DECADES AFTER W. E. B. DU BOIS in 1903 described the painful African American double consciousness, a cluster of critics transformed it into what Michael G. Cooke calls "the paradoxically favorable environment of suffering" (ix). *From Behind the Veil,* by Robert B. Stepto, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature,* by Houston A. Baker, Jr., and *The Signifying Monkey,* by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., are all grounded in the creative possibilities in the double consciousness that Du Bois defined in *The Souls of Black Folk:* 

[T]he Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world.—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.  (45)

For Stepto, Baker, and Gates, this double consciousness lies at the heart of African American artistic production. But their important and wide-ranging theoretical statements celebrate the Bakhtinian double-voiced subversiveness and the multivalent aesthetic expressiveness born in the fecund dualities of oppression. In the hands of these critics, the dynamic that Du Bois diagnoses as a spiritual and psychological burden becomes a powerful political and literary tool, "a nimble mental maneuver for fending off any overweening claim or any attempt to constrain and overdetermine the play of life" (Cooke 15).

It comes as no surprise, then, that Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* plays a central role in each of these studies (as a constant presence
in Gates and as the subject of the last chapters in Stepto and Baker). Ellison embraces the multicultural richness of his heritage, and we can see in all his work the artistic potential in the double consciousness. In both Shadow and Act and Going to the Territory, Ellison relishes “signifying”—an African American rhetorical device—and he often uses it in his reviews and fiction. One signifying artist after another parades through the pages of Invisible Man—Bledsoe, Trueblood, Brockaway, and Rinehart all display various degrees of double-voiced craftiness. Various critics read the book overall as an indirect critique of naturalism, of the American Renaissance, and of Marxist versions of history. Stepto regards Invisible Man as the apotheosis of the African American tradition of “ascent” and “immersion” narratives that has its first full flowering in Du Bois.

But Ellison’s double consciousness is a sword that cuts two ways. His complex and subtle response to the American experience has brought Ellison tremendous praise and tremendous blame, both often rooted in his dexterity with more than one tradition. His insistence on the variety and autonomy of African American life and his trafficking in the motifs and artistic techniques of the Euro-American literary tradition have attracted continual and vociferous criticism from the radical Left. The attacks have extended from the original stinging reviews in the Daily Worker—where Abner N. Berry derided Invisible Man in 1952 as “439 pages of contempt for humanity, written in an affected, pretentious, and other worldly style,” Baker is able to assert that Invisible Man “discovers America in a stunningly energetic blues manner” (Blues 173).

But, as always in Ellison, the end lies in the beginning, and the double consciousness in Invisible Man may well come back to bite itself in the tail. The recent interest in double-voiced strategies provides an opportunity to “slip into the breaks and look around” at some of the neglected aspects of Invisible Man and perhaps to reinscribe the book in the African American tradition even more forcefully than Stepto, Baker, and Gates do. An examination of Ellison’s largely unnoticed signifying on Anglo-American modernism and his implicit but devastating critique of double-voiced strategies of resistance may show Invisible Man speaking for us and to us in new ways.

I

Call me, since I have a theory and a concept, a “thinker-tinker.” Yes, I’ll warm my shoes; they need it, they’re usually full of holes.

Invisible Man

Alan Nadel writes that at the core of the debate over Invisible Man “is the more basic debate over the relationship of modernism to Afro-American values” (24). Indeed, both the canonization and the rejection of Invisible Man have turned on Ellison’s modernist proclivities. Invisible Man’s status as the Jackie Robinson of literature—the first novel to make a successful transition from the marginal Negro leagues to the mainstream, to unhyphenated “American” literature—depends on the white establishment’s reverence for the same highly literary and self-conscious techniques that Invisible Man’s detractors see as “the invention[s] of fascist, racist, elitists’” (Nadel 24). For these critics, the alienation, “dissociation of sensibility,” and “hothouse virtuosity” (Cooke 5) that underlie the modernist anticommmunity seem trivial from the African American perspective and “descriptive only of a bourgeois, characteristically twentieth-century, white Western mentality” (Baker, Modernism 7). A modernist “ideological content couched in the purrs of an obviously elegant technique . . . is the reason [Invisible Man]
and its author are so valued by the literary and academic establishments in this country” (Baraka 147). Ellison himself adds fuel to this fire by dwelling on the merits of highly crafted art, by insisting on his right to choose Euro-American literary ancestors (especially against those who would have him replicate Richard Wright), and by explicitly identifying T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Fyodor Dostoevsky as direct influences on *Invisible Man.*

So while critics have argued the virtue of *Invisible Man*'s status as a modernist text, few have disputed that the novel is one. Many studies focus on Ellison’s signifying critiques of nineteenth-century canonical American authors like Melville, Emerson, and Twain⁶ or of African American writers like Booker T. Washington and Wright, but critics who examine the references to Dostoevsky, Joyce, Malraux, and Eliot generally see only allusion and homage. Joseph Frank, for example, speaks of “Ellison’s profound grasp of the ideological inspiration of Dostoevski’s work” (232), and Mary Ellen Williams Walsh says that *Invisible Man* is “Ralph Ellison’s *Waste Land*” (150). Even those who read *Invisible Man* as an essentially African American text take its modernism at face value. For Nadel, “Ellison’s Afro-American identity is manifest through his modernism [specifically through his use of Joyce], not in spite of it” (26). In a similar argument, Gates pits “Ellison’s modernism” against “Wright’s naturalism,” paralleling an opposition in the Anglo-American tradition (*Figures* 243). Ellison’s typical signifying gesture (the move that helps Gates redeem *Invisible Man* for the African American tradition) is his use of modernism to revise and criticize Wright’s naturalism. Thus a modernist sensibility becomes acceptable in Ellison as long as he uses it to “play the dozens” on his predecessor.⁵

This kind of formal maneuver would no doubt leave leftist critics of *Invisible Man* unconvinced, and it does nothing to address African American objections to modernist ideology. Baker crystallizes these reservations in the introduction to his *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance:* “Such [modernist] questions presuppose at least an adequate level of sustenance and a sufficient faith in human behavioral alternatives to enable a self-directed questioning. In other words, without food for thought, all modernist bets are off” (8). Even the most cursory reading of the essays in *Shadow and Act or Going to the Territory* reveals Ellison’s “faith in human behavioral alternatives,” but, at the same time, it is difficult to believe that the creator of the invisible man’s grandfather and of Brother Tarp’s leg-iron would be insensitive to the spirit of Baker’s argument. In fact, if we clear away the long history of preconceptions about *Invisible Man*'s modernist allusions and begin to examine these references with an eye to the subtext, a new, largely unrecognized place for the novel emerges within a more sociological and materialist reading of the African American tradition. Close scrutiny of *Invisible Man*'s relation to three important modernist texts—*The Art of the Novel, Notes from Underground,* and *The Waste Land*—uncovers in Ellison’s book a critique of the modernist sensibility not all that different from Baker’s.

When wearing what Baker calls a “Western critical mask” (*Blues* 199), Ellison speaks highly of Henry James. Ellison mentions that one of the crucial moments in his coming to consciousness as a young writer was Richard Wright’s recommendation of James’s prefaces; he gives James prominence in his 1967 essay “The Novel as a Function of American Democracy,” which appears in *Going to the Territory,* and he allusively titles one of the essays in *Shadow and Act* “The Art of Fiction.” In Ellison’s pantheon of Euro-American ancestors, James’s place is secure.

But we should not too quickly assume that Ellison remains uncritical of James or the Jamesian tradition. For the thirtieth-anniversary edition of *Invisible Man* Ellison wrote a retrospective introduction, much as James prepared the prefaces for the New York Edition of his work that were later collected as *The Art of the Novel.* This introduction shows that Ellison can, in the words of Frederick Douglass, “write a hand very similar to that of [the] Master” (56).⁶ He incorporates all the typical elements of a Jamesian preface: the reminiscence about the circumstances of the book’s composition, the details of its publication history, the grousing about various aspects of the book having minds of their own. There are even places where Ellison’s syntax has a Jamesian ring.
Given these structural similarities and Ellison's insistence that his work be judged in terms of the art of the novel, this retrospective self-commentary could easily seem further evidence that Invisible Man fits squarely into the mainstream of the Jamesonian modernist tradition—the tradition of the well-made, artistically conscious novel.

But in the introduction's two overt references to James a disruptive subtext is apparent.7 "Henry James had taught us much," Ellison writes, beginning with a standard gesture of generational piety, "with his hyperconscious, 'Super subtle fry,' characters who embodied in their own cultured, upper-class way the American virtues of conscience and consciousness." The irony behind the phrase "their own cultured, upper-class way" is subtle but unmistakable, especially when juxtaposed with embracing words like "hyper-conscious," "conscience," and "consciousness." Ellison neatly reverses the old saw about the unconscious, primitive genius of artists from minority cultures. He pushes the needle in just a bit further in the next sentence: "Such ideal creatures were unlikely to turn up in the world I inhabited" (introduction xvi).

In fact, the creatures of Ellison's world sometimes impinged on the world his predecessor inhabited, as Ellison points out in his other reference to James:

Like my sudden recall of an incident from my college days when, opening a vat of Plastocene donated to an invalid sculptor friend by some Northern studio, I found enfolded within the oily mass a frieze of figures modeled after those depicted on Saint-Gauden's monument to Colonel Robert Gould Shaw and his 54th Massachusetts Negro Regiment, a memorial which stands on the Boston Common. I had no idea as to why it should surface, but perhaps it was to remind me that since I was writing fiction and seeking vaguely for images of black and white fraternity I would do well to recall that Henry James's brother Willy had fought as an officer with those Negro soldiers, and that Colonel Shaw's body had been thrown into a ditch with those of his men. (xiv)

This Homeric anecdote appears apropos of virtually nothing, certainly nothing having to do with Invisible Man. It does, however, remind us of the false class distinctions between Negroes (who are soldiers) and a member of the James family (an officer) and of how any combatants, regardless of their ranks, could end up dead in a ditch together. We also cannot help recalling that Henry James was free to cultivate a more detached and refined attitude toward the messy affairs of politics and history than his brother did. This choice was not often available to individuals from Ellison's world. Unlike his overt critique of Euro-American writers like Twain, Hemingway, and Faulkner in "Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity," an essay in Shadow and Act, Ellison's jabs at James are implicit and subtle.

The subtlety remains but the stakes are raised in Ellison's discussion of craft. We should not doubt the sincerity of his admiration of James as "one of the first writers . . . to rationalize, or to attempt to rationalize, an aesthetic of the novel" (Going 308, 313). But we should also be careful to note the significant gaps between James's aesthetic and Ellison's. When James turns to craft in The Art of the Novel, he generally dwells on compositional strategy: what to do about "misplaced middles," how to tell his story without going too much "behind" his point-of-view character, how best to deploy his ficelles, and so on. Ellison's artistic problem, by contrast, moves past the technicalities of composition and revolves around how to provide [the invisible man] 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. (introduction xviii)

In any context, this discussion of how Ellison's narrator was born would be interesting, but his placing it within a Jamesian stylization adds to its significance. James, as T. S. Eliot fondly points out, had a consciousness so fine that no philosophical question might penetrate it. His diction, while always complex, never strays from a limited range. And while he certainly displays a variety of American (and European) types, they almost
never operate on any but the upper levels of society. By playing his riffs on *The Art of the Novel*, Ellison gives himself credibility within the modernist tradition while creating a critical undertow that distances him from it.

Most of this distance develops between the two writers’ conceptions of what constitutes the art of the novel, and the divergence can be traced back to concepts of the “high.” James is most concerned with the rarefied aesthetic task of endowing the coarse material of life with “the high attributes of a Subject” (48), while Ellison works with the more socially and ideologically saturated contradiction of the disregarded African American’s “high visibility” (xii). James calls *The Ambassadors* “quite the best, ‘all around’ of my productions” on the basis of its organic perfection (309), while Ellison delights in his own work’s “down-home voice . . . as irreverent as a honky-tonk trumpet blasting through a performance, say, of Britten’s *War Requiem*” (xii).

A writer as careful as Ellison does not choose these references lightly, and they make it clear that *Invisible Man*’s ostensibly Jamesian preface moves beyond pure homage. While Ellison admires James’s dedication to the art of the novel, he does not lose sight of the James who is “a snob, an upper-class expatriate” (*Going 313*), Ellison prefers a vision of the novel whose highest value is not fine discriminations of taste; he calls for a Bakhtinian centrifugal and polyphonic novel, like a symphony orchestra in which a blues horn would not be out of place.

A similar pattern of signifying occurs with another of Ellison’s favorite Euro-American ancestors, T. S. Eliot. In *Shadow and Act*, Ellison speaks of *The Waste Land* as the catalyst for his “real transition to writing” (150). A series of allusions throughout *Invisible Man* acknowledges this debt, most obviously when the invisible man describes the college he attended:

> For how could it have been real if now I am invisible? If real, why is it that I can recall in all that island of greenness no fountain but one that was broken, corroded and dry? And why does no rain fall through my recollections, sound through my memories, soak through the hard dry crust of the still so recent past? Why do I recall, instead of the odor of seed bursting in springtime, only the yellow contents of the cistern spread over the lawn’s dead grass? . . . I’m convinced it was the product of a subtle magic, the alchemy of moonlight; the school a flower-studded wasteland, the rocks sunken, the dry winds hidden, the lost crickets chirping to yellow butterflies.

And oh, oh, oh, those multimillionaires.

(36–37)

Walsh argues that in this passage, “Ellison implies that the source of the isolation and dislocation felt by the protagonist is a spiritual sterility like that which devastates the Fisher King’s kingdom” (151), and Robert O’Meally makes a similar claim (*Craft* 21–22). These are examples of the kind of easy assimilation of *Invisible Man* to modernism that has dominated Ellison criticism. If we look at the passage in its context, it becomes clear that Ellison is again both embracing and distancing himself from a precursor, that the invisible man’s isolation has a lot more to do with white bankers and patrons than with the Fisher King.

The description of the college is retrospective, a memory tinged by the narrator’s later experiences with the white power structure. The college age invisible man is mesmerized by the “long green stretch of campus,” the “quiet songs at dusk,” and the “moon that kissed the steeple and flooded the perfumed nights.” The older invisible man, the “bird-soiled statue” (36), finds in *The Waste Land* a source of imagery for his new view of the college, but he does not necessarily endorse Eliot’s ideology of fragmentation, angst, and spiritual sterility. The invisible man’s plight is a specific physical and social one. In the quotation that ends Ellison’s Eliotic passage (and precedes the Golden Day episode), “that Shakespeherian Rag” (Eliot 57) has become “those multimillionaires.” While Eliot surveys a decaying Western culture and finds a wasteland, Ellison looks back on a barren campus at the mercy of the philanthropists and financial institutions dominating that culture.

These reworkings of James and Eliot, then, are Ellison’s approach to the theme of tradition and the individual talent. *Invisible Man*’s appearance on the modernist bookshelf does not simply highlight James and Eliot as literary giants, it insists that we see their tradition through a new
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—a road opens up before him only to end in a blind alley, a possibility of freedom tempts him but then only imprisons him once again. Similarly, each of the two episodes in Dostoevski'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.

This interesting comparison takes us just so far, and we should be careful not to overlook what Frank mentions only in passing: that the underground man “retreats symbolically” while the invisible man “retreats literally” (232). The invisible man has problems with a portion of the dominant society much larger than the intelligentsia, and the difference between the two retreats lies in the difference between a roomful of aristocrats speaking French and a legacy of slavery. Dostoevsky's targets are ethical utilitarianism and utopian socialism; Ellison's are leg-irons and Jim Crow.

Only *Invisible Man*’s prologue and epilogue are stylized after *Notes from Underground*. Within this frame lies the narrative of the process through which the invisible man is forced underground. The main text of *Invisible Man* is what Frank calls “a negative *Bildungsroman*” (235), wherein the narrator’s every attempt at a dialogue with the society is crushed by exterior forces. Bledsoe, Brockaway, Jack, and Ras the Exhorter are real obstacles, treacherous foes who lead the invisible man down a series of blind alleys. *Notes from Underground*, in contrast, never metamorphoses into anything more than interior monologue. The underground man’s enemies—his coworkers, the soldier on the Nevsky Prospect, Liza—are mostly ideological and psychological shadows. His numerous elliptical dialogues with himself are monologic vicious circles.

These differences, embodied in the authors’ choices of the genres of philosophical monologue and antibildungsroman, result from the qualitatively different ways in which the two characters
are oppressed. The underground man suffers from forces that bubble up within himself and endures the unraveling of his own social and cultural fabric. The invisible man falls prey to a physically oppressive and alien society. This distinction becomes clear at the end of Notes from Underground:

We even find it difficult to be human beings, men with real flesh and blood of our own; we are ashamed of it, we think it a disgrace, and are always striving to be some unprecedented kind of generalized human being. We are born dead, and moreover we have long ceased to be the sons of living fathers; and we become more and more contented with our condition. We are acquiring the taste for it. Soon we shall invent a method of being born from an idea. But that's enough; I shall write no more from the underground. . . .

The invisible man does not have the luxury of becoming contented with his condition. He does not strive to be some unprecedented kind of generalized human being—he has been made one by the dominant white society.

Frank’s argument about these two works—that “Invisible Man is more an extrapolation than an imitation of Notes from Underground” (239)—is only half right. Ellison inherited a useful form from his Russian ancestor. But Ellison also found a text of Ur-modernism that stands at the head of the Western “underground” tradition. By juxtaposing an allusion to Notes from Underground with the harrowing tale of the invisible man, he casts a new light on this tradition and develops an implicit critique of it. The underground man is at liberty to imagine two plus two equaling five, while the invisible man’s musing on “infinite possibilities” is laden with a heavy irony (576).8

Michael F. Lynch asserts that Dostoevsky and Ellison “are united by their growth in disaffection with materialistic explanations of human behavior” (7). On some level this claim may be true, but what unites Ellison’s use of James, Eliot, and Dostoevsky is his rematerializing and resocializing of their modernist forms. Ellison signifies on modernist symbolism and abstraction by juxtaposing them with representations of material and social oppression of African Americans. In doing so, he wrenches modernist fluidity and craft from the culture of privilege and dominance, where art has the leisure to chase its formal tail in a place far removed from lived experience.

Cooke, writing about Kafka, describes a similar situation:

It counts to Kafka’s credit that an era should have gone so wholeheartedly into that space, and have emerged with a sense that one man’s neurosis was every man’s norm. Still, without invidiousness, the point may be made that those who take Kafka’s vision as a mirror of Western culture tend to be the ones whose mirrors have guilty frames. One has more time to imagine oneself a cockroach if one’s rooms are not overrun with such insects, or if one is not commonly treated as such.

Though Cooke denies that when “the conditions of actuality . . . are thought unpalatable, unnecessary, even improbable,” the appropriate aesthetic is one of “mere correspondence . . . between the artistic work and the phenomenal data of . . . experience,” he insists that “there is some justice in scrutinizing the fact that [Kafka’s] imagination . . . has an intensely introspective bias,” and he finds The Metamorphosis ultimately “gratuitous” and “grotesque” (6). Signifying on modernism allows Ellison to push his writing beyond any theory of “mere correspondence” and simultaneously to dramatize the enormous gulf between imagining oneself a bug and being treated like one.

II

Black people are the greatest artists on this earth, probably because we’re the first people on the earth. White people know that . . . [but] I still can’t catch a cab. Ask any black man. Bill Cosby couldn’t catch a cab if he wanted to. They ain’t stopping for him.

Spike Lee

Ellison plays on modernist assumptions about art, spiritual sterility, and the underground in the way that Jim Trueblood plays on Mr. Norton’s sense of guilt and on the structure of American commerce. The butts of each joke end up rewarding their antagonist: Ellison wins the National Book Award and Trueblood gets a hundred dollars. Baker celebrates this disruption of hier-
archies in the final essay of *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*. Unlike Gates's appeal to a mostly formal double-voiced discourse, Baker's paradigm for the transformed double-consciousness—the blues—retains a subversive materialist component. His evaluation of *Invisible Man* as "a Blues Book Most Excellent" grows from a detailed explication of Jim Trueblood's blues performance and holds out the possibility of undermining the power structure:

A further question, however, has to do with the artist's affective response to being treated as a commodity. . . . Ellison's Trueblood episode, for example, suggests that the angst assumed to accompany commodity status is greatly alleviated when that status constitutes a sole means of securing power in a hegemonic system. . . . The imperious flats of whites relegate all blacks to an underclass. In Trueblood's words, "no matter how biggity a nigguh gits, the white folks can always cut him down" (p. 53). The only means of negotiating a passage beyond this underclass, Ellison's episode implies, is expressive representation.

Baker reclaims Ellison as an authentic African American voice by separating the blues artist from the "Western critical mask." Writing criticism is Ellison's Trueblood front, the deceptive component of his signifying. While the establishment waits for "the next high-cultural pronouncement from the critic," those in the know witness "the blues artist's surrender to the air in lively fulfillment of a dream of American form" (199). In Baker's reading, this characteristic duality in African American expression is a commodity that retains some social and economic power:

Artful evasion and expressive illusion are equally traditional black expressive modes in interracial exchange in America. Such modes, the Trueblood episode implies, are the only resources that blacks at any level can barter for a semblance of decency and control in their lives. Making black expressiveness a commodity, therefore, is not simply a gesture in a bourgeois economics of art. It is a crucial move in a repertoire of black survival motions in the United States.

Baker's ambitious reading makes the blues, as represented in the Trueblood episode, the para-

digm for all Ellison's work. But this episode is embedded in the larger whole of *Invisible Man*, and, like most of Ellison's sharp edges, it has another, equally sharp side.

Baker's account of antihierarchical blues negotiations tends to romanticize Cooke's "paradoxically favorable environment of suffering," the fertile region that lies beneath the "from the bottom up" dynamic driving carnivalesque discourse. But we should not too quickly pass by the paradox of suffering that brackets the "favorable environment." Critics such as Michael André Bernstein and Aaron Fogel point toward the dangers of accepting too uncritically the various dialogic utopias of the oppressed. Cooke notes that those who adopt signifying as their most powerful form of discourse often end up victims of their own self-veiling. In Cooke's reading of Charles Chesnutt's *Conjure Woman*, Uncle Julius "means to be craftly agreeable, but ends up being agreeably crafty, a kind of Uncle Tom under a thick patina of humor" (35). No matter how many small gains Uncle Julius may make or how hard we may laugh at his befuddled boss, we never have any doubt about where the true economic and social power lies.

At the same time that he is delivering a masterly signifying and blues performance, Ellison shows the limits of such a strategy, the dark side of the double consciousness that is "uncomfortably similar to Nietzsche's account of the slave's reactive, dependent and fettered consciousness" (Bernstein 201). Along with celebrating the polyphonic African American folk culture, craftily turning modernism back against itself, and holding a dogged faith in the possibilities of American individualism and democracy, *Invisible Man* also clearly recognizes that Du Bois's psychological and spiritual burden has economic and social equivalents: the dialogues that "do not open onto a universe of stimulating, vibrant exchanges, but rather deliver us to a vast madhouse whose loudest curse is our own at being thus abandoned" (Bernstein 201).

The first place to look for a madhouse of abandoned voices in *Invisible Man* is, of course, the Golden Day. In the scene immediately following the Trueblood episode, the narrator compounds his original mistake by taking the dazed Mr.
Norton to a saloon called the Golden Day. They arrive at the same time that “shell-shocked” black soldiers from the local veterans’ hospital have come to drink and visit the prostitutes upstairs. The dialogue among these vets is polyphonic, nearly cacophonous—some of the richest and funniest exchanges in the book—and it draws on all the resources of double entendre and humor associated with signifying and the blues. As two of the soldiers carry Norton into the Golden Day, for example, one says to the other: “Look Sylvester, it’s Thomas Jefferson.” Sylvester replies that he has “long wanted to discourse” with the former president. Our first impression is that these veterans are indeed shell-shocked, speaking a language with significance only for them. But the ensuing dialogue forces us to reevaluate this view:

As we carried him toward the Golden Day one of the men stopped suddenly and Mr. Norton’s head hung down, his white hair dragging in the dust.

“Gentlemen, this man is my grandfather!”

“But he’s white, his name’s Norton.”

“I should know my own grandfather! He’s Thomas Jefferson and I’m his grandson—on the ‘field-nigger’ side,” the tall man said. (76–77)

What seemed insane babble has quickly become an astute comment on the blurring of black and white so often ignored and on a chapter in early American history that does not usually make it into textbooks. The invisible man only dimly perceives the dynamics of this kind of discourse: “Sometimes it appeared as though they played some vast and complicated game with me and the rest of the school folk, a game whose goal was laughter and whose rules and subtleties I could never grasp” (73). The laughter and subtlety also escape Norton, who holds most of the political and economic power in this scene. When one of the vets claims that he discovered a way to turn blood into money but that “John D. Rockefeller stole the formula” from him, Norton fails to get the joke, to understand how the oppressed enrich the oppressor or to see Rockefeller as the butt of the vet’s signifying. Norton only recognizes the denotative accusation of one of his own and responds with the assurance that the vet “must be mistaken” (80).

The veterans’ conversations are shot through with the “languages” of various levels of society, and meaning is often multiple and circuitous. But the remarks also contain the deepest truths. When the invisible man, shoved to within a couple of inches of Norton’s face, sees only a “formless white death” and begins to scream with “a shudder of nameless horror,” one of the vets reminds him that Norton is “only a man” (84–85). The same vet, speaking later to Norton, sounds one of the dominant themes of the book:

“A little child shall lead them,” the vet said with a smile. “But seriously, because you both fail to understand what is happening to you. You cannot see or hear or smell the truth of what you see—and you, looking for destiny! It’s classic! And the boy, this automaton, he was made of the very mud of the region and he sees far less than you. Poor stumbling, neither of you can see the other. To you he is a mark on the score-card of your achievement, a thing and not a man; a child, or even less—a black amorphous thing. And you, for all your power, are not a man to him, but a God, a force. . . .” (95)

While Norton may not be a god, he certainly represents the force that created the situation at the Golden Day. These veterans, men who “had been doctors, lawyers, teachers, Civil Service Workers . . . a preacher, a politician, and an artist,” find themselves confined to a mental hospital because they forgot “some fundamentals which [they] never should have forgotten” (73, 89). They suffer not from the shell shock of war but from the shock of coming home. They are modeled on the black soldiers who tasted freedom and dignity in France during World War I and returned less willing to tolerate the institutionalized oppression prevalent in America. The wartime experience contributed to the black response to the riots of 1918–2010 and led Invisible Man’s veterans to incarceration.

The Golden Day contains, in every sense of containing, some of the liveliest signifying in African American literature. The saloon is a carefully circumscribed outlet where the power structure allows such a thing to exist. “[I]t used to be a jailhouse,” says the bartender, and one of the vets explains that “[t]hey let us come here once a week to raise a little hell” (79). The “local
white folks” make sure that any attempt by the nearby black college to “make the Golden Day respectable” goes “nowhere.” As soon as Norton sees the vets, he instinctively recognizes the need for strict control, saying, “[T]hey should have an attendant” (72). The vet who later revives Norton tells him that the patients are sent to the Golden Day for “therapy” but that the authorities “send along an attendant, a kind of censor, to see that the therapy fails” (80). When the veterans, some of whom are acutely aware of the futility of their position, want to vent their anger and frustration, they can only turn on Supercargo, their black attendant, the way that Watts turned on itself in the summer of 1965.

The Golden Day episode begins to show the underside of the blues, the limits of signifying. The paradox of suffering may produce a fertile artistic environment, a few small victories for Uncle Julius, some guilt money for Jim Trueblood, and the National Book Award for Ralph Ellison, but it does not remove the suffering or destroy many institutional and economic barriers. We begin to move from Bakhtin’s affirmation of the power of underclass discourse to Nietzsche’s bleaker view that action by the excluded “is fundamentally reaction” (37). The artistic deed, no matter how creative, remains socially futile. The veteran who used to be a doctor, after trying to explain himself to Norton and the invisible man, can finally only shout, “I’m sick of both of you pitiful obscenities! Get out before I do you both the favor of bashing in your heads!” But Norton has the last word, commenting, “Hurry, the man is as insane as the rest,” as he recognizes that the power of the blues does not extend past the walls of the Golden Day (94).

The universe of paralysis that parallels the kinetic and fecund spaces of signifying and the blues surfaces in a scene from the Brotherhood section of Invisible Man. A “short broad man” in his cups turns to the invisible man and asks him to sing: “How about a spiritual, Brother? Or one of those real good ole Negro work songs?” Jack, the invisible man’s mentor within the Brotherhood, senses “an outrageous example of unconscious racial chauvinism” and quickly says, “The Brother does not sing.” The drunk replies, “Non-

sense, all colored people sing.” Without letting the invisible man respond, Brother Jack has the offender removed. Turning to find “everyone staring at me as though I were responsible,” the invisible man can only counter with laughter and hysterical cries of “He hit me in the face with a yard of chitterlings” and “He threw a hog maw,” statements that “no one seemed to understand” (304–05). After listening to a woman tell him, “I would never ask our colored brothers to sing, even though I love to hear them,” the invisible man pauses to reflect on the paradoxical restraints at play in the episode:

I was puzzled. Just what did she mean? Was it that she understood that we resented having others think that we were all entertainers and natural singers? But now after the mutual laughter something disturbed me: Shouldn’t there be some way for us to be asked to sing? Shouldn’t the short man have the right to make a mistake without his motives being considered consciously or unconsciously malicious? After all, he was singing, or trying to. What if I asked him to sing? (307)

Those who would do the right thing have deprived the invisible man of any way of expressing a key element of his heritage. He has even lost the right to engage his adversary in a dialogue. The invisible man has been struck mute, and his predicament turns on one of the most important parts of African American expressive culture. Spirituals, along with the blues, jazz, and folk narratives (like Jim Trueblood’s), are the primary double-voiced tools that are supposed to undermine and transform the official hierarchies. In this incident, though, “those real good ole Negro work songs” serve the hierarchical purpose of keeping the invisible man invisible.

These representations of the limitations of “exchanging words for safety and profit” give Invisible Man a somber glow of inexorability (Baker, Blues 196). In “The World and the Jug,” Ellison chides Irving Howe for missing the irony in the invisible man’s musing on “infinite possibilities” while living in a hole in the ground” (Shadow 109). Given the seemingly unstoppable downward spiral that constitutes the invisible man’s odyssey, it is difficult to imagine that the irony is unintended (and easy to see that those
who read complete affirmation into Invisible Man’s epilogue could be the butt of Ellison’s signifying). Invisible Man does not stray as far from the tradition of Native Son as Ellison and many of his critics would have us believe. His technique goes beyond “narrow naturalism” and his protagonist is much more articulate and subtle than Bigger Thomas (and these qualities reflect the two areas where Ellison finds Richard Wright lacking\(^1\)), but the two works’ underlying economic and social realities and boundaries remain similar. Ellison may reject the teleology and determinism of a vulgar Marxism, but he is not blind to the material circumstances of oppression. And a blues carnival of signifying may point to the shortcomings of the status quo, but it does little to change them.

The recent transmogrification of the double consciousness, then, supplies the tools to shed new light on Ellison’s relation to both the African American tradition and modernism (and perhaps also to begin again the discussion of what “African American modernism” might mean). Ellison uses the strategy of African American vernacular signifying and of the blues to turn modernism back on itself and show its blindness to the social and economic circumstances of oppression. At the same time, he lays bare the ineffectiveness of this strategy against those circumstances. We may still have bones to pick with Ellison, but we can no longer claim that he turns his back on the African American tradition.

We should also recognize that the achievement of Invisible Man is not without a price. At the end of the novel, both the invisible man and his creator are trapped. The invisible man must choose among Ras, Rinehart, or a life underground, Ellison among the positions of modernist collaborator, impotent bluesman, or career essayist (the last choice—to stop producing fiction—a defiant gesture that may be aimed at those on both sides who would “keep this nigger-boy running”). James Baldwin, in an interview given shortly before he died, describes Ellison’s predicament:

It’s like I think that Ralph Ellison [is] totally trapped. It’s sad. . . . But you can’t do anything with America unless you are willing to dissect it. You certainly cannot hope to fit yourself into it; nothing fits into it, not your past, not your present. The invisible man is fine as far as it goes until you ask yourself, Who’s invisible to whom? . . . I don’t know how anything in American life is worthy of this sacrifice. And further, I don’t see anything in American life—for myself to aspire to. Nothing at all. (Troupe 204–05)

Baldwin’s implication, whether intended or not, is that Ellison has somehow not dissected America. In fact, Ellison has, and it is exactly doing so that put him in Baldwin’s trap. But though Baldwin (like Henry James and T. S. Eliot) felt he had no choice but to leave, Ellison has chosen to stay and persist as a lecturer and an essayist.\(^2\)

The faith in American possibility that Ellison maintains within the trap Baldwin describes may be tragic, but it is always uncompromising and never naive.

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**Notes**

1 For a collection of some of the most important Ellison criticism, see Benston. For a group of essays on Invisible Man, see O’Meally, New Essays.

2 Baraka’s essays “The Revolutionary Tradition in Afro-American Literature” and “Afro-American Literature and Class Struggle,” both collected in Daggers and Javelins, are versions of this kind of criticism.

3 See Ellison’s Shadow and Act, especially “Richard Wright’s Blues,” “The World and the Jug,” and “The Art of Fiction: An Interview.”

4 Nadell’s Invisible Criticism: Ralph Ellison and the American Canon does a brilliant job of showing how Ellison’s novel is a thorough implicit critique of nineteenth-century American fiction.

5 According to Gates’s Figures in Black, Ellison signifies on Wright by “explicitly repeating and reversing key figures of Wright’s fictions” to expose “naturalism to be merely a hard-ened convention of representation of the Negro problem” and perhaps part of the problem itself.” Ellison’s use of the “form of critical parody, of repetition and inversion,” that Gates defines as “critical signification, or formal signifying,” places Ellison, in Gates’s alignment, squarely in the center of the African American tradition (246–47).

6 For a discussion of James’s relation to African American writers in general and James Baldwin in particular, see Porter.

7 Ellison’s undermining of Jamesian modernism may begin in “The Novel as a Function of American Democracy.” After praising James the craftsman as “a writer with a great and subtle awareness of how the novel differed from all other forms
of narrative," Ellison points gently toward the gap between James's aristocratic ideology and a pluralistic American society: "Today, not too many people read James, although he is by no means an ignored writer. For me one minor test of this is the fact that I don't know of many Negro youngsters who are named Henry James Jones. There were, and are, a number who are named Waldo. I happen to be one of them. Amusing as this is, it reveals something of how the insight and values of literature get past the usual barriers in society and seep below the expected levels" (Going 314).

Ellison himself acknowledges this irony in "The World and the Jug," his famous response to Irving Howe: "Ellison also offends by having the narrator of Invisible Man speak of his life (Howe either missing the irony or assuming that I did) as one of 'infinite possibilities' while living in a hole in the ground" (Shadow 109).

In Mikhail Bakhtin also, carnivalesque discourse always originates in the lower strata of society, as this passage from "Discourse in the Novel" shows: "At the time when poetry was accomplishing the task of cultural, national and political centralization of the verbal-ideological world in the higher official socio-ideological levels, on the lower levels, on the stages of local fairs and at buffoon spectacles, the heteroglossia of the clown sounded forth, ridiculing all 'languages' and dialects; there developed the literature of the fabliaux and Schwanke of street songs, folksayings, anecdotes, where there was no language center at all, where there was to be found a lively play with the 'languages' of poets, scholars, monks, knights and others, where all 'languages' were masks and where no language could claim to be an authentic, incontestable face" (273).

For discussions of the "red scare" riots, see Lewis; Ruddick; and Waskow.


12Baldwin gave this interview near the end of his life and in the midst of what he saw as the dark night of the Reagan years. A late book like The Evidence of Things Not Seen suggests that Baldwin still held out some hope for America.


Frank, Joseph. "Ralph Ellison and a Literary 'Ancestor': Dostoevski." Benston 231–44.


