



A BUGLER OF WORDS:  
Ellison's musicality and the  
Jazz/blues Tradition in *Invisible Man*

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In 1949, Ralph Ellison lived in a cramped New York apartment, a young composer of words struggling to complete his first novel. Daunted by the ambitious project, Ellison would sit for hours at his typewriter waiting for inspiration to strike. His neighbor above him also was an aspiring artist, a singer who practiced in her apartment. Ellison initially found the sounds emanating from her flat a distraction to his work. But he soon came to identify closely with the musician. In his essay "Living With Music," Ellison explains, "If she sang badly, I'd hear my own futility in the windy sound; if well, I'd stare at my typewriter and despair that I should ever make my prose so sing" (*Shadow and Act*). It should come as no surprise that music profoundly affected Ellison. Long before he moved to New York, met Richard Wright, and chose to become an author, he had been a musician. He began lessons on the trumpet at age 8, and as a teenager studied under the composer Dr. Ludwig Hebestreit. Ellison's musical talent and discipline helped him land a scholarship at Tuskegee, where he planned to prepare for a career as a classical composer. Ellison's artistic ambitions eventually evolved from music to writing; but because music played such an integral role in his early development, the young author could not help but listen to the arpeggios and

scales of his neighbor. In fact, what at first frustrated him became a source of authorial inspiration:

Now in this magical moment all the old love, the old fascination with music superbly rendered, flooded back. When she finished I realized that with such music in my own apartment, the chaotic sounds from without and above had sunk, if not in silence, then well below the level where they mattered. Here was a way out. If I was to live and write in that apartment, it would only be through the grace of music.

Of his decision to quit music in lieu of writing, Ellison admitted that “when I broke I tried to break clean”. Now, he realized that his two passions did not have to contradict each other; rather, music and writing could exist in harmony as compatible voices in the creative process. Renewed and refocused, Ellison set to work on completing his literary masterpiece, *Invisible Man*, which he published three years later.

The novel, an epic exploration of an African-American young man’s search for identity amid the racism of 20<sup>th</sup> century America, proved to be a monumental undertaking for Ellison. The author confessed to an initial uncertainty about how he should structure the 581-page work. That uncertainty led Ellison to rely upon his musical instincts and training. In his 1981 introduction to the novel, written nearly three decades after *Invisible Man* was first published, Ellison recalled that “I would have to improvise upon my materials in the manner of a jazz musician putting a musical theme through a wild star-burst of metamorphosis”. The analogy aptly applies to Ellison’s great work, for jazz and its Afro-American musical antecedents, Negro spirituals and the blues, proved to be essential elements of the novel. In fact, in his essay “Musical Elements in *Invisible Man*,” Jerome de Romanet notes there are more than 50 allusions to music. Specifically, Ellison sets his protagonist’s tale to the music of Louie Armstrong, addressing the influential jazz trumpeter and singer in seminal passages from the Prologue and Epilogue. In between, the

reader hears the narrator reverently describe traditional spirituals such as “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God”, “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” and “Lead Me, Lead Me to a Rock Higher Than I.” Ellison even chooses to give one of his characters, Peter Wheatstraw, the same name used on stage by blues singer William Bunch and numerous other musicians who toured the “Chitlins Circuit” of the Deep South during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (O’Meally). In short, music provides a critical context for the plot of *Invisible Man*. In this paper, however, I will argue that the musicality of *Invisible Man* reflects and transcends thematic representation. First, Ellison relies upon jazz as a model for synthesizing classical and vernacular styles in his prose. Second, *Invisible Man* plays the role of a musically inspired performance artist in speech and writing. To achieve this effect, Ellison plays with language as he would a trumpet, taking lyrical flight in improvisational passages that stylistically emulate his artistic ancestor, “Satchmo” Armstrong. Third, the numerous narrative voices of the novel—namely Invisible Man, Jim Trueblood, and Peter Wheatstraw—illustrate Ellison’s belief in a democratic blues/jazz aesthetic. The musical genres stress cathartic expression as a means of responding to a chaotic world, and emphasize individuality amid the group. Thus, *Invisible Man* is a musician’s novel, a book meant to be heard as much as it is read.

Music, especially jazz and the blues, was an integral part of Ellison’s life growing up in Oklahoma City. In his biography *Ralph Ellison in America*, Horace A. Porter notes that his favorite musicians included local legends such as guitarist Charlie Christian and singer Jimmy Rushing. Oklahoma City also was a regular stop for popular touring musicians of the time, many of which Ellison heard in concert. In his essay “Living with Music,” Ellison credits the jazz idols of his youth for helping to shape his literary skills and style.

Now, I had learned from the jazz musicians I had known as a boy in Oklahoma City something of the discipline and devotion to his art required of the

artist . . . a will to achieve the most eloquent expression of idea-emotions through the technical mastery of their instruments (which, incidentally, some of them wore as a priest wears the cross) and the give and take, the subtle rhythmic shaping and blending of idea, tone and imagination demanded of group improvisation. (*Shadow and Act*)

Like his childhood musical heroes, Ellison viewed art as a quasi-religious endeavor that demanded diligence and complete commitment. The artist must be devoted to practicing all parts of his work, especially the fundamentals, for only through “technical mastery” could one hope to reach great heights of improvisational genius.

Ellison’s discipline and devotion for music began after he commenced formal studies with Zelia M. Breaux, whom Ellison described as “a second mother” (*Going to the Territory* 135). Breaux was instrumental in introducing Ellison to “the agent of music, which soon became the main focus of my attempts to achieve my own identity. Breaux taught Ellison many lessons, but he acknowledged one that stayed with him throughout his life.

While I was to become a writer instead of a musician, it was Ms. Breaux who . . . made it possible for me to grasp the basic compatibility of the mixture of the classical and vernacular styles which were a part of our musical culture.

Jazz, which author James Weldon Johnson identified as the first indigenous American art form, emerged out of the meeting of European and African music. *Invisible Man* reflects this kind of cross-cultural synthesis in its unique blend of European classicism and African-American vernacular. Ellison’s prose alternates between stylistically contrasting formal and informal voices. And while the novel as a whole reveals a meticulous structural mapping, Ellison often interjects passages that are playfully, and sometimes irreverently, improvisa-

tional. Ellison emphasizes the importance of improvisation in joining the classical and vernacular in stylistic harmony.

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.

In *Invisible Man*, those “refined styles” include the classical works of Dante and others to whom Ellison frequently alludes. But in paying homage to the canonical writers, Ellison merges his taste for classical literature and the African-American oral storytelling tradition in his own distinctive jazz voice.

Ellison sets out to achieve this stylistic merger in the novel’s opening pages. In the Prologue, *Invisible Man* rests underground, meditating on the chaotic string of events that has led to his self-imposed exile beneath the streets of Harlem. There, he eats ice cream slathered in sloe gin and listens to Louis Armstrong’s “What I Did to Be So Black and Blue.” As “Satchmo” scats and the marijuana makes him high, *Invisible Man* “not only entered the music but descended, like Dante, into its depths”. Ellison mirrors his protagonist’s journey with Dante’s inferno, but he does so in unique style by signifying the descent in musical terms. *Invisible Man* hears “an old woman singing a spiritual as full of Weltschmerz as flamenco” before falling even farther. At the “lower level” *Invisible Man* undergoes a folkloric fantasy in which a preacher addresses his congregation on the subject “The Blackness of Blackness.” The dialogue between preacher and congregation bounces with the rhythmic cadences of call-and-response intrinsic to the African-American vernacular.

“Now black is . . . ” the preacher shouted.

“Bloody . . . ”

“I said black is . . . ”

“Preach it, brother . . . ”

“ . . . an’ black ain’t . . . ”

“Red, Lawd, red: He said it’s red!”

“Amen, brother . . . ”

“Black will git you . . . ”

“Yes, it will . . . ”

“Yes it will”

Eventually, Invisible Man ascends from the syncopated depths of this “underworld of sound” to hear Louie Armstrong innocently asking, ‘What did I do/To be so black/And blue?’. Dante’s European hero, through the merging of styles with Louie Armstrong, has changed color. He is no longer white, but black and blue. Invisible Man, like his musically sensitive author, recognizes that this transformation has been keyed by listening to jazz. In fact, he comes to see his existential quandary in musical terms.

I’ve illuminated the blackness of my invisibility—and vice versa. And so I play the invisible music of my isolation. The last statement doesn’t seem just right, does it? But it is; you hear this music simply because music is heard and seldom seen, except by musicians. Could this compulsion to put invisibility down in black and white be thus an urge to make music of invisibility?

Ellison’s use of color takes yet another ironic twist, for now black and white refer to the pen and paper Invisible Man has employed to tell his story of his invisibility. In comparing his condition to music, the narrator insists that his story be heard as well as read. Thus, Ellison outlines in the Prologue his ambition to merge the European and African traditions of storytelling in a jazz-like voice that emphasizes the primacy of music in the life of the protagonist.

As the narrator’s fantasy from the Prologue indicates, Invisible Man connects speech with music, especially with regard to the African-American tradition of sermonizing. Ellison expounds upon this motif as Invisible Man enters the college chapel to listen to Reverend Homer A. Barbee speak.

The reverend's first name provides yet another classical allusion, this time recognizing the famous Greek storyteller. But before Barbee approaches the stage, Invisible Man interjects to reminisce about his own speechmaking skills. The narrator explicitly identifies the musicality of his speech, with its "accents staccato upon the ridgepole" and words "more sound than sense, a play upon the resonances of buildings, an assault upon the temples of the ear". Honoring the classical tradition of storytelling, Invisible Man invokes his own muse, "the gray-haired matron in the final row," and entreats her to "listen to me, the bungling bugler of words, imitating the trumpet and the trombone's timbre, playing thematic variations like a baritone horn. Ellison, the former trumpeter, now plays a narrator whose words evoke sounds similar to the brass instrument that he chose to lay down for a typewriter. Obviously, the narrator does not yet possess the supreme confidence in those skills, for Invisible Man sees himself as a "bungling bugler." Yet Invisible Man continues in his imagination, and the language burns with the improvisational fire of a Charlie Parker bebop solo.

Ha! singing achievement. Ha! booming success, intoning, Ha! acceptance, Ha! a river of word-sounds filled with drowned passions, floating, Ha! with wrecks of unachievable ambitions and stillborn revolts, sweeping their ears. Ha! a-spraying the ceiling and a-drumming the dark-stained after rafter, that seasoned crossarm of tortuous timber mellowed in the kiln of a thousand voices; playing Ha! as upon a xylophone; words marching like the student band, up the campus and down again, blaring triumphant sounds empty of triumphs.

This lyrical revelry is replete with jazzy intonations that "sweep the ears." Each burst of "Ha!" punctuates like the sharp staccato of a trumpet's horn, accentuating the improvisational thoughts that follow. Rhythmically, the complex syncopation of jazz is rendered through words such as "a-spraying" and "a-

drumming.” And Ellison employs alliteration (“tortuous timber”) and rhyme (“after rafter”) to add to the prose poetry’s musical richness. Romanet argues that the narrator’s role in this passage extends from storyteller to musician.

Language and music are so mingled as to become indistinguishable, leading to the rhythmic prose found in traditional black sermons which leave the audience spellbound. This rhythmic prose is also close to the rhythm of the numerous bands from which jazz stemmed.

The narrator’s improvisational outburst also reflects the jazz aesthetic in its treatment of time. As Wilfried Raussert notes in his essay “Jazz, Time, and Narrativity,” the musical form “is characterized by a fusion of temporal continuity and discontinuity”. In the above passage, Ellison applies this principle by juxtaposing the narrator’s experiences as simultaneously past and present. Thus, in remembering his days as an idealistic college student, Invisible Man experiences the bittersweet, paradoxical sensation of “blaring triumphant sounds empty of triumphs.” Similarly, in presently invoking his muse from the past, Invisible Man sadly recalls “the sound of words that were no words, counterfeit notes singing achievements yet unachieved. . . .”. Ellison accomplishes this counterpoint by emphasizing what Raussert calls “the smallest perceptible time unit, the moment”.

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