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## *The Ambiguities of Dreaming in Ellison's Invisible Man*

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. . . It was a strange evening. . . .  
. . . Under the spell of the reefer I . . . descended, like Dante,  
into . . . depths. And *beneath the swiftness of the hot tempo*  
*there was a slower tempo and a cave and I entered it and looked*  
*around*. . . —Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*<sup>1</sup>

“THE ARTIST,” Ellison has stressed, must be capable of descending “into the deeper level of his consciousness,” opening himself to an “inner world where reason and madness mingle with hope and memory and endlessly give birth to nightmare and to dream.” This “inner,” oneiric universe is as much the “province” of the creator as it is of “the psychiatrist.”<sup>2</sup> And in *Invisible Man* dreams, drug-induced nightmares, and other hallucinatory states of consciousness become Ellison’s “province” as he explores human personality and imagination in depth. A black American author penetrating, in his fiction, through the socially visible persona—above all, through stereotypes and formulas which have conventionally, and delusively, defined black identity in America—Ellison becomes a surveyor of “activity, dreamlike yet intense,” transpiring “on the dark side” of the “mind.”<sup>3</sup> He seeks a fuller understanding of human consciousness by probing its dream-plots and hallucinated images. Criticism, however, which has steadily contributed to our understanding of Ellison’s novel over the years, has yet to grapple satisfactorily with this dimension of his art.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> All references to *Invisible Man* in this article are to the Vintage Books Edition (New York, 1972), noted parenthetically in the text.

<sup>2</sup> *Shadow and Act* (New York, 1966), p. 109.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. ix.

<sup>4</sup> Therman B. O’Daniel, in “The Image of Man as Portrayed by Ralph Ellison,” *CLA Journal*, X (June, 1967), 278, briefly observes that *Invisible Man* “is sprinkled throughout with dreams . . . —some resolved and some unresolved”; William J. Schafer, in “Ralph Ellison and the Birth of the Anti-Hero,” *Critique*, X, No. 2 (1968), 81–93, writes that Ellison “probes the unconscious” through “hallucinatory fantasy”; but

Certainly to explore oneiric phantasmagories in *Invisible Man* is to forego tidily one-dimensional definitions and to traffic in ambiguity. Closely scrutinized, the novel's most vivid and frightening nightmares resist clear-cut, definitive interpretation. Metaphoric images and situations suggest multiple meanings simultaneously. Orientation in time and space becomes problematic. Riddles and puns abound. Visual euphemisms gnaw at the edge of consciousness while eluding, through some final ambiguity, full detection and disclosure. In his hallucinatory phantasmagories, Ellison catapults consciousness into an ominous but evasive world of semi-revelations, where nebulous shapes and forms insinuate and half-expose, without fully clarifying, an elusive reality receding beyond grasp.

Dreams, nightmares, and hallucinations in *Invisible Man*, then, elude cognitive mastery. Sometimes, it is true, they invite psychoanalytic interpretations.<sup>5</sup> Ellison, influenced by Freud, hypothesizes that "the distorted images that appear in dreams . . . quiver in the . . . mind" at least with "hidden . . . significance," like "muggers haunting a lonely hall."<sup>6</sup> But much in Ellison's hallucinatory fantasies defies even a Freudian perspective of the dream as an equivocating yet decipherable idiom. The ultimate question is: beyond Freudian acts of censorship, why, in Ellison's novel, should dream so rudely shatter waking epistemological assumptions, immersing consciousness in an anarchically surreal universe un-governed by waking principles and modes of logic?

## I

Although Trueblood's dream is the most characteristically Freudian dream in the novel, even in this case Ellison reaches beyond

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criticism, in these cases as elsewhere, fails to explore this facet of the novel with the depth that it surely deserves.

<sup>5</sup> Ellison, in *Shadow and Act*, p. 123, writes of his education at the Tuskegee of the 1930s: "So in Macon County, Alabama, I read Marx, Freud, T. S. Eliot. . . ." Psychoanalysis is clearly *one* of the intellectual movements in the background of Ellison's novel and is probably as germane to criticism of *Invisible Man* as, say, the concept of the "Great Chain of Being" is germane to criticism of earlier literature. But one must be cautious here: Ellison knows Freud just as earlier authors knew the dominant thinkers of their age—knows him without following him rigidly in his art. Frederick J. Hoffman emphasizes in *Freudianism and the Literary Mind* (Baton Rouge, La., 1957), pp. 93-94: "Freud . . . influenced the writing of our time. . . . But he did not, except for a few minor examples, *control* the act of creation. . . . The power of aesthetic independence is such that it invariably changes original doctrine. . . ."

<sup>6</sup> *Shadow and Act*, p. 283.

waking consciousness into an oneiric universe ultimately not explicable in psychoanalytic terms. Certainly, as in the Freudian dream, what one glimpses, from one perspective, is a refracted version of interior psychodynamics. A dark drama of the psyche is obligingly converted into a displacing, figurative language of metonyms and analogues. Beyond the profuse and exotic imagery of Trueblood's nightmare—so actual events in the wake of the dream confirm—incestuous cravings lurk. In the nightmare itself, however, only oblique, metamorphosed versions of these cravings surface, leaving the cravings themselves censored and unnamed. The "fat meat" initially sought, the entry into a womb-like clock with "crinkly stuff like steel wool on the facing," the journey thereafter down a "hot and dark . . . tunnel" (pp. 44-45)—such wild and profuse imagery proves to be the sign of perceptual caution and fear. Dreaming consciousness, half-shunning its own erotic wish, elaborately distorts and disguises it. Trueblood's "dream-sin" (p. 48), as he terms it, eventually results not from dreaming but from a breakdown in dreaming. Too much pressure overwhelms floodgates which his equivocating dream images struggle to keep partly closed.

But how completely, finally, does the equivocating machinery of dream break down for Trueblood? "I don't quite remember it all" (p. 44), he confesses, acknowledging that portions of his nightmare still lie buried below the surface. Even the images recalled appear, upon closer scrutiny, to be, in psychoanalytic parlance, "overdetermined"—that is to say, seem to be expressing multiple meanings simultaneously.<sup>7</sup> Trueblood's incestuous entry into his daughter provides one way—certainly a primary way, confirmed by waking events—of decoding his queer hallucinatory entry into a womb-clock. But the violent breaking *away* from the lady in the dream, the forcing open, *thereafter*, of the womb-clock, the journey down a "hot and dark . . . tunnel," and the fantasy, finally, of immersion and drowning in water could also suggest a longing to enter the womb as a *refuge* from sexuality and its emotional turbulence, a longing for a lost uterine oblivion beyond sexuality and time. Perhaps several motives are expressed in Trueblood's dream simultaneously, in keeping with the principle, advanced by Ellison in

<sup>7</sup> See Freud's comments on "overdetermined" dreams in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), trans. James Strachey (New York, 1965), pp. 311-339.

*Shadow and Act*, that behind the simplifying "mask" of the socially enacted and visible "I," one discovers not certitudes, but "ambiguities."<sup>8</sup> The dream, in its equivocating fluidity, may be avoiding literal, one-dimensional expression partly to accommodate itself to the inherent complexity of subjective reality. Such complexity may become falsified when translated into a less fluid and ambivalent language than that of dreaming. This possibility, with which psychoanalytic dream theory flirts, nevertheless drives a wedge into the psychoanalytic assumption of a putatively knowable, if, in practice, largely unconscious self.<sup>9</sup> How conclusive and definitive a vision may ultimately be possible of the self? Behind public gestures and forms, in the private depths of a nightmare, is one truth divulged to Trueblood, or do numerous and incongruous motives clamor for acknowledgement because all are equally true? Has Ellison created the episode of Trueblood and his nightmare to clarify perceptions of the self or, in keeping with other portions of *Invisible Man* (especially the chapter on Rinehart), to manifest the self in polymorphous multiplicity and ambivalence?

Significantly, the opening fantasia of the novel indicates that dream-language—"perhaps," Ellison suggests, "the poet's true language"<sup>10</sup>—may consist, in the manner of a palimpsest, of multiple texts superimposed one upon the other. Such "language" is likened to a musical score composed of many strands, for it emerges as a multilinear form of consciousness and expression. In the complex phantasmagoria experienced by Ellison's narrator as he smokes a reefer and listens to Louis Armstrong's music, time thickens as well as advances; various and conflicting possibilities are revealed to exist simultaneously in the same ambiguous now: "And beneath the

<sup>8</sup> *Shadow and Act*, p. 70.

<sup>9</sup> Freud, read closely, wrestles anxiously with this problem throughout *The Interpretation*, and at times comes very close to a vision of the self as ultimately *not* knowable through dream. "Trains of thought . . . diametrically opposed to each other," he acknowledges, may be "represented by the same elements in the . . . dream" (p. 354), and the dream, indeed, may give rise to three or more interpretations, and "the fact that the meanings of dreams are arranged in superimposed layers is one of the most delicate . . . problems of dream-interpretation" (p. 253). "One is inclined to regard the dream-thoughts that have been brought to light as the complete material, whereas if the work of interpretation is carried further it may reveal still more thoughts concealed behind the dream. . . . It is in fact never possible to be sure that a dream has been completely interpreted. . . . The possibility always remains that the dream may have yet another meaning" (p. 313).

<sup>10</sup> *Shadow and Act*, p. 257.

swiftness of the hot tempo there was a slower tempo and a cave and I entered it and looked around and heard an old woman singing a spiritual . . . and beneath that lay a still lower level on which I saw a beautiful girl the color of ivory pleading in a voice like my mother's . . . and below that I found a lower level and a more rapid tempo . . ." (p. 7).

One moment of time in this fantasia ambiguously deepens into multiple and conflicting possibilities, and in other fantasias space turns out to be equally ambiguous. Though little discussion of space appears among elucidations of psychoanalytic dream theory, spatial distortions and warpings contribute to the macabre, dreamlike atmospheres of works by De Quincey, Dodgson, and Edgar Allan Poe. And among the "dimensionless" (p. 349) hallucinations of *Invisible Man*, macabre subversions of the laws of backward and forward, near and far, become graphic reflections of hallucinatory ambivalence. Immersion in oneiric space in the novel is immersion in the epistemologically—and psychologically—problematic: what is wished for but dreaded is paradoxically distanced and yet approached. In Trueblood's nightmare, for example, "Broadnax's house" (read: "Broad" and "ax"—ultimately, incest and terror of incest) sits "up on a hill," and "I was climbin' up there. . . . Seems like that was the highest hill in the world. The more I climbed the farther away . . . Broadnax's house seems to git" (p. 44). Moreover, in dream the locality of the ego itself may become equivocal as it emerges in several areas of a dreamscape simultaneously, engaging in contradictory dramas. The fragmentation of an ambivalent ego into contradictory figures is nowhere more vividly apparent than in a sequence of hypnagogic hallucinations, "neither of dreaming nor of waking, but somewhere in between," experienced by the narrator in the final chapter of the novel. Motives and psychological postures become paradoxical in these phantasmagories. On the one hand, the hallucinating narrator experiences a vision of castration as trustees, college presidents, and political organizers struggle to impose various versions of reality, and various forms of selfhood, upon him. Discovering his resistance, they come "forward with a knife," cut his genitalia, and fling them away, depriving him—so this metaphor of castration would seem to imply—of the power to shape public events on any terms but their own. He feels "painful and empty" and seems capable only of ironic, despairing laughter at

those who, blinded by what Earl H. Rovit terms their capacity "to see and to be seen in stereotyped images,"<sup>11</sup> are ultimately as powerless as he. Yet while, in the *foreground* of his vision, he seems reduced to an ineffectual lucidity that can find its outlet only in despairing laughter, a bridge, beneath the apex of which his genitalia catch, slowly comes alive as if drawing life from those genitalia. It begins to "move off to where I could not see, striding like . . . an iron man" whose "legs clanged doomfully as it moved. And then I struggled up, full of sorrow and pain, shouting, 'No, no, we must stop him!'" (pp. 429-431). The hallucinating narrator's foreground gestures and words become overshadowed and overruled, in this complex vision, by the background image of this "iron man," who would seem to be embodying an alternative version of the dreamer's personality. In the foreground of his phantasmagoria, he voices his protest that "we must stop him." The headless automaton striding "doomfully" away from him, however, would seem to reflect back to him an unacknowledged, more vengeful personality in a form disquietingly severed (its very headlessness suggests this) from his ostensible ego and will. His nightmare, in short, would appear to be the nightmare of a fractured, ambivalent ego inhabiting contradictory figures simultaneously. The hallucinating narrator in the foreground, "painful and empty" and reduced to ineffectual laughter, and the "iron man" in the background, heedlessly bent on vengeance, would both seem to be authentic, if polar and contradictory, versions of the same self.

In dream, then, mutually exclusive attitudes and stances may turn out to be equally valid, or forward may simultaneously be backward, or another may simultaneously be oneself. In dream—so goes the long, equivocating sermon in the opening fantasia of the novel—

" . . . black is . . ." the preacher shouted.

"Bloody . . ."

"I said black is . . ."

"Preach it, brother . . ."

" . . . an' black ain't . . ."

"Red, Lawd, red: He said it's red!"

"Amen, brother . . ."

<sup>11</sup> "Ralph Ellison and the American Comic Tradition," *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*, I (Fall, 1960), rpt. in Donald B. Gibson, ed., *Five Black Writers* (New York, 1970), p. 110.

"Black will git you . . ."

"Yes, it will . . ."

". . . an' black won't . . ."

"Naw, it won't!"

"It do . . ."

"It do, Lawd . . ."

". . . an' it don't."

"Halleluiah . . ."

.....

"Black will make you . . ."

"Black . . ."

". . . or black will un-make you."

"Ain't it the truth, Lawd?" (p. 8)

## II

Dream-language in the novel, then, equivocates. It assumes, in speech and gesture, mutually exclusive stances and tones, or suggests multiple interpretations, or proffers foreground events that clash dissonantly with background events. In dream the psyche simultaneously says yes and says no, by distorting a meaning without entirely erasing it, by permitting conflicting interpretations of the same symbol, or by inhabiting contradictory figures simultaneously. Rather than serving to define the self, the dreaming psyche multiplies it, reinforcing that vision of the essential fluidity of personality and consciousness dramatized by B. Proteus Rinehart. This slippery figure can think contradictory thoughts and inhabit contradictory sensibilities in a "seething, hot world" without "boundaries" (p. 376). Beyond static, defining forms of selfhood and belief, Ellison suggests, a fluid and problematic essence lurks, containing within itself multiple and conflicting possibilities. Such a vision of human identity and consciousness as essentially unseizable could have come straight out of the pages of Melville's *The Confidence-Man*, a book whose influence on *Invisible Man* Ellison has acknowledged.<sup>12</sup> An open-ended psychology—what Rovit terms a vision of "fluid amorphous identity"<sup>13</sup>—is to be found at the heart of Ellison's novel

<sup>12</sup> See *Shadow and Act*, p. 181, where Ellison stresses: "Rinehart is my name for the personification of chaos. . . . He has lived so long with chaos that he knows how to manipulate it. It is the oid theme of *The Confidence Man*."

<sup>13</sup> "Ralph Ellison and the American Comic Tradition," p. 109.

just as it lurks at the center of Melville's later fiction, where all faith in socially authorized idioms of self-definition collapses. There all reaching inward only leads to the discovery that "deep, deep, and still deeper must we go, if we would find out the heart of a man; descending into which is as descending a spiral stair in a shaft, without any end. . . ." <sup>14</sup> Ellison similarly gazes into the "darkness . . . within" the "mind" (p. 437). Oneiric images that spontaneously surface from the depths of the psyche in his novel quiver with equivocating, ambivalent significance. If this be the language of the essential self and of its essential conceptual predispositions behind its outward masks, it is, accordingly, a language admitting of multiple, even contradictory interpretations, a language of paradox, ambiguity, and cognitive dissonance.

To peer down into the depths of dream in Ellison's novel, then, is to gaze into a contradictory and equivocating world reflecting back to waking reason what Melville terms "the mystery of human subjectivity," <sup>15</sup> all "profounder emanations" from which "never unravel their own intricacies, and have no proper endings." <sup>16</sup> Moreover, as *Invisible Man* progresses, all waking defenses against the oneiric universe give way. Ellison allows his protagonist no rational refuge from it. Unlike other dream-haunted figures in literature—unlike Dodgson's Alice, who can flee back into a tidy, well-regulated Victorian universe, unlike even De Quincey, who can claim that the "moral" of his hallucinatory "sufferings" is that the would-be opium-eater should be forewarned <sup>17</sup>—Ellison's hero is left, at the close of the novel, without any standpoint beyond the incongruity and dissonance of dream towards which to flee from it and from which to judge it. As the novel advances, received moral and intellectual foundations all but collapse for Invisible Man, who sees through one tidy illusion of orderliness after another. Homer Barbee's envisagement of the modern black experience according to the biblical paradigm of the Promised Land and Brother Jack's rigid, pseudo-scientific dogmatism melt into an inscrutable world-in-

<sup>14</sup> *Pierre; or The Ambiguities*, ed. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston, Ill., 1971), pp. 288–289.

<sup>15</sup> *The Confidence-Man*, ed. Hershel Parker (New York, 1971), p. 112.

<sup>16</sup> *Pierre*, p. 141.

<sup>17</sup> *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, ed. Alethea Hayter (Baltimore, 1971), pp. 114–115.

itself "too obscure for learned classification, . . . too ambiguous for the most ambiguous words" (p. 332). Stepping "outside the narrow borders of what men call reality," Ellison's narrator discovers, beyond the "pattern" of human "certainties," an anarchic, absurd universe "without direction." His capacity to define and to judge finally breaks down completely, so that, in the Epilogue, "I condemn and affirm, say no and say yes, say yes and say no[,] . . . denounce and . . . defend" (pp. 435-438). If there were the possibility of oracle in the bewildering, problematic universe of *Invisible Man*, that possibility might conceivably lie in dream, traditionally a fount of wisdom that transcends waking reason. But to descend into hallucinatory depths in Ellison's novel is to lose "one's sense of time completely" (p. 11), to see one's basic perceptual models shattered, to become immersed in a prevaricating, multidimensional world where the only governing principle is "ambivalence" (p. 8). Dreaming in *Invisible Man* is as anarchic as in Dodgson's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, which has been explored as a revelation, via "dream-vision," of a fluid and paradoxical universe lurking "beneath the man-made groundwork of Western thought and convention."<sup>18</sup>

Certainly, even in dream, ambiguous vision is resisted, tidiness and definition are sought. Ellison's hero, like Dodgson's, does not easily accommodate himself to the equivocating fluidity of oneiric experience. His hunger for deliverance from its perils, however, only delivers him to fiendish jokes and reversals in disorienting nightmares. These nightmares are generally presided over by the taunting figure of his grandfather, whose surreal ruses mock and confound earnest reason. Such surreal jokes offer important lessons in epistemology. They dramatize the dangers of assuming that phenomena are necessarily rational and that entities are closed and fixed in a finite and conclusive universe:

That night I dreamed I was at a circus with him [fit dream-setting of prevaricating set-ups that lure and fool, of reversals and equivocations]. . . . He told me to open my brief case and read what was inside and I did, finding an official envelope stamped with the state seal; and inside the envelope I found another and another, endlessly, and I thought I would fall of weariness. . . . "Now open that one." And I did and in it I found an engraved document. . . . "Read it," my grandfather said. "Out loud!"

<sup>18</sup> See Donald Rackin, "Alice's Journey to the End of the Night," *PMLA*, LXXXI (Oct., 1966), 313.

"To Whom It May Concern," I intoned. "Keep This Nigger-Boy Running."

I awoke with the old man's laughter ringing in my ears. (p. 26)

In keeping with the old man's equivocating deathbed utterance—a "constant puzzle" (p. 14) which, in its paradoxes and ambivalences, invites yet baffles interpretation, and seems deliberately designed to do so<sup>19</sup>—the old man himself, in his grandson's innermost, oneiric consciousness, mocks reason with surreal irrationality. He proffers that gift of fluid, ever-ambivalent vision which, had waking Invisible Man initially accepted it, would have kept him from falling for those "official"-looking letters, written by Bledsoe, which actually keep him "running" for a time. In dream the principle of certitude itself is subverted, and thus that subspecies of certitude which allows equivocators to diddle dolts.

In this sense dreaming instructs. Indeed, the opening fantasia of the novel, fittingly introduced by an equivocating sermon, evolves into a parable preaching paradox and ambivalence. Down into the depths of dream Ellison's narrator descends in the Prologue. Seeking a passageway out of ambivalence, he comes upon an "old singer of spirituals" (p. 8) who seems to promise—but, as it turns out, only with the exasperating deceptiveness of a dream-figure—to serve as an oracle amidst so much turbulence and confusion. In Jungian dream-ymbology, she might be interpreted as a figure of the "Anima," a mediating agent between the conscious self and that within the self which "exceeds the limits of consciousness."<sup>20</sup> What she has to say, in the manner of much dream-speech, seems awesomely important and profound. Closely scrutinized, however, it remains only marginally coherent. First "surprised, then thoughtful, then baffled"—note how these fluctuating moods, as they flash across the old woman's face, first invite, then deflate expectation—she never quite manages to come out of her verbal maze:

<sup>19</sup> In the Epilogue, in the struggle to define that "constant puzzle," Ellison's narrator writes: "And my mind revolved again and again back to my grandfather. . . . I'm still plagued by his deathbed advice. . . . Perhaps he hid his meaning deeper than I thought, perhaps his anger threw me off—I can't decide. Could he have meant—hell, he *must* have meant. . . . Did he mean . . . ? Did he mean to . . . ? Or did he mean that . . . ? Was it that we . . . ? Or was it, did he mean that . . . ? Had he seen that . . . ? . . . I can't figure it out; it escapes me" (pp. 433-434).

<sup>20</sup> See C. G. Jung, "Two Essays in Analytic Psychology," in *The Portable Jung*, ed. Joseph Campbell and trans. R. F. C. Hull (New York, 1971), pp. 148-162.

"Old woman, what is this freedom you love so well?" I asked around a corner of my mind.

She looked surprised, then thoughtful, then baffled. "I done forgot. . . . It's all mixed up. First I think it's one thing, then I think it's another. It gits my head to spinning. I guess now it ain't nothing but knowing how to say what I got up in my head. But it's . . . hard. . . . Ever' time I starts to walk my head gits to swirling and I falls down. Or if it ain't that, it's the boys; they gits to laughing and wants to kill up the white folks. They's bitter, that's what they is . . ."

"But what about freedom?"

"Leave me 'lone, boy; my head aches!"

I left her, feeling dizzy myself. (p. 9)

"Freedom," then, is knowing how to say what is in one's head? But one's head is "swirling." Or if it "ain't that, it's the boys," who are "bitter," and yet "laugh," and yet want to murder the white folks. The narrator tries to lure this dizzying pseudo-Sibyl back from her dizzying digressions, but she will not be lured, and he leaves her feeling dizzy himself. His longing to nestle against this "old woman," draw wisdom from her, and find release from paradox and ambivalence is not fulfilled. Indeed, what follows is implacable judgment: the dreaming narrator, dizzy and empty-handed, must "git outa here and stay. . . ." Banished from longed-for, uterine depths back into wakefulness, he is chased through a "dark narrow passage" further and further from the old woman, yearning for "tranquility . . . I felt I could never achieve," until he resurfaces, finally, "from this underworld" (p. 10). The subversive message is that there is no message, no epistemological refuge even within, no harbor of elucidation or enlightenment to be found.

### III

Writing *Invisible Man* at midcentury, then, Ellison, who "in Macon County, Alabama, . . . read . . . Freud," nevertheless painted bizarre and subversive dreamscapes in an ultimately non-Freudian spirit. *Invisible Man* collapses the Freudian distinction between the manifest dream (prevaricating and deceptive) and the latent dream content (putatively definable). From the disintegration of that surface-depth paradigm a radically different orientation to dream-language as an idiom of irreducible ambiguities emerges. And "perhaps," to refer again to Ellison's hypothesis quoted earlier

in this article, "the poet's true language is that in which he dreams," by which Ellison means to suggest, I assume, that the problematic language of dream, with its incongruities and paradoxes and divergent possibilities suggested all at once, is the least falsifying of languages and may even provide a model for art itself. Certainly *Invisible Man*, a most dreamlike novel in its total effect, struggles to replace rigid caricatures of reality with a form of fiction registering experience in authentic fluidity and dissonance. It subverts racist caricatures—meager, diminishing, cruel—the fiction becoming nothing less than an epistemological weapon against "those formulas" which have been "evolved to describe my group's identity."<sup>21</sup> But Ellison's novel wages war on reductive formulae of all kinds, managing, through radical fluctuations of form and startling tonal blends of comedy and terror, through reversals, changes of pace, and a punning, ambivalent voice, to remain perpetually off-balance and conceptually fluid. Beyond racist caricatures, beyond Brotherhood-like dogmatism, beyond cheap Hollywood stereotypes—"I would be *charming*. Like Ronald Colman" (p. 125)—the modern American artist, as Ellison well knows, is bereft of iconography in a problematic, dissonant world. Significantly, in a central episode in the novel, Primus Provo and his wife, evicted and standing forsaken in Harlem snow, are surrounded by a "jumble" of folk artifacts—"knocking bones," . . . nuggets of High John the Conqueror, . . . a dime pierced with a nail hole so as to be worn about the ankle . . . for luck"—which elicit, in Ellison's narrator, "a pang of vague recognition" and yet a deeper "pang" of "dispossession"; for they remain largely "confounding" (pp. 205–207). The orientation and guidance once made possible by a once coherent, culturally mandated symbolology have been irrevocably lost.<sup>22</sup> The modern American artist, black or white, must forge his vision out of radical disinheritance. Ellison makes a virtue of this necessity, discovering, in the absence of a cohesive metaphysic, adventure as well as a horror of intellectual seasickness. He offers both in both the hallucinatory and the non-hallucinatory portions of his novel.

<sup>21</sup> *Shadow and Act*, p. xvii.

<sup>22</sup> Marjorie Pryse, in "Ralph Ellison's Heroic Fugitive," *American Literature*, XLVI (March, 1974), 5–6, writes: "Keats's term 'negative capability' comes close to characterizing the move North, as Faulkner and Ellison explore it. . . ." The movement northward "cuts" Ellison's hero "off from community"—from a stable definition of reality and of selfhood imposed upon the individual by the group.