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SCATting THE SEMANTICS: READING SCAT IN RALPH ELLISON'S *INVISIBLE MAN*

SAMRIDHI AGGARWAL

Independent Researcher, MA in Contemporary Literature Culture and Theory,

King's College London, United Kingdom

Samridhiaggarwal95@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the relationship between Ralph Ellison's text *Invisible Man* and the musical form Scat. In looking at the various connotations of sentence formations and fragmentations, Ellison draws on the tradition of African- American musical forms. I will first explore the inspiration Ellison draws from Louis Armstrong's work. Subsequently, by drawing out the kinetic orality of alterity projected through the narrator's physicality, I attempt to show the significance Ellison places in musical expression for the African-American community. The aim of this paper is to link Ellison's use of afro-sonic modern expression with the themes of poverty, racism, and socialism in *Invisible Man*.

Keywords: afro-sonic modernity; kinetic orality; expressions of alterity.

Introduction

In an interview, Ralph Ellison said: 'My strength comes from Louis Armstrong' (Ellison 2002, 286). This is evident in the prologue of the *Invisible Man* when the protagonist narrates 'I like Louis Armstrong because he's made poetry out of being invisible' (Ellison 2016, 6). He ends the prologue with 'but what did I do to be so blue?', playing off the lyrics from Armstrong's 'What Did I Do to Be so Black and Blue'. (Ellison 2016, p.14) Clearly, *Invisible Man* is a text influenced by music, particularly Louis Armstrong's music. My aim is to show that Ellison has played off the musicality and the semantics in his text to represent the disarticulation and delineation of the narrator's life. He has further linked this disarticulation within the physicality of the narrator. By linking this disarticulation with scatting, I will do a structured reading of scenes from the *Invisible Man* through Brent Hayes Edwards' *Louis Armstrong and the Syntax of Scat* that locate scat music within the text to explore the impact it has over the physicality

of the narrator and through the temporal and spatial manipulation of the prose.

The Narrator's physicality and Armstrong's 'Heebie Jeebies'

In his text, Ellison often uses heavy onomatopoeic words like 'flash' and 'explosion' to convey the spontaneity and disarticulation through the prose acting as a medium of violence and unease. (Ellison 2016, p28). Ellison retains the significance of musicality in his linguistic expressions and in doing so ties together the symbolic expression of language within the physicality of the narrator. In a similar strand of thought, Edwards discusses Armstrong's Heebie Jeebies creating a split between the verbal and the written that 'happens as a kind of erosion or disarticulation, not a sudden loss' (621). This can be further interpreted in *Invisible Man* as the Heebie Jeebies convey the 'jitters' that can be compared to the atmosphere created by the dancer in the text. The narrator describes that 'my muscles jumped, my

nerves jangled, writhed.’ (Ellison 2016, p.26) Taking this further, these jitters then cause ‘a loss of control, a nervous loss of articulacy that expresses itself as incommodious physical movement’ (Edwards, 621). This is especially visible when during the Battle Royale scene, the narrator reads his speech through a bleeding mouth, the action is then transformed to a transferred epithet that translates the physical violence to a violent orality.

Further, this epithet is carried onto the second chapter when the narrator belches and his belch is enlarged and magnified through the misplaced pressing of the horn. This can be read in the essay as Edwards discusses Armstrong forgetting his lyrics but finding ‘resource, happening upon a new sound (itself falling away from the word) in the void of the phonographic horn’ (Edwards 620). The belch then becomes a sound of a combined expression of orality and alterity through the physicality of the narrator, who immediately becomes embarrassed of his bodily process. Ellison takes a mere belch and stretches it out as a loss of articulation over the body ‘that finally proves enabling’ (Edwards, 620). The belch becomes a much more magnified and loud expression because the narrator tried to suppress or rather ignore a natural instinct of his being. It thus gains meaning through the narrator’s desire to hide it. In this non-linguistic expression, one can locate the narrator suppressing the truth about Trueblood’s condition from the trustee as it would spoil the impression that Bledsoe wishes to create. In these moments of the unspeakable, expressivity is carried through a ‘telling inarticulacy’ and through bodily processes that narrator has no control over (Edwards, 624).

The Battle Royale and the Scat Idiom

Through the application of this bodily release in times of inexpressibility, the battle royale scene takes up a more layered meaning. The narrator speaks his speech through a bloody mouth which he earlier associates to strangling and later to nausea. ‘My dry mouth, filling up with blood from the cut, almost strangled me.’ (Ellison 2016, p.29) The throat then comes further into play through coughing. Moreover, the seriality of speech is constantly interrupted through broken repetitions and yells.

‘Whenever I uttered a word of three or more syllables a group of voices would yell for me to repeat it.’ (Ellison 2016, p.30) It is this repetition that dissociates the memorization of words that the narrator is trying to get through and further places the stress of utterance within the narrator’s throat so that every time he is made to repeat he has to swallow or gulp his own blood. This violent scene brings to play the connection between utterance, throat and blood with scat being expressed through the ‘somatic excess of that body’ (Edwards, 647). Here, the narrator’s choking and interruptions express the breaking away of ‘words that slip to the ground’ (Edwards, 620).

The scat idiom uses ‘special styles and registers, fast delivery, high pitches, broken rhythms, grunts, anomalous mumbo jumbo words’ (Leonard, 156-7). Through repetitions of multiple syllables and incomplete words, Ellison thus manipulates not just the linguistic register but also expresses the disarticulation of the inexpressible racial violence that the narrator has experienced. He uses the scat form to displace both temporal and spatial qualities of the scene. By interrupting the syllabic formulations of words, the narrator is made to repeat them, thereby stretching the temporal dimensions of words but also blockading the narrator’s speech. Thus robbed of his speech, Ellison expresses this suppression by taking away not just the smooth progression of the narration but in leaving an actual void between sentences in the form of dotted lines. Scat here is used to represent “extrinsic symbolization” by transferring the violence ‘through either spatio-temporal, kinetic or affective registers’ (Edwards, 623). These blank spaces in actuality represent the ‘alterity projected onto the level of linguistic impenetrability’ (Edwards, 627). This impenetrability is explored throughout the text by sentences left incomplete with these dotted lines either at the end or the middle. Scat becomes spatialized as language falls through and ‘in avoiding use of words, is seen to strive for abstraction’ (Grant, 289). By further adding the blood choking the narrator’s throat, Ellison translates physical violence to an oral violence. This is taken further when in a similar situation of violence at the hospital, Ellison once again repeats the imagery of a bloody mouth.

Excess or Loss of meaning through Scatting

The hospital scene particularly stands out because the narrator is semi-conscious and interprets his surroundings through the sounds around him. However, he manages to locate even these sounds within the physicality of the narrator by describing them as 'stabbing pulses' and thereby further locating the music within the very body. (Ellison 2016, p. 225) He then magnifies this effect by connecting the voices to a phonograph. The narrator furthers this connection by embodying the phonograph within himself through the description of his lungs as 'bellows' and his breath 'punctuating the rhythmical action of the nodes' (Ellison 2016, 224). This location is something Edwards points to in his essay when he notes that Armstrong used his razor during shaving 'like the way he fingered the valves on his horn' (Edwards, 622). Similarly, through this location, Ellison draws on an intimacy between the musicality and the body. By doing this he manages to bring to light the narrator 'wanting to embody and be embodied by sound' (Weheliye, 109). This association finds its place within the narrative when the narrator recedes further into himself and 'this disease itself claims the body' (Edwards, 622). The narrator finds himself disconnected from outside so that what he says or rather imagines as saying remains unheard and what is said outside of him becomes alien to him. 'Their simplest words seemed to refer to something else, as did many of the notions that unfurled through my head' (Ellison 2016, 228). This dislocation of meaning hidden underneath meaning is the 'excess of meaning' and the multiplicity of references that scat music itself allows (Edwards, 624). Thus, by creating a dissociation between voices on the outside and the inside of the narrator, Ellison manages to create a semantic gap which he expresses through dots that visually separate what he has managed to achieve through this technique.

With the clever usage of words, Ellison further manages to convey the unease and the pain of the narrator by then scatting the semantic onto the linguistics. Using words like 'blasted' he plays on the sound and the action that the word connotes and transfers the embodiment of sound within the body into a performance as 'the pulse came swift and

staccato, increasingly gradually until I fairly danced between the nodes' (Ellison 2016, p.229). He transfers the 'Heebie Jeebies' from the electric shock into the stimulant responses of his physicality and 'the dance starts with sense of an inherently modern state of bodily unease, anxiety or trembling' (Edwards, 621). As his lips smother his screams 'warm blood filled' his mouth (Ellison 2016, 229). Ellison here once again repeats the technique he had used in the earlier Battle Royale scene. He manages to locate the disarticulation through the excess of blood in the narrator's mouth and scat here is expressed through his bodily reaction. He scats the physicality of the narrator to express the immense pain and loss of control. It is this suppression that is then racially derided as the perpetrators of this violence scream 'Get hot, Boy!' (Ellison 2016, p.229). This creates a sense of rage within the narrator but the excess of current prevents its release leading to the split within the narrator.

Ellison explores this split through the displacement of meaning in language. When the narrator is asked 'What is your name?', this split is represented by increasing the distance between each word through dotted lines (Ellison 2016, p. 231). So the sentence gets transformed to 'What..is..your..name?' (Ellison 2016, p.231). The use of these dotted lines here represent not just the time and the dislocation of meaning but also the self that has been split. The self that cannot be expressed through language and thus gets represented through the non-linguistic. Thus, 'scatting reaches feelings "so deep, so real" that "they can't be verbalized" (Grant, 289). Instead they explore the release of the split in the self. Throughout the text therefore, Ellison has explored that split self through the dotted lines that often leaves the narration incomplete or sometimes breaks the words to nonsensical terms like in the Battle Royale scene.

Moreover, he often links these moments of nonsensical words or incompleteness to anger and public performance. Taking for instance the scene where the narrator witnesses his first dispossession in Harlem. Through a small mere detail like converting 'brick and brack' to 'bric-a-brac' he manages to play on the musicality of similar sounding phrases and adds a layer of meaning over meaning

(Ellison 2016, 268). This shift is explored through alliteration that when spoken out loud would play off each other's sounds and become a broken and deconstructed repetition. Therefore, this shift expresses a potentiality for multiple meanings. For instance, brick, brack and bric-a-brac at surface relate to just debris from the eviction. However, on second glance the throwing out of brick and brack implies the displacement of not just home but also livelihood. Just like he did earlier in the text by converting 'heh' to 'he', Ellison converts the nonsensical sounds to words and presents the reader with the written version of scat's vocal improvisation. (Ellison 2016, 209) These moments experience the trauma from the racial experiences which remain 'outside the sayable, something seen where it collapses' (Edwards, 649). He has dropped such words that have enacted as pauses throughout the text. For instance, the multiple uses of 'uh huh uh huh' and 'heh heh heh'. (Ellison 2016, .202, 209) These pauses create a nonsensical disruption in the conversation and forces the reader to step out of the narrative. This corroborates with the narrator disengaging from himself and explores the 'splitting of sound, a "wooing of another voice, an alternate voice" (Edwards, 631).

'It signifies as a "potentiality" engaging a "narrative impulse" in the listener who follows and fills in its syntax' (Edwards, 623). Here the narrator destabilizes his own narration and leaves it to the reader to pick up on, especially because these pauses or dotted lines often transition into useful words. By disengaging the reader from the narrative, Ellison tries to explore the split in the self that he brought about during the hospital scene. As a tale of past experience, these queues are picked up from the narrator after him having gone into invisibility. Taking for instance, the prologue where the protagonist is hiding in his hole 'in a state of hibernation'. (Ellison 2016, p.6) The narrator writes about music, 'wanting to feel its vibration not only with my ear but my whole body'. (Ellison 2016, p.7) Subsequently the narrator destabilizes his voice and drifts into an exploration with multiple voices when he strives to listen differently by descending into the 'depths' of music. (Ellison 2016, p.8) He narrates a scene from a fictive congregation. He scatters this scene with

various incomplete sentences spoken by multiple people. He constantly displaces this narration of a fictive congregation through incompleteness, repetitions and dotted lines. This technique explores 'a music where the action of words and music falling away from each other might best be described as a release, a sought-out condition of flow' (Edwards, 633). The voice of one splits into several and is once again expressed through disarticulation and delineation of the narrative. Through an overflowing of punctuation, Ellison manages to explore not just the split from one voice into multiple voices but also connects it to the unspeakable lynching trauma inflicted by 'Ras the destroyer'. (Ellison 2016, p.12) Therefore, he uses scat to not just explore the split in the sound but also the split in the self. The essence of this split is used throughout the text as a release through scat music.

The Disillusionment of the Brotherhood and Scatting

This progression through scat becomes apparent when the narrator joins the Brotherhood. Ellison drops subtle hints throughout the text to gradually show this journey of disillusionment. For instance, during his first winter in New York, the narrator stumbles into a yam shop and yams become not only the provider of warmth but also a symbol of his old Southern self. This can be decoded when he says 'I yam what I am'. (Ellison 2016, p.256) Through this one phrase Ellison manages to not only show the association between the yam and his old Southern self but he does this through the sound intonations of the two terms. By merging the 'I' with the 'y' of the yam, he drags the sound and stretches the temporal dimension of the line. 'Yam' here then comes to indicate the protagonist's natural enjoyment for yams that does not align with the city atmosphere he is altering himself to fit into. As he denies himself of his natural cravings, Ellison stretches out the moment to articulate this suppression. Therefore, he uses scat here by playing on the sound transition from 'I' to 'yam' and disarticulating the sentence construction while at the same time highlighting the hidden meaning of yam.

Transforming this, the narrator repeats a similar line several pages after when he has become

thoroughly indoctrinated by the Brotherhood's ideology. However, instead of scattering he stretches out the sentence by writing 'I am what they think I am'. The phrase connotes the scientific discipline he has imbibed in his language and thinking. The narrator now connects his identity with the brotherhood's perception of him. The distance between the repetitions of the 'I am' in the second sentence becomes an expression of the distance not just between the two statements but also the two identities and further yet, it becomes the expression of the distance between his improvised speeches to his disciplined ones. This creates a split through the semantic gap expressing the split in himself and between his two identities. One hidden inside the other; this split is what scat music truly releases through the narration of this story.

This becomes clear when in the second half of the text after beginning his training with the brotherhood, Ellison only writes about the protagonist having given some phenomenal and scientifically disciplined speeches, however they remain absent to the eye of the reader. As discipline becomes further entwined within the protagonist's speeches, Ellison changes his writing technique and deprives the text of its distinctive scattering expressions. They only make their way through the utterances of other's accents and in the protagonist's thoughts through dotted lines that are often left incomplete. However, his old expressions often slip out through dramatic sounds like 'plop!'. (Ellison 2016, p.364) These words are 'action words', a symbolic experience where the narrator is still trying to grapple with the split in his identity (Hurstons, 24). His narration however bears more than ever before the dotted lines.

They represent not just the displacement of meaning but in the telling of his tale, the invisible man's constant lingering presence from his hole of hibernation. His scattering becomes more linguistic as he starts using what Hurston calls 'the double descriptive' more often in the text (Hurstons, 25). In fact, the second half of the text experiences constant use of double-descriptive words like 'zig-zag'. (Ellison 2016, 275) These double descriptive words spatialize the split in sound and his own self through the hyphen. By using punctuation, Ellison has expressed

what the narrator has tried to suppress within the Brotherhood. His denial of his impulses and improvised speeches crack through by employing scat music as its release. 'The shift in positioning of the dash implying multiple renditions of the words, performed each time with different intonation and emphasis' (Edwards 2017, 254). Therefore, when spoken the hyphen causes a pause in the words and stretches the scene.

These vocalized interruptions scatter the otherwise disciplined narrations. Therefore, these words and sound operate as an expression of the protagonist's black identity as these 'action words' and 'double descriptive' are the 'negro's greatest contribution to the language' (Hurstons, 25). But apart from these, the narrator doesn't delve into disarticulation of speech as he used to earlier in the book. Through these minute brushes with 'the overgrowth of punctuation, self-interruptions, asides', Ellison exercises brief moments of scattering flows working as a release for the narrator (Edwards, 648-49). Therefore, these expressions represent the lingering presence of the man from invisibility during the narration of his time in the realm of political visibility. However, it is not till Clifton's death and his isolation from the other Brotherhood members that Ellison's scattering textuality makes a reappearance in its full glory. For instance, at Clifton's funeral Ellison explores the striking of the bell and stretches out the sound to compare with the surrounding silence in the background.

'I could feel my ear drums throbbing with the old, hollow, guy-vibrant Doom-Dong-Doom'. (Ellison 2016, 434) Once again, Ellison employs the hyphens to create distance but also to transition into non-linguistic vocables. Through this improvisation, the 'slow-paced rhythm' is used to drag out the sadness and the anger of the protagonist over Tod Clifton's death and the immediacy. In this scene, 'the language peels away from itself' even as the narrator starts peeling away the layers of Brotherhood's disillusionment from around himself (Edwards, 639). With the return of non-linguistic and nonsensical vocables, scattering is used to also show the return of the narrator to Harlem and the breaking of his misplaced trust.

Conclusion

By placing the void of invisibility within the location of the hole, Invisible man converts the underground to state of aboveground. This is something that can be applied to scat in that it upturns the split and the universal meaning shoots forward through the nonsense vocables. Ellison uses the deep association between scat music by expressing it not just through semantic but the very physicality of his narrator. In doing so he portrays the split in the consciousness and disillusionment of the narrator not just through over the surface operating symbolisms but by scatting the very text. Further, he often locates the bodily excesses associated with scatting within the throat of the narrator which throbs whenever he improvises his public speeches. In these moments of scatting, the narrator wields the power to empower and his inner self is brought out to confront moments of racial violence. As I have shown in this essay, these scatted semantics give the text moments of musicality and an undulated temporality which the narrator expresses in the prologue and then continues throughout the text. Just like scat music becomes a way for Armstrong to reclaim control during recording, in the text it gives the narrator the power to reclaim his hidden self and rise up. Moreover, by placing the scat within the body of the narrator, Ellison shows the importance and connection of music to the African-American body and in its expression the flow of past trauma. To embody scat and be embodied by scat, thus implies a feeling of empowerment and release that the invisible man expresses through his lingering visibility within the narration of his tale.

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