot," as Ellison says. Nevertheless, there is a clear hint, from the juxtaposition of these names of reputed art historians and Malraux that Ellison has been able to locate the hidden sources of Malraux's ideas about art mainly, Nietzsche and Panofsky, and thus he was reappraising Malraux through his reading of the originals. In another letter to Murray on February 15, 1956, he says that he has:

I reread *The Royal Way* early last summer. Yes, it is thin. My reaction was that Malraux had just knocked it together as one would a detective story or an entertainment, using as a means of playing around with the place, archeology and a few notions."

Ellison explains that he has reached an age "when some of the things we loved grow wan,"<sup>632</sup> which may be an indication that his admiration for Malraux has waned over time. Just before mentioning his reading of *The Psychology of Art*, Ellison points out in an interview that he doesn't go to any predecessor "expecting the whole thing. I learn what I can use and use what I'm prepared to use."<sup>633</sup> The sentence can be interpreted as an example of Bloom's Tessaera about the incompleteness of the predecessor's work to which the belated writer can bring the missing part.

We may also look at Ellison's interest in digging where Malraux dug his digging as, to a certain extent, an instance of Bloom's concept of Deamonization of getting beyond Malraux by seeking the original sources of his philosophical and artistic thought. However, there is an element in Ellison's artistic disposition, for which Bloom

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<sup>632</sup> *Ibid.*, Box II: 46/ Folder 2.

<sup>633</sup> Maryemma Graham and Amritjit Singh, *op. cit.*, 364.

does not account, which Ellison calls “antagonistic cooperation.” That is the possibility of emulating an ancestor on one's own terms and to one's own ends.

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