

Ralph Ellison's *Heroic Fugitive*

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As Henry James suggested, being an American is an arduous task, and for most of us, I suspect, the difficulty begins with the name. (*Shadow and Act*)

THE EPILOGUE TO *Invisible Man* ends with a question: "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?"¹ The Prologue begins with a statement: "I am an invisible man." It has become a critical cliché to interpret ends of literary works as recycling mechanisms, redirecting the reader back into the text. Ralph Ellison is conscious of this paradigm, and his narrator explicitly states in the Prologue, "the end is in the beginning" (p. 9). The narrator's identity as well as his novel both lead to and have resulted from his quest for affirmation and realization. If we view the closing question with the opening statement in mind, we are compelled to ponder whether or not, and how, Ellison's narrator does indeed speak for us. To what extent does the reader become the protagonist; to what extent does he share the narrator's invisibility?

It comes as a surprise to the literary critic to face such a question in response to the work, and perhaps his first inclination may be to avoid doing so. If he chooses instead to explore the novel's central theme—invisibility—he is partially foiled by Ellison's narrator, who insists on interpreting the novel for us in the Prologue-Epilogue frame. What is left to the critic but revelation and reiteration of the obvious? The narrator admits as much in the last paragraph of the Epilogue when he states, "'Ah,' I can hear you say, 'so it was all a build-up to bore us with his buggy jiving. He only wanted us to listen to him rave!' But only partially true: Being invisible and without substance, a disembodied voice, as it were, what else could I do? What else but try to tell you what was really happening when your eyes were looking through?" (p. 503). He addresses us as contributors to his invisibility, as co-conspirators with those

¹ Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York, 1947), p. 503. Subsequent references to the novel will be noted parenthetically in the text.

people who “refuse to see me”: “When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me” (p. 7). But he speaks also as a narrator to us as readers, justifying his role as commentator and interpreter. And as such, he directs our attempts to explain “what was really happening” in the novel. His justification for blocking our literary critical attempts is enlightening: it is to compensate for his substancelessness, his “disembodied voice.”

In what amounts to Ellison’s theory of literary criticism, he states in a footnote in *Shadow and Act*:

Perhaps the ideal approach to the work of literature would be one allowing for insight into the deepest psychological motives of the writer at the same time that it examined all external sociological factors operating within a given milieu. For while objectively a social reality, the work of art is, in its genesis, a projection of a deeply personal process, and any approach that ignores the personal at the expense of the social is necessarily incomplete.²

In what way is it possible to write about *Invisible Man* in terms of Ellison’s own “theory” of literary criticism? Ellison stresses that personal and sociological motives operate “at the same time.” It would not seem appropriate for the reader to catalogue his own experiences of invisibility. To do so would be not to participate in Ellison’s dialogue but to write another novel. What the narrator seems to lack to complete his self-realization is a social and historical context. He decides to emerge from hibernation, to “come out” of the hole he’s in, but not yet. The reader’s half of the exchange must provide this context, must embody the voice. If the narrator’s final appeal to our “lower frequencies” succeeds, he’s out of his hole. We let him out, because we put him in. And we do the same for ourselves.

What context does the narrator demand? He reflects that Tod Clifton died for his right to “plunge outside of history . . . into nothingness, into the void of faceless faces, of soundless voices, lying outside history” (p. 379). He looks about him on the subway at “men out of time, who would soon be gone and forgotten” (p. 381). Who would record and document the lives of these men like

² (New York, 1964), p. 27. Subsequent references to *Shadow and Act* will be footnoted as “Ellison.”

Clifton? "They were outside the groove of history, and it was my job to get them in, all of them" (p. 383). Thus it becomes Invisible Man's responsibility at Clifton's funeral "to put his integrity together again" (p. 387).

He states in his eulogy that Clifton "lost his hold on reality" (p. 395). Invisible Man translates Clifton's coffin into the ghetto "box," attempting to remind the mourners of *their* reality:

"It has a cracked ceiling and a clogged-up toilet in the hall. It has rats and roaches, and it's far, far too expensive a dwelling. The air is bad and it'll be cold this winter. Tod Clifton is crowded and he needs the room. 'Tell them to get out of the box,' that's what he would say if you could hear him. 'Tell them to get out of the box and go teach the cops to forget that rhyme. Tell them to teach them that when they call you *nigger* to make a rhyme with *trigger* it makes the gun backfire.'" (p. 396)

When he finishes his speech he states, "as I took one last look I saw not a crowd but the set faces of individual men and women. . . . Tod Clifton was underground" (p. 397). The reconstruction of Clifton's history permits Invisible Man to see the individuality of faces in the crowd; each individual becomes a manifestation of the dead man, "our hope shot down."

Similarly, by becoming such a manifestation of the narrator, in admitting the invisibility we share, we in turn pull him out of his box, his hole. The novel itself urges, then, that the reader place Invisible Man back into history, that we provide his embodiment, his American context. It is to this end that the multitude of symbols and structures the novel provides must be interpreted. The attempt involves nothing less than a revision, a new Reconstruction. For the invisible man, "to be unaware of one's form is to live a death" (p. 10). To free ourselves from the same formlessness of invisibility, it is necessary to reintegrate our awareness of historical, literary, and sociological aspects of the changing American identity which lead to Invisible Man's self-realization.

I

The first six chapters take place in the South, converting into "symbolic action" the necessity that the protagonist move North.³

³ Cf. Ellison's formulation of the fiction-writer's effort, *ibid.*, p. xix.

In a *Paris Review* interview, Ellison states:

In my novel the narrator's development is one through blackness to light; that is, from ignorance to enlightenment: invisibility to visibility. He leaves the South and goes North; this, as you will notice in reading Negro folktales, is always the road to freedom—the movement upward. You have the same thing again when he leaves his underground cave for the open.⁴

Historically, as Ellison suggests, the road North was “the road to freedom”—for Frederick Douglass, Eliza, *Uncle Tom's Children*, James Baldwin's Florence in *Go Tell It On the Mountain*, and Ellison's Brother Tarp, who reminds Invisible Man of his slave history by giving him the filed chain link. With the gift, Invisible Man inherits an obligation to become, himself, a link in the chain of black emancipation. Tarp acted nobly and essentially: “‘I lost my wife and my boys and my piece of land. . . . I said no to a man who wanted to take something from me’” (p. 335). By the same means, as he wrote in his autobiographical *Narrative* of 1845, Frederick Douglass began his escape from slavery—by physical resistance to Edward Covey. “You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall show how a slave was made a man.”⁵ As Thomas Vogler expresses it, “the contemporary world presents a continued affront to man, and . . . his response must therefore be at least in part that of the rebel.”⁶

In the literal sense of his name, however, Tarp acts as a “cover”—for emancipation has become a false construct for the contemporary heroic fugitive. The intellectual rebel no longer confronts a tangible bondage—as Ellison writes, “reality is difficult to come by.”⁷ Part of the pastoral nostalgia which Invisible Man feels for the South⁸ he owes to that historical road, once open to the slave, which is no longer open to him. Filing a chain link, real as well as symbolic action, literally frees. When external conflict becomes internalized, “repressed,” as Ellison would have it,⁹ reality becomes pastoralized and man “invisible.”

⁴ Reprinted in *Shadow and Act*, p. 173.

⁵ Benjamin Quarles, ed. (Cambridge, 1960), p. 97.

⁶ Thomas A. Vogler, “*Invisible Man*: Somebody's Protest Novel,” *Iowa Review*, 1 (Spring, 1970), 66.

⁷ Ellison, p. xix.

⁸ Cf. the narrator “remembering” his green and white college, p. 36.

⁹ Ellison, p. 29.

The theme of escape from the South runs through white as well as black fiction and is expressed by such characters as William Styron's Peyton Loftis, Eudora Welty's King MacLain in *The Golden Apples*, and Faulkner's Quentin Compson, whose attempt to come to terms with his Southern heritage leads to suicide. Quentin protests to Shreve in *Absalom, Absalom!*, "'Gettysburg. . . . You can't understand it. You would have to be born there.'"¹⁰ The articulation of this theme in *Invisible Man* and all of Southern fiction poses a challenge to Northern readers, who were not "born there." Unlike *Invisible Man*, Northern readers do not have open to them even a symbolic avenue of escape. Keats's term "negative capability" comes close to characterizing the move North, as Faulkner and Ellison explore it; and, historically, Keats's expression finds no more appropriately American symbol than the myth of the Mason-Dixon line. As *Invisible Man* puts it, "In the South everyone knew you, but coming North was a jump into the unknown" (p. 431).

It is one of the ironically belated attractions of Southern literature and Black literature, for many of us, that we can get outside the Southern and Black experience precisely *because* we were born outside it. We can look at it because we are not it. But the semantics of this distinction may trap us, blind us. Faulkner realized that definition is only possible through negation, what Erich Neumann called "the acceptance of the shadow."¹¹ In "Red Leaves," the Negro body servant experiences what life means by becoming a heroic fugitive from death.¹² Quentin Compson goes North to find out his Southern identity, and, unable to affirm, succeeds at least in denying his denial. Shreve asks him, at the end of *Absalom*, why he hates the South. The passion of ambivalence Quentin reveals—"I *dont* hate it! I *dont* hate it!"¹³—cannot be understood by Shreve; but it *is* understood by Ralph Ellison, who would suggest that the North / South dichotomy is only part of the total "American" experience. By the intuitive logic of this argument, it should be easier for the

¹⁰ William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (New York, 1936), p. 361.

¹¹ Erich Neumann, *Depth Psychology and a New Ethic*, trans. Eugene Rolfe (London, 1969), pp. 81-94ff. Neumann writes, "The recognition and acceptance of the shadow presupposes more than a mere willingness to look at one's dark brother—and then to return him to a state of suppression, where he languishes like a prisoner in a gaol. It involves granting him freedom and a share in one's life" (p. 81).

¹² Cf. my essay, "Race: Faulkner's 'Red Leaves,'" forthcoming in *Studies in Short Fiction*.

¹³ Faulkner, p. 378.

Northerner and the white reader to realize the affirmation Quentin and Invisible Man just fail to achieve. We need only direct our attention—we need only *look*—in order to see and thus restore the narrator and ourselves from invisibility: “I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me” (p. 7).

A problem emerges. Given our refusal to see, is it possible for Invisible Man, one representative of a mass of white and black individuals, to achieve by moving North an alternative identity which will endure for an individual, a group, or a race? Ellison offers the blues as a lyrical expression of personal catastrophe,¹⁴ and states, “They fall short of tragedy only in that they provide no solution, offer no scapegoat but the self.”¹⁵ Ellison’s alternative to a redemption which depends on the recognition of his visibility lies in self-sacrifice. He defines “humanism” as “man’s basic attitude toward a social order which he accepts, and individualism his basic attitude toward one he rejects.”¹⁶ Individualism becomes a means of affirmation, but its price is great: there is “no scapegoat but the self.” Moving North becomes a move to anonymity: “How many days could you walk the streets of the big city without encountering anyone who knew you, and how many nights?” (p. 431). But it also cuts him off from community. Ellison explains,

The pre-individualistic black community discourages individuality out of self-defense. Having learned through experience that the whole group is punished for the actions of the single member, it has worked out efficient techniques of behavior control. . . .

Personal warmth is accompanied by an equally personal coldness, kindness by cruelty, regard by malice. And these opposites are as quickly set off against the member who gestures toward individuality as a lynch mob forms at the cry of rape.¹⁷

“The horrible thing,” Ellison stresses, “is that the cruelty is also an expression of concern, of love.”¹⁸

II

It is not surprising that in the attempt to depict a society where “there is in progress between black and white Americans a struggle

¹⁴ Cf. the end of “Richard Wright’s Blues,” Ellison, p. 79.

¹⁵ Ellison, p. 94.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

over the nature of reality,"¹⁹ naturalism should not be an effective or even an appropriate mode of aesthetic discourse. Ellison explains, in part, his choice of allegorical mode: "I was forced to conceive of a novel unburdened by the narrow naturalism which has led, after so many triumphs, to the final and unrelieved despair which marks so much of our current fiction."²⁰ As a novelist Ellison confronts the problem his narrator expresses in the Prologue: "Responsibility rests upon recognition, and recognition is a form of agreement" (p. 16). Invisible Man justifies here his own withdrawal from "social responsibility" when he goes underground—the terms of "agreement" between himself and his society have not been mutually acceptable. It is not "final and unrelieved despair" which Ellison's narrator avoids when he avoids naturalism, but a presentation of reality which might be subject to "agreement."

To understand this, it is only necessary to review controversies over two novels about black protagonists, Richard Wright's *Native Son* and William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. Ellison summarizes the complaints against *Native Son* when he remarks, I felt that Wright was overcommitted to ideology. . . . You might say that I was much less a social determinist. But I suppose that basically it comes down to a difference in our concepts of the individual. I, for instance, found it disturbing that Bigger Thomas had none of the finer qualities of Richard Wright, none of the imagination, none of the sense of poetry, none of the gaiety. And I preferred Richard Wright to Bigger Thomas.²¹

This statement amounts to an attack on the novel's presentation of reality and recalls an earlier criticism by James Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel": "The failure of the protest novel lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended."²² Similar conflict inspires the essays in *Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*. John Oliver Killens sums up the collective thesis of these essays, calling Styron's "pretense" to adopt Turner's point of view "a colossal error, one that required tremendous arrogance."²³ "This is all just a way of

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 26. The phrase is a paraphrase of Richard Wright.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 105.

²¹ Ibid., p. 16.

²² James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston, 1955), p. 23.

²³ John Oliver Killens, "The Confessions of Willie Styron," in John Henrik Clarke, (ed.), *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond* (Boston, 1968), p. 36.

saying that the story of Nat Turner is still to be written, and it will be up to a black man to write *this* great American tragedy."²⁴ Naturalism becomes an epistemological tool in the struggle over the nature of white and black reality, as if vehemence in argument could serve as a catalyst for social change.

Ellison denies the assumption and rejects naturalism. This artistic repudiation, however, places limitations on Ellison's narrator-protagonist. "You ache," he says in the Prologue, "with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world" (p. 7). One might ask whether or not the protagonist of the novel, in achieving new identity, succeeds in convincing himself of his reality. More important, does he convince anyone else? The problem of naturalism for the narrator and the protagonist's ache for reality become part of the same dilemma. "I too have become acquainted with ambivalence. . . . That's why I'm here," Invisible Man writes in the Prologue. He proposes this ambivalence, underground, as a solution to his conflict in "the real world." Paradoxically, just as he discovers his Southern identity in the North—"I yam what I am" (p. 231)—so he resolves his anonymity by making visible his invisibility. The protagonist's struggle becomes the narrator's allegory: "I am an invisible man."

To the extent, however, that the narrator's fictional world articulates ambivalence—as he states in the Epilogue, "too much of your life will be lost, its meaning lost, unless you approach it as much through love as through hate" (p. 501)—the particular characters within it become less free to do the same. The protagonist encounters other people as symbols, refusing or unable to see them as less phantom-like than himself, as Clifton's funeral and the emotional transactions with Mary Rambo or Brother Tarp indicate. Ellison says in the *Paris Review* interview, "I felt that such a man as this character would have been incapable of a love affair; it would have been inconsistent with his personality."²⁵ There is more than the lack of a love affair which strikes the reader—there is a lack of love, constraining the protagonist and inhibiting the narrator. His depiction of characters becomes "black and white." Only after Clifton achieves mythical proportions for Invisible Man does he elicit the protagonist's "love." The narrator chooses "symbolic action" as

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

²⁵ Ellison, p. 180.

method and response to his lack of reality. Allegory becomes Ellison's "underground."²⁶

III

In his allegorical interpretation of his protagonist's behavior, the narrator of *Invisible Man* attempts to break out of his isolation. Erving Goffman's distinction, in *Stigma*, between persons who feel visibly "discredited" and those who feel relatively invisible but still "discreditable" provides a model for interpreting this isolation sociologically as well as historically. As Goffman implies, visual discredit limits social behavior in a predictable and therefore manageable way; whereas the individual who remains only discreditable attempts to "pass" but chronically experiences the fear that his stigma will be recognized and his behavior then limited. To the extent that he "passes," we might call him successfully invisible: he wears a mask of social ease to cover up real or imaginary, social or psychic "disease."²⁷

For the nineteenth-century Negro in the South, individuality was a death-warrant. The man who rebelled against the acceptance of stigma, who refused to accept the subordination of his identity into the shadow of blackness, could hope only to go North. In Goffman's terms, *Invisible Man* does not lose his stigma in the move North but undergoes a transformation from discredit to discredibility—from a position of social certainty to one of insecurity. Unlike the escaping slave, *Invisible Man* does not see his move North as an escape—because he doesn't choose to act. Both Bledsoe and, in effect, his historical situation make his choice for him.

As an ambitious student, *Invisible Man* wants recognition; he wants to distinguish himself in Bledsoe's eyes from the mass of his schoolmates, and his assignment to act as chauffeur for Mr. Norton becomes his "golden" opportunity to do so. At this point in the

²⁶ Ellison's recently-published fiction affirms his continuing choice of allegorical method. The narrator of "Cadillac Flambé," because he happens to carry a tape-recorder, captures the exact words of LeeWillie Minifees as he proceeds to set fire to his "Coon Cage Eight." The other characters who appear in the story—the narrator, the senator, the people on the lawn, the police—act as audience, stage props, or technical crew for LeeWillie's spectacle. In a fictional conflagration not unlike Hawthorne's "Earth's Holocaust," the narrator pushes an allegorical interpretation by calling Minifees's action "almost metaphysical." *American Review* 16 (New York, 1973), pp. 249-269.

²⁷ *Stigma* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1963), pp. 4-19.

novel, the protagonist views invisibility as the absence of personal identity. Thus his crime originates in his desire for visibility; and, ironically, he achieves "recognition" from Bledsoe, even though he doesn't understand his expulsion this way. The punishment results not from his action—as Norton explains, "nor was the boy responsible" (p. 94)—but from the visibility he acquires in performing it.

Bledsoe's lynching cuts Invisible Man off from the opportunity to distinguish himself. Such distinction presupposes membership in a group. Thus, once in the North, even after Bledsoe's letter to Emerson destroys his dream of reintegration with his college, Invisible Man continues to associate the pursuit of identity with membership in an organization—Men's House, the union meeting at Liberty Paints, finally the Brotherhood.

At the opening smoker, the protagonist merited the audience's laughter when he used the phrase "social responsibility," which he envisions as "social equality" and which they translate as "you've got to know your place at all times" (pp. 32–33). In the last meeting with Brotherhood, he explains that he acted on his own "personal responsibility" (p. 400) in deciding to hold a public funeral for Tod Clifton; Brother Jack replies, "You were not hired to think" (p. 405). The social yields to the personal for the narrator by the end; Invisible Man tries to separate his identity from his social role. Thus, although his desire throughout the novel to become an integral part of a community seems to reflect his "social responsibility," in fact it becomes his path to self-discovery. He wants to "join" an established unity because he has not yet become aware that the strength and power which originate in union lie within himself. His isolation is metaphysical as well as social.

In an interview with Allen Geller, Ellison agreed to call Invisible Man "an example of a social rebel," but stated that "he doesn't have that level of conscious revolt" that might make him, like Ahab, a metaphysical rebel.²⁸ Ellison denies the metaphysical implications of Invisible Man's search because, as he states in the interview, "This is not a God-constructed world. I don't think God constructed society. I think it's man-made."²⁹ In spite of these remarks, however, Invisible Man resembles a twentieth-century ver-

²⁸ Allen Geller, "An Interview with Ralph Ellison," *Tanŕurack Review*, no. 32 (Summer, 1964), p. 12.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

sion of Ishmael. Ishmael chooses a mast-head distance; Ellison's protagonist climbs the ghetto steps and the stage podium—his variation on Ras's ladder—and ends still further distanced, ends underground. Like the dramatic chapters of *Moby-Dick* and Ishmael's withdrawal as omniscient narrator, the "symbolic action" of *Invisible Man* achieves metaphysical distance for the narrator. Both Ishmael and Invisible Man have earned self-designated names which express their namelessness. Both recognize that their invisibility is the price of vision; and both see their search as motivated by internal need for light.

In the Prologue of *Invisible Man*, the narrator compares his own search to the whaleman's search for light, and states that the blackness of invisibility puts you "glory, glory, Oh my Lawd, in the WHALE'S BELLY" (p. 13). Like Jonah, Invisible Man tried for a long time to avoid his mission by not recognizing it. And like Ishmael, he fuses his social search with his soul's search: "I carried my sickness and though for a long time I tried to place it in the outside world, the attempt to write it down shows me that at least half of it lay within me" (pp. 497-498). It may not be a God-constructed world. As Ellison suggests, it may be only the social equivalent of the Leviathan which a man may now pursue. But within their different historical spheres, Ishmael and Invisible Man end by confronting the same problem. Ishmael's moment of transcendence is only temporary: when he is picked up by the "errant" *Rachel*, he's pulled back into the physical world with its old problems and no new solutions. Invisible Man doesn't let himself get picked up by the *Rachel* (or her counterpart, Mary Rambo); yet, as he contemplates returning above ground, he faces a question he can't answer: does he return to a world which is *all* model, which may be adequately explained by sociologists, which cannot "see" his invisibility and thus make possible his humanity; or has he achieved permanent realization, which goes beyond Ishmael's limits, in the recognition that because society *is* man-made, man can make a better one?

IV

Invisible Man affirms invisibility because he has transformed it, underground, and by his art, from a symptom of personal disorder

to a symbol of social rebellion;³⁰ it becomes his *modus vivendi*, where the self may correspond to no definition of identity but its own.³¹ This affirmation leads to his personal transcendence of social problems but fails to link his new identity as an invisible man with a program for social behavior. How does naming oneself or pointing out moral issues ease his reintegration? Where are the social potential and the ontological realism of "symbolic action"?

This is the question with which the novel ends. And, without an answer to it, *Invisible Man* remains underground. In *Shadow and Act*, Ellison talks about "that intensity of personal anguish . . . any and everything in this life which plunges the talented individual into solitude while leaving him the will to transcend his condition through art":³² "My goal was not to escape, or hold back, but to work through; to transcend, as the blues transcend the painful conditions with which they deal. . . . If there is anything 'miraculous' about the book it is the result of hard work undertaken in the belief that the work of art is important in itself, that it is a social action in itself."³³ Ellison asserts that art is social action by implicitly recognizing that the vision of the artist and the vision of the stigmatized are intimately related.

The "joke" at the center of *Invisible Man* is the conclusion that in order for the narrator to achieve integration with his society he must become visible again. By enacting invisibility, he resumes the stigma that originally protected him against lynching. But his new visibility would be self-conscious strategy: "Before that I lived in the darkness into which I was chased, but now I see. I've illuminated the blackness of my invisibility—and vice versa. And so I play the invisible music of my isolation. . . . Could this compulsion to put

³⁰ Critics have stressed the usefulness of the narrator's art as a means of his self-realization. Robert Bone speaks of Ellison's novel as "an act of ritual naming, the novelist as a 'moralist-designate' who *names* the central moral issues of his time" and thus accepts the burden of his given name (Emerson). Cf. Bone, "Ralph Ellison and the Uses of Imagination," *Anger and Beyond* (New York, 1966), p. 100. Thomas Vogler views artistic activity as a process of self-examination, where *Invisible Man* "is forced, in the darkness of his hole, to explore the contents of the briefcase which are the real clues to his identity and the only source of light." Cf. Volger, p. 71.

³¹ Todd M. Lieber writes, "all men, unless their identity corresponds completely to someone else's image of reality, are at least partially invisible in Ellison's terminology." Cf. Lieber, "Ralph Ellison and the Metaphor of Invisibility in Black Literary Tradition," *American Quarterly*, XXIV (March, 1972), 99.

³² Ellison, p. 130.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

invisibility down in black and white be thus an urge to make music of invisibility?" (p. 16). His experience as a discredibly invisible man gives him the "second sight" of the visibly stigmatized³⁴ and leads to his "attempt to write it down" (p. 497).

Out of invisibility comes the artist's vision. In the final scene of the novel prior to the Epilogue, Invisible Man in a waking dream sees himself castrated by Jack, Emerson, Bledsoe, and Norton: "But now they came forward with a knife, holding me; and I felt the bright red pain and they took the two bloody blobs and cast them over the bridge. . . . And I looked up through a pain so intense now that the air seemed to roar with the clanging of metal, hearing, HOW DOES IT FEEL TO BE FREE OF ILLUSION" (pp. 492-493). The image of the "bloody blobs" develops the image of Jack's "two eyes in the bottom of a shattered glass" and the full impact of blinding-as-castration fills the dream. At the same time, his castration becomes Jack's blinding as well as his own, and he shouts, "there hang not only my generations wasting upon the water—. . .

But your sun

And your moon

your universe, and that drip-drop upon the water you hear is all the history you've made, all you're going to make. Now laugh, you scientists. Let's hear you laugh!" . . .

And I awoke in the blackness. (pp. 493-494)

But out of vision comes visibility, and in this transformation art becomes social action. This is the "compulsion to put invisibility down in black and white"—the compulsion to make it visible and symbolically act it out in order to externalize it, then transcend it. As the black woman in the Prologue redefines freedom, "I guess now it ain't nothing but knowing how to say what I got up in my head. But it's a hard job, son. Too much is done happen to me in too short a time. Hit's like I have a fever'" (p. 14). The myth of the road North is gone; Brother Tarp's physical flight to freedom is no longer an option for Invisible Man. "Knowing how to say" replaces the file as the narrator's political instrument. Unlike Ahab, Invisible Man need not destroy the evil that is white in order to strike through

³⁴ Cf. Goffman, pp. 5-6, for a discussion of the "stigma-theory" by which "normals" impute a "sixth sense" to stigmatized individuals.

the mask. Like Ishmael, he reconstructs his journey to omniscient invisibility and begins to create a new myth.

To reconstruct mystery is to take possession of the powers of language: "Stephen's problem, like ours, was not actually one of creating the uncreated conscience of his race, but of creating the *uncreated features of his face*. Our task is that of making ourselves individuals. The conscience of a race is the gift of its individuals who see, evaluate, record" (p. 307). Such creation is possible in fiction, which formulates experience. As Ellison writes, "the function, the psychology of artistic selectivity is to eliminate from art form all those elements of experience which contain no compelling significance."³⁵ Ellison's fiction marks this "compelling significance" and, like the scapegoat, brings to visibility hidden human truths, not to "conform" to reality but to reform it. Thus the fiction-writer usurps the power of the social group—he stigmatizes for his own ends, destroying the Light and Power Monopoly of the lynch mob by stealing its catharsis. At the same time he provides a formula for reconstructing reality. For Ellison, the search for identity "is *the American theme*." In art, "the identity of fictional characters is determined by the implicit realism of the form, not by their relation to tradition; they are what they do or do not do. Archetypes are timeless, novels are time-haunted."³⁶ In *Invisible Man*, where identity is a problem, to take control of the creation of realism would be to alter reality in the process, and the novel is "implicitly realistic" because the narrator's choice of allegory has been socially determined: the escaping slave is an archetype; an invisible man is a new creation, or at least a new reconstruction.

The final solution to the narrator's dilemma remains the reader's acceptance of his own responsibility. It isn't up to Invisible Man to emerge from his hole; we must join him there. The artist and the minority member confront the whole world. Until illumination becomes universal, we shall all be on the same train; and, like Mr. Norton's, ours doesn't get to Centre Street without passing through the Golden Day. *Invisible Man* is Ellison's attempt to turn the literary mark into social password. By asserting that "black is beautiful," the formerly stigmatized minority member gains control of his own stigma. For the narrator, writing eases his condition by

³⁵ Ellison, p. 82.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

revealing to him his own position; and, even if that position isn't yet affirmed "outside" his hole, "in spite of myself, I've learned some things" (p. 501). The making of fictions, as Melville and Faulkner both knew, makes things visible that might have remained hidden. Fiction is Ellison's new "mark," both the vehicle of his discovery and the record of its accomplishment; the "second sight" of the stigmatized and the "inner vision" of the artist become yoked towards new integration.

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