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## LOVE BETWEEN SEPARATION AND CONTINUITY The Poetics of Natality in Ralph Ellison

by Michael Stone-Richards

They just don't recognize no continuance of anything after that:  
not love, not remembrance, not understanding, sacrifice, compas-  
sion—nothing.

—Ralph Ellison, Juneteenth

The loss of the past is the fall into colonial servitude.

—Simone Weil, "À propos de la question coloniale"

André Breton articulated a powerfully held belief amongst the Surrealists when he wrote that "There is no solution outside of love," something with which the French, Lacanian-inflected culture of Psycho-Analysis agreed when, after taking the epistemology of the cure—its limits and even possibility—to aporetic ends, they would come to realize that the only cure worthy of the name would be that produced by love (301). Wladimir Granoff acknowledged this in his way when, many years after the split with Jacques Lacan, he would nevertheless say that "all the history of analysis is a story of love," and Granoff makes this comment in the context of his concern with continuity and group formations and the way in which the historical awareness of the group is made part of its continuing conditions of being, for which Granoff's term is *filiations* (Weill et al. 54).<sup>1</sup> There is no thinking on love that does not run up against the problem of continuity, the nature of radical separation, and the dynamics of unconscious desire, and there is a surprisingly stable core of concerns in this comprehension of love worthy of being considered in terms of philosophical anthropology.

Allow me, then, to begin these reflections on the thinking of love in Ralph Ellison by first quoting from *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (1609), followed by an Elizabethan art song, Thomas Campion's "What then is loue but mourning" set by Philip Rosseter (1601). The opening quatrain of Sonnet 1 reads:

From fairest creatures we desire increase,  
That thereby beauty's rose might never die,  
But as the ripper should by time decease  
His tender heir might bear his memory. (Booth 4)

There is readily available a neo-Platonic reading of these verses, indeed, of the entire sonnet sequence, terms which can readily be modernized in Psycho-Analytic language, the core of which would say that there is an internal relation between beauty and goodness such that if a subject can but feel the attraction to one then this attraction, that is, at the level of felt experience, would also be the condition and trigger to the other. The dynamics of this attraction are nothing other than *eros* (which is here *desire* rhyming with *fire*), hence it will be asked in Ellison's *Juneteenth*, "Fire! Why my Lord, what did he want with *fire*?" (101.) Desire animates the recognition of beauty and goodness such that it should want to see reproduced in the world more exempla of themselves, more beauty and goodness, so that desire itself might also be renewed and feed not merely upon itself (Narcissus as pathology) but upon another in reciprocal renewal and joy. Desire, then, not only is birth, but reproduction and, ultimately, as the first seventeen sonnets in Shakespeare's cycle explore, desire needs, is, in a powerful sense, population:

From fairest creatures we desire increase,  
That thereby beauty's rose might never die,  
But as the ripener should by time decrease  
His tender heir might bear his memory.

Birth, reproduction, and population point, at the same time, to continuity; but there cannot be continuity—the *bearing of memory*—without the threat of separation, and here I do not mean something so obvious as—but not for all that trivial—there cannot be love without the possibility of loss. No, rather, that there is already a politics of *bearing of memory* at the heart of desire's representation to itself of the possible reference for birth-reproduction-population, whence the Elizabethan art song famously set by Rosseter which opens:

What then is loue but mourning?  
What desire, but a selfe-burning?  
Till shee that hates doth loue returne,  
Thus will I mourne, thus will I sing,  
Come away, come away, my darling. (Campion 29)

I construe these verses as both a statement about representation and reference, that is, that the lyric self is engaged in a particular performance of the status of its own self-division and enactment of division (*selfe-burning*, as one verse says, which language in Shakespeare's Sonnet 1 is *self-substantial fuel* in the absence of love's return) simultaneously with the status of reference, that is, love in a world which possibly transcends my desires and longings which, in other words, might be resonant with a world enriched *by*—populated *with*—the increase of creatures as evidence of love where memory might find a *stay*, may, that is, be borne. Failure of reference here would point to the *selfe-burning* (not merely immolation but consumption) of mourning, and even the scattering of the elements of self no longer capable of recursive consolidation.

And Ellison in all this? I should like to make the following large claim through Ellison: the work of Ellison, like any founding literature that would seek to mark itself historically, which is to say, phylogenetically, as African American, is marked by—obsessed

with—continuity.<sup>2</sup> Within Ellison’s thought and African American literature, the image *par excellence* of this obsession with continuity—at once materialist and semiotic—is the family, the power of which is captured, for example, in the unfinished novel *Juneteenth* in the boy preacher Bliss’s rendition of separation as follows: “. . . And we, let’s *count it again*, brothers and sisters; let’s *add it up*. Eyeless, tongueless, drumless, danceless, songless, hornless, soundless, sightless, dayless, nightless, wrongless, rightless, motherless, fatherless—*scattered*” (124, emphasis added). This scene of separation followed by dissemination and concomitantly errancy, a choreography in the horizontal dimension, is implicitly scored in relation to the stillness and immobility of Hickman seated by the bedside of Bliss / the Senator, a choreography enacted in the vertical plane (“*Wait, wait!* the Senator’s mind cried *beneath* the melodic line of Hickman’s reminiscing voice” (Ellison, *Juneteenth* 140, emphasis added).<sup>3</sup> As Hickman sits at the bedside of the wounded Senator, in a secondary state, passing in and out of consciousness, he meditates, almost in spite of himself, on the nature and relation of separation and what he characterizes as *unkillable continuity* (166), and it is no accident that he does so not by considering the black family *per se*, but rather the family consisting of a (perhaps “white”) child nurtured, raised by the Black Caregiver / mother-figure in a dynamic configuration of separation and belonging:

I tell you, Bliss, when it comes to chillum, women just ain’t gentlemen, and the fight between her kind of woman [the white woman coming out of nowhere to claim Bliss as her own stolen from her by “gipsy niggers”] and ours goes way back to the beginning. Back, I guess, to when women found that the only way they could turn over the responsibility of raising a child to another woman was to turn over some of the child’s love and affection along with it. They been battling ever since. (Ellison, *Juneteenth* 155, 160)

Such is the deep mutual implication of competing maternities of raising and loving a child that Hickman can say that not only the child but “They have got to be weaned—our women, I mean, the nursemaids” (161), for when puberty comes there awaits another kind of pain for these nursemaids / mother-figures as, in a powerful inversion of social roles, it is the child who withdraws, and violently so, from the mother-figure:

Come the teen time, what we used to call the “smell-yourself” time, when the sweat gets musty and you start to throb, they cast out the past and start out new—baptized into Caesar’s way, Bliss. Which is the price the grown ones exact for the privilege of their being called “miss” and “mister.” So self-castrated of their love they pass us by, boy, they pass us by. . . . Even their beloved black tit becomes an empty bag to laugh at and they grow deaf to mammy’s lullabies. What’s wrong with those folks, Bliss, is they can’t stand continuity, not the true kind that binds man to man and Jesus to God. . . . They can’t stand continuity because if they could everything would have to be changed; there’d be more love among us, boy. But the first step in their growing up is to learn how to *spurn* love. *They have to deny it by law*, boy. (162)<sup>4</sup>

The law of separation, which is here the denial of love, is then configured in a remarkable image at once acoustic and visual as the cutting of the cords—that is, the second umbilical cords for the second death that makes possible and secures symbolization—floats away like a balloon but at the same time causes a pain that bears the mark of law, a law simultaneously of sociality and animality:

Oh, sure Bliss; you can cut that cord and zoom off like a balloon and rise high—I mean that cord woven of love, of touching, ministering love, that’s tied to a babe with its first swaddling clothes—but the cord don’t shrivel and die like a navel cord beneath the first party dress or the first long suit of clothes. Oh no, it parts with a cry like a rabbit torn by a hawk in the winter snows and it numbs quick and glazes like the eyes of a sledge-hammered ox and the blood don’t show, it’s like a wound that’s cauterized. It snaps with the heart’s denial back into the skull like a worm chased by a razor-beaked bird, and once inside it snarls, Bliss; it snarls up the mind. It won’t die and there’s no sun inside to set so it can stop its snakish wiggling. It bores reckless excursions between the brain and the heart *and kills and kills again unkillable continuity*. (Ellison, *Juneteenth* 165–66, emphasis added)

This is a remarkable lyric passage for its presentation of law as separation, of law as repetition (*again* may be the sacred word in the poetics of a J. H. Prynne but here it is the poetics of fatality) and law as tragedy, that is, necessity, as this condition “kills and kills *again*.” What? That which is unkillable, namely, *unkillable continuity*. Finally, this passage is remarkable for its schematization of inheritance as phylogenetic condition, for this condition “won’t die and there’s no sun inside to set so it can stop its snakish wiggling.” This is the non-dialectic condition of which Hickman and Bliss / the Senator are moments, and this the condition phylogenetically in which the *American* family at the level of representation is entailed, though the *burden* of representing this condition has been made that of the African American family, for the family within African American cultural history is implicitly a vehicle (to use a term from James Baldwin to which I shall return) of suspect transmission, is, indeed, at the same time that it is a vehicle of necessarily suspect transmission, also a vehicle of radical separation—not only the separation (fragmentation, scattering) of family members through the sale in slavery, but also separation from the grounds of natality (a still operant if fading fiction), but above all: (i) the permanently ambiguous separation from maternal presence necessary to successful symbolization; (ii) the permanently ambiguous (and violent) separation from childhood (*la mort de l’enfance* as condition of symbolization discussed by Serge Leclair in *On tue un enfant* [*A Child Is Being Killed*]<sup>5</sup>); from which (iii) there may ensue a phylogenetic inheritance of fragmented, troubled symbolization, the drama of which is the attempted recuperation of the conditions of natality (which Bliss renders as being tongueless, drumless, songless, motherless, etc). One finds this in Du Bois’s

Do bana coba, gene me, gene me!  
Do bana coba, gene me, gene me!  
Ben d’ nuli, nuli, nuli, ben d’ le

passed down from his grandfather's grandmother "knowing as little as our fathers what its words may mean" (233). This extraordinary sound-poem from Du Bois, for it is nothing less, may be taken as the very image of this simultaneous loss and attempted recuperation of the conditions of natality / fragmented symbolization. Natality, though related to place, is not first and foremost a matter of the place of birth, but rather of the fact of birth: we are creatures for death—beings-toward-death—and finitude as Heidegger argued, but as Arendt argued with no less force, we are creatures of natality, that is, creatures who are born, and, more over, born into the world in such a way that the narrative of our place in the world participates as an important feature of the world, namely that it is narratively constructed and open, so for each individual natality is intimately linked to the possibilities of narrative or self-authorship. Where radical constraints are imposed upon this capacity of narrative self-construction—through displacements, radical instabilities, programmed failures of symbolization, conditions of pathological fear, etc.—then liberty, the ability to act in consort with one's peers, the ability recursively to conceive oneself as so acting, is curtailed and with it honor and the possibilities which stem from continuity and union. The loss of a native land is not alone the radical loss. The continual re-enactment of the absence of self-authorship does, however, serve to make fragile the terms—and *links*, in Ellison's language<sup>6</sup>—of natality. Natality, thus, in Ellison's oeuvre, both the imaginative and critical oeuvre—is the fragile medium through which the possibilities of love (that is, the felt experience of *unkillable continuity*) and separation (that is, the rupture) are played out. Ellison, who rarely speaks explicitly, it must be said, of love person to person, dramatized this problematic of love caught between separation and continuity in the form of the symbolization of a child, Bliss (placed in what the Rev. Daddy Hickman thinks of as a box as part of his churchly theatrics, but which box, for the child, is a coffin), and the loss of that child, Bliss, who will separate himself from Hickman and the Black world in the process of becoming a Senator and "racist" (Ellison, *Juneteenth* 159–60). Here is the dramaturgy of radical separation as division: "But though they took us like a great black giant that had been chopped up into little pieces and the pieces buried; though they deprived us of our heritage among strange scenes in strange weather; divided and divided us again . . ." (Ellison, *Juneteenth* 124). And here is the extension of the dramaturgy to the terms of re-birth, that is, natality, where heat, the transcendent fire of the vibrating Word, re-animates: ". . . Amen, stirring, and right there in the midst of all our death and buriedness, the voice of God spoke down the Word" to make the dry bones live and with it the recovery of the possibility of once more acting in consort with the narrative universe as "we were rebirthed dancing . . . rebirthed from the earth of this land. . . . So now we had a new language and a brand-new song to put flesh on our bones," indeed, "We had a new name and a new blood, and we had a new task . . ." (126, 127). Everything in the role and conception of Hickman and Bliss—right down to the manner in which each blurs into the other's voice, or the indeterminacy of Bliss's "race"—points to this new task as function of natality as condition of love and continuity, for the task of Hickman, of the narrative of which he is part with Bliss, is to overcome the biblical scattering of linguistic natality. When Bliss preaches of the scattering of the bodily parts—almost echoing Billie Holiday's song of dismemberment "All of Me"—the diction and action of scattering is deeply biblical and evokes not only the punishment for the hubris of the Tower of Babel, but evokes, too, the paradoxes of dissemination in the creation of difference, languages, plurality, and

errancy as function of radical separation and fragmentation.<sup>7</sup> Within the American system of representation and reference the black family has borne the burden of this logic of separation, difference, and errancy. Ellison's work, but especially so the unfinished novel *Three Days Before the Shooting...* and *Juneteenth*, the novel derived from this unfinished work, seeks an act of recursive re-founding of the American mode of representation in which natality would be the organizing principle, for this is how, in his acceptance speech for *Invisible Man* at the National Book Award ceremony, he brings together, or so sought to bring together, the things that mattered to him: "the mood of personal responsibility for democracy" in the American condition as explored by the classical nineteenth-century novelists for which writers "the Negro was the gauge of the human condition as it waxed and waned in our democracy" (Ellison, "Brave Words" 102, 104).<sup>8</sup> What is most telling, however, is the way in which he works the continuities between (American) democracy and love, namely, with natality as the middle term:

We who struggle with form and with America should remember Eidothea's advice to Menelaus when in the *Odyssey* he and his friends are seeking their way home. She tells him to seize her father, Proteus, and to hold him fast "however he may struggle and fight. He will turn into all sorts of shapes to try you," she says, "into all the creatures that live and move upon the earth, into water, into blazing fire; but you must hold him fast and press him all the harder. When he is himself, and questions you in the same shape that he was when you saw him in his bed, let the old man go; and then, sir, ask which god it is who is angry, and how you shall make your way home homewards over the fish-giving sea. (Ellison, "Brave Words" 105)

Then adds Ellison: "The way home we seek is that condition of man's being at home in the world, which is called love, and which we term democracy" ("Brave Words" 106). In other words, hold down a parent, the *father*, Proteus-like, and gain from him a key to the return to the native land, which cannot but be the condition of childhood, understood as the potency of birth and thus potentiality itself.<sup>9</sup> The way home is, then, nothing less and nothing more than, the overcoming of separation. Allow me, however unlikely it may at first seem, to conclude with a passage from James Baldwin speaking of Alex Haley's *Roots*:

*Roots* is a study of continuities, of consequences, of how a people perpetuate themselves, how each generation helps to doom, or helps to liberate, the coming one—the *action of love, or the effect of the absence of love, in time*. It suggests, with great power, how each of us, however unconsciously, can't but be the vehicle of the history which has produced us. Well, we can perish in this vehicle, children, or we can move on up the road. (765, emphasis added)

Auden said something similar in his (revised) poem on the death of Freud, and this may be the conclusion of my reflections and response to Kenneth Warren's opening debate about *What (rather than When) Was African American Literature?*, namely, that within the terms of love and the anthropology of separation to be found in Ellison and his peers, either the *idea of America* comes to be celebrated precisely when the conditions of Jim Crow are

overcome or are no longer operant, or, the failure of the realization of human potential leaves us with human waste,<sup>10</sup> in which case the subject and techniques of reflection are no longer African American literature *per se* but Biopolitics, a regime of discourse shaped by the power over life where life is regarded as a resource—aspects of which resource happen to be located in human beings. The politics thereby implied are quite grim, to be sure. These possibilities are well within the terms of Ellison and his peers and speak of the need for a new ethic and politics of love, of the population and reproduction of desire in continuous acts of shared world-making.

#### NOTES

1. Cf. Granoff.
2. It is curious, given Warren's epistemological aim to re-configure the idea of an African American literature away from race to broader, more encompassing questions of class and justice, that the title of his book is not the more radical *When was African American Literature?* For the initial responses provoked by Warren's DuBois Lectures at Harvard, cf. Edwards, Nielson, and Michaels.
3. For a more detailed account of the performance of separation in Ellison, cf. Stone-Richards.
4. Implicit in *Juneteenth*, in the figure of Bliss no less than the worshipping women, is a confrontation with what may be called the *confusion of affect* generated within and from a confusion of tongues—the tongue which, in the Epistle of James, is held to be a tongue of fire—which is to say, an economy of erotic turbulence for which worship is at once a technology of projection and containment mediating eros and agape. Cf. Ferenczi. This problematic of confusion of affect would need to be explored in relation to the idea touched on above of suspect transmission within the framework of the family.
5. Cf. Leclair.
6. Cf. Ellison, "My Strength Comes from Louis Armstrong" 265.
7. Cf. Genesis 11: 1–9.
8. We might consider how, today, the gauge for our global condition, its dispossessions and frailties, is the undocumented figure. Cf. Debord 1592.
9. Here could be the place for a thought-experiment in which one might set in juxtaposition a reading of Ellison on potentiality with Ezra Pound's "The Return" (1912)!
10. Cf. Bauman; also *From the Other Side / South*.

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