

## Eloquence and *Invisible Man*

Christopher Hanlon

*Christopher Hanlon is assistant professor of English at Eastern Illinois University. His writing has appeared in **New Literary History, Pedagogy, and Exquisite Corpse.***

1.

It is the doctrine of the popular music-masters that whoever can speak can sing”—or so Emerson opens his essay “Eloquence,” included in the 1870 volume *Society and Solitude*. As Emerson describes it near the end of his career as an orator, verbal eloquence becomes a form of musical expression, not only inasmuch as both share the formal elements of pitch, rhythm, and meter, but also to the extent that both make “instruments” of their audience. Hence, “Him we call an artist who can play on an assembly of men as a master on the keys of the piano,—who, seeing the people furious, shall soften and compose them, shall draw them, when he will, to laughter and to tears” (1903-04, 7. 65). The Emersonian speaker is a “master” of men, an Orphic wordsmith who “will have them pleased and humored as he chooses.” But eloquence is for him no mere art of domination, the art of propaganda Emerson keeps in mind as he paraphrases Plato’s definition of rhetoric: “the art of ruling the minds of men” (7.

64). The symphonic and harmonic dimensions of eloquence suffuse Emerson's essay of 1870, so that when he describes the eloquent speaker's art as that of "compos[ing]" "the people," he does not primarily point toward the power of the word to dominate and control un-self-reliant minds. Composing the people may involve calming them, as it did for Emerson during the opening moments of the Civil War and later, after Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, but it also means constituting them as a group, composing them as a "social organism." But more so than either of these, Emerson thinks of eloquent composition as a process of musical collaboration that draws upon, channels, provides a conduit for energies already in circulation among "the people." "Of all the musical instruments on which men play," Emerson explains, "a popular assembly is that which has the largest compass and variety, and out of which, by genius and study, the most wonderful effects can be drawn." This is because "An audience is not a simple addition of the individuals that compose it. Their sympathy gives them a certain social organism, which fills each member, in his own degree, and most of all the orator, as a jar in a battery is charged with the whole electricity of the battery. No one can survey the face of an excited assembly, without being apprised of new opportunity for painting in fire human thought, and being agitated to agitate" (1903-04, 7. 62-63).

Emerson's model of spoken composition, proceeding from the recognition that every listener is also a potential speaker ("How many orators sit mute there below!" [1903-04, 7. 63]), also captures the most charged moments of eloquence to appear in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, a novel that measures the self-reliance of its nameless protagonist through his growing acumen as a public speaker. Midway through the novel, Ellison's narrator stands before a massive audience after his initiation into the political organization called the Brotherhood, observing that "The audience seemed to have become one, its breathing and articulation synchronized" much like the "social organism" or "battery" to which the Emersonian speaker both addresses and connects himself. The Brotherhood has hired Ellison's protagonist as a political agitator, but having achieved only measured success with past public speeches, he now approaches his first large audience with trepidation. Fumbling at the lectern and blinded by the spotlight, he makes an awkward beginning:

The microphone was strange and unnerving. I approached it incorrectly, my voice sounding raspy and full of air, and after a few words I halted, embarrassed. I was getting off to a bad start, something had to be done. I leaned toward the vague audience closest to the platform and said, "Sorry, folks. Up to now they've kept me so far away from these shiny electric gadgets I haven't learned the technique. . . . And to tell you the truth, it

looks to me like it might bite! Just look at it, it looks like the steel skull of a man! Do you think he died of dispossession?"

It worked and while they laughed someone came and made an adjustment. "Don't stand too close," he advised.

"How's that?" I said, hearing my voice boom deep and vibrant over the arena. "Is that better?"

There was a ripple of applause.

"You see, all I needed was a chance. You've granted it, now it's up to me!"

The applause grew stronger and from down front a man's far-carrying voice called out, "We with you, Brother. You pitch 'em we catch 'em!"

That was all I needed, I'd made contact, and it was as though his voice was that of them all. (Ellison 1981, 341-42)

In the end, the speech is fabulously successful; after finding his point of "contact" within an otherwise inscrutable mass of listeners, the protagonist delivers a virtuoso spoken performance drawing its strength from the audience's enthusiastic participation. The format of his speech is, in a way, generic: "I had to fall back upon tradition and since it was a political meeting," the narrator explains, "I selected one of the political techniques that I'd heard so often at home" (Ellison 1981, 342). But more than strictly "political," his chosen technique is also spiritual and musical, drawing upon a tradition of call-and-response oration that also informs the improvisational styles of jazz composition. The anonymous point of contact in the audience becomes for the protagonist a kind of duet partner or Greek chorus, ostensibly speaking for the audience as a whole and encouraging the spoken composition onward. This dynamic of collaboration (wherein it becomes difficult, as Emerson's 1870 commentary implies it might, to distinguish between speaker and listener) finally gives way to a moment of sanctification: as the protagonist nears the end of his speech, he finds himself at "a natural pause [where] there was applause, but as it burst I realized that the flow of words had stopped. What would I do when they started to listen again?" (344) Feeling suddenly "naked, sensing that the words were returning and that something was about to be said that I shouldn't reveal" (345), the protagonist throws himself into the welter of coagulating phrases, achieving as he does so a new but long-sought stature:

My shoulders were squared, my chin thrust forward and my eyes focused straight into the light. "Something strange and miraculous and transforming is taking place in me right now . . . as I stand here before you!"

I could feel the words forming themselves, slowly falling into place. The light seemed to boil opalescently, like liquid soap shaken gently in a bottle.

“Let me describe it. It is something odd. It’s something that I’m sure I’d never experience anywhere else in the world. I feel your eyes upon me. I hear the pulse of your breathing. And now, at this moment, with your black and white eyes upon me, I feel . . . I feel. . . .”

[. . .] “What is it son, what do you feel?” a shrill voice cried.

My voice fell to a husky whisper, “I feel, I feel suddenly that I have become more human.” (Ellison 1981, 345–46)

There is much irony in the narrator’s statement that this speech for the Brotherhood has effected his transmogrification, has allowed him to become more “human,” especially since though the protagonist’s audience recognizes and values this moment of becoming, the Brotherhood itself largely does not. Precisely inasmuch as the speech is steeped in the sort of community identification call-and-response engenders and the Brotherhood strives to efface, and precisely inasmuch as the speech abandons quasi-“scientific” ratiocination in favor of emotionally charged oratory, many of the Brothers resent it and their new fellow traveler deeply. But the speech nevertheless marks a crucial turning point for the protagonist of *Invisible Man*, whose journey along the color line of 1930s America has up until now been a steady descent into a hell of racist *de*-humanization. It is also, moreover, a quintessentially Emersonian moment, inasmuch as the protagonist’s re-humanization is facilitated through his re-birth as an eloquent speaker. As in Emerson’s “Self-Reliance,” where the burden of speech is precisely the burden of speaking oneself into existence (the un-self-reliant individual, Emerson complains, “dares not say, ‘I think,’ ‘I am’” in an elocutionary gesture of auto-genesis akin to “I am that am”), *Invisible Man* invests the public words of its protagonist with the capacity to re-substantiate the self whose existence other selves have effaced. In this way, Ellison’s novel formulates its own ethos of spoken self-creation along Emersonian lines. As a collaborative but also improvisational model of eloquence, the protagonist’s first speech for the Brotherhood privileges spontaneous expression over rehearsed argument: its achievement is thus to commit itself to the Emersonian challenge, “Speak what you think now in hard words and to-morrow speak what to-morrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict everything you said to-day” (Emerson 1983, 265).

At moments such as this, the protagonist of *Invisible Man* finds himself within the context Ellison would later identify—echoing the musical metaphors of Emerson’s essay on eloquence—as that of the American author, whose audience is “a far more receptive instrument than may be dominated through a skillful exercise of the sheerly ‘rhetorical’ elements—the flash and filigree—of the artist’s craft” (1995, 492). For Ellison, indeed, Emerson’s sense of spoken performance as an orchestral event carries over into a musicolog-

ical understanding of written composition. Of the American writer's readership, Ellison explains that "Like a strange orchestra upon which a guest conductor would impose his artistic vision, it must be exhorted, persuaded, even wooed, at the price of its applause" (492). The American writer Ellison describes "play[s] artfully upon the audience's sense of experience and form"; his audience is that which "he is called to play as a pianist upon a piano," though "this second instrument can be most unstable in its tuning, and downright ornery in its responses," a fact that Ellison regards as "a special, most American problem" (496). Such collaborative interaction between writer and audience, Ellison explains, comprises an act of "democratic faith" entailing "an incalculable scale of possibilities for self-creation" (494).

Other commentators on *Invisible Man* have concluded that Ellison's novel mounts a sustained critique of Emersonian ethics, suggesting that Ellison rejects "Self-Reliance" as irreducible to—and also insensitive of—the powerful social forces that burdened African Americans throughout the twentieth century. Still other readers of *Invisible Man* have focused upon the novel's musicological qualities, the ways in which the narrative experimentation of the novel incorporates Ellison's early love of and expertise with music, pulling together an authorial voice that draws upon the techniques of several musical forms in order to re-invent the American novel.<sup>1</sup> None of these commentators, however, have considered that these two facets of *Invisible Man*—the novel's musicological commitments, on the one hand, and its struggle with the legacy of Emerson on the other—may shed light upon each other, that part of the Emersonian tradition that is Ellison's inheritance might be the musical, harmonic, and improvisational understanding of eloquence that Emerson outlines most explicitly in the 1870 essay devoted to this topic but that also circulates through much of Emerson's writing prior to this work.<sup>2</sup> In exploring this possibility, then, I am suggesting at least two things about Ellison's relationship with Emerson. The first is that, viewed in such a way, *Invisible Man* affiliates itself with a crucial strain of thought, running throughout Emerson's writings, that ponders the musical qualities of eloquent communication and links these qualities to a promise of speakerly rebirth. But another premise from which I proceed is that imposing, larger-than-life figures like Emerson lead a protean life in American literary and intellectual history, since the resonance of such essays as "Self-Reliance," "The American Scholar," or "The Poet" shifts in accordance with whatever desires or values a given generation of readers brings to them.<sup>3</sup> In *Invisible Man* particularly, the name of "Emerson" marks a site of contest and struggle where various interests compete to authorize their values through reference to an "Emersonian" tradition. In this sense, Ellison's affiliation with Emersonian values of eloquence does not come about through a simple

process of “transmission” and “reception,” nor even through a Bloomian *mise en scène* wherein Ellison unconsciously if productively misreads Emerson. The Emersonian strains at work in *Invisible Man* constitute a series of appropriative gestures on Ellison’s part; they are deliberate, revisionary attempts at constituting an Emersonian tradition that resists other versions of “Emerson” that are largely antithetical to the sort of American intellectual history Ellison wishes to write. The Ellisonian reading of Emerson is a transformative reading, faithful to the wide-ranging ramifications of Emerson’s philosophy even as it assimilates its particular components into Ellison’s specific and progressive philosophical aims. This is to say that before Ellison’s protagonist is able to learn the kind of improvisatory give-and-take *Invisible Man* values, Ellison himself enacts such give-and-take with Emerson as duet partner. To put it still another way, Ellison’s reading of Emerson is a reading undertaken in the spirit of “Quotation and Originality,” in which Emerson tells us that “Original power is usually accompanied with assimilating power . . .” (1990, 433). What Henry Louis Gates, Jr., refers to as “signifyin(g),” the spoken tradition of “expressive doubleness” by means of which generations of African Americans have commandeered existing oral or written texts in order to re-direct the thematics of those texts along their own lines of intent, is for Emerson the paradoxical genius of “originality” itself, since “In hours of high mental activity we sometimes do the book too much honor, reading out of it better things than the author wrote,—reading, as we say, between the lines” (435). And we might liken this stratum of meaning the Emersonian reader discerns “between the lines” to what practiced blues and jazz players call microtones—the “notes between the notes” or tonal gradations that lie unscripted, invisible, within the apparently blank spaces of the measure.<sup>4</sup> Ellison’s metaphor for this mode of Emersonian reading, the kind of reading to which *Invisible Man* subjects Emerson himself, also emphasizes the musicological dimension of “reading . . . between the lines,” suggesting that only “on the lower frequencies” of any text do we find the matrix of possibilities for reconstruction and renovation.

## 2

As if in fulfillment of its thesis that eloquence emerges as the product of a dialogue between orator and audience, Emerson’s 1870 version of “Eloquence” bears the impress of its long history of spoken delivery. Passages of the 1870 text appear in Emerson’s Journal as far back as 1844; Emerson drafted the essay on his second trip to Europe in 1847; and as an address, “Eloquence” was a frequent part of Emerson’s repertoire throughout the second half of his public career, during which he revised, re-developed, and rethought the essay repeatedly. One of these revisions is especially worth not-

ing here. Near the outset of the 1870 text, Emerson ascribes particular powers of eloquence to various regional, ethnic, and national sensibilities, describing the “Irishwoman” whose “speech flows like a river—so unconsidered, so humorous, so pathetic, such justice done to all the parts!” as well as “Our Southern people” who “are almost all speakers, and have every advantage over the New England people, whose climate is so cold that t’is said we do not like to open our mouths very wide” (1903–04, 7. 68–69). In a footnote to a later edition of *Society and Solitude*, Edward Emerson reports a second-hand anecdote concerning the essay’s reception, in which “Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson relates that he heard Emerson speak thus in praise of Southern eloquence, to the content of students from that section, in the audience; a content that was lessened when he went on, ‘The negro too is eloquent’” (1903–04, 7. 368). By 1870, Emerson had apparently decided to omit the remark.

It would be tempting to suppose that Emerson’s decision to exclude the remark from his 1870 edition of *Society and Solitude*, and hence to exclude African Americans from the constellation of articulacy and ethnicity that essay charts, was more of a grudging acquiescence to the popular racism of his day than it was an indicator of Emerson’s felt ambivalence over the eloquence of the “negro.” Such a view is certainly implied in Edward Emerson’s notes to “Eloquence.” But Emerson’s troubled attitudes about race necessarily bar the way to such a conclusion. While Emerson was always a monogeneticist—while he never found that African Americans and Caucasian Americans were so profoundly different as to indicate ultimately disparate biological origins for each race—he long believed that the differences were significant enough to make genuine social and political equality impossible. Writing in his journal at the age of 19, attempting to argue the case in favor of slavery as a kind of thought-experiment (only months before, he had proclaimed in the same journal that “no ingenious sophistry can ever yet reconcile the unperverted mind to *slavery*”), he slipped into the required perspective rather too easily, relating that “I saw ten, twenty, a hundred large-lipped, lowbrowed black men in the streets who, except in the mere matter of language, did not exceed the sagacity of an elephant” (1960–82, 2. 55). In 1837, no longer writing within such a consciously constructed persona, he actually suggested that the middle passage was “only a little worse than the old sufferings. [Africans] exchange a cannibal war for a stinking hold” ( 5. 382). But Emerson progressed well beyond such views by the time he reached middle age. Two years after the Civil War, he wrote angrily in his Journal, “You complain that the negroes are a base class. Who makes & keeps the jew or the negro base, who but you, who exclude them from the rights which others enjoy?” (16. 55)

Emerson's liberal abolitionism, like the liberal abolitionism of many of his peers in Concord and Boston, often consisted of a paternalistic attitude toward African Americans, which in turn rested upon the assumption that Africans were less rational and more childlike than Europeans. And yet, when we consider the great premium Emerson places on autonomy, on self-reliance, and also how closely these values are tied to Emerson's sense of the self-reliant *voice*, his assumptions about the capacity of "negroes" to reach such ideals become more difficult to pin down. After hearing speeches by Toussaint L'Ouverture and Frederick Douglass in 1844, Emerson recorded his impression that

now it seems to me that the arrival of such men as Toussaint if he is pure blood, or of Douglas [sic] if he is pure blood, outweighs all the English & American humanity. . . . Here is Man, & if you have man, black or white is an insignificance. Why at night all men are black. The intellect, that is miraculous, who has it has the talisman, his skin and bones are transparent, he is a statue of the living God: him I must love & serve & perpetually seek & desire and dream on: and who has it is not superfluous. (Emerson 1960-82, 5.63)

For Emerson, the eloquence of Douglass and L'Ouverture is the eloquence of self-reliance itself, the sort of eloquence he believed would liberate all African Americans. Offering individual exemplars of Emerson's more general sense in "Eloquence" that the successful public speech was a fundamentally musical event, orators like Douglass and L'Ouverture signaled a new "occasion of . . . jubilee" in which "the black race can begin to compete with the white; that in the great anthem of the world which we call history . . . after playing a long time a very low and subdued accompaniment they perceive the time arrived when they can strike in with force & effect & take a master's part in the music" (1960-82, 5. 63).

It is Emerson's unpatronizing accolade for such speakers as Douglass and L'Ouverture, resonant with the eventually deleted assertion from "Eloquence" ("The negro too is eloquent"), that I want to emphasize here, but in doing so I do not mean to suggest that Emerson's attitudes toward race, or indeed on self-reliance, are uncomplicated at any level. Rather, it is Emerson's very inconsistency on such issues that makes him such a contested figure for all sorts of intellectual historians, including Ellison himself. *Invisible Man*, for instance, circulates the name of Emerson in ways that question which values the name signals and for whom these values resonate. At an early point in the narrative, Mr. Norton, a white college trustee whom the young protagonist chauffeurs for the better part of an afternoon, asks the boy, "You have studied Emerson, haven't you?" Embarrassed that he has not, the boy replies, "Not yet, sir. We haven't come to him yet."

“No?” [Norton] said with a note of surprise. “Well, never mind. I am a New Englander, like Emerson. You must learn about him, for he was important to your people. He had a hand in shaping your destiny. Yes, perhaps that is what I mean. I had a feeling that your people were somehow connected with my destiny. That what happened to you was connected with what would happen to me. . . .” (Ellison 1981, 41)

Later, when the protagonist promises to read Emerson, Norton describes his own sense of subjection to an abiding “destiny” or “fate,” which for him seems always connected in some way to Emerson’s philosophical legacy: “Very good. Self-reliance is a most worthy virtue. I shall look forward with the greatest of interest to learning your contribution to my fate” (Ellison 1981, 108). In the early chapters of the novel, however, it is Norton who shapes the fate of the protagonist. After taking Norton first to visit a local sharecropper who describes his rape of his daughter, and then to a local asylum (the “Golden Day” hospital for shell-shocked veterans, where one inmate criticizes Norton’s hypocritically condescending views toward the very “Negroes” he professes to uplift), the boy is expelled from college as punishment for his role in these escapades. Norton’s obliviousness to the ripple effects his words and deeds have upon the protagonist’s life has led some commentators to conclude that Ellison rejects the “Emersonian” outlook Norton claims to embrace. Kun Jong Lee, for example, points to several statements from Emerson’s journal—statements, like those I have already mentioned, that echo the ideologies of racial hierarchy endemic to Emerson’s era—in order to argue that Ellison creates Norton as an indictment of cryptically racist facets of Emersonian philosophy. Without accusing Emerson of bigotry, Alan Nadel argues that Norton represents a parody of Emersonian idealism, which remains blind and aloof wherever mechanisms of social coercion operate; Emerson, Nadel suggests, is for Ellison an “author of false hopes” whose blithe optimism serves to obscure “the complicated form [evil] takes in the real world” (1989, 118, 116).

In a recent answer to such charges, however, James Albrecht insists that Nadel’s reading places much too high a premium on Norton’s allegedly “Emersonian” evocations of self-sufficiency (as when he blithely and vaguely mentions that “Self-reliance is a most worthy virtue” for black individuals such as the protagonist). Nadel’s readiness to take Norton at his word insofar as the latter aligns himself with Emerson, as Albrecht points out, already obscures what should be the first question here: are Norton’s references to Emerson coherent in the first place? Whereas Norton repeatedly espouses his notion of an operative “fate” upon which his own legacy as a philanthropist depends (“I am dependent upon you to learn my fate,” he explains, since “Through you and your fellow students I become, let us say, three hundred

teachers, seven hundred trained mechanics, eight hundred skilled farmers, and so on" [Ellison 1981, 45]), Albrecht rightly points out that such notions concerning "fate" are antithetical to Emerson's essay of the same name, which "explicitly rejects fatalism in favor of activism" (1999, 49). Looking beyond the disjunctions Albrecht identifies, even Norton's stated appreciation for "Self-Reliance" should seem less discerning when we recall that essay's critique of the "foolish philanthropist," the "angry bigot who assumes this bountiful cause of Abolition . . ." (Emerson 1983, 262). Apropos of such philanthropists as Norton, who enjoin social causes in order to prove themselves virtuous, Emerson asks, "why should I not say to him, 'Go love thy infant; love thy wood-chopper; be good-natured and modest; have that grace; and never varnish your hard, uncharitable ambition with this incredible tenderness for black folk a thousand miles off. Thy love afar is spite at home'" (262). The "tenderness" of such individuals is, for Emerson, "incredible," literally lacking in credibility, a form of false compassion—a fact that should underscore that Emerson does not belittle social activism and charitable involvement as such. Rather, what is at issue in "Self-Reliance" is precisely the sort of "philanthropy" Norton embraces, a philanthropic project grounded in "penance," what Emerson refers to as that virtuous work "done as an apology or extenuation of . . . living in the world . . ." (262).

In at least this sense, Norton represents the sort of individual "Self-Reliance" deplures, not the sort of individual the essay values. Norton's desire to associate himself with an Emersonian tradition he barely understands thus marks off "Emerson" as a site of interpretive dissent for *Invisible Man*. This is to say that in depicting Norton as a self-professed "Emersonian," Ellison does not dismiss Emersonian philosophy as impertinent to the racial and social struggles *Invisible Man* depicts. Rather, he includes the name of Emerson within the horizon of these struggles, contesting the various renditions of "Emerson" that have sometimes eclipsed his abiding relevance to the problem of "the color line" and the forms of self-consciousness it engenders. Norton's misreadings of Emerson are precisely what Ellison wants to contest, but the protagonist's reply to Norton's early query as to whether he has studied Emerson—"Not yet, sir. We haven't come to him yet."—comments more widely upon Emerson's posthumous reception and philosophical legacy. In certain ways, Ellison's novel suggests that *we* have yet to come upon Emerson—that if, "on the lower frequencies," Ellison's narrator speaks for us, then his journey toward self-emergence and self-reliance coincides with the project of extracting a living dimension of Emersonian thought from an ossified and nominally "Emersonian" narrative. While *Invisible Man* may complicate and often challenge the idealism Emersonian philosophy represents, it does not simply discard the hopes this philosophy articulates. Rather, *Invisible*

*Man* capitalizes upon Emersonian motifs that are more submerged than those readers such as Norton typically use as shorthand for Emersonian thought *in toto*. In other words, Ellison reads Emerson in an Emersonian way.

So if there are in fact Emersonian figures to be found in *Invisible Man*, they appear in less grandiloquent guise than Norton, and certainly not as either of the “Mr. Emersons” who enter the narrative after the protagonist’s arrival in New York. It is telling that Ellison chooses here to divide his “Emerson” in two, presenting to us a young Emerson apparently wracked with Freudian angst, tyrannized by and alienated from Emerson, Sr., the absent father who never appears directly in the narrative but toward whom the novel’s protagonist has been misdirected. Young Mr. Emerson bars the protagonist’s way to Emerson, Sr., but Emerson, Sr., we discover, is himself part of the conspiracy to “keep this nigger boy running”: the letters of introduction with which the protagonist has been provided by his college headmaster (one of which he is now attempting to deliver to the elder Emerson) instruct their addressees to deny him assistance, since (as the letters say) he “shall never, under any circumstances, be enrolled as a student here again” (Ellison 1981, 190). Having set off in search of one Emerson, the protagonist finds another; attempting to deliver a message he has not read to Emerson, Sr., he instead receives that message from Emerson, Jr. (who reveals to the protagonist the contents of the letters he has been delivering and thus enables him to begin the process of making his own way in the world). But again, this is not to say that young Mr. Emerson lives up to his surname; for one thing, he offers the protagonist little more than an un-Emersonian, nihilistic resignation as he dismisses the very notion of the self as passé: “Identity! My God! Who has any identity anymore anyway?” (187) In *Invisible Man*, Emerson’s thought channels not through the characters who speak or bear Emerson’s name but rather through those who speak in Emersonian fashion.

Take, for example, the character Peter Wheatstraw, the riffing and gregarious blues man whom the protagonist meets earlier in the narrative, as the latter is on his way to keeping his appointment with Emerson. At this point in the narrative, Ellison’s protagonist has placed his confidence in the plan of action supplied to him by Bledsoe, a plan of action that is founded on his letters of introduction and that hence masks an elaborate deception. The blues man appears at this juncture as a walking personification of the protagonist’s (actual, though yet to be ascertained) situation: when the protagonist first sees Wheatstraw, the latter is pushing a cart filled with a stack of abandoned plans, blueprints that represent designs for nearly every conceivable building project—from cities to country clubs—but which never came to fruition. As Wheatstraw remarks, “I guess somebody done changed their plans” (Ellison 1981, 175).

Part of the comedy here hovers over the absurd mystery of *Wheatstraw's* plans—what, after all, does he plan on *doing* with the hundreds of rolls of paper, of which he explains he has “a coupla loads”? But though he cannot fully realize it, Wheatstraw’s remarks also offer a commentary on the protagonist’s de facto situation as someone whose long-nurtured plans are about to disintegrate. “Folks is always changing their plans,” Wheatstraw comments, to which the protagonist responds, “Yes, that’s right [. . .] but that’s a mistake. You have to stick to the plan.” To this, Wheatstraw appears “suddenly grave” before stating, “You kinda young, daddy-o” (Ellison 1981, 175). As someone who knows by first-hand experience that “this Harlem ain’t nothing but a bear’s den,” Wheatstraw also presumably understands, better than the young protagonist, how early plans have a way of falling through, a lesson the protagonist will learn only too soon once he discovers the damaging statements contained in his letters of introduction. Wheatstraw’s message of resilience is an Emersonian message, redressing the false confidence we tend to place in designs that may or may not turn out as we had initially hoped. Emerson’s answer to this misplacement of confidence is to insist that the self-reliant individual “has not one chance, but a hundred chances”; his response to the fragility of human “plans” is to ridicule the common wisdom according to which “If the finest young genius studies at one of our colleges and is not installed in an office within one year afterwards [. . .] he is right in being disheartened and in complaining the rest of his life” (1983, 275). Wheatstraw’s ironic distance toward the protagonist’s faith in “the plan,” however, does not issue directly from a self-consciously Emersonian philosophy of self-reliance, but rather from Wheatstraw’s status as a “blues man” whose primary mode of communication draws a source of strength from what W. E. B. Du Bois recognized as the “half-despised” African American tradition of musical word-play and improvisation. Wheatstraw embodies what Ellison described as the fundamental impulse proper to the blues, “an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness,” “not by the consolation of philosophy, but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near comic lyricism” (1964, 78). Explaining that “All it takes to get along in this man’s town is a little shit, grit, and mother-wit,” Wheatstraw performs these necessary qualities for survival—and simultaneously claims them as his own—through a spiel of spoken performance: “man, I was bawn with all three. In fact, I’maseventhsonofaseventhsonbawnwithacauloverbotheeyesandraisedonblackcatbones-highjohntheconqueorandgreasygreens—” (1981, 176)<sup>5</sup>

So what precisely is Wheatstraw’s place in this narrative? Though his appearance in *Invisible Man* is brief, Wheatstraw serves as one of several surrogate father figures for the narrator, who also receives paternal guidance of

varying worth from figures such as the grandfather, the vet at the Golden Day, the yam man in New York, and Brother Tarp—and who is also subject to the paternal tyranny of tricksters such as Bledsoe, Norton, and Brother Jack. But what distinguishes Wheatstraw from the array of possibilities these characters represent is that he models a loquaciousness—a lingua franca of shit, grit, and mother-wit—enacting his message of resilience at the register of spoken performance. His eloquence is both traditional *and* improvisational; though he addresses the narrator through a series of tropes and codes he assumes the boy will recognize (since both are, as he points out, “from down home”), he also deploys these codes in ways that enact the spoken equivalent of developing one’s own “plan” as one proceeds. In this sense, Wheatstraw appears as one of a string of spoken performers in *Invisible Man*, but one who stands out for his improvisational powers. Unlike, for instance, the Reverend Homer A. Barbee, whose earlier speech at the protagonist’s college is a tightly rehearsed repetition of other, similar speeches (as Barbee begins his speech, he remarks “my young friends, it is indeed a beautiful story. I’m sure you’ve heard it many times” [Ellison 1981, 119]), Wheatstraw’s eloquence is an off-the-cuff, organic eloquence, an eloquence that foregrounds the possibilities of improvisation as opposed to strict recitation.<sup>6</sup> To borrow a terminology once used by Charles Mingus, Wheatstraw appears as a “spontaneous composer” as opposed to speakers like Barbee, whose adherence to a pre-prepared script would make him a “pencil composer.” And so though Wheatstraw qualifies as an Emersonian speaker whose wordplay blends whim with self-reliance, and though he is also a “blues man” who sublimates his adversity into art, Wheatstraw’s improvisational abilities also connect him to aesthetic principles that formed the core of Ellison’s relationship with jazz.

## 3

For Ellison, improvisation enabled each jazz performer’s emergence as a distinctive figure within a larger compositional group. “Each true jazz moment,” he remarked in a 1958 essay on Charlie Christian, “springs from a contest in which each artist challenges all the rest; each solo flight, or improvisation, represents (like the successive canvases of a painter) a definition of his identity as individual, as members of the collectivity and as a link in the chain of tradition” (1995, 267). Ellison’s commentary on jazz also describes his own Emersonian relationship with Emerson, a relationship that connects Ellison to a certain tradition even as it distinguishes him from that tradition. Simultaneously including the artist within a “chain of tradition” and providing an outlet by means of which this artist may distinguish him- or herself as an “individual,” jazz concocts an equilibrium between the artist’s sense of indebtedness and belonging, on the one hand, and this same artist’s impulse

to distinguish his or her own voice within that of “the collectivity,” on the other. In this way, Ellison’s understanding of jazz resembles T. S. Eliot’s effort to mediate between individual genius and the efficacy of tradition in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” where Eliot describes literary tradition not as a monolith against which each artist must either turn his or her back or be subsumed, but rather as a form of aesthetic ground upon which the artist’s idiosyncratic talents take root. Analogously, Ellison’s understanding of improvisation requires that every jazz artist “learns tradition, group techniques and style” even as it affords this artist an opportunity for individuated “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,’ must be ‘reborn,’ must find, as it were, his soul,” Ellison explains. “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” (245).<sup>7</sup>

Ellison’s connections between improvisation and the attainment of an “original” voice, an attainment coinciding with an achievement of “self-determined identity” and thus facilitating a form of “rebirth,” suggest a certain correspondence with both Emerson’s musicological descriptions of eloquence and his habit of attaching self-reliance to a mode of spontaneous, “impertinent” speech. Emerson’s descriptions of self-reliant speech often emphasize an improvisational dimension, requiring us to “Speak today what you think now in hard words and to-morrow speak what to-morrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict everything you said to-day” (1983, 265). Emerson gives us this advice in view of his famous insistence that “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds”—that is, in light of his understanding that at times, the most powerful obstacle to self-reliance is indeed our tendency to imagine ourselves beholden to our past statements and formulations, to imagine that we are simply what we once were, and that only. Against the imagined rebuttal that without at least some degree of consistency in our speech we risk incoherence, Emerson reminds us that “The voyage of the best ship is a zigzag line of a hundred tacks” (266), or that though the surface of contradiction, revision, and experimentation making up the texture of self-reliant speech may appear as a broken and uneven landscape when viewed from up close, these same elements “are insignificant in the curve of the sphere” they ultimately shape (265).

So as Ellison assesses jazz improvisation as a technique for self-definition, Emerson values contradictory, revisionary, and above all spontaneous speech as the hallmark of self-reliance. This is not to lose sight of the obvious fact

that Emerson's own addresses were carefully rehearsed events, culled from journal entries and often reworked over years of delivery, just as it should not be to lose sight of the fact that improvisation is only possible for musicians (jazz or otherwise) who have spent years honing their craft. Indeed for neither Emerson nor Ellison does successfully improvised performance or self-reliant speech resemble or verge upon bedlam, since neither abandons tradition so much as it expands the boundaries of tradition proper to any given moment. One of Emerson's ways of saying this is to explain that he hopes his whim is somewhat more than whim; another is to urge the self-reliant speaker to "Speak your latent conviction, and it be the universal sense" (1983, 259). The alternative to such bravado is for Emerson the elocutionary equivalent of self-dismemberment: "We but half express ourselves, and are ashamed of that divine idea which each of us represents" (260). Lacking self-reliance, our speech lacks declarative force, becoming instead derivative, formulaic, utterly non-disruptive and cautious: "I hear a preacher announce for his text and topic the expediency of one of the institutions of the church," Emerson recalls. "Do I not know beforehand that not possibly can he say a new and spontaneous word?" (264). The preacher Emerson describes becomes little more than the mouthpiece of an institution, a kind of propaganda machine that only imitates the qualities of authentically eloquent speech; but self-reliant speakers, as Emerson put it as early as *Nature*, "pierce this rotten diction" by breaking with conventional modes and mores of expression (1903-04, 1. 30).<sup>8</sup>

Emerson's image of the cautious, circumscribed preacher might call to mind Ellison's protagonist's eventual position as a speaker for the Brotherhood, the Marxisant organization on whose behalf the protagonist speaks fervently—and finally too eloquently—but whose leader, Brother Jack, eventually explains, "You were not hired to think" (1981, 469). But it should also remind us of what is probably the most famous episode from *Invisible Man*, where as a recent high-school graduate, Ellison's protagonist is invited to re-read his valedictory address before the white power-brokers of his small southern town. Shortly after arriving to deliver his speech, the narrator is forced to participate in a "Battle Royal," for which he is blindfolded with a handkerchief and forced to box a group of similarly-blinded black adolescents. After the boxing match, the protagonist is allowed to give his speech (remarkably, he remains eager to deliver it even throughout his humiliating ordeal), in fact a well-known passage from Booker T. Washington's Atlanta Day Exposition Address, (though Ellison seems to imply that in the diagetic reality of his novel, the boy remains the speech's true author). The satire here is bifocal. First and perhaps foremost, the outrageous conditions of the boy's speech (for which he remains clad in his boxing shorts, swallowing

“blood, saliva and all” in order to pronounce every word faithfully for a group of white racists who barely listen) point up the ludicrousness of the Atlanta Day Exposition Address itself, in which Washington advanced his own accommodationist program of African American economic advancement at the expense of social equality. But in addition to initiating *Invisible Man*'s sustained critique of Washington, the sequence initiates a series of questions that will continue to pervade *Invisible Man*, questions concerning the qualities and conditions of moving, eloquent oration. This is to say that the first public speech of *Invisible Man* is not only undercut by the inappropriateness of its specific message to the specific setting of its delivery (southern blacks, the young man explains, should “cast down their buckets” in “cultivating friendly relations with the southern white man who is his neighbor,” presumably southern white men like those who have subjected the protagonist to an elaborate humiliation). Washington, in other words, is not Ellison's primary target here, and to focus on the fact that the speech comes from Washington is to miss Ellison's point about the (overly) poised way in which the protagonist pitches Washington's (obtuse) social program. Reading his pre-prepared text verbatim, apparently attempting to duplicate a prior performance from his high-school graduation, the narrator recalls that he “spoke automatically and with such fervor that I did not realize that the men were still talking and laughing until my dry mouth, filling up with blood from the cut, almost strangled me. . . . The speech seemed a hundred times as long as before, but I could not leave out a single word. All had to be said, each memorized nuance considered, rendered” (30).

The speech is not simply bad because the scene of its delivery lays bare the naïve philosophy it espouse, and it's not simply bad because history had already shown Ellison upon which side of the Du Bois/Washington divide to situate himself. More primarily for Ellison, it is bad because of its unmoved and unmovable recital, because even in spite of the appearance of “fervor” the protagonist attempts to project through his inclusion of “memorized nuance[s],” such rhetorical flash only constitutes the simulation of an inspired voice. Its inept delivery is in keeping with the speech's irrelevant logic, the let's-just-all-get-along wisdom the speech offers an imagined audience of black southerners but which is now rehearsed for a set of white men who recoil from the phrase “social equality.” Even as the protagonist departs from his script in uttering these disruptive words, he does not improvise so much as he is improvised upon: sensing the dangerous ground he has opened up, he quickly substitutes the words “social responsibility” and hence returns to the prudent conventions of Washingtonian segregation. And so as an address that ventriloquizes the actual speech of Washington and hence strives to mimic the tradition of oratory authorized by such figures as he—the speech

is constructed of what Emerson describes as the parlance of the derivative. “We are like children,” he explains, “who repeat by rote the sentences of the grandames and tutors, and, as they grow older, of the men of talents and character they chance to see—painfully recollecting the exact words they spoke” (1983, 270–71).

As an aspiring public speaker, the young protagonist of *Invisible Man* is a mnemonic impersonator of other voices, and as he later recollects the numerous speeches he gave prior to his expulsion from college, the narrator recognizes and theorizes his failures in terms of musical dissonance and cacophony. In the campus chapel, he recalls, “I too had stridden and debated, a student leader directing my voice at the highest beams and farthest rafters,” but though these speeches and debates once provided the boy with self-satisfaction, in retrospect the narrator finds them “a play upon the resonances of buildings, an assault upon the temples of ears” (Ellison 1981, 112–13).

*listen to me, the bungling bugler of words, imitating the trumpet and the trombone's timbre, playing thematic variations like a baritone horn. Hey! old connoisseur of voice sounds, of voices without messages, of newsless winds, listen to the vowel sounds and the crackling dentals, to the low harsh gutturals of empty anguish, now riding the curve of preacher's rhythm I had heard long ago in a Baptist church, stripped now of its imagery. . . . Ha! as upon a xylophone; words marching like a student band, up the campus and down again, blaring triumphant sounds empty of triumphs. . . . the sound of words that were no words, counterfeit notes singing achievements yet unachieved, riding upon the wings of my voice out to you. . . .* (Ellison 1981, 113)

The narrator's memory of his own youthful and abortive eloquence extends Emerson's equation of musicality and effective oratory. Here, the narrator recalls that his prior mode of address was a mere “imitation” of eloquence that could never have engaged its audience because it directed itself away from them, “at the highest beams and farthest rafters.” The result is not properly speech, for Ellison's narrator, but rather the simulation of speech, “the sound of words that were no words,” mere “counterfeit notes” as opposed to genuinely musical intonations. Ellison's point here, as with his fashioning of the Battle Royal Speech, is not at all akin to a vapid bias one might entertain against “tradition” in favor of “innovation”—his aim is not to denigrate “the curve of the preacher's rhythm” or to hold it liable for its hold over the young speaker who imitates it. Rather, Ellison's stance on eloquence and form resembles the stance of Henri Bergson regarding his concepts of *élan vital* and *duree reel*: just as the very sequentiality and orderedness entailed in our perception of events tend to fragment otherwise irreducible living systems, rendering the living curl a mere succession of straight lines, so to speak, so does Ellison's young speaker witness the petrification of his own impulse to speak (his own *élan vital*, in a way) in the forms he finds available

to him.<sup>9</sup> Those forms are essentially monological forms, and they result in the same torpor that afflicts Homer Barbee and Emerson's preacher, speakers who cannot possibly say a new or spontaneous word. In Ellison as in Emerson, the possibility of eloquence is bound to the possibility of breaking with such forms, entering into something akin to a collaboration with one's audience, and later in *Invisible Man*, Ellison's commitment to such a possibility is brought closer to the fore.

Midway through the novel, Ellison's protagonist finds himself adrift in New York City, having come to the painful realization that his earlier plans—among which was his hope of returning to college in order to finish his degree and hopefully attain a position—have run aground. “And the more resentful I became,” he explains, “the more my urge to make speeches returned” (1981, 259). Within a few pages, the protagonist in fact makes a speech, and this speech dramatizes the sort of symbiotic, compositional qualities Emerson associates with eloquence as such. Wandering the streets of Harlem, the protagonist comes across a mid-winter eviction of an elderly couple, and joins a crowd of onlookers who soon begin an open debate over whether or not to charge the armed marshals enforcing this eviction. The narrator's response to this possibility is ambivalent, swinging between his identification with the growing mob and his desire to avert a bloody disaster: “I knew they were about to attack the man and I was both afraid and angry, repelled and fascinated. I both wanted it and feared the consequences, was outraged and angered at what I saw and yet surged with fear; not for the man or of the consequences of an attack, but of what the sight of violence might release in me. And beneath it all there boiled up all the shock-absorbing phrases that I had learned all my life” (275). As if without his conscious volition, the protagonist's sense of moral outrage begins to transform itself into words and phrases, the sum of which now override his anxiety:

“No, no,” I heard myself yelling. “Black men! Brothers! Black Brothers! That's not the way. We're law-abiding. We're a law-abiding people and a slow-to-anger-people.”

[. . .] They stopped, listening. Even the white man was startled.

“Yeah, but we mad now,” a voice called out.

“Yes, you're right,” I called back. “We're angry, but let us be wise. Let us, I mean let us not. . . . Let us learn from that great leader whose wise action was reported in the newspaper the other day. . . .”

“What mahn? Who?” a West Indian voice shouted.

[. . .] This was it, I thought, they're listening, eager to listen. Nobody laughed. If they laugh, I'll die! I tensed my diaphragm.

“That wise man,” I said, “you read about him, who when the 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 ...”

“Yeah,” a voice rang out, “yeah, so they could lynch his ass.”

Oh, God, this wasn't it at all. Poor technique and not at all what I intended. (Ellison 1981, 275-76)

Unlike prior speeches he has given, this speech is directed at an audience that will not constrain itself to listen quietly, that offers its own retort when provoked. Over the course of his potentially disastrous intervention, the protagonist finds himself forced to adjust his pronunciations to the temperament of the crowd; as his listeners fire back their own answers and protests in response to his various statements, they actively interfere with the trajectory of the protagonist's address, but in such a way as to tease a sort of repressed eloquence from him. Over the course of this sequence, the protagonist's audience functions as the “ornery” American audience Ellison identifies as the writer's muse; it is also, for that matter, the critical, evaluative audience Emerson describes in the essay on eloquence: “The audience is a constant meter of the orator. . . . If anything comic or coarse is spoken, you shall see the emergence of the boys and the rowdies, so loud and vivacious that you might think the house was filled with them. . . . There is also something excellent in every audience,—the capacity for virtue. They are ready to be beatified. They know so much more than the orator,—and are so just!” (1903-04, 7: 66). Re-gathering his powers, Ellison's protagonist continues:

“But wasn't it the human thing to do? After all, he had to protect himself because—”

“He was a handkerchief-headed rat!” a woman screamed, her voice boiling with contempt.

“Yes, you're right. He was wise and cowardly, but what about us? What are we to do?” I yelled, suddenly thrilled by the response. “Look at him,” I cried.

\*\*\*

“And look at their possessions all strewn there on the sidewalk. Just look at their possessions in the snow. How old are you sir?”

“I'm eighty-seven,” the old man said, his voice low and bewildered.

[. . .] “Did you hear him? He's eighty-seven. Eighty-seven and look at all he's accumulated in eighty-seven years, strewn in the snow like chicken guts, and we're a law-abiding, slow-to-anger bunch of folks turning the other cheek every day of the week. What are we going to do? What would you, what would I, what would he have done? *What is to be done?* I propose

we do the law-abiding thing. Just look at this junk! Should two old folks live in such junk, cooped up in a filthy room? It's a great danger, a fire hazard! Yes, yes, yes! Look at that old woman, somebody's mother, somebody's grandmother, maybe. We call them 'Big Mama' and they spoil us and—you know, *you* remember. . . ." (Ellison 1981, 276-77)

More than any other spoken performance in *Invisible Man* (I would suggest, even more so than the narrator's eventual eulogy for Todd Clifton), this speech is energized by its tempo and rhythm, its dramatic repetition (not only "Yes, yes, yes!" but also the building momentum of the ironic phrase "law-abiding") and the Ciceronean wink and nudge of ending rhymes like "turning the cheek every day of the week." So begins the protagonist's career as a public speaker, for it is this event that will draw the attention of the Brotherhood, the shadowy political organization that hires the protagonist as a political agitator and mouthpiece. The speech is finally unsuccessful as an effort to quell a burgeoning riot (at a later juncture in his speech, the protagonist is rushed by a group of men who decide to follow through on their original plans), but as an act of Emersonian auto-genesis, it is utterly successful, since over the course of this speech, the protagonist re-invents himself as a public orator. Ellison figures this reinvention as a moment of rebirth; as the protagonist flees the scene of his brief but transformational intervention, he passes a car from which he sees "a man leap out with a physician's bag."

"Hurry, Doctor," a man called from the stoop, "she's already in labor!"

"Good," the doctor called. "That's what we've been waiting for, isn't it?"

"Yeah, but it didn't start when we expected it." (Ellison 1981, 287)

"What a time to be born," the protagonist thinks as he passes by, and it should be clear here that the birth with which Ellison is concerned is the protagonist's new birth as a public intellectual, a speaker whose voice is now—as Emerson would say—"agitated to agitate."<sup>10</sup> In this way, the re-birth of Ellison's narrator resembles the sort of speakerly self-creation advocated in "Self-Reliance," where so often, Emerson describes the affirmation of the "I" as a simultaneously elocutionary and melodic act. "Speak your latent conviction," Emerson insists, "and it shall become universal sense; for the inmost in due time becomes the outmost, and our first thought is rendered back to us by the trumpets of the last judgment" (1983, 259). In speaking before the crowd before his phrases have fully taken shape, the protagonist initiates the process of elocutionary self-invention the was always Emerson's truest subject matter; though this process will ultimately end where the novel begins, in the catastrophic revelation that "I am an invisible man," the laying-bare of selfhood Ellison describes variously as a form of "invisibility," of "hibernation," or of "going underground" is itself presented as preliminary to some

as-yet unrealized—but newly attainable—moment of becoming. The hibernation of Ellison's protagonist is of a piece with that process Emerson describes in *Nature*, where transcendentalist selfhood comes only at the price of selfhood itself: "Standing on the bare ground—my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space — all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God" (1903-04, 1. 10).

For his part, Ellison's protagonist witnesses something like the vanishing of what Emerson calls "mean egotism" in an abandoned basement deep under New York, where he can finally say only one thing with confidence: "I am an invisible man." Jazz itself, though it finally conceives musical patterns that would have been impossible otherwise, only discerns these patterns by delving deep into chaos and contingency, which is why Ellison recognized jazz aesthetics as an aesthetics of self-erasure, commenting that "the jazzman must lose his identity in order to find it" (1995, 267). For both Emerson and Ellison, the process of spoken self-invention entails a moment of self-annihilation, which is why both writers are drawn to metaphors of invisibility in the first place. Which is to say that Emerson's transparent eye is to "the current of the Universal being" what Ellison's transparent I is to the mellow, melodious voice that speaks for me and for you.

#### Notes

Earlier versions of this essay received helpful commentary from Jeffrey Insko of Oakland University as well as Julie Campbell, Daiva Markelis, Francine McGregor, Dana Ringuette, Donnelle Ruwe, Martin Scott, and Angela Vietto of Eastern Illinois University. I am also indebted to an anonymous reviewer for *College Literature*.

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Robert O'Meally, who traces Ellison's narratological and thematic incorporation of jazz throughout *Invisible Man*. C. W. E. Bigsby suggests that Ellison's improvisational narrative form amounts to an improvisation of America itself, what Ellison viewed as a political and cultural gesture akin to that of the founders, who "were improvising themselves into a nation, scraping together a conscious culture out of the various dialects, idioms, lingos, and mythologies of America's diverse peoples and regions" (qtd. in Bigsby 1987, 177). Houston Baker traces the blues aesthetics of *Invisible Man* through the "Trueblood episode," which spins its blues narrative out of the mythical phallic power of black males while also recognizing the cultural capital of its mystique. And describing it as "the true musical idiom of modernism," Berndt Ostendorf views jazz as both synthesizing agent and aesthetic "world" in which Ellison's anthropological, folkloric mindset comes to terms with his Modernist sensibility (1986, 147).

<sup>2</sup> The organic mode of composition proper to the Emersonian essay has led some commentators to note that in certain ways, Emerson's prose is less formally constrained (for some, more "musical") than his poetry. Mutlu Konuk Blasing, for

example, argues that “Emerson’s concept of poetry as the language of law—or even language *as* law—makes clear that his idea of poetry is much more restrictive than what critics have termed the musical or inspired speech of his essays” (1985, 11). Less inclined to inscribe broad aesthetic distinctions between the Emersonian essay and the Emersonian poem, but equally attentive to the musical elements of Emerson’s eloquence, Brian Harding suggests that Emerson’s writing “attempted to express an idea of poetry that combined (through metaphor) the apparently irreconcilable qualities of architecture and music” (1985, 101).

<sup>3</sup> Much recent scholarship on Emerson takes up some version of this thesis: that, for instance, the resonance and meaning of Emersonian individualism has always been contested in American culture. For examples that produce very different accounts of Emerson’s political legacies in America (swinging between “corporatist” versions of Emerson, which see him as fundamental to a tradition of middle-class submission, and “democratic individualist” renditions which highlight Emerson’s ethics of autonomy, see Kateb (1992), Newfield (1996), or Mitchell (1997).

<sup>4</sup> Thanks to Martin Scott of Eastern Illinois University for alerting me to this connection.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Marvin opens up an extended investigation here concerning Wheatstraw’s self-description as “the devil’s son-in-law,” as well as the supernatural motifs at play in the rapid-fire, extended epithet quoted above. The blues, as Marvin reminds us, always carries with it connotations of the demonic, so that African Americans who deploy blues themes on their own behalf also identify themselves, at least to some extent, as what Marvin calls “children of Legba,” or as magicians of vaguely Satanic forces (1996, 591–95).

<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Robert List sees Wheatstraw as a “bricoleur” who “saves and juxtaposes heterogenous materials” in the aesthetic tradition of Joyce or Ellison himself, “an embodiment of buoyant self-determination and the rebelliousness of High John the Conquerer . . . [who] echoes the past and eyes the future” (1982, 200–201).

<sup>7</sup> The history of jazz criticism in the U.S. has often been shaped by listeners who revere jazz for having “transcended” the earliest conditions of its production, for having moved past its “merely” folk origins in order to “elevate” itself as a more “universal” art form. One example of this perspective can be found in Gunther Schuller’s *Musings*, which consistently measures the achievement of jazz in terms of its transformations during the 1930s and 40s, before which jazz was “sometimes hardly more than sociological manifestations of a particular American milieu . . . but in the process of maturing has gradually acquired certain intellectual properties” (1986, 94). An alternative account may be found in Albert Murray, whose influential *Stomping the Blues* focuses upon the folk tradition behind jazz as the determining force *within* jazz—for Murray, jazz “is the product of the most complicated culture, and therefore the most complicated sensibility, in the modern world” (1970, 166); hence, the “particular American milieu” Schuller imagines jazz to have “transcended” is for Murray the very source of jazz’s aesthetic power. For more on the history of jazz criticism in the United States, especially concerning the competing ideologies within this critical tradition, see John Gennari’s “Jazz Criticism: Its Development and Ideologies.”

It is worth noting in this context that Ellison himself embraced the national culture other jazz artists and critics saw as co-opting and reductive. Against Amiri Baraka, for instance, who wrote that jazz and the blues were essentially revolutionary aesthetic forms that had been commodified and commandeered by whites (see, for instance, Baraka 1963) Ellison said simply that “The tremendous burden of sociology which [Baraka, then LeRoi Jones] would place upon this music is enough to give even the blues the blues” (1964, 249-50).

<sup>8</sup> As Sheldon Liebman indicates, Emerson’s later pronunciations concerning eloquence and speech grew out of his shifting readings in rhetoric during the late 1820s. During his years at Harvard, Emerson followed closely the advice of Hugh Blair, the eighteenth-century rhetorician whose advocacy of a measured and rational style would cause the early Emerson to exercise caution with his use of metaphor, to model his prose self-consciously upon that of figures such as Samuel Johnson, and to adopt an ornamental Latinate vocabulary. By the late 1820s, however, Emerson had begun to value spontaneity over convention, to believe that “an alehouse is a better school for eloquence than a college” (qtd. in Liebman 1969, 193). While Emerson still sought out models of eloquence in other writers, he was now drawn to those whose writing, like Carlyle and Montaigne, “draws strength and motherwit out of a poetic use of the spoken vocabulary,” whose writing was “the language of conversation transferred to a book” (195). For an early and still intriguing assessment of Emerson’s successes and failures as public orator, see Scudder (1935).

<sup>9</sup> Here is how Bergson puts it:

A very small element of a curve is very near being a straight line. And the smaller it is, the nearer. In the limit, it may be termed a part of the curve or a part of the straight line, as you please, for in each of its points a curve coincides with its tangent. So likewise “vitality” is tangent, at any and every point, to physical and chemical forces; but such points are, as a fact, only views taken by a mind which imagines stops at various moments of the movement that generates the curve. In reality, life is no more made of physico-chemical elements than a curve is composed of straight lines. (Bergson 1911, 31)

<sup>10</sup> In this way of course the scene fits with the larger motif of death and regeneration treated since the inception of Ellison criticism, beginning with Jonathan Baumbach’s 1963 essay.

#### Works Cited

- Albrecht, James M. 1999. “Saying Yes and Saying No: Individualist Ethics in Ellison, Burke, and Emerson.” *PMLA* 114: 1 (January): 46-63.
- Baker, Houston A. 1984. *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*. Chicago: University of Chicago.
- Baraka, Amiri. 1963. *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*. New York: Morrow.
- Baumbach, Jonathan. 1963. “Nightmare of a Native Son: Ellison’s *Invisible Man*.” *Critique* 6: 1 (Spring): 48-65.
- Bergson, Henri. 1911. *Creative Evolution*. Trans. Arthur Mitchell. New York: Henry Holt.

- Bigsby, C. W. E. 1987. "Improvising America: Ralph Ellison and the Paradox of Form." In *Speaking For You: The Vision of Ralph Ellison*, ed. Kimberly W. Benston. Washington D. C.: Howard University Press.
- Blasing, Mutlu Konuk. 1985. "Essaying the Poet: Emerson's Poetic Theory and Practice." *Modern Language Studies* 15: 2 (Spring): 9-23.
- Ellison, Ralph. 1964. *Shadow and Act*. New York: Random House.
- . 1981. *Invisible Man*. 1952. Reprint. New York: Random House.
- . 1995. *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*. Ed. John F. Callahan. New York: Modern Library.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. 1903-04. *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Ed. Edward Waldo Emerson. 12 vols. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin.
- . 1960-82. *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Ed. William H. Gilman et al. 16 vols. Cambridge: Belknap.
- . 1983. *Emerson: Essays and Lectures*. Ed. Joel Porte. New York: Library of America.
- . 1990. *Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Ed. Richard Poirier. Oxford and New York: Oxford UP.
- Gennari, John. 1991. "Jazz Criticism: Its Development and Ideologies." *Black American Literature Forum* 25: 3 (Autumn): 449-523.
- Harding, Brian, 1985. "Frolic's Architecture: Music and Metamorphosis in Emerson's Poetry." *Nineteenth-Century American Poetry*: 100-17.
- Kateb, George, 1992. *The Inner Ocean: Individualism and Democratic Culture*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Lee, Kun Jong, 1992. "Ellison's Invisible Man: Emersonianism Revised." *PMLA* 107: 2 (March): 331-44.
- Liebman, Sheldon. 1969. "The Development of Emerson's Theory of Rhetoric, 1821-1836." *American Literature* 41: 2 (May): 178-206
- List, Robert. 1982. *Dedalus in Harlem: The Joyce-Ellison Connection*. Washington: University Press of America.
- Marvin, Thomas. "Children of Legba: Musicians at the Crossroads in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*." *American Literature* 68:3: 587-608.
- Mitchell, Charles E., 1997. *Individualism and its Discontents: Appropriations of Emerson, 1880-1950*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts.
- Murray, Albert. 1970. *The Omni-Americans: Black Experience and American Culture*. New York: Vintage.
- . 1982. *Stomping the Blues*. 1976. Reprint. New York: Vintage.
- Nadel, Alan, 1989. *Invisible Criticism: Ralph Ellison and the American Canon*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.
- Newfield, Christopher, 1996. *The Emerson Effect: Individualism and Submission in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- O'Meally, Robert G. 1980. *The Craft of Ralph Ellison*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Ostendorf, Berndt. 1986. "Anthropology, Modernism, and Jazz." In *Ralph Ellison*, ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House.
- Schuller, Gunther. 1986. *Musings*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Scudder, Townsend III. 1935. "Emerson's British Lecture Tour, 1847-1848, Part II: Emerson as a Lecturer in Britain and the reception of the Lectures." *American Literature* 7: 2 (May): 166-80.