

Utopian Rhythms: Ralph Ellison and the Jazz Aesthetic

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Albert [Ayler] was *mad*. His playing was like some primordial frenzy that the world secretly used for energy. Yeh, the Music. Feeling all that, it touching us and us touching it, gave us that strength, that kind of irrevocability we felt.¹

This essay explores the utopian notion of freedom at work in Ralph Ellison's major writings and, following the cues laid out in his essays on literature and music, traces the process of the realization of freedom to a recognition of the rhythmic nature of history. Ellison finds the key to this recognition in aesthetic creation, exemplified in the performative aspects of writing fiction and making music. These creative acts, which take the past as both irrevocable *and* mutable, strive to recapitulate the rhythms of experience in such a way as to make them rise to the level of consciousness. To explore the extent to which such acts are liberating, I focus on Ellison's notion of history as it ties in with other aspects of African-American culture. In particular, the notions of repetition and rhythm come to the fore. I examine the extent to which the rhythmic resonance of historically created ideals or principles constitutes the primary significance of the past – in short, its life in the present. Using Ellison's fiction and elements of the jazz tradition, I seek to use this understanding of rhythm to find a sense of utopia, or perhaps in a more tempered sense of possibility within the irrevocability of the past. I begin by discussing various ways of coming to terms with repetition and, homing in on the notion of repetition as

rhythm, examine the interrelations of rhythm and improvisation, actuality and possibility, history and freedom.

At first glance we see that the phenomenon of repetition has many faces. In our habits, languages, art forms, values, and institutions we find the past recapitulated in the present, our histories defining even the most mundane aspects of our present lives. This is only to say that the past is a constituting force in the present. Though we must not confuse repetition with duplication, there are dangers in failing to acknowledge this presence of the past. Historical blindness and its counterpart, unreflective action, may combine to undesirably limit future possibilities and to quell creativity. *This is to say that history, no less than the denial of history, determines the field of possibility.* Thus James Snead writes in his essay, "On Repetition in Black Culture": "coming-to-terms [with repetition] may mean denial or acceptance, repression or highlighting, but in any case *transformation* is culture's response to its own apprehension of repetition." He continues, "One may readily classify cultural forms based on whether they tend to admit or cover up these repeating constituents within them."² The denial of recurrence, of the present significance of the past, is among the more striking

themes of Ralph Ellison's writings. Indeed, his *Invisible Man* may fruitfully be read as an account of one individual's struggle for self-creation in the face of the tragedies of the past and their disavowed recurrence in the present.

Ellison's narrator is continually confronted with the incongruity between the official, coherent history of the academics and theorists and that which comes to him in fits and starts through folklore and music. The conventional historian, who Ellison claims is dedicated to chronology, is at one time a documenter and a concealer of history. In presenting linear accounts, such historians pin down the past, reducing its complexities and contradictions to formulas and stereotypes. In such linear conceptions of history, the occurrence of repetition is typically explained by means of a concept such as Hegel's *Bildung*, or "development." Here the notion of recurrence is subsumed under the broader notion of progress. In this scheme, "repetition must be seen to be not just circulation and flow, but accumulation and growth."³

Snead finds a different approach to repetition in black culture: "repetition means that the thing *circulates*...there in an equilibrium." He continues, "In black culture, the thing (the ritual, the dance, the beat) is 'there for you to pick up when you come back to get it.'"⁴ What repeats are rhythms, styles, attitudes, and, most important for Ellison, principles. The complexity of the recurring rhythms and the absurdities (to use one of Ellison's favorite words) that result from their incompatibilities with one another are for Ellison among the key characteristics of American life. The "boomerang of history,"⁵ as Ellison calls it, moves by these contradictions. The founding documents of the republic offer promises of freedom and responsibility which

resonate in contradiction for those who have yet to see the promises fulfilled. The resonance of these ideals and promises occurs, for Ellison, in the manner of a boomerang: "(Beware of those who speak of the *spiral* of history; they are preparing a boomerang. Keep a steel helmet handy.) I know; I have been boomeranged across my head so much that I now can see the darkness of lightness."⁶

In his 1956 essay, "Society, Morality, and the Novel," Ellison speaks of the principles laid down in the founding of the United States: "In the beginning was not only the word but the contradiction of the word."⁷ The nation began with the avowal of equality and liberty and the stark contradiction of slavery. But it was precisely this state of contradiction which laid the ground for a world of democratic possibilities, "for man [sic] cannot simply say, 'Let us have liberty and justice and equality for all,' and have it; and a democracy more than any other system is pregnant with its contradiction."⁸ The founders of the nation (much like the "Founder" of *Invisible Man*) laid forth what Ellison refers to in his novel as "the principle, the plan in whose name we had been brutalized and sacrificed."⁹ The principle became an American archetype, a rhythmic, utopian undercurrent to even the most contradictory of experiences. Thus even for the narrator's grandfather – a former slave – the utopian democratic rhythm "was his, and the principle lives on in all its human and absurd diversity."¹⁰

For Ellison the rhythms of history are transmitted through the imagination far more readily than the intellect. The lyric and poetic language of the streets and the rhythmic, improvisational style of blues and jazz are to Ellison's mind important vehicles for the expression, repetition,

and exploration of those undercurrents ignored by historians. The “democratizing action of the vernacular,”¹¹ whether oral or musical, is the medium in which the “ongoing task of naming, defining, and creating a consciousness of who and what we have come to be”¹² will most likely occur. The vernacular is, for Ellison, the site of the synthesis of traditions – that is, the unwritten histories, the rhythms – which are “always at work in the background to provide us with clues as to how this process of self-definition has worked in the past.”¹³ Ellison writes, “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.”¹⁴ As vernacular evolves somewhat unconsciously, it is through the exploration of vernacular through such creative acts as writing, composing, and performing that we undertake the *conscious* pursuit of attaining the utopian ideals whose first expression began the process by which this particular vernacular could develop at all.

The rhythm of the American vernacular is an expression of what Ellison calls the “unconscious logic of the democratic process.”¹⁵ And it is precisely rhythm, the repeating of the past in the present, which is at the heart of the American divergence from European culture. As Snead points out, European music used rhythm primarily as a tool for the construction of harmonic cadence, rarely emphasizing rhythm as a goal in itself.¹⁶ By way of contrast, Snead traces the notion of the “cut,” an abrupt return to the beginning of a piece, from African music to slave songs and spirituals, and finally to blues and jazz. He writes, “Black culture, in the ‘cut,’ builds

‘accidents’ into its *coverage*, almost as if to control their unpredictability. Itself a kind of cultural *coverage*, this magic of the ‘cut’ attempts to confront accident and rupture not by covering them over, but by making room for them inside the system itself.”¹⁷ The “cut” is a principle of repetition in black music, a “seemingly unmotivated break...with a series already in progress and a willed return to a prior series.”¹⁸ The return to the beginning is a conscious return to the originary rhythm, the principle of organization without which “true improvisation would be impossible, as a improvisator relies upon the ongoing recurrence of the beat.”¹⁹

The assurance of musical repetition is found in its sociality. The beat is something there for the musicians to diverge from and rejoin and for the audience to participate in, tapping their feet and nodding their heads. The rhythm is a point of social reference, much like the responsorials of the Catholic mass or the call-and-response of the black church service.²⁰ The rhythm is that to which we “musicians” might return if we find ourselves too far afield. It is that which holds a group of otherwise disparate sounds together.²¹ Above all, is that which we rely on to provide the material for our imaginative romps into the realm of improvisation.

Turning back for a moment to the rhythms of history, we must consider the sense in which the past both is and is not fixed entity. I have described the past as a principle of repetition, as the birthplace of those rhythms which define present life; and until now I have isolated and discussed only one of those rhythms, namely, the democratic rhythm laid out in the founding documents of the nation. However we must not overlook the fact that there were and are other, competing principles and rhythms. The principles

which underwrote slavery, segregation, and patriarchy resonate in the present as much as those which underwrote the quest for equality and liberty. Though we can see the utopian democratic ideals upheld in jazz and vernacular, it is equally so that the anti-democratic ideals are found in the perpetuation of ghettos and the eschewing of African-American vernacular in classrooms across the country.

Ellison tells us that there are a plurality of historical rhythms which find voices in the present, but that each is derivative of the underlying "logic of the democratic process,"²² which in turn is an expression of the "old universal urge toward freedom."²³ He writes, "I think that the mixture of the marvelous and the terrible is a basic condition of human life and that the persistence of human ideals represents the marvelous pulling itself up out of the chaos of the universe."²⁴ For Ellison, the most marvelous of human ideals is freedom; its best expression is democracy. And for him even the anti-democratic rhythms of oppression have at their root the utopian ideal of freedom; they are at odds with freedom precisely because they have forgotten their origins, lost the beat.

Ellison's optimism is thus grounded in the repetition of the rhythmic ideal that underlies the "beautiful absurdity"²⁵ of the American identity. The complexity of the rhythm is such that it cannot be simply cognized or articulated in a formula.²⁶ Rather, Ellison insists, the rhythm is describable only piecemeal, "there is no way for any one group [or any one method] to discover by itself the intrinsic forms of our democratic culture."²⁷ We cannot capture utopia in a single vision, for the nature of utopia-as-rhythm makes it a moving target; hence the importance of those aesthetic outlets which, like vernacular and jazz, aim to

synthesize rather than exclude, to experiment rather than codify.

Ellison considers the novel and the song to be the mediums most agreeable to this sort of artistic realignment. He tells us that the social function of the novel "is that of seizing from the flux and flow of our daily lives those abiding patterns of experience which, through their repetition and consequences in our affairs, help to form our sense of reality and from which emerge our sense of humanity and our conception of human value."²⁸ Like the blues, which "at once express both the agony of life and the possibility of conquering it through sheer toughness of spirit,"²⁹ the novel does not offer solutions. Rather, it presents (and thus affirms) an artistically ordered image of experience, evoking a sense of the human ideal which lies unrecognized (or, more often, obscured) beneath our strivings. This artistic pursuit of history, unlike its academic counterpart, elicits the imaginative reenactment of the ideal rhythms.³⁰

Ellison's narrator in *Invisible Man* struggles to find himself in a society that refuses to see him because of its historical blindness. He wrestles with those who would cut the past off as a mistake (the trustees and administration of the black college) and those who would theorize about History at the expense of actual occurrences (the revolutionary members of the Brotherhood). And yet, even in the midst of a life which would emphatically deny its own rhythmicity, the rhythm presents itself, often in the form of speech or song. When the narrator finds himself upon a stage, instructed to give a speech at a Brotherhood rally, he describes the experience as follows: "I had the feeling that I had been talking beyond myself, had expressed words and attitudes not my own, that I was in the grip of some

alien personality deep within me.”³¹ The “alien personality,” he discovers, is precisely that within him which partakes of the rhythms which he would outwardly dismiss. Thus he tells us, “now I realized that I had meant everything I had said to the audience....What had come out was completely uncalculated, as though another self within me had taken over and held forth.” This self – this historical self – emerges again at the funeral of Tod Clifton, when several of the marchers begin playing “There’s Many a Thousand Gone.” He recounts, “It was as though the song had been there all the time and [the singer] knew it and aroused it; and I knew that I had known it too and had failed to release it out of a vague, nameless shame or fear.”³²

Ellison’s narrator finds himself only by his attunement to the rhythms of his past. Through the reminders of old slave songs, the jazz he hears pouring from a record store, and the performance of sermon-like speeches, the narrator is confronted with his past. He recounts the experience: “and now all past humiliations became precious parts of my experience, and for the first time... I began to accept my past... I saw that they were more than separate experiences. They were me, they defined me.”³³ In these experiences he is swept away into an almost dreamlike state, and what emerges is a creative, improvisational act. His speeches at Clifton’s funeral (“Such was the short bitter life of Brother Tod Clifton. Now he’s in this box with the bolts tightened down. He’s in the box and we’re in there with him, and when I’ve told you this you can go. It’s dark in this box and it’s crowded.”³⁴) and the Brotherhood rally (“Let’s make a miracle.... Let’s take back our pillaged eyes! Let’s reclaim our sight; let’s combine and spread our village.”³⁵) emerge as the creative attunement with

the past. Thus the narrator says in the middle of his Brotherhood speech, “I hear the pulse of your breathing. And now, at this moment, with your black and white eyes upon me, I feel...I feel.... I feel suddenly that I have become *more human*.”³⁶

These speeches and indeed the narrator’s entire memoir³⁷ are precisely those sorts of creative performances which Ellison would have us partake in. For they point to the often muted patterns of our lives, performing and inciting the improvisational possibilities which lay waiting for those who would seek them. In this sense the narrator’s speeches are jazz solos, his memoir a blues lick. Ellison invokes this parallel by setting the narrator’s oratory performances in the sudden silence that follows a chaos of sound, recalling for the reader the “stop-time” of a jazz tune when everyone stops playing except the soloist. In these scenes of improvisation the narrator returns to the history he has tried in vain to suppress³⁸ and from this “cut” back to its slangy folk rhythms expresses – improvises upon – its patterns. In so doing, the narrator recognizes not only the necessity of the past, but the possibility it engenders. The past is what we may “cut” to during the “stop-time” and, touching upon its rhythms, we create and recreate the content of the present. It is thus that the narrator can say during the “stop-time” of his hibernation underground, “my world has become one of infinite possibilities.”³⁹ The memoir which emerges from this recognition of possibility is a living expression of freedom rather than an attempt to pin down the past.

The writing of the memoir is the activity which draws the narrator out of the hole to affirm the democratic ideal of freedom. He tells us, “Thus, having tried to give pattern to the chaos which lives

within the pattern of your certainties, I must come out, I must emerge.”⁴⁰ The “I” which must emerge is the formerly obscured identity, the personality without which the concept of freedom is empty. A much-repeated refrain in the jazz world rings true here: “you can’t play unless you have found yourself.”⁴¹ Ellison’s narrator echoes this, saying, “When I discover who I am, I’ll be free.”⁴²

In jazz, a musician discovers her identity in the jam session, which Ralph Ellison dubs the “jazzman’s true academy.”⁴³ He writes,

It is here that [the musician] learns tradition, group techniques and style... It is more meaningful to speak, not of courses of study, of grades and degrees, but of apprenticeship, ordeals, initiation ceremonies, of rebirth. For after the jazzman has learned the fundamentals of his instrument and the traditional techniques of jazz – the intonations, the mute work, manipulation of timbre, the body of traditional styles – he must then “find himself,” he must be reborn, must find, as it were, his soul. All this through achieving that subtle identification between his instrument and his deepest drives which will allow him to express his own unique ideas and his own unique voice. He must achieve, in short, his self-determined identity.⁴⁴

The jam session is a pedagogical arena where the rhythms are enacted instead of professed. It is a place of competition and experimentation, story-telling and story-making. The jam session is where you go to find your voice through the humiliation of defeat and the lure of challenge. Above all, the jam session is the site to which the players continually return to play and listen, to explore the old rhythms in new voices. In short, the

jam session is the place where the past is taken up as a source of possibility.

Ellison holds the jam session ritual in such esteem because, he believes, it is a site of freedom’s expression. Not without its humiliations or triumphs, the jam session engenders responsibility between its members. Its demand is “find yourself,” but it also provides the material – the rhythms and traditions – out of which this greatest of creative acts may spring.

Invisible Man is a sort of jam session. In it the chaos of experience is presented — not boiled down — in such a way that the narrator and the reader are able to detect something underneath. What we find beneath the novel and beneath our own experience is a search for the freedom found in spontaneous improvisation and the self-definition that results from it. More importantly for Ellison, we find that this search is grounded in a utopian principle, a rhythm of history, an unconscious logic of the democratic process by which we might live if only we could will it. Utopia, like the rhythms of jazz and blues, is present here and now, there waiting for our return.

By way of conclusion we might ask as to the upshot of Ellison’s conceptions of history and freedom. There is an idealism inherent in his view of history as the evidence of an underlying universal search for freedom. But this is not an absolute idealism. We might not get there. Things might just get worse for freedom. What is significant in Ellison’s thought is that, despite the failures of history (and there will always be failures), the *urge* to freedom, inspired by such ideals as founded this nation, marches on. He recognizes that the reality of ideals is not an ahistorical matter. Rather, it is only historically that the ideals were set forth and only historically that they find recurring

expression. It is only through an examination of our histories that we may come to find and act upon those ideals. Thus he writes, "I believed that unless we continually explored the network of complex relationships which bind us together, we would continue being the victims of various inadequate conceptions of ourselves."⁴⁵ The means by which we must do this cannot be reductive in the manner of many academics. The proper exploration is piecemeal and aware of its experimental, and thus fallible, nature. For Ellison the attitude of such exploration is typified by the jazz musicians of his day. Their emphasis on tradition and willingness to experiment within (and with) its framework exemplifies the improvisational sense of freedom employed in Ellison's fiction. Here aesthetic exploration in the spirit of improvisation is at once a search for and an enactment of freedom.

What we are left with is a notion of history which is at once tragic and ennobling, at once dystopian and utopian. We get a promise of freedom and the knowledge that it appears only infrequently. We get despair and we get hope. In short, we get all of the contradictions that make up our

experiences. But the abiding message of Ellison's work is a demand upon us which originates in the smoky backrooms of jazz clubs: "find yourself." This is a principle of action, if nothing else. It imparts a challenge for us to take ourselves seriously... but not too seriously. In a world made up largely of those who take themselves too seriously and those who are kept from taking themselves seriously, I can think of no finer cultural challenge.

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¹ Amiri Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka* (New York: Morrow, 1963), 195.

² James A. Snead, "On Repetition in Black Culture," *Black American Literature Forum*, Vol. 15, No.4 (Winter 1981), 146-154.

³ Snead, p.149.

⁴ Snead, pp.149-150.

⁵ Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Random House, 1952), 6.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ralph Ellison, *Going to the Territory* (New York: Random House, 1986), 243.

⁸ Ibid., 251.

⁹ *Invisible Man*, 574.

¹⁰ Ibid., 580.

¹¹ *Going to the Territory*, 143.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 144.

¹⁴ Ibid., 139.

¹⁵ Ibid., 126.

¹⁶ Snead, 152. Here he cites the frequent ignoring of "second repeats" in the performance of

Beethoven pieces to “avoid the undesirability of having ‘to be told the same thing twice.’”

¹⁷ Ibid., 150.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ However, a striking difference between these two sorts of rhythmic ritual lies in the fact that for the Catholic the responses are codified and prescribed, while in the black church the preacher provides a rhythm into which each member of the congregation may enter his or her voice in various ways or not at all.

²¹ A few years ago I was watching a little jazz band play in a coffee shop in East Texas, when a group of four or five Indian men walked in with their sitars and drums. We learned later that they were supposed to meet a friend and head to his house to play, but as their friend had not yet arrived, they sat down to wait. The band saw them with their instruments and asked if they wished to join the next set, but as these men had been in the States for barely a day and didn’t speak English, the communication soon resorted to gestures. Nevertheless, the Indian men joined the band, and for a few minutes the most hideous cacophony I have heard came from the stage. But suddenly, without visual or vocal cues, and to the delight of those who had endured the noise, they magically found a rhythm and a key. For the next hour or so I had the privilege of hearing the most exquisite blend of John Coltrane, Thelonious Monk, and Ravi Shankar imaginable, impressing upon me the communicative power of rhythm.

²² *Going to the Territory*, 126.

²³ Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, 1964), 22.

²⁴ *Shadow and Act*, 20.

²⁵ *Invisible Man*, 559.

²⁶ Ellison speaks harshly of those who would study experience in sociological terms. The

short-sightedness of statistical interpretations of life fail, he claims, to appreciate the moral strength of social groups. See *Shadow and Act*, pp. 16-17, for a more detailed discussion.

²⁷ *Going to the Territory*, 142.

²⁸ *Going to the Territory*, 244.

²⁹ *Shadow and Act*, 94.

³⁰ Lonnie Johnson, a New Orleans blues guitarist who worked with Louis Armstrong, describes this attitude as a “feelin’” he experienced in his childhood: “Everybody played something. It didn’t make any difference which instrument we played, ‘cause the feelin’ was there and that’s all you needed, to get started anyway.” Quoted from Mark Thomas, “I’m a Roamin’ Rambler: Lonnie Johnson,” *Jazz Quarterly* 2 (No.4), 18.

³¹ *Invisible Man*, 249.

³² *Invisible Man*, 453.

³³ *Invisible Man*, 507-508.

³⁴ *Invisible Man*, 458.

³⁵ *Invisible Man*, 344.

³⁶ *Invisible Man*, 345-346.

³⁷ Ellison insists that we realize that “although *Invisible Man* is my novel, it is really his memoir. “On Initiation Rites and Power,” in *Going to the Territory*, 59.

³⁸ We see this attempt when the narrator says, “This was no time for memory, for all its images were of times past.” *Invisible Man*, 390.

³⁹ *Invisible Man*, 576.

⁴⁰ *Invisible Man*, 580-581.

⁴¹ Quote from Jo Jones, found in Douglas Henry Daniels, “The Significance of Blues for American History,” *Journal of Negro History*, Volume 70 (Winter – Spring, 1985), 14-23.

⁴² *Invisible Man*, 243.

⁴³ *Shadow and Act*, 208.

⁴⁴ *Shadow and Act*, 208-209.

⁴⁵ *Going to the Territory*, 42.