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ABSTRACT

The literature of black America repeatedly reflects a native rootlessness and its creators' yearning for a home. The black writer settles his work in an ethos, which has evolved from an older African heritage, primarily in response to an omnipresent white society. In this document, one of these ethnic expressions--the blues--is examined as a means of exploring American Negro literature in general. The blues form a body of significant poems and, transmuted, they become the symbolic basis of such complex works as Richard Wright's "Black Boy" and Ralph Ellison's "Invisible Man." In formal terms, the blues are typically a 12 bar, three line stanza--the first two lines repeated, but linked in content and rhyme with the third. (CK)

The Blues in Black Literature

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American literature has always reflected the American's restlessness and rootlessness. Ishmael goes off to the South Seas. Huck Finn takes a raft down the Mississippi. Christopher Newman heads for Europe. Yet American writers repeatedly ground their works in a particular locale. Hawthorne sticks close to Salem, Faulkner confines himself to his particular postage-stamp, Yoknapatawpha County, Saul Bellow locates the majority of his works in large urban centers. The history of the black man in America has also been one of rootlessness; yet his movements have perhaps more often been determined by external forces — the auction block, the boll weevil, the world wars — than they have been determined by his own angst or his own decisions as have been the movements of other Americans. Though the black man, too, has certainly been stirred by that greatest of American illusions: freedom. The literature of black America, with certain exceptions, repeatedly reflects this native rootlessness, but it also reflects its creators' yearning for a home, for a proper place. But the black writer settles his work in no geographical place; he settles it — in varying degrees — in an ethos. An ethos, which has evolved from an older African heritage, but which has evolved primarily in response to an omnipresent white racist society. This ethos expresses itself in diverse ways: in a rich idiomatic language, in allegorical tales of Brer Rabbit and Brer Bear, in great sermon orations, in "soul" food, in music — the spirituals, blues, jazz, in a particular philosophical stance.

My interest here is to examine one of these ethnic expressions as a means of exploring American Negro literature in general — the blues. I suggest first that the blues in themselves form a body of significant poems and second that, transmuted, they become the symbolic basis of such complex works as Richard Wright's *Black Boy* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. LeRoi Jones in "The Myth of 'Negro Literature'" in his collection of essays, *Home*, points to the blues as the most significant of black art forms; he writes:

> There are a great many reasons for the spectacular vapidity of the American Negro's accomplishment in other formal, serious art forms — social, economic, political, etc. — for one of the most persistent and aggravating reasons for the absence of achievement among serious Negro artists, except in Negro music, is that in most cases the Negroes who found themselves in a position to pursue some art, especially the art of literature, have been members of the Negro middle class, a group that has always gone out of its way to cultivate *any* mediocrity, as long as that mediocrity was guaranteed to prove to America, and recently to the world at large, that they were not really who they were, *i.e.*, Negroes. Negro music alone, because it drew its strengths and beauties out of the depth of the black man's soul, and because to a large extent its traditions could be carried on by the lowest classes of Negroes, has been able to survive the constant and willful dilutions of the black middle class. Blues and Jazz have been the only consistent exhibitors of "Negritude" in formal American culture simply because the bearers of its tradition maintained their essential identities as Negroes; in no other art (and I will persist in calling Negro music, Art) has this been possible.[1]

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In the same essay Jones has some advice for the young Negro poet:

> It would be better if such a poet listened to Bessie Smith sing *Gimme a Pigfoot,* or listened to the tragic verse of a Billie Holiday, than be content to imperfectly imitate the bad poetry of the ruined minds of Europe. And again, it is this striving for *respectability,* that has it so. For an American, black or white, to say that some hideous imitation of Alexander Pope means more to him, emotionally, than the blues of Ray Charles or Lightnin' Hopkins, it would be required for him to have completely disappeared into the American Academy's vision of a Europeanized and colonial American culture, or to be lying. In the end, the same emotional sterility results. It is somehow much more tragic for the black man.[2]

James Baldwin was saved from this tragedy; in his essay "The Discovery of What it Means to be an American," Baldwin explains how, in Switzerland, he came to a realization similar to Jones's:

> There, in that absolutely alabaster landscape, armed with two Bessie Smith records and a typewriter, I began to try to re-create the life that I had first known as a child and from which I had spent so many years in flight. It was Bessie Smith, through her tone and her cadence, who helped me to dig back to the way I myself must have spoken when I was a pickaninny, and to remember the things I had heard and seen and felt. I had buried them very deep. I had never listened to Bessie Smith in America (in the same way that, for years, I would not touch watermelon), but in Europe she helped to reconcile me to being a "nigger."[3]

There is considerable evidence of the fact that both Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison were also influenced by the tradition of the blues; Wright wrote the introduction for one of the basic critical studies of the blues, Paul Oliver's *The Meaning of the Blues;* Ellison has written explicitly of the great blues singers, Jimmy Rushing and Bessie Smith, in his collection of essays, *Shadow and Act.*

What are the blues? In formal terms they are typically a 12 bar, three line stanza — the first two lines repeated, but linked in content and rhyme with the third. They are an original and highly controlled verse form. And it is because of this form that the otherwise overpowering emotions of the blues singer can be contained. Before discussing the nature of these emotions, let me point out, as LeRoi Jones has already done in his book, *Blues People,* that the blues are an individual expression, unlike the spirituals which are a group expression. Though a blues singer may be backed up by a combo or a band, he sings solo. The song he sings very often deals with his sense of rootlessness: the blues do not convey images of homes, but of roads, highways, intersections, railways. Related to this expression of rootlessness is a sense of abandonment, of isolation. Usually the isolation stems from difficulties in sexual relationships. However, the isolation may also have a metaphysical cause as in the following song by the fine blues poet, Robert Johnson:

"I got to keep moving . . ." (recorded on a Columbia album, King of the Delta Blues Singers, by Robert Johnson).

Or there may be an implicit social cause for this sense of isolation as another song by Johnson suggests:

"I went to the crossroads . . . ." (recorded on a Columbia album, King of the Delta Blues Singers, by Robert Johnson).

It isn't the dark that "poor Bob" fears will catch him; until recently in the South, blacks were subject to curfew regulations; it is the local sheriff and his "patarollers" whom "poor Bob" fears will catch him. The blues seldom, however, can be called explicit protest songs; yet because they are such powerful outpourings of single individual feeling and because they deal so frankly with that most formidable of middle-class taboos — sex, they implicitly protest.

My remarks to this point might imply that the blues are songs of lamentation, songs of self-pity; such an implication is, however, misleading. Not only are there those blues which assert a determination to survive, to take the blue devil by his hand and to take the sweet woman's jelly roll, but the language of the blues is consistently ironical, which suggests that the singer is able to laugh at his own predicament. This sense of irony is conveyed, for example, in the following blues stanzas:

Got the blues, but I'm too mean to cry.
or
I'm goin' down and lay my head on the railroad track, (Repeat)
When the train comes along I'm goin' snatch it back.
or
She's a kind-hearted woman, studies evil all the time.

Richard Wright says of the blues that their most astonishing aspect is

> that though replete with a sense of defeat and down-heartedness, they are not intrinsically pessimistic; their burden of woe and melancholy is dialectically redeemed through the force of sensuality into an almost exultant affirmation of life, of love, of sex, of movement, of hope.[4]

In the same vein, Ralph Ellison, who finds that the blues embody "the art of ambiguity," writes:

> The blues speak to us simultaneously of the tragic and the comic aspects of the human condition and they express a profound sense of life shared by many Negro Americans precisely because their lives have combined these modes. This has been the heritage of a people who for hundreds of years could not celebrate birth or dignify death and whose need to live despite the dehumanizing pressures of slavery developed an endless capacity for laughing at their painful experiences.[5]

Ellison himself suggests that Wright's autobiography — *Black Boy* — is comparable to the blues; it is "like a blues sung by such an artist as Bessie Smith, its

lyrical prose evokes the paradoxical, almost surreal image of a black boy singing lustily as he probes his own grevious wound."[6] In the very singular, very personal voice of his work, Wright certainly strikes a correlation between his autobiography and the blues' solo. Evidences of the repressive devices of white society upon the psyche of a growing black child permeate the work, yet Wright does not make white society his whipping boy, for throughout the work he seems to be converting his hatred, his anger into art — into poetry and song.

The hero of Ellison's novel — a rootless young man who moves from country to city, South to North, one ideology to another — also speaks in the first-person — the characteristic voice of the blues singer. He articulates, like the blues singer, his own confusion and frustration, and yet, also like the blues singer, the strain of self-pity is undermined by humor. In the course of his self-education, the hero discovers his ethnic roots: he learns to like sweet potatoes, and he comes to associate himself with Brer Rabbit. He also comes to appreciate the blues. Initially Ellison's hero is appalled by Jim Trueblood, the black sharecropper who had impregnated both his wife and daughter, but who weathered his crisis by looking up at the stars and singing "some blues that night ain't never been sang before, and while I'm singin' them blues I makes up my mind that I ain't nobody but myself and ain't nothin' I can do but let whatever is gonna happen, happen."[7] Later, however, in New York, the hero listens with new ears to an old man who calls himself Blue, who carts blueprints through the city, and who sings a characteristically ironical blues song:

> She's got feet like a monkey,
> Legs like a frog, Lawd, Lawd,
> But when she starts to loving me,
> I holler, Whoo, God-dog.[8]

Shortly after meeting Blue the Cartman, the hero realizes he has been duped by Dr. Bledsoe, and he, too, starts singing the blues, a blues song about poor Robin:

> O well they picked poor Robin clean (Repeat)
> Well they tied poor Robin to a stump
> Lawd, they picked all the feathers round from Robin's rump
> Well they picked poor Robin clean.[9]

In the novel's conclusion, the hero devotes the days in his underground briar patch to listening to Louis Armstrong sing, "What did I do to be so black and blue?" Ellison might well have been speaking of his own novel when he said that Wright's most important achievement in *Black Boy* lies in his having converted "the American Negro's impulse toward self-annihilation and 'going underground' into a will to confront the world, to evaluate his experience honestly and throw his findings unashamedly into the guilty conscience of America."[10] His hero's increasing ability to appreciate the blues seems to confirm his ability to reconcile love and hate, to transcend the sufferings of invisibility, and to suggest that his descent into the underground is synonymous with an ascent into self-knowledge. In the Prologue to the novel, Ellison's hero asks himself, with characteristic *double-entendre*, "Could this compulsion to

put invisibility down in black and white be thus an urge to make music of invisibility?"[11] If we answer in the affirmative, perhaps we have the basis for establishing a new literary genre, "the blues novel."

Lawrence, Kansas
February, 1971

FOOTNOTES

1 *LeRoi Jones*, Home *(William Morrow, New York, 1966), p. 106.*

2 Ibid., *p. 112.*

3 *James Baldwin, Nobody Knows My Names (Dell, New York, 1961), p. 18.*

4 *Richard Wright, "Foreward,"* The Meaning of the Blues *by Paul Oliver (Collier, New York, 1963), p. 9.*

5 *Ralph Ellison, Blues People,"* Shadow and Act *(Signet, New York, 1964), p. 249.*

6 *Ellison, "Richard Wright's Blues,"* Shadow and Act, *p. 91.*

7 *Ellison,* Invisible Man *(Signet, New York, 1952), p. 63.*

8 Ibid., *pp. 152-53.*

9 Ibid., *p. 170*

10 *"Richard Wright's Blues," p. 104.*

11 Invisible Man, *p. 16.*