

THE SIGNIFYING ELLISON (1)

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I. The Impact of *Invisible Man*

When Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* came out in 1952, it was immediately recognized as the greatest novel ever written by an African American author. People were especially impressed by the expression of the protagonist's self as being invisible, which somehow reminds us of W. E. B. Du Bois's expression of the self of a Negro in *The Souls of Black Folk*, which is divided because of double consciousness he is forced to have in American society. Also people were very surprised at Ellison's sophisticated treatment of African American history and popular culture. People had never heard before, for instance, the voice of the blues resounding in a novel, producing infinite meanings and contexts, and it was only made possible through Ellison's masterful writing. Compared with this, Richard Wright's novels of protest seem even childish, no matter how serious their themes are, and how shocking their expressions.

Even today, more than sixty years after its publication, many people still consider *Invisible Man* to be the very best African American novel, simply because the author is trying to solve many difficult problems in it, which African Americans are confronted with in American society. Interestingly enough, the author means to do so not only for African Americans but also for white Americans, because in his opinion they are their problems as well. Moreover, since many of the problems he is grappling with in this novel and in his essays are the very problems of this modern age, Ellison's insight into American culture and society can be a great help in understanding this chaotic modern age and solving many difficult problems we find there.

It is really surprising that *Invisible Man* contains a number of

cultural and historical issues connected with African American people's life. It is no exaggeration to say that to read this novel is to go through a very interesting history of African American life and culture. For instance, as Eric J. Sundquist suggests in *Cultural Contexts for Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man*, this novel indeed seems to predict the civil rights movement, which begins with the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, just two years after its publication, by showing that the protagonist is presented a brief case as a prize for his excellent graduation speech by the Board of Education. (Sundquist 72)

Also, through his tragicomic experience at a college in the South and his going to New York to look for a job, Ellison is dealing with the cruel ideology of Southern conservative black leaders, represented by Booker T. Washington, and the social and cultural significance of the great migration to the North of black people. As Langston Hughes points out in "Cowards from the Colleges," this problem of the suppressive and reactionary nature of educational institutions for black people in the South seems quite serious, because it looks as if black teachers were asking their students to give up pride in themselves (Sundquist 56-65). It is only natural that authors like Jean Toomer and Nella Larsen take up this problem and severely criticize or caricature suppressive teachers in the South in their works. As for the theme of the great migration, this novel is unique in showing that through the great migration black culture was spread to Northern cities and urbanized, and entered the mainstream of American popular culture. Most novels and stories written by African American authors in the 20th century contain what Farah Griffin calls migration narratives in them, but there is something so appealing about Ellison's novel in stressing its cultural influence on American society. We realize by reading it how much the movement has blackened American society and culture.

Furthermore, through the descriptions of Ras the Destroyer and Brotherhood, Ellison is considering politics for black people in the United States. Black nationalism, which was started by Marcus Garvey in the late 1910s, has always attracted so many African Americans by stimulating their racial pride. And the issue of Socialism during the Depression was deeply connected with some African American authors including Ellison.

Especially, power inherent in Socialism and its denial of an individual, the theme which Ellison tries to examine in the Brotherhood episode in this novel, was exactly the issue which was attracting international concern because of Stalin's dictatorship during the war.

When we look back on American literature or American and European thoughts of the 20th Century, the First World War seems to be a very symbolic event, which tells us the beginning of the modern age. In *This Side of Paradise*, which was written right after the war and instantly became a best seller because of its romantic sense of loss, F. Scott Fitzgerald defines the new generation like this:

Here was a new generation, shouting the old cries, learning the old creeds,.... a new generation dedicated more than the last to the fear of poverty and the worship of success; grown up to find all Gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in man shaken.... (282)

This was the image of the modern age for Fitzgerald. Destructive power of war was overwhelming, and people were not able to believe in God any more. The Roaring Twenties was a decade of prosperity and materialism, in which people were enjoying an unprecedented economic boom and the liberation of moral, but nothing seemed certain now. Living in a world like this, young American authors such as Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and Faulkner began to produce various fresh and modernistic works one after another. They were not able to establish a solidly-structured world in their works any more as authors of the pre-war period did. The world was often described in fragments, and the flow of time was rapidly interrupted. They adopted "stream of consciousness" or "interior monologue," and Hemingway, say, tried to simplify his writing to the utmost limit.

In 1935, when Ralph Ellison changed his major from music to literature at Tuskegee Institute, Alabama, he discovered T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, a monumental work of modernism. He was so fascinated by it that he began to write poetry and study major modernists intensively. He says that Eliot's work makes him feel the rhythm of jazz more than African American authors' works do. This remark seems important for

two reasons. Firstly, Ellison showed interest in a work of modernism, and wanted to write modernistic works for himself, because he thought he needed techniques of modernism in order to express this chaotic modern world. And secondly, he began to think of using the esthetics and conception of jazz in creating literary works.

Jazz is a kind of music, which was born together with the advent of modern art around the beginning of the twentieth century, and it has many elements closely related to modernism in it. What is really unique about Ellison is that he tried to unite jazz and modernism, and write a novel based on them. Before Ellison, there had been African American writers and poets who introduced the elements of Negro spirituals, the blues, and jazz into their works, but none of them had done what Ellison aimed to do in *Invisible Man*, that is, to apply the modernistic elements of black music to a literary work. And Ellison was able to do this just because he was well versed in both black music and European classical music.

The 1930s and the 1940s were both turbulent decades, when Ellison was preparing himself for a literary career. In the 1930s the United States was in the midst of the depression, and coming to New York in 1936, Ellison got acquainted with Alain Locke, Langston Hughes, and Richard Wright, and did various jobs related with writing, staying rather close to the leftist groups. The threat of war became increasingly strong, and finally in 1945 people came to observe the worst outcome of modern technology of man. They felt as if seeing the Destruction Instinct of man, which Freud proposed, being realized. It was in a situation like this that Ellison began to write his masterpiece.

II. The Spirit of Place: Lawrence, Ellison, and Rushing

D. H. Lawrence's *Studies in Classic American Literature* shows very deep insight into American literature and society. Contrary to the generally accepted idea that the United States is a country of freedom, he says that Americans are the least free people in the world. In his opinion, man is free when he obeys "some inward voice of religious belief," (Lawrence 12) and not when he is getting away. When the Pilgrim

Fathers came to the new world to build a colony, they were getting away from “the old master Europe,” (11) and therefore they were not free at all. Lawrence calls America “a vast republic of escaped slaves,” (11) comparing it to “the republics of Liberia or Haiti.” (11) When we consider some American authors’ lament about their cultural sterility, Lawrence’s argument sounds fairly reasonable. However, he is not quite pessimistic about America’s future concerning its freedom. In order to be free, he argues, man needs to find “the deepest self,” (13) and to do this, “it takes some diving.” (13) Lawrence explains his point like this:

Liberty in America has meant so far the breaking away from *all* dominion. The true liberty will only begin when Americans discover IT, and proceed possibly to fulfil IT. IT being the deepest *whole* self of man, the self in its wholeness, not idealistic halfness. (13)

He maintains that Americans have found only “half-truth” (13) so far, and that they need some time to find their “*whole* self.” (13) He even predicts that “the great day [will begin]” when “Americans have at last discovered America and their own wholeness.” (13)

Also in this essay Lawrence criticizes democracy, which is a peculiarly American idea. In his opinion, democracy is a system for those who have never tried to find their deepest self and their wholeness. He explains the negative aspect of American democracy like this: “Democracy in America is just the tool with which the old master of Europe, the European spirit, is undermined.” (14) When it becomes really free from the European spirit, he goes on to say, “American democracy will evaporate” and “America will begin.” (14) Lawrence was unique among European thinkers in pointing out the limitations of democracy. In this essay, too, his criticism of democracy is very severe and to the point. What is important is that Lawrence is quite aware of the crisis of the modern age and that he is trying to find ways of maintaining humanity in this chaotic age. We need to consider his criticism of democracy against this background, and here we seem to find some closeness between D. H. Lawrence and Ralph Ellison.

The first chapter of *Studies in Classic American Literature* is entitled "The Spirit of Place." Lawrence points out that "[e]very continent has its own great spirit of place." (12) Man comes and tills the field and lies beneath, and after many a summer dies the swan.¹ Then the place has come to have "its own great spirit of place," and people begin to think of the place as "home" or "the homeland." To obey "the deepest *whole* self of man" is the same as obeying "the spirit of place." Lawrence seems to think that it takes Americans some more time to find their own "spirit of place" and feel at home in their own country.

Ellison's "Remembering Jimmy" sounds like an answer to Lawrence's criticism of American literature and its lack of "the spirit of place." This "Jimmy" is Jimmy Rushing, who was a very famous jazz and blues singer from Oklahoma City, and a great hero at the Oklahoma City jazz scene, when Ellison spent the first twenty years of his life there. Rushing first played the piano and later sang for the Blue Devils, the celebrated jazz band based in Oklahoma City, in the late 1920s. Then he moved to Kansas City and joined the Benny Moten's Kansas City Orchestra, and in 1935 he became a regular singer for the Count Basie Orchestra. After Basie's big band moved to New York, his powerful voice indeed rang throughout the world, impressing people with the charm of the blues. It may be hardly possible to prove that Ellison meant to write this essay in order to object to Lawrence's criticism; however, there are a couple of hints which seem to imply that he was well aware of Lawrence's essay in writing this recollection of his days in Oklahoma City. First, he refers to "the festive spirit of the place," (273) which Jimmy's powerful and lyrical voice evoked at a jazz dance. Secondly, he stresses "some semblance of wholeness" (275) that jazz and the blues helped to give their lives, just as Lawrence stressed the importance of "wholeness" as an element of life in "The Spirit of Place." In any event, there is no question that Ellison is trying to describe Oklahoma City as an ideal place or a kind of the Garden of Eden for young black people living there.

"Remembering Jimmy" begins with a sentence like this: "In the old days the voice was high and clear and poignantly lyrical." (Callahan 273) Indeed Jimmy's voice, which was "[s]teel bright in its upper range and, at its best, silky smooth," (273) sounded like the spirit of the place and the

time in Ellison's early days in Oklahoma City. With his voice "soaring high above the trumpets and trombones" (273) and "skimming the froth of reeds and rhythm," (273) and "evok[ing] the festive spirit of the place," (273) Jimmy was "the natural herald of its blues-romance," (273) and "expressed a value, an attitude about the world." (273) Even though black people were forced to live in "what seemed to be the least desirable side of the city," (273) they were still able to find an opportunity and "a sense of possibility" in the Negro community. Ellison goes on to say like this: "it was this rock-bottom sense of reality, coupled with our sense of the possibility of rising above it, which sounded in Rushing's voice." (274)

Moreover, Ellison says that Jimmy's voice, which carried so far, even for several blocks, seemed to "[affirm], as it were, some ideal native to the time and to the land." (274) Ellison calls "jazz and the public jazz dance" (275) "a third institution" (275) for education in their lives, next to the church and the school, where young Negroes were able to learn about life in its wholeness. He also refers to "that feeling of communion" (275) and says that it was "the true meaning of the public jazz dance." (275) He points out "the thinness of ... 'modern jazz,'" (275) which suffers from "this loss of wholeness." (275) When he was too young to attend night dances, he and his friends gathered under a corner streetlamp to hear the performances of the Blue Devils, playing in a dance hall blocks away. Now they heard Jimmy Rushing "preaching," now they heard "Hot Lips" Page signifying with Jimmy. Then they would "go on to name all the members of the band as though they were the Biblical four-and-twenty elders." (274) Here the word "signifying" of course means to communicate and to interact. Jazz is a kind of music, in which players try to communicate and interact with each other, and even with the audience, and therefore call and response is one of the most basic ideas of this music. It seems obvious that Ellison considers this element of communion in jazz as the most important thing as he grew up in Oklahoma City. In the Negro community in Oklahoma City each black man is independent, but not separated from others just as players in a jazz performance.

As he implies at the beginning of "Remembering Jimmy," Ellison is deeply attracted to Jimmy Rushing because of his lyricism and romanticism. He says that Jimmy's lyricism is "not of the Deep South,

but of the Southwest: a romanticism native to the frontier.” (276) Even though Jimmy is known as a blues singer, unlike blues shouters from the Deep South, he always shows “a concern for the correctness of language,” (277) and pronounces every word clearly. Ellison says that Jimmy comes “from a family already well on its rise into what is called the ‘Negro middle class,’” (277) and actually the family was really enterprising people. And this is closely related with the fact that Oklahoma became the Territory in 1889, and that the spirit of pioneering and enterprising was everywhere. In “Going to the Territory” he says that “geography was fate.” (Callahan 606) In the days of slavery this was really true, for the Mason-Dixon Line exactly determined the fate of black people. The sense of optimism, which Ellison heard in Jimmy’s voice, and which he found in the Negro community in Oklahoma City, comes from the geography of Oklahoma as a kind of “the frontier.”

Oklahoma attracted many people including blacks from other states, who wanted to pioneer the wild west, for it seemed to assure them of “equal chances with the white man, free and independent.” (Rampersad 5) However, everything was not really so ideal for black people in the Oklahoma Territory, or later in the Oklahoma State. There was severe segregation there, and many farmers suffered from drought and a poor harvest, as John Steinbeck described in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Ellison’s father Lewis, too, shows his anger about Oklahoma in a letter to his wife from Texas, saying: “I am sorry there ever was such a place.” (Rampersad 10) He also says in the same letter: “I don’t want and don’t intend to be there another winter.” (10) After all, Lewis dies after having an operation for stomach ulcer in 1916, when “the new life of poverty started almost at once” (13) for Ellison. Arnold Rampersad says like this about Lewis’s death in *Ralph Ellison: A Biography*:

Ironically, the son probably wouldn’t have become famous if his father had lived. Protected, perhaps even cosseted, by his father’s love, he would probably have escaped the wounds of poverty, loneliness, and despair that came howling in the wake of Lewis’s death. (12)

It was the blues spirit that Jimmy Rushing expressed in his singing, and Ellison was able to understand it the better because he himself suffered so much at his father's untimely death. According to Ellison, the blues are "the only consistent art in the United States which constantly remind [sic] us of our limitations while encouraging us to see how far we can actually go." (Callahan 277) This is why Ellison has such a profound attachment to the blues Jimmy sings. Moreover, Ellison points out that the appeal of Jimmy's blues will become greater because the Great Depression has "made us a little bit more circumspect about the human cost of living of our 'American way of life.'" (277) It may be obvious now that the blues is not only a style of popular song for black people, but also it tells us how we should live.

In "Remembering Jimmy" Ellison mentions the reason he is having "this shamelessly nostalgic outburst." (276) It is because of "a series of Rushing recordings issued over the past few years" (276) : three Vanguard's *Jazz Showcase* records and two Columbia records. Ellison is recalling the happy days he spent in Oklahoma City with an outburst of nostalgia, while listening to these five records and Decca's *Kansas City Jazz*, which "contains Rushing's best version of his classic 'Good Morning Blues.'" (276) And the image of Ellison listening to these records in his New York apartment somehow reminds us of the scene in Prologue of *Invisible Man*, where the protagonist tries to listen to five different recordings of Louis Armstrong singing and playing "Black and Blue" all at the same time. John Hammond, who supervised the Vanguard *Jazz Showcase* series, says like this in his liner notes for *Listen to the Blues with Jimmy Rushing*: "In this new album, an effort has been made to recapture the flavor of the Kansas City honkytonks of the Thirties, where Jimmy was ruler of the roost."² So these records of Rushing's were made to recapture the glory of the Southwest jazz, which had flourished some twenty years before.

Then, what was actually happening at the American jazz scene and in American society, when these albums were recorded in the middle of the 50s? Charlie Parker, who began the bebop movement and was pioneering jazz, died in 1955, but younger modern jazz giants appeared on the jazz scene, and jazz was beginning to show a new aspect as

modern and abstract art. In American society, the civil rights movement was going to advance a great deal, beginning with the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, and the bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama. Ellison and the protagonist of *Invisible Man*, who are both listening to jazz records alone, look very similar. Both of them, secluded in a safe and cozy place, seem to be not interested in, and separated from what is happening in the outside world now. And they remind us of Ralph Ellison, who refused to take part in the civil rights movement, disappointing many black people who requested of him that he support the movement as a respected African American intellectual. The description of Oklahoma City in “Remembering Jimmy” seems to be a little bit too much idealized and romanticized. It looks as if Ellison were trying to describe the Negro community in Oklahoma City in his memories as a secluded and comfortable place like the warm underground coalhole, in which the protagonist of *Invisible Man* finally finds himself. Ellison probably found himself subtly unadaptable to the rough and harsh sound of the bebop and modern jazz, and to the turbulent atmosphere of American society at the time of the civil rights movement as well.

III. The Migration: Blackening America

The Great Migration, which began in the middle of the 1910s triggered by the wartime prosperity, was a very important event in American history for a couple of reasons. First of all, the life of a large number of African Americans, migrating from the rural South to large Northern cities, changed a great deal. Compared with their homes in the South, where there was always severe racism and sometimes even the threat of lynching, James R. Grossman says, the North looked like “a land of opportunity” for black people (Grossman 3). In the North, there was less discrimination, wages were higher, and it seemed possible for African Americans to pursue wealth and happiness only if they had a strong will to do so. After all, the North did not necessarily turn out to be an ideal place they expected it to be; however, there is no question that the life of black people fairly advanced as a result of the migration. On the other

hand, since many black people who migrated northward brought their culture and life style with them, America changed a great deal, that is, America was blackened. After Storyville, the notorious red light district of New Orleans, was closed when the United States entered World War I in 1917, many of the great jazz musicians of the city moved to Chicago through the Great Migration. Chicago became the center of jazz, and King Oliver and Louis Armstrong became big stars, impressing people of the United States, and people all over the world, with the beauty and thrill of jazz. In this way, black culture like jazz, the blues, and dancing joined the mainstream of American culture.

Some of the major African American authors of the twentieth century have experienced for themselves the process of migration to the North, and take up the theme of the Great Migration in their works: Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, and Ralph Ellison, just to name a few. Toni Morrison, too, takes up that theme in her first novel *The Bluest Eye*. Pecola's mother Pauline is born in Alabama, and she moves to Kentucky with her family for "the possibility of living better in another place," (Morrison 111) where she meets and marries Cholly. Cholly is a jolly black boy full of energy and humor with "flaring nostrils," (114) who comes "strutting right out of a Kentucky sun on the hottest day of the year" (114) with "his own music." (114) Cholly and Pauline then move to Loraine, Ohio. However, while she moves northward to Ohio, she comes to be attracted by Hollywood movies so much that she is now unable to feel love for Cholly, who has peculiarly African American features. Now that her standard of beauty is that of Hollywood movies, Pauline is absolutely blind to Pecola's beauty, which lies modestly in her better nature. When Pecola is born, Pauline calls her just ugly, which finally leads to Pecola's tragedy.

The Great Migration is one of the most important themes of *Invisible Man*, and what is really interesting about the novel in terms of the migration theme is that the author is trying hard to affirm black culture, which has not only survived the migration but also has been urbanized and become more attractive through it. *Invisible Man* is, as it were, a story in which the protagonist awakens to his own identity as a Negro of the South after he leaves his home in the South. Before the

protagonist leaves the Negro college campus for New York, he has a couple of chances to experience black culture. For instance, he mentions the sensuous sound of the clarinet resounding throughout the battle royal scene. This sensuous clarinet music seems to imply jazz, especially the kind of jazz played in a bordello in New Orleans. At the Golden Day, the jukebox makes a noisy sound and a composer bangs a wild piece on the out-of-tune piano. The kind of music played at the Golden Day sounds like jazz or the blues, too. On the day before the protagonist leaves for New York, he hears “an old guitar-blues plucked from an out-of-tune piano [drift] toward [him]” (*Invisible Man* 146) on the campus. And yet the protagonist does not seem to feel any attachment to these kinds of black music in these cases. However, after he arrives in New York, he begins to rediscover his own identity, which is deeply rooted in the Southern soil and culture, through the encounters with people who also migrated to the modern city from their home in the South.

It is the blues, a song of black people of the South, that first awakens him to his identity as a black man from the South. On his way to the office of Mr. Emerson, who is supporting Bledsoe’s college, to ask for an interview with him, he meets a dirty, homeless-like black guy, who is singing a blues. As the protagonist walks along behind him, he remembers the time when he had heard that kind of singing at home. He goes on to say how far the song took him back to the past: “It seemed slipped around my life at the campus and went far back to things I had long ago shut out of my mind. There was no escaping such reminders.” (173) The song is based on Count Basie and His Orchestra’s “Boogie Woogie” with Jimmy Rushing singing, which was recorded on March 26, 1937. The performance can be heard in Decca’s *Kansas City Jazz* which Ellison mentions in “Remembering Jimmy,” and in it one can hear Jimmy’s cheerful, strong voice and Basie’s sophisticated boogie-woogie style piano. Obviously Ellison himself is remembering his early days in Oklahoma City with nostalgia at this point. Then the guy begins to play with words, saying various incomprehensible things and asking ridiculous questions. The protagonist enjoys the strange conversation with the black guy very much, and is reminded that he is deeply rooted in the Southern black culture, which is rich with wordplay, signifying, and folklore.

Also consider his encounter with a yam vendor. One snowy morning the protagonist finds a yam vendor on a Harlem street, and “the odor of baking yams” (262) slowly brings him “a stab of swift nostalgia.”(262) He buys one, eats it, and is “suddenly overcome by an intense feeling of freedom,” (264) eating yam “while walking along the street.” (264) He realizes that he has been ashamed of doing what he really likes to do, but now he is determined to do anything he wishes to do. Finally he seems to be liberated from Dr. Bledsoe’s curse. As he has recovered confidence in himself now, he is willing to answer to the yam vendor in wordplay, saying: “I yam what I am.” (266)

Soon after his encounter with the yam vendor, the protagonist happens to observe an eviction on another street in Harlem. Since he has never seen an eviction in the South, he feels shocked to see old people being put out of their apartment, saying: “They can do that up *here*?” (269) And it is exactly this eviction that makes him realize his own identity as a black man and his cultural background. Especially, after he looks at the miscellaneous household objects, which are carried from the apartment and piled up high on the sidewalk, he keenly feels that these people and he share the same culture as black people from the South. Among the household objects the protagonist finds on the sidewalk, there are “FREE PAPERS” for the husband, three old “life insurance policies,” “a yellowing newspaper portrait of” Marcus Garvey, and “knocking bones.” “FREE PAPERS” shows that the husband used to be a slave, and the “knocking bones” suggest that he used to work for a minstrel show to make a living, when he was young. Now the protagonist, who has seen these significant objects, gives a thought to the history of black people’s suffering, and finding it almost impossible to hold back his emotion, he gives quite an impressive speech before the crowd, which finally drives them to an action.

Mary Rambo, who runs a boarding house in Harlem, also migrated from the South years ago. She has a strong racial pride, and understands the blues spirit very well, taking good care of young black people from the South and encouraging them to work hard for the race and “make the changes”. (255) When the protagonist returns to the boarding house after he gives the impressive speech and turns down a request by a member

of Brotherhood to join the organization, he finds Mary singing “Back Water Blues,” while cooking cabbage. This is the third time that Mary cooks cabbage within the week, and the odor of cabbage reminds him of Mary’s poverty. When he hears Mary’s “Back Water Blues” and smells her cabbage, he has “a calm sense of [his] indebtedness” (297) and understands that he has to accept the request to join the organization in order to make some money. Then what kind of a song is “Back Water Blues” and what kind of a message does the song send to the protagonist?

“Back Water Blues” is a monumental and social blues. Even though a blues is almost always a private song, “Back Water Blues” was composed to describe a disaster of a flood which actually took place, and black people’s suffering from racism related to it. Angela Y. Davis explains how sensational this song became when it was released in 1927:

Its timing made the recording of “Backwater Blues” extraordinarily successful. The song’s 1927 release coincided with one of the most catastrophic and tragic floods of the Mississippi River in history. Twenty-six thousand square miles of land were inundated, causing over 600,000 people, more than half of whom were black, to lose their homes. (Davis 108)

Thus “Back Water Blues” was to remain in people’s memory associated with the disastrous floods of the Mississippi River in 1927. William Faulkner’s “Old Man” in *The Wild Palms* is also based on this disaster. Furthermore, Sterling Brown takes up this blues in “Ma Rainey,” in which Ma Rainey, a great blues singer and Bessie Smith’s mentor, sings this song on a stage. Actually, “Back Water Blues” was written and composed by the one and only female blues singer Bessie Smith, who was called the Empress of the Blues. When she sings about a girl who has lost her home in the flood and looks down on the place where she used to live from a high and lonesome hill, black folks bow their heads and cry. In this way, “Back Water Blues” is a song which urges black people to see the harsh reality of their life, share the pain of others, and have the courage to overcome their trouble.

IV. “Black and Blue”

“Black and Blue” which the protagonist mentions in Prologue of *Invisible Man* is the most important song for us to interpret this novel. What kind of a song is this? What message is Ellison trying to send to us through this song? And who is Louis Armstrong? In order to suggest some hints to these questions, I would like to give an explanation of the background of this song and the jazz giant Louis Armstrong.

This song was made for an all black revue *Hot Chocolate* which was presented in New York in 1929. It was composed by the marvelous jazz pianist and clown Fats Waller, and its lyrics were written by Andy Razaf. Louis Armstrong, who had recently moved to New York from his second hometown Chicago, happened to participate in this revue and came to know the song. It immediately became one of his favorite songs, and he recorded it for the first time on July 22, 1929. As he recorded the song several times later, it may be possible today to listen to five different recordings of Satchmo playing and singing “Black and Blue” all at the same time, just as the protagonist is planning to do in his underground hole in New York. However, it is not Louis Armstrong who sang the song in *Hot Chocolate* but a female singer Edith Wilson. Sundquist states about “Black and Blue” in *Cultural Contexts* that “the song came to be regarded as one of the first overt instances of racial protest in American popular music.”(115) George Avakian, who produced Armstrong’s recording praises his performance like this: “*Black and Blue*, which has been described as a song of social protest, is one of Louis’ most moving performances.”³ So let us suppose that “Black and Blue” is a song of social protest. It sounds a little bit similar to Bessie Smith’s “Back Water Blues,” which also seems to criticize racism in American society subtly. Then, is this song a blues?

S. I. Hayakawa points out in “Popular Songs vs. the Facts of Life” that there are two completely different kinds of popular song in the United States. One is the blues, the song of black people, and the other is the song of what is called Tin Pan Alley. The blues always describes the harsh reality and suffering of black people’s life. Also the blues usually consists of three lines and 12 bars. On the other hand, the popular song

of Tin Pan Alley describes a very romantic and sentimental world and feeling. It very often consists of four lines and 32 bars. Then let us try to analyze the song “Black and Blue,” using S. I. Hayakawa’s theory about American popular songs. “Black and Blue” is composed and written by black people, and its content is protest against racism in America. If we consider these aspects, it looks like a blues. However, it cannot be a blues for one important reason. The song seems to be sung for white people, and it is impossible for a blues singer to sing a song of protest for white people, at least in the 1920s. Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey always sang the blues for black folks and recorded the blues with black audience in mind. In terms of its form, too, “Black and Blue” belongs to the Song of Tin Pan Alley, even though it is written and composed by black people.

Louis Armstrong moved from New Orleans to Chicago in 1922, and shortly he became a great star. A large number of black people moved to Chicago in the waves of the Great Migration, and the city became the center of jazz and black culture. Armstrong released records of excellent performance one after another, each of which all jazz fans of the world accepted with the sense of wonder. He seemed to have a pride in his music, and to be quite eager to create great art as a black man rising in American society in the Roaring Twenties. He was for sure an excellent serious artist at that time. However, around the time when he moved to New York in 1929, there seems to have happened a change in his mind about his music. It seems that he decided to live not as an artist but as a professional entertainer now. He was an artist until 1928, but he was an entertainer from 1929 onward. The repertory in his recordings also changed a great deal around this time. Until 1928 there were many tunes which were peculiarly African American including the blues in his recordings. However, after 1929 he came to sing songs of Tin Pan Alley so much, and moreover he began to play a clown on a stage more often than before.

In Prologue of *Invisible Man* the protagonist says about Louis Armstrong like this: “Perhaps I like Louis Armstrong because he’s made poetry out of being invisible. I think it must be because he’s unaware that he *is* invisible.” As an entertainer, wasn’t he aware that he was wearing a mask and that people were not looking at his real face? How about it?

Notes

¹ This sentence is quoted from Alfred Tennyson's "Tithonus." *The Complete Poetical Works of Alfred Tennyson*, p.89.

² *Listen to the Blues with Jimmy Rushing* was recorded on August 16th, 1955.

³ Armstrong's first performance of "Black and Blue" was recorded on July 22nd, 1929.

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