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The Absurd in the Briar Patch: Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Existentialism

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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April 2010

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ABSTRACT

The Absurd in the Briar Patch: Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Existentialism

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Master of Arts

This article claims that Ralph Ellison's use and then revision of French existential themes is essential to understanding his overriding message of *Invisible Man*: Ellison's hope for a more polyglot American democracy that transcends the white democracy of mid twentieth century America. Specifically, I argue that Ellison, after demonstrating his ability to understand and engage in the traditional ideology of European existentialism, deviates from its individualistic conclusions demanding that the larger community, not just the solitary individual, must become ethically responsible if the classic existential tenet of authenticity is to be achieved.

In order to establish this claim, I identify key passages in *Invisible Man* that indicate Ellison's desire to engage the existential movement. Writings from Camus and Sartre provide the foundation for comparison between Ellison's work and the French based philosophy. This background provides the groundwork to explore Ellison's deviations from the existential forms of his day. These departures have significant implications for Ellison's view of a socially productive individual, and therefore of his message in *Invisible Man*. In order to document the prevalence of existentialism in Ellison's literary consciousness, I then discuss its rise and decline in postwar New York. I also outline what is known about Ellison's relationship to the movement. Lastly, I conclude with a discussion of the philosophical tradition of existential philosophy and the difference between the philosophy of existence, seen in the Western canon through philosophers like Kierkegaard, and existentialism, one of its popular manifestations that peaked in the 1940s. Separating the two existential movements allows me to explore the tangential way most Ellison critics have associated him with existentialism and advocate for a more inclusive critical discussion of Ellison's relationship to existentialism.

Keywords: Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, existentialism, Albert Camus, Jean Paul Sartre

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Introduction

For the last six years, I have enjoyed an annual tradition of picking up and relishing Ralph Ellison's classic novel *Invisible Man*. My well-worn paperback has gradually become brown, long ago losing its crisp corners and new book smell. Even the book's binding, designed like most paperbacks for a few casual readings, is cracking and splitting. In fact, all that seems to improve with each reading is my appreciation for Ellison's craft and a wishful belief that each journey through the novel is enabling me to unpack more of this layered masterpiece.

It is the layering and play between folklore and history, myth and fact, culture and tradition, hope and despair, and the individual and society that draws into me the novel year and after year. Noted author and critic Charles Johnson noticed many of these same themes when wrote in *Juneteenth's* (2000) preface that Ellison's work challenges "philosophical questions such as reality vs. illusion, blindness vs. true seeing, and the fact that our lives are already more integrated than we usually dare to acknowledge" (xvii). What both of us detected, joining in agreement with legions of Ellison critics, is that Ellison works on multiple levels, conversing within his texts with a variety of ideas, topics, traditions, and writers.

In these multiple readings I started to focus in one of these layers, a conversation I believed Ellison was having centered on the theme of identity and self-creation. Ellison actually summed up this theme well when he wrote, in his first collection of essays *Shadow and Act* (1964), about several questions that he claimed were central to his writing: "Who am I, what am I, how did I come to be? What shall I make of the life around me, what celebrate, what reject, how confront the snarl of good and evil which is inevitable?" (59). Ellison's statement of purpose speaks to his interest in the undetermined nature of the individual, a fascination with the past and its existence in the present, and the conscious act of self-creation that defines how an

individual interacts with the world. In my readings these themes appeared again and again in the text. In fact, I became convinced these themes are central to Ellison's work, appearing both in the journey of *Invisible Man*, his most famous fictional creation, and throughout his award-winning essays. After all, central Ellison motifs like the trickster figure, blues singer, or cultural critic are all figures in the midst of self-creation, or as Ellison wrote, "conscious struggle for self-definition" (*Invisible Man* xiv).

This "self-definition" based reading resonates with major authors who were concerned about these same themes during the period Ellison was writing. For example, Ellison's questions of "Who am I, what am I, how did I become," echoed the philosophically charged rhetoric of Albert Camus, Jean Paul Sartre, and other major French existentialists. This thematic connection was strengthened by the fact Camus and Sartre shared Ellison's beliefs about self-creation functioning as a necessary part of individuality.

The thematic links between Ellison and existentialists seemed promising enough that I searched in the Ellison criticism to see if anyone wrote about a connection in Ellison's work. After all, because of Ellison's broad interests, critical inquiry of Ellison spans history, psychology, cultural studies, and philosophy. Specific books on Ellison cover these relationships in terms of jazz, the blues, modernist texts and authors, art, Freudian psychology, communism, and even James Joyce. Unfortunately, what is largely absent or basically glossed over in most of these works is any relationship between Ellison and existentialism. For example, both of Ellison's major biographers, Lawrence Jackson and Arnold Rampersad, spend less than two pages of their noteworthy works addressing the relationship between the author and the movement. This dismissive treatment is even more interesting considering existentialism was the most prominent literary movement during the period Ellison was writing the novel. In

addition, most of the limited space spent on existentialism throughout Ellison criticism was used to link him to tangential figures in the existential movement like Andre Malraux. These critics did not note any significant linkage to major existential figures like Jean Paul Sartre or Albert Camus.

Having failed to find relationships between Ellison and existentialism in the Ellison criticism, I searched existential criticism to see what they wrote about Ellison. His inclusion in this field was also mixed, indicating that Ellison's work is not necessarily considered part of the field's canon. Yet, he was claimed eagerly by some critics in this camp, like George Cotkin, author of the significant cultural work *Existential America* (2003), and Lewis Gordon, the founder of the Black Existential movement. Even so, both of these critics also saw Ellison as largely operating within a broad context of existential thinkers like Malraux or Dostoevsky. Both wrote very little about relationships between Ellison's work and the existentialists who rose to international prominence in the 1940s, like Sartre or Camus.

This article explores the presence and significance of these existential threads. The primary purpose of the article is to explore Ellison's relationship to French existentialism, the most dominant literary and cultural force in post-World War II America, through the lens of Ellison's seminal work *Invisible Man*. As Ellison wrote *Invisible Man* during the postwar era, he became familiar with the major works and figures of the French existential movement. Although he was wary of its European figures and self-centered conclusions, Ellison utilized significant existential themes in his novel to explore notions of individuality, absurdity, self-creation, and authenticity. In fact, Ellison's use and then revision of French existential themes is essential to understanding the overriding message of *Invisible Man*: Ellison's hope for a more polyglot American democracy that transcended the segregated democracy of Ellison's era. Specifically, I

wish to argue that Ellison's *Invisible Man* both demonstrates Ellison's ability to understand and engage in the traditional ideology of French existentialism, and deviates from its individualistic conclusions. Ellison demands that the larger community, not just the solitary individual, must become ethically responsible if the classic existential tenet of authenticity, or living in a position of good faith, is to be achieved.

This argument relies on a historical and cultural context. The cultural existential allusions Ellison references in *Invisible Man* require an established historical connection. Since this context does not currently exist in Ellison criticism, the remainder of the article provides the critical background to establish the prominence of French existentialism in Ellison's cultural psyche. Lastly, the paper explores the treatment of Ellison and existentialism by previous critics and provides a place for my critical reading within this larger conversation.

Existentialism in *Invisible Man*

After World War II, a new philosophical movement called existentialism rose to prominence in the United States. The movement's champions, writers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, were published in almost all of the major New York publications. Their writings, available in France since the 1930s, were focused on core ideas of self-creation once recognition of the world's absurdity, or lack of innate meaning, spurred an individual past to a realization of their own responsibilities. These ideas were popular with a disillusioned intellectual population attempting to comprehend the broken narrative of Western philosophy—a tradition that many saw culminating in the tragedies of the Holocaust, targeting of civilian populations, and use of atomic weapons. The specific theoretical tenets of the movement will be discussed in further detail later in the article.

Existentialism appears throughout the novel *Invisible Man* and eventually culminates in a critique of the self-centered conclusions of the French philosophers. The character Invisible Man, like other existential heroes, struggles to understand his place until he recognizes the innate absurdity of existence and embraces the freedom that emerges from the angst of his realization. It is not until the Invisible Man makes a choice about how he will choose to live and why that choice is important that he finally deviates from typical existential form. This deviation is Ellison's response to and critique of the existentialism promoted by Sartre and Camus.

Existentialism first appears in the novel through a repeated existential theme—the absurd. Although the term itself does not appear until the novel's concluding pages, when it is used again and again, absurdity runs through the novel. For example, Invisible Man's quest takes him from one absurd situation to another. Although this pattern continues through the entire novel, the first three major incidents in the novel: the Battle Royal, the visit to Trueblood's quarters, and the encounter at the Golden Day, illustrate this reoccurring motif. Each incident is characterized by Invisible Man's inability to understand both the incident's cause and effect on him. Incongruous to his worldview, these events traumatize Invisible Man again and again as each absurd situation propels him to the next. Eventually, as the novel nears its conclusion, he begins to recognize and acknowledge the absurdity.

Recognition of and response to absurdity are existential traits. Albert Camus explained in "The Myth of Sisyphus" that society "cannot be tragic or epic today because we are so concerned with one particular part of man that we do not see that our tasks are hopeless. Because we no longer know what is tragic or epical, we are absurd" (Barnes 38). Camus believed that the way to respond to this fallen condition was for man to "realize his lack of tragic or heroic stature, but through struggling, even through only to an inevitable defeat, he will eventually conquer. The

triumph comes in the recognition and the struggle” (38). Therefore, the existential response to absurdity is for an individual to recognize the prevalence absurdity and then choose to face life despite one’s recognition.

Invisible Man follows through the same transition. He is transformed during the Harlem riot when he is attacked by Ras and followers, much in the way that Camus suggests one must be transformed to face life in the absurd. Facing these imminent threats, Invisible Man responded:

I looked at Ras...and recognized the absurdity of the whole night and of the simple yet confounding complex arrangement of hope and desire, fear and hate, that had brought me here still running, and knowing now who I was and where I was and knowing too that I had no longer to run for or from the Jacks and the Emersons and the Bledsoes and Nortons, but only from their confusion, impatience, and refusal to recognize the beautiful absurdity of their American identity and mine...I knew it was better to live out one’s own absurdity than to die for that of others, whether Ras’s or Jack’s. (559)

Invisible Man’s recognition of the limits of social constructions led to an internal struggle and the acknowledgement that creation is better than ignorance. From the hole in which he finishes the novel, Invisible Man later concludes, after giving “absurd answers” to others and seeing that society was “compromised to the point of absurdity,” that “life is to be lived, not controlled; and humanity is won by continuing to play in face of certain defeat” even as “all life seen from the hole of invisibility is absurd” (573, 574, 577, 579).

Ellison's frequent use of the term "absurd" in the novel's concluding passages also bears exploration because it speaks to his interaction with and later revision of the model of French existentialism. The role of the word absurd played a significant function for Sartre and Camus in drawing an individual to recognition of one's freedom. For example, in Sartre's 1939 short story "The Wall," Pablo Ibbieta, a prisoner in the Spanish Civil War, is sentenced to death for refusing to give up the name of a fellow fighter. When he makes up a false location in order to amuse himself by watching the police rush off on a wild goose chase, he inadvertently exposes the new hiding place of his fellow fighter and leads to the fighter's death. The story concludes with Ibbieta laughing manically after his realization of the absurdity of existence. In addition, when Camus published his seminal essay "The Myth of Sisyphus" in book form, the first three sections of the work were titled "An Absurd Reasoning," "The Absurd Man," and "Absurd Creation." Camus' opening sentence in his preface explained that the work deals "with an absurd sensitivity that can be found widespread in the age" (1).

In addition, French existentialism colonized the popular use of the term absurd during the 1940s—with the existential meaning of the term dominating its usage in the literary landscape. According to Ross Murfin, existential themes were essentially linguistically coupled with the word absurd until the emergence of the theater of the absurd in the mid-1950s. Eugene Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, both produced in 1954, helped to change the public perception of the term (2). However, for Ellison, who wrote the 1940s and early 1950s, the term absurd was still loaded with existential connotations. In this context, Ellison's frequent use of the term on one page during the Harlem riots and throughout in the prologue takes on added significance. Most likely, the early 1950s reader would have

recognized existential overtones to the passages, encouraging them to look for similarities or differences with the writings of the French existentialists.

For French existentialists like Camus and Sartre, recognizing the absurdity of life led one to face the angst or despair that accompanies the understanding that one is “condemned to be free,” in the words of Sartre (Cotkin 3). However, the dark nights of the soul that accompany such a realization were also accompanied by recognition that facing the absurd also created action within one’s self. Camus wrote, “I draw from the absurd three consequences, which are my revolt, my freedom, and my passion” (47). In other words, one did not wallow in the self pity that previous beliefs, social structures, and culture were reduced to mere constructions. Instead, Camus argued that life only came from awareness and choices one made after one recognized that he is responsible for those actions. “Being aware of one’s life, one’s revolt, one’s freedom, and to the maximum, is living, and to the maximum,” Camus wrote (46).

Existentialists called the concept of how an individual responded to the despair and its subsequent freedom “authenticity.” Sartre, for example, believed that people who continued to deny their freedom lived in self-deception or a state of bad faith. An inauthentically lived life was one that allowed others or even society to define one’s actions. For this individual, even the belief that someone or something else defined one’s self was simply an abdication of accepting responsibility for what they were really doing—making choices for themselves about themselves. Famously in “Being and Nothingness,” Sartre’s waiter tried to convince himself that he was defined in thought and even movement by the idea of what it meant to be a waiter, when in reality he was the one choosing to decide what he believed society thought it meant to be a waiter (Graham 81-82). Camus argued in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that each situation created its needs and an authentic response was what ultimately provided each individual the opportunity to

be human. Unified response and one moral code were not the end result of existentialism. Instead, what was praised was recognition that action in the face of absurdity literally made the world (Heims 21). This, Camus believed, was Sisyphus' triumph—he knew he would fail, but it was his decision to live and be “master of his days.” An action or struggle, Camus claimed, that “is enough to fill one's heart. [For this] one must imagine Sisyphus happy” (91).

Authenticity, then, is a conscious act of self creation. This act of creation, critic George Cotkin says, is to recognize “that we must take responsibility for our own lives; we must create the world anew” (3). This creation process continues within individuals as they act out choices and responses to situations. Camus noted, “A man's sole creation is strengthened in its successive and multiple aspects: his works” (84).

Invisible Man's move from the recognition of the absurd to a conscious response of self-creation mirrors this progression outlined by Sartre and Camus. As Ellison explained in an interview, “I think you miss the point [of the character's struggles]. The major flaw in the hero's character is his unquestioning willingness to do what is required of him by others” (Chester 15). Ellison's observation is a sentiment expressed by Invisible Man while pilfering Harlem with Dupree when he says, “It didn't occur to me to interfere, or to question. They already had a plan” (546). Therefore, Invisible Man's progression plays out in his eventual decision to go underground in order to choose his own path forward. Ellison noted:

[*Invisible Man*] is a novel about innocence and human error, a struggle through illusion to reality....Before [*Invisible Man*] could have some voice in his own destiny he had to discard these old identities and illusions; his enlightenment couldn't come until then. (Chester 14)

The entire novel, says Ellison, is the process of Invisible Man refusing “to run the risk of his own humanity, which involves guilt,” or what Sartre would call “anguish.” In addition, since Invisible Man continues to live in a state of “bad faith,” rather than authentically, Ellison says that “what the hero refuses to do in each section...leads to further action.” His inauthenticity continues until “he must assert and achieve his own humanity; he can not run with pack and do this—this is the reason for all of the reversals.” Ellison concludes that eventually “the hero discovers what he had not discovered throughout the book: you have to make your own decisions; you have to think for yourself” (Chester 16). As Sartre explains in “Existentialism is a Humanism,” each man eventually realizes that “we ourselves decided our being” (298).

Within the text, the character Rhinehart becomes Invisible Man’s model for the discovery of the potential of self-creation. As Invisible Man flees through the absurd Harlem riots, he is mistaken on several blocks for Rhinehart—a cop-paying bookie, pimp, preacher, fighter, and entrepreneur who is only known on each block by one of his personas. While Invisible Man navigates the neighborhood and begins to understand the worlds that Rhinehart inhabits, he also begins to recognize his own potential for self-creation. He has the ability, he realizes, “to do a Rhinehart” (507). Later, after he retreats underground and prepares to return to society, Invisible Man explains, “My world has become one of infinite possibilities...Step outside the narrow orders of what men call reality and you step into chaos—ask Rhinehart, he’s a master of it—or imagination” (576). Invisible Man sees this possibility as a positive trait and in doing so echoes Sartre’s conclusion, “I am creating a certain image of man as I would have him be. In fashioning myself I fashion man” (292). As Invisible Man continues to explore the concepts of choice and self-creation, he becomes an existential creature. By the time he writes the prologue, Invisible Man’s notes that his personal philosophy saw him through the absurd world, to the despair of

choice, and finally left him with the realization that authenticity demands he lives a life which he alone chooses.

Authenticity, when demonstrated in fictional characters by Camus and Sartre, tended to have a particularly individual manifestation. In addition, it should be noted that Camus and Sartre's work in the 1930s and 1940s were to be less nuanced and more exaggerated in its assertions than their later works. While social responsibility would assume larger role in their future writing, their early work, which was what was published in America during the 1940s, was devoid of a discussion of responsibility for the other. Instead, both men's early works celebrated individual self discovery, almost to the point of hyper-individualism, as the penultimate moment of moral awareness. In Camus' first novel *The Stranger*, published in France in 1938 and in the United States in 1946, the main character Meursault's moment of self discovery is his realization, in the words of Sidney Finkelstein, that "the world is indifferent to human beings and he, in his indifference, has penetrated the secret of reality. He has lived within himself. This is the awareness of truth to life" (115). In Sartre's first novel *Nausea*, published in France in 1938 translated into English in 1949, historian Antoine Roquentin suddenly found that he is overwhelmed with a sense of meaninglessness. Everything from his body to all personal relationships became loathsome and grotesque. Only when he accepted the nausea as a revelation that strips the veneer of order from the absurdity of reality does Roquentin feel peace (126). Both authors' protagonists demonstrated little, if any, concern for anyone else. Meursault even killed another character with little emotion or regret. Other characters attempted to forge relationships with them, including romantic and even erotic interactions. However, the relationships were rebuffed and both novels' moments of illuminations were individual epiphanies with essentially no mention of social place or responsibility.

After Invisible Man's encounters with the absurd demands self-realization and conscious self-creation, Ellison's hero's trajectory bucks this traditional mode of individual existentialism. After all, Invisible Man's journey already showed him powerful black men who self-consciously created their own lives. Both Dr. Bledsoe and Lucius Brockway explain to Invisible Man that the larger world is nothing like the naïve place he imagines it. As Bledsoe tells him, "You don't even know the difference between the way things are and the way they're supposed to be" (142). Both Bledsoe and Brockway also explain that they determine and protect the roles that they have chosen for their lives. However, both are predators, feasting on the status quo and their understanding of it to retain or even gain position and power. In addition, like Camus and Sartre's early protagonists, Bledsoe and Brockway's mindsets are highly individualistic. "I don't owe anyone a thing, son," explains Dr. Bledsoe before he banishes Invisible Man. "This is power set-up, son, and I'm in control" (142).

Invisible Man, however, does not follow their examples in his eventual effort to live an authentic existence. Authenticity for Invisible Man requires another path, a path that involves social effort. As he considers leaving the underground, Invisible Man asserts, "The mind that has conceived a plan of living must never lose sight of the chaos against which that pattern was conceived. That goes for societies as well as for individuals" (580-81). He explains there is relationship between an individual's ability to choose an authentic path and society's ability to do the same. "Thus, having tried to give pattern to the chaos which lives within the pattern of your certainties, I must come out. I must emerge," he continues (581). Having chosen a life in the midst of the absurd, Invisible Man believes he is responsible to help society do the same. In fact, as Invisible Man explains why he preparing to leave his life underground, he says, "Perhaps that's my greatest social crime, I've overstayed my hibernation, since there's a possibility that

even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play” (581). For Ellison’s protagonist, life outside of society becomes inauthentic because if individuals must choose how to face the absurd, then society must also collectively choose their path together.

The art of fiction, for Ellison, fulfills the same social role that *Invisible Man* articulates. Ellison explained in his “Introduction” to the thirtieth edition of *Invisible Man* that he believes the “novel could be fashioned as a raft of hope, perception and entertainment that might help keep us as we tried to negotiate the snags and whirlpools that mark our nation’s vacillating course toward and away from the democratic ideal” (xx-xxi). Fiction is therefore, according to Ellison, a social act that explores the ideas of “What are we? Who are we?...What is it that stopped us from attaining the ideal?” (“The Novel” 760). This social aspect, however, does not negate the personal responsibility the story may describe in its characters or call for in its readers. The danger Ellison writes, is that when fiction fails to lead the reader to the social then it becomes a “cry of despair. Talent, technique and artistic competence are there, but a certain necessary faith in human possibility before the next unknown is not there” (768). Fiction provides, Ellison continues, a space for the individual to

take advantage of the wonderful opportunity which we have to project ourselves into the lives of other people—not to modify these lives but to understand them, to add dimensions to our own sense of wonder and the sense of the possibility of living in a society like this. (768)

This action, Ellison states in another interview, allows fiction to not only describe society’s experience, “it creates it” (Chester 19). The alternative, Ellison concludes, is to live in a society in which “our streets look like circuses...[where] we don’t know who we are” (“The Novel” 768). Inauthenticity, therefore, is the result of authors failing to do their social jobs. It makes

sense, therefore, why Ellison claims, “The hero comes up from underground because the act of writing and thinking necessitated it. He could not stay down there” (Chester 16).

This focus on society as a force for authentic living is not present in Camus and Sartre’s early writing. However, it is replete in Ellison’s. For Ellison, after one understands the complex absurdity of society, one then chooses to respond to it through interaction with others. Life is ultimately a democratic endeavor. And with that backdrop, even the novel’s concluding lines become inclusive and communal rather than individual and exclusive as *Invisible Man* wonders if “on lower frequencies, I speak for you?” (581).

Existentialism in Ellison's New York

The remainder of this article will provide a cultural and historical context to support this existential reading of *Invisible Man*. In particular, the following two sections will explore the prevalence of existentialism in the American literary scene during the 1940s, the time period when Ellison wrote most of *Invisible Man*. This connection between French existentialism and Ellison is necessary because no scholarship has explicitly dealt with this relationship. Therefore, these sections will outline establish Ellison’s connection to existentialism, a connection that is most completely fleshed out in *Invisible Man*. Interestingly, Ellison’s relationship to French existentialism during this decade is similar to his relationship to it in his novel, both started with close interest before providing significant revision.

European existentialism burst onto the postwar New York intellectual scene in a flurry. Promoted as a philosophy of freedom, its proponents found themselves being written about and published in nearly every notable American publication during the mid to late 1940s. Popular magazines like *Time* and *Life* glamorized Jean Paul Sartre’s bohemian lifestyle, the normal

routine focused around Paris cafes. *New Yorker* and *New York Times Magazine* articles focused on the movement reputation for pessimism (Cotkin 100-01).

Partisan Review became European existentialism's most powerful ally. Its 1945 publication of Sartre's "The Case for Responsible Literature" was only the beginning of a furious three year obsession with Sartre and Albert Camus. In 1946, *Partisan Review* produced an entire issue devoted to French life and authors. Over the next two years, nearly every issue contained a review of one of the three's works. In addition, Camus's influential "Myth of Sisyphus" and Sartre's "The Provincial Portrait Gallery" found their first American audiences through the *Review* (Cotkin 109). Other venues were not far behind in publishing the new French material. By 1948 both *politics* and *Yale French Studies* also dedicated entire issues to the existential discussion.

Ralph Ellison's first exposure to the codified tenets of postwar existentialism probably took place in these early publications. Meticulously devoted to engagement in New York's intellectual publications, Ellison often peppered his correspondence with comments about articles in the *Partisan Review*, *New Yorker*, *Commentary*, or other journals (Murray 6, 12; Jackson 417). However, Ellison did not need to wait long before he had a firsthand source for existential information—Richard Wright, the author of *Native Son* (1940) and *Black Boy* (1945).

Richard Wright enjoyed a close friendship with Ellison during the 1940s and Wright's literary ties took him into New York elite literary circles. Ellison was Wright's best man during his second marriage in 1939 and the two enjoyed a close intellectual friendship and correspondence for the next decade (Rowley 177). Wright's early literary success and political affiliations allowed him to maintain an influential circle of friends outside of Harlem. Wright often remarked to friends about Kierkegaard's influence on him, once proclaiming, "Kierkegaard

is one of the great writers of today” (Cotkin 163). So, when patron Dorothy Norman wanted to learn about the new European phenomenon in early 1946, she invited Wright to learn from philosophers Hannah Arendt and Paul Tillich about European existentialism. Weeks later, Wright returned to Norman’s drawing room to meet Jean Paul Sartre himself (Rowley 326). Sartre, in the midst of his second visit to the United States, was viewed by this time as a philosophical celebrity at lectures at Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and Colombia (Cotkin 113). He was eager to meet Wright, whose short story “Fire and Cloud” Sartre included in the debut issue of his new journal *Les Temps Modernes*. By March, Wright reported to Gertrude Stein that “New York is buzzing over existentialism” (Rowley 326). In April, Wright was back in Norman’s drawing room, this time exchanging pleasantries with Albert Camus.

In addition to meeting the existential luminaries, Wright was eagerly devouring their work. Literary historian Michael Fabre documents that Wright started reading Sartre and Camus in *Partisan Review* in 1946. Over the next few years, he read most of Sartre and Camus’ work then published in English (Cotkin 169). Although Ellison’s exact reading schedule is unknown. He wrote familiarly about existentialism in letters to Wright and acknowledged to others that he read Camus closely (Jackson 340, Marino 494). So, although the timeline is blurred, it is an established fact that by the late 1940s Ralph Ellison was aware and reading both Albert Camus and Jean Paul Sartre.

Although Camus and Sartre were certainly not the only leading figures of existentialism, they became its mouthpiece as their work came to epitomize the movement for a fascinated American public. Existentialism also included other leading French existentialists like Simon de Beauvoir, Gabriel Marcel, or Jacques Maritain. These figures were recognized in particular American readerships, like among religious intellectuals in the case of Marcel and Maritain.

However, they were largely ignored by the popular American press in favor of the two literary mouthpieces of the movement. Even, Beauvoir, who was widely recognized for her relationship with Sartre and others and her work in the social sciences, did not have her writing translated at the anywhere near the same rate as Camus or Sartre (Cotkin 95). However, as with Ellison's novel, America's close interest in the French existentialists would also begin to create increased scrutiny.

Eventual New York Disenchantment

The American love affair with French existentialism began to fade by the end of the 1940s, and the split appeared to be mutual on both sides. Camus and Sartre returned from their trips to the United States unimpressed by America's philosophical sincerity. Americans, they both wrote, lacked a sense of anguish when dealing with issues of existence. Instead, Americans replaced despair and dread with bravado, confidence, and naïve optimism. "In general, evil is not an American concept," said Sartre in 1950. "There is no pessimism in American regarding human nature and social organization." Camus said he believed American materialism and optimism drowned out other philosophical concerns (Cotkin 2).

American intellectuals also began to distance themselves from their French counterparts. Comments that existentialism was essentially pessimistic were common themes in later popular and intellectual coverage of the French movement. In addition, postwar American critics were busy trying to create a distinctly "American" literary aesthetic. The desire for "original" American thought and culture drove critics to look to American authors to establish as literary figures (Cotkin 111). In addition, as patriotic American critics distanced themselves from the Stalinist aesthetics that were often tied to the Popular Front critics of the 1930s, it was easier for

them to deal with philosophically complex dead American authors like Henry James than living French authors with socialist ties like Sartre. As George Cotkin explains, “The former could be appropriated more easily, and they could not take a firm stance on issues of particular moment, such as the Cold War, the nature of Stalinism, the Marshall Plan, or nuclear proliferation” (107). Thus, existentialism became over time in the eyes of the American intellectuals a French movement worthy of casual interest, but unable to fill the American literary needs of the postwar moment.

Ellison and Wright’s position regarding existentialism was much more fraught than the early adulation and later criticism they read about in the New York literary world. Early in the existential boom, Ellison and Wright were already weary of their place, as blacks, in the new, largely white, phenomena (Cotkin 105). Race, for example, played a role in Wright’s conversations with both Sartre and Camus. When Wright mentioned to Camus his intention to visit Paris, Camus encouraged him and then animatedly urged him not to stay permanently. Blacks needed to stay and fight in America, Camus strenuously claimed. Both Norman and Wright were shocked by the depth of his convictions (Rowley 327). Sartre was also fascinated by the theme of racial discrimination. “Return from the United States,” his first published comments about his 1946 overseas trip, focused on the racial situation in America.

Although both men continued to read the popular existentialists, Ellison and Wright bristled at what they saw as the Frenchman's simplistic, privileged, and impassioned summations of the status of Black America. During a 1946 trip to France, a tired Wright wrote to Ellison in frustration that he saw the French as naïve (Jackson 340). Ellison was at the time increasingly devoted to the philosophical complexity of black American life. The vigor of black traditions, argued Ellison in a later interview, was one’s role as an intimate observer and participant in

American culture. “One of the greatest advantages of being black,” claimed Ellison, “[is] you have a perspective which is fairly uncluttered if you will use it. By being in it and outside you can evaluate. Housekeepers, bellhops, domestics, have done this for years” (“Indivisible Man” 388). Even as the domestic help was denied social acceptance, they were also privy to events in the bedrooms of their employers. This perspective, continued Ellison, allowed blacks to be “wise in certain ways; they’re wise in the ways of human folly and aspiration....So what better position can you have? A psychiatrist doesn’t have that advantage of observation” (388).

So, in response to Wright’s comments about French naiveté and championing the privilege inherent in black social observation, Ellison wrote back in August of 1946 that black life was inherently philosophically superior to French existentialists. The French, Ellison wrote, had to dive from the height of their philosophy to reach the reality about which they wrote. American blacks, in contrast, spent their day-to-day lives underneath the surface of the water (Jackson 340). The horror and chaos of black life demanded nearly continual navigation of situations that might only be philosophical abstractions for others.

Ellison’s less filtered correspondence with Albert Murray contained similar remarks. In 1953, Ellison wrote to Albert Murray about Wright’s *The Outsider*. Ellison claimed that Wright’s work was unsuccessful because Wright tried to go “elsewhere looking for what [he] already had at home.” Ellison continued, “Wright goes to France for existentialism when Mose, or any blues, could tell him things that would make the cock-eyed Sartre’s head swim” (Murray 43). Murray wrote in response, “Look man, you can loose your hat ass and gas mask farting around with them damned French cats if you don’t know what you are doing” (sic; 48). In a later letter, Murray summed up his response to existentialism before repeating to Ellison the same critique that black life better equipped a black writer than French philosopher to deal with the

American condition. Murray wrote, “It really does look like the French and Europe have had it. It was good but it aint enough for now and it damn sure dont spell future. I too have learned from it, but you have to admit in the end you actually find less and less use for it every day.” Then, remembering his experience with other expatriates in Paris, Murray continued:

[I] spent most of my time there arguing that we already knew stuff much more important than the crap they claimed that only Anouilh & Sartre & Co. could teach them. Sure there’s plenty there that I got to see and get, but I got to use it in terms of what’s back over yonder. (sic; 111)

Yet, even as Ellison and Wright recoiled from many of the formal stances and tracts of existentialism, existential themes began to play a more prominent role in both of their writings. Wright, for example, continued to read existential works long after his first return from Paris in 1947. One French journalist in 1947 remembered that Wright brought up the subject on his own, and defended the philosophical belief when she questioned some of its tenets (Rowley 353). However, it is Wright’s novel *The Outsider* (1953) that Wright was most closely linked to existentialism. Finished while living in Paris, the novel was Wright’s most philosophical writing, with philosophy, according to Granville Hicks, replacing sociology as its driving force (Cotkin 169). Wright opened the novel with a section entitled “Dread,” quoting Kierkegaard in a chapter’s epigraph, and concluded the novel with another section dedicated to Kierkegaard’s work “Decision” (Cotkin 173-74). However, Wright’s novel was not just limited to Kierkegaard but riffed incessantly on Sartre, often playing with many of Sartre’s most famous dictums as his character progressed in a Sartrean spiral from nihilism to despair to self-consciousness to guilt for living in bad faith (173-75). Critics, even Ellison, were quick to notice the novel’s existential

themes. Nelson Algren, summing up the general consensus, wrote in *Paris Review* that *Outsider* was Wright's attempt "to write like a Frenchman" (Rowley 409).

Even for Ellison, despite his criticisms, existentialism was a formative intellectual influence. Ellison tacitly acknowledged, even in the midst of his distancing, that he was aware of and understood the figures and ideas that he criticized. In addition, Ellison's critiques of existentialism may be part of the reason critics have been slow to associate him with the existentialism movement. However, Ellison's most eloquent response to existentialism was *Invisible Man*, where he dramatized the social implications he claimed were a necessary response to the existential condition. The novel became the incarnation of his personal critiques.

In many ways, the Ellison's larger relationship to existentialism was duplicated within the novel. Both include a period of significant interest, in which existential themes are drawn upon and acknowledged. However, as strict existential themes no longer filled the social role envisioned by Ellison, they were reappraised and found to be lacking. As before, the gulf between Ellison's views and those of the existentialists provides a window into Ellison's beliefs about the role of an individual in a larger society.

The Larger Existential Tradition

Since Ellison scholarship is largely silent on Ellison's relationship to Sartre and Camus, it is important to document the relationship critics do see Ellison's work playing in the existential tradition. The final two sections of this article explore in detail Ellison's critical relationship to the existential field. In doing so, these sections provide space in this conversation for Ellison's critique of French existentialism within *Invisible Man*.

Existentialism is a broad and inclusive category, with various critics claiming an array of authors as existential proponents. Definitions of major terms allow critics to justify the inclusion of selected literary and philosophical figures. Many existential critics find it productive to create a distinction between authors who overtly prescribe to existential tenants and authors who covertly maintain existential worldviews. For example, the theologian Paul Tillich wrote about a distinction between existential and existentialism. While existential referred to “the human attitude,” existentialism was “a philosophical school” devoted to “analysis of the human predicament” (Cotkin 4). However, in this article, definitions by critic Lewis Gordon are used to distinguish between the distinct tradition of existentialism and a larger mindset. Gordon wrote in *Existence in Black* that the term existentialism can be regarded “as a fundamentally European historical phenomenon. It is, in effect, the history of European literature that bears that name.” In contrast, the philosophy of existence is a larger “philosophical question premised upon concerns of freedom, anguish, responsibility, embodied agency, sociality, and liberation” (Gordon 3). Within this article, the terms existentialism and the philosophy of existence follow Gordon’s definition. Existentialism refers to a particular literary and philosophical movement that reached its peak in France following World War II. The philosophy of existence refers to a larger tradition that includes a variety of literary and philosophical participants who are concerned with ideas of freedom and responsibility.

This broader philosophy of existence is usually seen as a late nineteenth century revolt by several philosophers against a number of assumptions of traditional Western philosophy. For these figures, the Cartesian assumption of “I think, therefore I am” was flawed. Existence, they argued, was the primary site of human essence, with the individual navigating in a rooted, tangible world. Traditional Cartesian inspired-idealistic philosophers like Hegel and Kant give,

in the worlds of Margaret Chatterjee, “the cognitive subject, the knower, a leading role in the constructing of the world.” The difference with existentialism, Chatterjee continues:

...is that whereas idealism in its manifold forms leads to some kind of ‘loss’ of the actual world, existentialism seeks above all to insist on the concreteness of the world, and this it can do only by abandoning the notion of the cognitive subject and putting the living person in its place. (19)

This ontological transition, seen in the works of so-called irrationalist philosophers like Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche, Henri Bergson, and Soren Kierkegaard altered the basic assumptions about the role and responsibilities of the individual. Hegel or Kant’s models declared that rational individuals could understand larger moral frameworks by which thought and decisions could be determined, creating the loss of the actual world described above as their moral frameworks transcended base existence. Irrationalist philosophers responded to this in a variety of ways, but all centering on what William Barrett called “irrational man.”

Schopenhauer, for example, valued the primacy of will, based on the illogical and directionless impulses of desire, as the central motivation for human behavior. Nietzsche declared that man is a being who can create values. Bergson focused on creativity as a practical, individual facility (Chatterjee 19). It was through the Danish philosopher Kierkegaard, however, that many of the main themes of the philosophy of existence including despair and alienation were explored.

Soren Kierkegaard maintained that individuals live in danger of being submerged by a perceived existence focused on objects, routine, and convention. Individuals, Kierkegaard claimed, must reach a state of necessary dread, also called angst, that draws them away from the false structure of society and forces them to confront death and the meaningless of life (Monk 102). This confrontation forced individuals to make decisions—decisions about one’s self that

allowed an individual to obtain an authentic sense of freedom and being. Thus, as Walter Kaufmann noted, “Ethics is for [Kierkegaard] not a matter of seeing the good but of making a decision” (17). Although Kierkegaard believed that confronting dread brought man ultimately to God through a personal decision to have faith, Kierkegaard’s legacy is much more secular. Most philosophers credit Kierkegaard for inspiring a succession of philosophers including Heidegger and Sartre that focused on individual responses to the absurd in an amoral world.

When viewed from the perspective of the philosophy of existence, existential critics sweep with a broad brush. Formal self-identification by a philosopher or author with existentialism, after all, is not a requirement for existential critics to claim their inclusion in the field. In addition, the breadth of the philosophers referred to above and the fact that, as Walter Kaufmann points out, they would probably resist being assigned to membership in any movement, points to the difficulty in outlining a concrete chronology of existentialism (11). However, each philosopher is notable because of the alternative responses they posited to dominant Cartesian philosophical models of their times. Their “repudiation of the adequacy of any body of beliefs whatever, and especially of systems,” in the words of Kaufmann, inspired the post-World War II generation of philosophers and authors that would later form the more formal movement of existentialism (12). As Lewis Gordon points out in his attempt to establish a unified tradition between these varied philosophical and literary figures, they all address “problems of freedom, anguish, dread, responsibility, embodied agency, sociality, and liberation. [They] addresses these problems through a focus on the human condition” (“African American Philosophy” 34). This foundation is important because helps explain why critics who choose to link Ellison to existential philosophy do so through a variety of literary ancestors and several instances of tepid self-identification on Ellison’s part.

Ellison and the Philosophy of Existence

In terms of Ellison's connections to existential thought, most of the infrequent Ellison scholars who even choose to address his relationship to this field place him within this larger camp of the philosophy of existence. Esther Merle Jackson was one of the first to make this connection in 1962 in "The American Negro and the Image of the Absurd." There she linked Ellison to a tradition she follows through Dostoevsky, Malraux, and eventually Sartre. These authors, Jackson claims explore man's "alienation from the larger community, his isolation within abstract walls, his loss of freedom, and his legacy of despair" (359). Critics Mark Busby and Wesley Barnes saw Ellison's primary ties to existentialism as a broader connection to Andre Malraux. Seminal Ellison biographers Lawrence Jackson and Arnold Rampersad barely touched the subject at all, each spending less than two pages discussing Ellison's explicit relationship to existential thought. Lewis Gordon, who eagerly claims Ellison within the confines of the black existential movement, writes Ellison's existential leanings only bear an "affinity" to existential figures like Sartre (*Existence* 73). Instead, Gordon insists that Ellison's place in the existential canon, like DuBois, Fanon, and Toni Morrison, is due to the fact that the authors "have shown us, anxiety, dread, and despair was in the modern world's underside, in the blackness that it often sought to hide in its theoretical and aesthetic moments of self-representation." Their response, Gordon claims, was an alternative to the European "continent's response to a set of problems that date from the moment human beings faced problems of anguish and despair" ("African American Philosophy" 34). Even existential critic George Cotkin, who titled one of his chapters "'Cold Rage': Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison" in his book *Existential America* is the critic most eager to place Ellison within the confines of traditional existentialism, acknowledges that

Ellison's existential themes often only run tangentially through the blues and a literary ancestry that claims Dostoevsky and Malraux (175-76).

Ellison's exposure to the broader themes of the philosophy of existence began at Tuskegee and intensified during his early days in Harlem. Albert Murray remembered that Ellison was a voracious reader at Tuskegee. Tutored by faculty members like Morteza Sprague and Walter Williams, Ellison eagerly began exploring the work of T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, and early modern authors. However, by the time Ellison left Tuskegee he was actively reading contemporary authors like Eugene O'Neil, William Faulkner, and, one of Ellison's most influential influences, Andre Malraux (Murray xxi).

Andre Malraux was a leading French intellectual, author, critic, adventurer, and eventually statesman. His novel *Man's Fate*, published in 1933, cemented his reputation as an international figure. The work traces several figures involved in a socialist revolution in Shanghai, China. As the novel progresses, each character explores different paths before defining their futures in moments of self-determination. In *Man's Hope*, published in English in 1938, Malraux fictionalized the Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno. Unamuno popularized the metaphor "consciousness is a virus" as part of his belief in the profound personal tragedy of the human mind (Jackson 339).

Malraux was never closely identified with Sartre, Camus, and the main figures of existentialism. However, his writings were replete with entries about the meaning of life, presence of death, chaotic absurdity of life, and necessity for the individual, as he wrote in *Man's Hope*, to "organize the Apocalypse" of life. Several existential critics are quick to explore these themes within the context of the philosophy of existence. For example, Wesley Barnes noted that Malraux's characters commit themselves to action because only in "the arena of killing,

living, dying, suffering, and agonizing can a man derive some real meaning from life and give meaning to life” (116). However, Malraux’s unwillingness to align himself with Camus and Sartre set him apart from the traditional movement of existentialism.

The influence of Malraux followed Ellison from Tuskegee in his move to Harlem. In Ellison’s early days in the city, Langston Hughes lent him two books by Malraux, *Man’s Fate* (1933) and *Days of Wrath* (1935). Hughes, who was also staying at the YMCA, took a liking to Ellison and guided him in his first associations and early reading in New York (Rampersad 82). Under the guidance of Hughes and later Richard Wright, Ellison continued to voraciously acquire Malraux texts. Albert Murray remembered seeing copies of *Man’s Fate*, *The Conquerors* (1928), *The Royal Way* (1930), and *Man’s Hope* (1937) on his shelf during his early Harlem days (*Trading Twelves* xxi). Later in life, Ellison would delight in telling interviewers that he “was spending \$25 a volume for Malraux’s *The Psychology of Art*” during the same time he was walking around with holes in his shoes. Ellison claimed that Malraux’s “blending of art history, philosophy, and politics was more important than having dry feet” (Jackson 369). Wright also led Ellison to other authors considered to be part of the philosophy of existence circle like Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky.

Ellison, however, was eager throughout his life to associate himself with Malraux. In a 1963 interview with Allen Geller, Ellison responded to the question if he was existential writer by saying “would be existential in terms of André Malraux rather than Sartre. It would be in terms of Unamuno, let’s say, without the religious framework, rather than Camus’ emphasis” (76). Ellison’s comparison pitted the members of the larger philosophical movement against the more dogmatic leaders of existentialism. In addition, the comment also brought up a frequent Ellison criticism over the overt presentation of philosophy in literature. For example, Sartre’s

overtly philosophical agenda, Ellison claimed, at the expense of the novel's literary value.

Malraux, in contrast, incorporated existential thought into his work without allowing philosophy to supplant characters. For Ellison the novel's form and its message should be intertwined without bothersome overt preaching of a particular agenda.

This criticism appeared again, for example, when Ellison spoke of Richard Wright's existentialism, cementing in the minds of some critics the relationship between Malraux and Ellison. When asked about Wright's overtly existential novel *The Outsider* (1953), Ellison replied, "I think he was writing better existential fiction when he was writing *Uncle Tom's Children*" (1938). In *The Outsider*, Ellison claimed, Wright "talked ideas instead of dramatizing them. But there is an existentialist tradition within American Negro life." In order to clarify, Ellison explained, "Philosophy in art should be dramatized, it should be part of the given situation, part of the motivations of the characters, a part of their way of confronting life. This is dramatized" (Geller 84). For critics, who saw Malraux as part of the larger philosophy of existence school, Ellison's preference for Malraux's less overt philosophy cemented his position in that camp. In addition, the overt criticism of Wright's association with French existentialism also cemented a perceived critical split between the philosophy of existence and existentialism.

Ellison's relationship to Malraux, however, was not Ellison's only link to the philosophy of existence. Ellison himself frequently acknowledged a link between black experience and the tradition of the philosophy of existence. Ellison believed that the black experience was a lived existential one. In a 1974 interview with John Hersey, Ellison explained that black identity, even if based on nothing more than appearance and culture, placed black Americans outside the norms of society. Therefore, in order to navigate their humanity and the overwhelming absurdity of their situation, blacks "were thrown upon our own resources and sense of life." The result,

claimed Ellison, was that “you were forced to be existential in your outlook” (807-808). The relationship between self and other of such an existence fascinated Ellison. He wrote that blacks consciously choose the mask they would present in various social situations. Ellison elaborated to Hersey:

For years white people went through Grand Central Station having their luggage carried by Ph.D.’s. They couldn’t see the Ph.D.’s because their race and class attitudes had trained them to see only the uniforms and the dark faces, but the Ph.D.’s could see them and judge them on any number of levels. (806)

Ellison saw this conscious performance as permeating all levels black culture from normal social interaction to the intricate complexity of Black American art forms, such as the blues and jazz. He told Allen Geller, “There is an existential tradition within American Negro life and, of course, that comes out of the blues and spirituals” (Geller 84). “The blues,” Ellison claimed, “is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy by squeezing it from a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism” (“Richard Wright’s Blues” 129). Therefore, the blues, and its accompanying mindset, became a combination of acknowledgement of and response to the absurd. In this manner, the tradition of self recognition and creation in the philosophy of existence became an ideal form to draw upon. Ellison could address black life while avoiding, in his own words:

...certain ideological formulas [that] were recommended as solutions, but I myself felt that they were reductive, that they overemphasized the negative aspects of our conditions while leaving unnoticed the tragic-comic transcendence

through which we had survived and remained hopeful, both as individuals and as a people. (“Bearden” 838)

It is easy to understand why, considering Ellison’s placement by critics and himself within the camp of the philosophy of existence and his criticism of the leaders of existentialism, Ellison is rarely mentioned with Camus or Sartre. However, Ellison’s resistance to formal existentialism does not mean that he fails to interact with works of Sartre and Camus. Instead, it means that Ellison’s personal philosophy fits well, according to himself and critics, within the tradition of the larger philosophy of existence. Nonetheless, affiliation with the philosophy of existence does not exclude the fact that Ellison interacted with the wave of French existentialism that dominated across the postwar American intellectual landscape. In fact, not only did Ellison address existentialism within its own terms, he provided within *Invisible Man* a critique of its self-centered, socially-isolated results. This relationship deserves future space in the discussion of Ellison and his place within the cannon of major authors of the philosophy of existence.

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