

# Plunging (outside of) History: Naming and Self-Possession in *Invisible Man*

## Prologue

In several interviews, Ralph Ellison joins many of his readers in resolving *Invisible Man* into a declaration of coherent identity. Effectively interpreting *Invisible Man* as a modern *Bildungsroman*, Ellison says: "In my novel the narrator's development is one through blackness to light; that is, from ignorance to enlightenment: invisibility to visibility" (Graham and Singh 12); "It's a novel about innocence and human error, a struggle through illusion to reality" (14); "Whatever [Invisible Man] did when he returns . . . should be based on the knowledge gained before he went underground. This is a question of self-knowledge and ability to identify the processes of the world" (74); "I do believe that knowing where we are, has a lot to do with our knowing who we are and this gets back to the theme, I hope, of identity with which [*Invisible Man*] was sometimes involved" (263). This chain of reasoning presents Invisible Man as successfully negotiating a labyrinth designed to rob him of his identity. Once his invisibility is made visible, a preeminent and self-reliant self lifts out of its confusing history in a *parousia* of self-knowledge and resolves to act or write—conflated by this logic into the same thing—a declaration of coherent identity.<sup>1</sup>

This reading of *Invisible Man* as an heroic narrative of the ultimate re/possession of a dispossessed self derives out of Aristotelian conceptions of language and subjectivity. The Aristotelian logic of metaphor, in which a metaphor properly resembles the essence of a prelinguistic and determining referent, is compatible with—in fact, constitutive of—the logics of the transcendental Self and instrumental writing. The term *Self* serves as the literal figure that categorically names the proper transcendental Self that sits behind, as it were, the term. A person's proper name, in this way, is the literal—and, so, most proper—figure of the extralinguistic Self behind the name. The Self is a stable referent that extends itself to its proper name; the proper name thus consists of a transference, a carrying over, from the stable referent of the Self. What motivates one's proper name is the Self behind (before, *a priori*, etc.) the name. A proper relation of transference from Self to proper name ("Self") defines resemblance. The literalizing of the Self (to "Self" or proper name) is the process of naming, of properly rendering into language what exists prior to language. Writing, then, is instrumentalized in the process of naming: The term serves (as a tool, or vehicle) the *a priori* Self as slave to master. The master Self determines its linguistic presence by

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using appropriate language to name itSelf. Language does not interfere in the process; it merely serves the Self properly.

Conceiving of a Self prior to and as master of writing provides the conceptual basis for interpreting *Invisible Man* as a *Bildungsroman*. By this logic, Invisible Man becomes the stable identity behind the writing of his story: He sits in his chamber, reflects on his life experiences, and writes his biography, the meaning of which is guaranteed by the referential stability and coherence of instrumentalized writing. The guarantee to reference in writing by the transcendental and *a priori* Self not only allows for the existence of referentially stable biography, but extends to any form of *graphein*. As long as writing can be mastered, then history can be written.

But *Invisible Man* does not so neatly resolve into such coherence. Following a different narrator, this essay will argue that *Invisible Man* "plunges" modern fantasies of narrative coherence and stable identity, and defines history as being constituted by disruption, contingency, and the difference in writing.<sup>2</sup> And while these qualities do not "add up" to the logic of an aporia, I work to show that the relation between Invisible Man and his name is not dialectical but aporetic.<sup>3</sup>

### Dispossessing the Possessed Self

The ostensibly declarative opening of *Invisible Man*—"I am an Invisible Man"—reveals, in a grammatical *askesis* of declaration, an incompleteness of the subject. Instead of the predicate nominative properly complementing the subject, the modifier "Invisible" negates ("In") the empirical status of the object, "Man." The "object" thus disappears even as it is called into being, leaving "Man" to signify nothing other than a space of negation. This disrupted declaration,

however, seems to be explained by the narrator in the second paragraph of the "Prologue":

That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality. . . . you're constantly being bumped against by those of poor vision. Or again, you often doubt if you really exist. You wonder whether you aren't simply a phantom in other people's minds. . . . You ache with the need to convince yourself you do exist in the real world . . . and you swear to make them recognize you. And, alas, it's seldom successful. (3-4)

By emphasizing the viewer's "poor vision," *Invisible Man* creates the possibility of an ontological condition of good vision, or true sight, wherein observers would be able to recognize the real person—not the negation or phantom—they are seeing. True sight would therefore resolve the apparent problem introduced by the negation of the subject in the process of its declaration.

But in a fashion emblematic of the novel's structure as a whole, *Invisible Man*'s positivism is shown to be untenable:

One night I accidentally bumped into a man. . . . I stopped the blade, slicing the air as I pushed him away, letting him fall back to the street. . . . He lay there, moaning on the asphalt; a man almost killed by a phantom. . . . Would he have awakened at the point of death? Would Death himself have freed him for wakeful living? But I didn't linger. . . . Poor fool, poor blind fool, I thought with sincere compassion, mugged by an invisible man! (4-5)

The ambivalence of the encounter for *Invisible Man* is palpable: His "compassion" for the "poor blind fool" evinces a continuing belief in the possibility for true sight, but the question of whether the blind fool would have "awakened at the point of death" to "recognize" *Invisible Man* is both left unanswered and, at the same time, by virtue of the extreme likelihood that

the man would not have awakened, is highly pessimistic about the potential for "wakeful living." Indeed, the combination of contingency, unknowability, and absurdity that characterizes the "accidental" encounter between an anonymous "phantom" who later becomes institutionalized as a "mugger" is both introduced and left unresolved throughout the novel's remainder. Just as there is no clarity of sight available for the "tall blond man"<sup>4</sup> to properly identify his "invisible" assailant (4), genealogical and typological methods of any kind to establish a coherent and stable identity will also always be subject to the same—and unceasingly urgent—conditions of impossibility.<sup>5</sup>

### (Un)Mastering Mastery

The disruptive syntax and semantics of the novel's opening two paragraphs begin the novel's disruption of identity claims and self-possession. To better contextualize the significance of Ellison's aporetic narration, and to situate my reading of the novel—a reading that departs from and is conditioned by the novel's opening sentence—it will be necessary to outline the logic of self-possession for which both a certain Ellison and many of his readers argue. Then I will compare Houston Baker's impressively wide-ranging reading of the Trueblood episode to the logic of self-possession.

There are two primary components to the logic of self-possession. First, the novel must be seen as being written retrospectively: The narrator, having emerged from his confusing labyrinth, reviews the trials of his process of self-discovery. The traumatics of self-discovery are finished; the self is discovered, an identity completed. After all, "we must know who we are before we can be free"—the narrator's knowledge of who he is gives him a history to represent. Second, the novel (and, by

extension, writing in general) must be seen as *consisting* of this representing: The hero, safely ensconced in his illuminated chamber, writes the story of a quest for identity, which is *Invisible Man*.

My purpose in engaging Baker's article is neither revisional nor agonistic: I wish to call attention to one revealing aspect of his argument rather than to contest or add to it. A particularly representative passage from Baker's essay highlights the crucial tension. "Artists," he contends, "must, in essence, sufficiently modify their folk forms (and amply advertise themselves) to merchandise such forms as commodities in the artistic market. To make their products commensurate with a capitalistic marketplace, folk artists may even have to don masks that distort their genuine selves. Ralph Ellison is a master of such strategies" (344). Two dichotomies exist here: artists vs. merchants and "masks" vs. "genuine selves." The movement from the "vital repository of 'humane value'" (323) of an "undeniable folk authenticity" to the "constraint" of the marketplace signifies many things for Baker, including an "obscene . . . delivering up" of Afro-American "expressive selves" to "their Anglo-American oppressors" (341). But what concerns us here are the dichotomies themselves.

Fully stable categories of "authentic selfhood" and "inauthentic masking" are embedded in Baker's dichotomous "dualisms"; one cannot, at least within Baker's logic, make use of a term like *authentic* without positing such categories. These dualisms then form the basis for a number of other divisions: public and private, "critic" and "creative writer," "nonsignificant life experiences and their inscribed, artistic significance" (322). These divisions allow Baker to take one further step, illustrated by the idea of mastery in the above quote: ". . . Ellison is a master of such strategies." Mastery of this kind both reinscribes the separation between artist and merchant

(Ellison "dons" whichever masks are necessary in his manipulation of the public marketplace), and relegates writing once again to instrumentality (Ellison masters his words to tell a story, represent reality, reform society, etc.). Thus the figure of Ellison as the master mask-man conjoins the related classical ideals of the transcendent Self and instrumentalized writing: Baker's reading of the Trueblood episode vividly articulates the heroic repossession of the once dispossessed Self, and the story it tells after its return.

**Invisible Man is an open-ended, continually disruptive, unaccountable, and aporetic history of naming.**

a larger project of describing both the epistemological conditions of Ellisonian naming and the beginnings of an ethics of (un)naming that derives in part from Ellison's writings. Making use of many of Ellison's noted literary antecedents, Benston schematizes a complex of naming that fundamentally consists of two inextricable components: an Emersonian/Ahabian desire for mastering phenomena and an Ishmaelian/Ellisonian resistance to being mastered by the name (155-56). Ahab and Emerson attempt to transform an

otherwise inscrutable whale or object into "Moby Dick"—a detached and bounded projection of the Poet's Adamic art. By doing so, they totalize the phenomenon within their conceptual or artistic frame. Conversely, Ishmael and Ellison recognize "that any classification, any figurative 'cetology,' is only a partial, expressive delineation (an 'extract') of what cannot be totalized (154-55). In other words, for Ellison there is always that which necessarily escapes any act of naming, any attempt at mastery; an impassable epistemological and linguistic gap separates what is named and its name. In Benston's terms, there is always an "un" alongside "naming."<sup>9</sup> But this does not imply or countenance, as Baker argues, an escape or redeemed position from the doubled condition of (un)naming. Benston shows that there is never a Self transcendent from its unnamings, and one can never act and/or write outside of one's history.

### (Un)naming Nameability

An alternate set of Ellison's readers challenge, to varying degrees, the logic of self-possession in *Invisible Man*. One of the most compelling is provided by Kimberly Benston in his essay "I Yam What I Yam."<sup>6</sup> Benston's tightly packed reading of the tradition of (un)naming in African American literature points to the problem of meaning in general, a problem of central importance to Ellison's anonymous narrator.<sup>7</sup> As Benston suggests, processes of naming and the function of the name are central to the problem of identity in *Invisible Man*. I will begin by briefly recounting Benston's argument.

Just as there is no absolute position from which one can identify Hart from Rine—the internal, unmolested Self from, say, external public projections—the process of naming can never produce "true" names.<sup>8</sup> Benston enumerates various traditions of naming relevant to Ellison's poetics of naming—African American "genealogical revisionism" and "self-creation"; Muslim and Black Muslim movement "nominations"; and Du Boisian dialectical double-consciousness naming (152-53)—in

### Plunging (outside of) History

#### (Un)Naming History

The question of what makes up history, which is really a question of whose history, which is itself a question of who is naming history, is cen-

tral to the problem of naming in *Invisible Man*:

All things, it is said, are duly recorded—all things of importance, that is. But not quite, for actually it is only the known, the seen, the heard and only those events that the recorder regards as important that are put down, those lies his keepers keep their power by. But the cop would be Clifton's historian, his judge, his witness, and his executioner, and I was the only brother in the watching crowd. And I, the only witness for the defense, knew neither the extent of his guilt nor the nature of his crime. Where were the historians today? And how would they put it down? (IM 439)

The problem of who is writing history and how they are putting it down does not disappear during any of the novel's historiographical modes. *Invisible Man* presents an array of historiographies, including: the Brotherhood's pseudo-Marxist notion of a dialectical "History" in which "realists . . . and materialists . . . determine the direction of events" according to a scientific program (307); the moments of "history" as recording the "clutter of household objects" (271) of the dispossessed tenants; *Invisible Man*'s desire to "get them in, all of them"—to bring the historically unnamed into the "groove of history," to "record" the otherwise "forgotten names" (443) in histories dominated by historians un- or disinterested in African American history. Yet none of these historiographies escapes the problem of writing, which is a problem of naming.

History, thus, in many of its "frequencies" in *Invisible Man*, records events and names that would otherwise be ignored or obscured (see Callahan). But just as Ellison is unyielding about the necessity for all peoples to have the capacity to record history's events, he is equally adamant in rejecting a thing named "History." Historical events, no matter the degree to which they're "witnessed," are still subject to the activity of "recording." There is no immediate history; Clifton's historical and printed "name" will always be, at the very least, inex-

trically enmeshed in the contingencies of encounters between the recorder's eye and the recorder's writing of what is to be recorded. "Naming history," then, requires at least two distinct though potentially related acts: identifying a name to be recorded, and recording that name.<sup>10</sup>

The problem of naming history reemphasizes the necessity to acquire the power to print and record, which could be taken, as Baker does, as the defining ethical injunction of twentieth-century African American identity. This assumes that if History is always History-For, then it should merely be a matter of gaining control of various print media (acknowledging the particular privileging of print in American political and juridical systems) to produce the necessary conditions for self-definition. According to this logic, individuals should write their own histories, or record the events of their lives, like a masterful Rinehart or Trueblood, who slips outside of history and into a mask to manipulate or take advantage of a given historical context, to define his own identity. Taking *Invisible Man*'s rousing anti-dispossession speech seriously in this way ("WE'LL BE DISPOSSESSED NO MORE!"), individuals who would become, as it were, the "CITIZENS OF TOMORROW'S WORLD" (IM 346), must therefore complete two principal tasks: (1) transcend—step outside of—History to identify a name, and (2) write a History for—name—the name. The possession of History would then be structurally homologous to the possession of Self: Both presume a transcendability to History and an instrumentality to writing.

This is precisely where *Invisible Man* runs into trouble with many of its critics, who contend that the novel cannot be coherently converted into grounds for ethical action, or objective historiography.<sup>11</sup> For good reason, *Invisible Man*, as I will now elucidate, "plunges" both the idea of a transcendental Self—a name existing outside of history—and the instrumentalization

of writing—the capacity to unproblematically record or name the transcendent name. Neither writing nor selfhood can escape the divisibility, contingency, or inextricability of writing/naming history; “history,” by this logic, is never anything that can be named, or made equal to the writing of its name: It is not a concept.<sup>12</sup> What happens in *Invisible Man* is not a “stepping outside of” history; rather, it is a “plunging into” the “chaos” or abyss of the name of history.<sup>13</sup>

### *Plunging the Abyss of Aristotle*

We can now begin to see how this disrupts the Aristotelean logic underlying self-possessed readings of *Invisible Man*. Within an Aristotelean logic of metaphoricality, the master “Rinehart” can be seen as extending himself—metaphorizing himself—into a variety of proper names or masks which resemble in some manner his proper self; each mask serves his needs seamlessly as he “dons” them without concern. The masks will behave: They are mere instruments designed to enable master Rinehart to achieve his ends. The same with Trueblood, and, as Baker argues, with Ellison: Master storytellers use words as tools to manipulate their situation, to achieve Self-possession. In this way, language is mimetic: It represents (expresses, describes, illustrates) its referent—it carries over the essence of the referent to the term—as a mirror reflects its image. Self-possession through language occurs when the Self is made external to itSelf through the vessel of the name (“Self”): The Self recognizes itSelf in its name (“Self”), as one recognizes the image of oneself in a mirror. The master writer/magician conjures himself (represents himself) in language; language primarily (if not exclusively) “exists” to reflect its master.

But in *Invisible Man* there is no demonstrable “Self” outside of language, and no unity-of-self that the notion of Selfhood requires. Both of these claims—that language is inextricably linked to selfhood, and that selfhood itself is disintegrated and plural (itself)—are not only supported by, but emphatically present in, *Invisible Man*. Writing is never master-able; it is never subject to the objectivity of pre-linguistic determination: If it serves at all, it does so while exceeding or undermining the “master’s” intent. If one utters a sound, speaks a word, signs one’s name, then one has plunged into—is shown to have always already been plunging—the *différance* of language.

### *Plunging*

Both *Invisible Man* and Derrida’s “La Mythologie Blanche” metaphorize linguistic incompleteness and excess as a “plunging.” One is, writes Derrida under Alan Bass’s translation, “*met . . . en abyme*” (“put into *abyme*”). Bass translates “putting into” also as “to plunge,” or “plunged/plunging,” “into” *abyme*. The many functions of *abyme* include: “infinite reflection” (as *mise en abyme*), “to ruin” (*abimer*), and “*abime*” (“abyss, chasm, depths, chaos, interval, difference, division, etc.”).<sup>14</sup> Plunging into *abyme*, then, is (in part) plunging into writing, or *différance*, which is precisely the condition of ruinous self-dispossession, of writing the self. This conception of writing opens subjectivity up to the potentially infinite play of difference—demonstrates the already-having-been of the play of difference—of a trembling movement of simultaneous making and unmaking. The “*généralisation de la métaphoricité par la mise en abyme d’une métaphore déterminée*” (“the generalization of metaphor by plunging into *abyme* one determined

metaphor") shows the Aristotelean logic of metaphoricity, in which metaphor properly carries over the essence of a pre-linguistic and determining referent (resemblance), as being always already divided (262). Plunging metaphoricity stipulates that meaning will never be made properly present, and any notion of a Self behind the metaphor is a nostalgic idealization. There is no Self outside of language; all "selves" are divided and dividing metaphors. Claiming self-possession and representing it through writing thus require a blindness to writing and difference.

The first uses of *plunge* in *Invisible Man* occur at the point of a name:

WHAT IS YOUR NAME?

A tremor shook me; it was as though he had suddenly given a name to, had organized the vagueness that drifted through my head, and I was overcome with swift shame. I realized that I no longer knew my own name . . . . I tried again, plunging into the blackness of my mind. (239)

Despite continuing attempts by the "doctors" to elicit his name, Invisible Man merely "lay fretting over [his] identity" until the "Director" calls it, which provokes a "stabbing pain" of recognition (242, 246). The episode concludes with Invisible Man in a state of confusion: "Things whirled too fast around me. My mind went alternately bright and blank in slow rolling waves. We, he, him—my mind and I—were no longer getting around in the same circles" (249- 50).

The factory hospital episode as a whole is one of the transition points in the novel: a movement from one condition or conceptual register to another—transitions often marked by birth imagery, and always involving some form of paper exchange or transmission. This transition shares the iconography of vertical movement with each of Invisible Man's subsequent transitions (into the subway system, down the stairs of the burning building, onto the "load of coal"): The "train plunged," and he "dropped through

the roar, giddy and vacuum-minded, sucked under and out into the later afternoon Harlem" (250). Invisible Man's identity confusion (and/or fusion—at one point he felt "somehow a part of all of [the names], had become submerged within them and lost" [241]) is narrated as a plunging: He plunges his mind unsuccessfully for his name, and his confusion is troped as an underground or submerged subway that stresses agent-less, chaotic transport over active, participatory self-transformation.

The attempt by Invisible Man to remember a name forgotten triggers the instability of an identity crisis.<sup>15</sup> Writing is emphasized throughout the scene: Names are scrawled on placards; his name is written on the set of papers he takes with him from the Director's office. Invisible Man's name is forgotten, painfully recognized, written, and soon lost again in a subterranean confusion of transport. The "burning eye" (232) that plagues Invisible Man is "cured," though with no lasting results, by the announcement of his name. Naming and visibility are linked, of course, throughout the novel, which emphasizes the severity of an eye-identity crisis: "When I discover who I am, I'll be free"—and thereby be able to see (243). But he leaves without the stability he seeks, even after his name is given: "I had the feeling that I had been talking beyond myself, had used words and expressed attitudes not my own, that I was in the grip of some alien personality lodged deep within me. . . . It was as though I were acting out a scene from some crazy movie. Or perhaps I was catching up with myself and had put into words feelings which I had hitherto suppressed" (249). These questions are—unmistakably—left unanswered, open: His movement underground to the plunging trains as "We, he, him—my mind and I" does nothing to stabilize his identity.

We have, then, a juxtaposition of the desire for a stable identity and, even after his name is given, the insta-

bility of a continuing identity confusion. This is not an identity confusion leading toward resolution. If the narrator's loss of a proper name were cat-achrestic—a radical *misnaming*—then we could posit a potential (re)possession of his proper name by virtue of the presupposed latent proper name in the notion of "*misnaming*." But Invisible Man's name is precisely never given; he ranks as one of the most well-recognized anonymous characters in American literature. This anonymity emphasizes not the promise of an eventual fulfilling of identity claims by a more appropriate, or totalizing, name, but the necessary *unfulfillability* of the name for the named. By this logic, there is never a time—and has never been a time—when a proper name would exist; no name would be proper to, or fulfilling of, whatever it failed to name, which is always the impossible condition of naming.

The six remaining uses of *plunge* that I am focusing on will develop this point.

The second use of *plunge* reveals the despair in the concept of the potentially infinite unnameability in plunging. Tod Clifton's "'plunge outside history'" is in this sense an attempt to fix an identity, to stabilize the chaotic swirl of trying to distinguish the "'lies'" of a "'corrupt ideology'" from the truth of a "'black king,'" or to know "'your pahst and where are you going'"—to know your history (375). Ras has settled the issue for himself: He has determined his identity and named it; he has identified his history and acts upon it; he works toward a resolution of his proper name. Clifton is, as yet, unsettled: "'I don't know. . . . I suppose sometimes a man *has* to plunge outside history. . . . Plunge outside, turn his back. . . . Otherwise he might kill somebody, go nuts'" (377). If you are the black king, then you have stepped outside of history: You can see historical progression; your name is visible, or perhaps you have created your own name. The conditions of your decision make your

choice clear *because* you have reduced the potentially infinite activity of plunging the name of history to a binary condition. Either one goes mad by staying in an infinitely spiraling history, or one steps outside of mad history and into a blinded, and sanitized, concept of history. Ras's sight is actually an occlusion of history.

But another way of seeing Clifton's problem allows for the grammatical ambiguity of the verb *has to plunge*—both ethics and necessity simultaneously, or the epistemological condition of ethics *as* necessity. One is always choosing to go mad, and one is always mad in the choosing. Clifton's history is mixed with madness: Already in the pointing—in the choosing of one's history—is a radical *undoing* of history, an irresolvable destabilizing of history.<sup>16</sup> At the instant of the pointing, history is constructed and deconstructed; as you point to history, you plunge it, you are plunged by it. History, like the problem of a name, cannot exist as a transcendental referent. Clifton is acutely aware of this double pointing/unpointing, and it eventually drives him to the madness in/of his name.

Clifton's anxiety conditions Invisible Man's form of reflection. His name having been plunged, Invisible Man will now be (as he has always been) unnamed. The first several appearances of plunging after Clifton's remarks occur just before Clifton is killed. I will address three separate components of this episode, each of which are "plungings," and each of which functions differently, though all are related to *abyme*. First, Invisible Man is plunged into anxiety by the sight of Clifton's dolls:

It was as though he had chosen—how had he put it the night he fought with Ras—to fall outside of *history*. I stopped in the middle of the walk with the thought. "To plunge," he had said. But he knew that only in the Brotherhood could we make ourselves known, could we avoid being empty Sambo dolls. Such an obscene flouncing of everything human! My God! . . . I'd overlooked it a thousand times; no matter why I wasn't called. I'd forget it

and hold on desperately to Brotherhood with all my strength. For to break away would be to plunge. . . . To plunge! (434-35)

Clifton's "plunge" is terrifying to Invisible Man: He will go so far as to suffer humiliation to retain the value of (the) Brotherhood. What is valuable in the Brotherhood, what the Brotherhood gives, is a sense of definition, of identity, of history—"make ourselves known." It allows one to become "human," to move out of the degradation of being defined as inhuman, or of no account. But this passage is deeply and bitterly ironized: As Invisible Man will later come to find out, the Brotherhood's interest in its workers, particularly its African American workers, is anything but "human"—at least in the sense that Invisible Man speaks of it here. Thus an anxiety for definition and identification is proleptically apposed to the impossibility of acquiring one, of achieving nameability or knowability. Invisible Man's desire to "hold on desperately to Brotherhood" parallels Derrida's "everything within us that desires a kingdom"—the need to step outside of, to see above, to look over, etc., namelessness, contingency, motion; to stop, in other words, the maddening infinity of abyssal reflexivity, to define a stable position (see Derrida, "Différance" 21-22.). Clifton does this definitively a page later, which pushes Invisible Man further, or intensifies his plunging.

Invisible Man begins his reverie by "wandering": "I wandered down the subway stairs seeing nothing, my mind plunging" (*IM* 438). As his mind plunges, so does he: "Plunging" here alludes to epic traditions of wandering into the wilderness of chaos and unknowability<sup>17</sup>; and it returns to the spatial metaphor of descent introduced by Invisible Man's earlier plunge into the sub-way of an identity crisis. He continues:

Why should a man deliberately plunge outside of history and peddle an obscenity, my mind went on abstractedly. Why should he choose to disarm

himself, give up his voice and leave the only organization offering him a chance to "define" himself? The platform vibrated and I looked down. Bits of paper whirled up in the passage of air, settling quickly as a train moved past. (438-39)

Invisible Man is "platformed" outside of the trains, on the edge of the "transitory" trains as they rush by. He understands Clifton's "choice" from the position of an outsider, someone who is not familiar with Clifton's anxiety. The idea of self-definition is still enviable in Invisible Man's mind, and the Brotherhood is still the catalyst for making oneself "known." While these positions are radically destabilized later in the novel, we do get hints here of what is to come: The platform exists, but it is "vibrating," which links it to the "tremoring" (239) and "trembling" (441) that elsewhere characterizes Invisible Man's movement into uncertainty; his looking "down" suggests a continuation of his plunge(ing); and the association of writing and selfhood is again adumbrated by the "bits of paper" floating up in the train's path. Invisible Man's reflection is, in other words, plunging him further into a destabilizing and abyssal reflexivity, and closer to writing. Both of these movements are advanced by his continuing reflection:

Why had he turned away? Why had he chosen to step off the platform and fall beneath the train? Why did he choose to plunge into nothingness, into the void of faceless faces, of soundless voices, lying outside history? I tried to step away and look at it from a distance of words read in books, half-remembered. For history records the patterns of men's lives . . . . All things, it is said, are duly recorded—all things of importance, that is. But not quite, for actually it is only the known, the seen, the heard and only those events that the recorder regards as important that are put down . . . . (439)

Invisible Man's reflections extend into an explicit consideration of chaos and abyss. Just "outside history" is the abyss of namelessness, of "nothingness": He maintains a distinction

between history and abyss, and inside and "outside history," but the oppositions are losing their difference. He "tries" to step away from this form of reflection—he is no longer able to maintain an absolute separation from the "it" of this plunging—indicating his closer proximity to namelessness. He appeals to historical writing for an objective, rational anchor—a buttressing of his platform—but the notion of an objective history is losing its valence: History, as we saw earlier, is subject to the persistent questions of "whose" history and "how would they put it down?"

A different form of "putting it down" (which nicely captures the plunging in/of writing) becomes, at this episode's conclusion, a temporary "platform" for Invisible Man: "I'd been so fascinated by the motion that I'd forgotten to measure what it was bringing forth. I'd been asleep, dreaming" (444). That is, Invisible Man awakens to a form of writing about history that reconstitutes a separation between writing and history, and allows for a "measurable" history to exist outside of writing. But this does not occur until his idea of history has been destabilized. After standing at the platform "with the trains plunging in and out" (439), he sees a group of zoot-suitors and, like Poe's narrator, becomes interested in the men in the crowd:

... They were men outside of historical time, they were untouched, they didn't believe in Brotherhood, no doubt had never heard of it; or perhaps like Clifton would mysteriously have rejected its mysteries; men of transition whose faces were immobile . . . . They were men out of time—unless they found Brotherhood. Men out of time, who would soon be gone and forgotten. . . . But who knew (and now I began to tremble so violently I had to lean against a refuse can)—who knew but they were the saviors, the true leaders, the bearers of something precious? The stewards of something uncomfortable, burdensome, which they hated because, living outside the realm of history, there was no one to applaud their value and they themselves failed to understand it. What if

Brother Jack were wrong? What if history was a gambler, instead of a force in a laboratory experiment, and the boys his ace in the hole? What if history was not a reasonable citizen, but a madman full of paranoid guile and these boys his agents, his big surprise! His own revenge? For they were outside, in the dark with Sambo, the dancing paper doll; taking it on the lambo with my fallen brother, Tod Clifton (Tod, Tod) running and dodging the forces of history instead of making a dominating stand. (440-41)

"Outside history" has taken on a new suit: *Outside* no longer simply refers to literal death; it no longer imposes a distinction between history and outside (the zootsuitors are not outside of history, but in a different history). *Outside* now suggests an ontical dimension, though aporetically ontological by its enigma, for being "outside" of "history" is describable but not knowable. The possibilities, in other words, for being outside of history are becoming brighter, though they involve characteristics that are precisely disruptive to conventional or bounded notions of ontology (see n12): transitoriness/transition, syncopation or alternate temporal register, aleatory, mad, paranoid, unpredictable, running and dodging. And once a "definition" of zootsuing outside of history is written, the zoot-suitors are gone, dodging, out of time and place.

The possibilities of a zootsuing history unfold further in *Invisible Man* as the narrator shows a distinctly different use of *plunging* after his confrontation with one-eyed Brother Jack and his experience as Rinehart. He recognizes and accepts, as far as he knows it at this point, a form of active "invisibility": "So I'd accept it, I'd explore it, rine and heart. I'd plunge into it with both feet and they'd gag. . . . Let them gag on what they refused to see" (508). This conception of plunging history, based as it is on a model of agency or active subjectivity, is later ironized—but here brings the aporetic apposition of deconstruction-construction (writing) into greater relief. Invisible Man is more aware of "that progress goo" that

a transcendental history requires, and hence the possibility of teleological movement and linear temporality is challenged: "Not only could you travel upward toward success but you could travel downward as well; up and down, in retreat as well as in advance, crabways and crossways and around in a circle, meeting your old selves coming and going and perhaps all at the same time." This "shattering" of his knowledge systems produces in part a realization of the immense possibility involved in being able to change his "name and never [be] challenged even once" (510). This realization belies the stable and unified Aristotelian Self still lingering behind his name, one capable of writing a "useable history." It takes a riot to destabilize or "tremble" him out of this ideal.

The next appearance of *plunging* falls during the riot and after Invisible Man's foiled attempt to seduce from Sybil the information necessary to "plunge" the Brotherhood. Invisible Man "plunged down, shaking with fierce excitement," as he helps light an apartment building on fire (549). He is also attempting to plunge away from being recognized. Repeatedly his Brotherhood name is sounded by various people, and he is recognized by those either who are after him (Ras's supporters) or who admire or need him (549-51). Part of his desire to escape their name-calling is tactical: Being recognized in the context of a riot is dangerous; anonymity is preferable for various reasons. But he also is driven away from his name by a "feverish inner need" (549). His movement into the crowd ("I was one with the mass, moving down the littered street over puddles of oil and milk, my personality blasted" [550]) inverts his earlier fascination with, and abstraction from, the zootsuits in the crowd: He *becomes* the man in the crowd, which is to say he moves into the anonymity of the abyss of history and his name. This movement also emphasizes the contingent nature of history:

The riot embodies the suspicion of history being a "gambler."

Finally, Invisible Man plunges through the opening of a manhole cover that "for some reason" had been removed: "I felt myself plunge down, down; a long drop that ended upon a load of coal that sent up a cloud of dust, and I lay in the black dark upon the black coal no longer running . . ." (565). The contingency and unpredictability of history are clearly marked by the contingent appearing of the manhole cover; through them, so to speak, he is shown "the hole he was in" (572), which opens for him to plunge into a "state neither of dreaming nor of waking, but somewhere in between." Once again, this is brought about by Invisible Man facing the outrageous fact of his Self not being his own, of being the running joke or effects of a "stroke of the pen"—of being named by Jack or "anyone at that late date" who "could have named me and set me running" (568). As has been the case throughout the novel, the dis-possession of his Self has (been) plunged(ing) Invisible Man into *abyme*: It has ruined his sense of a coherent, unified, integrated Self (shown to have always been ruining) by (un)resolving it into an aporetic apposition between a trembling (plat)form and an abyss of infinite self-reflection—the necessary and impossible condition from which Invisible Man could write his unnameability.

## Epilogue

One way to view Invisible Man's writings on writing in the "Epilogue" emphasizes a paradoxical logic to the problem of identity declarations and historiography in the novel. Two contradictory forms of writing appear. First, writing is making "passive love to your sickness" or burning "it out" and going "on to the next conflicting phase" (576). Writing is

"self-torture," "failure," and exceeds or thwarts or undermines intention: "The very act of trying to put it all down has confused me and negated some of the anger and some of the bitterness" (579); writing is approached "through division"—through love/hate, denouncing/defending (580); writing is "disembodied," "invisible and without substance" (581); and writing is "disarming [oneself] in the process" (580). But, second, writing also brings one to the point of a decision, which implies imminent, "socially responsible" action (580-81), and which presumes some form of "self" that acts: Writing gives "pattern to the chaos" (580), and writing is the "true health" of knowing the "division" of invisibility (576). Thus, a self, disembodied and disarmed, writes the condition of its invisibility; self and invisibility, like "man" and "invisible," are the terms opposed to one another in a paradox of declaration.

The difference, however, between a paradox of terms and an aporia of terms lies in difference itself. In a paradox, two contradictory terms are nonetheless paired to reach a new term, which contains them. The logic of the paradox is dialectical, and the full force of the paradox is given at the instant of the resolution of the two contradictory terms. This logic has persisted in readings of *Invisible Man*. Critics who have acknowledged some of the elements of plunging in the novel have nonetheless ultimately followed a paradoxical logic by trying to resolve the problems they have encountered. For example, Kimberly Benston transforms *unnaming* into an epistemological condition capable of sustaining an ethics of self-creation, in which "dreams of the hypostatic experience that simultaneously names and unnames itself" resolves into a stance capable of taking "responsibility for the rhythms of self by reconciling them with the intolerable music of [one's] familial past" ("I Yam" 164, 169).<sup>18</sup> This transformation performs a dialectical logic by converting the plurality and difference of "unnaming" into a coherent and uni-

fied step leading toward the telos of personal responsibility.

But, as I have tried to demonstrate, *Invisible Man* does not proceed dialectically. The nature of the relation between possession and dispossession, identity and non-identity, naming and unnaming, visible and invisible, in *Invisible Man* is an unbounded apposition of imperfected (plunging) terms, not a contradiction of opposed and perfected terms. There is no final, stable "platform," somehow outside of or un-imblicated in the plunging that is *Invisible Man*, from which to re-view the course of events in such a way as to yield the stability necessary for a proper identification of the opposing forces of a contradictory logic. Every term the novel gives to define a given side or term of the opposition is plunged by the problem of naming in the act of designation. Plurality and difference and aleatoriness and disruption overwhelm and generalize the terms of opposition/contradiction. Invisible Man never gives a proper name to compare his others to (which are also unknown); history never receives a stable referential status; and, despite the many indices pointing to a systemic progression of the narrative from beginning to end, the novel consists of disruptions of sequence and plot and point of view that cannot be resolved into a coherent identity.

The distinction, in short, between I and You is plunged into an aporia of I-You: Any "I" or "You" cannot be properly named; any act of designation will always have fallen short or have exceeded or been exceeded by the possibility of a referent; and the relation between I-You makes possible everything that has nevertheless been written or named up to this point. "One" disappears, becomes invisible, the instant "one" writes or names oneself; "history" disappears the instant it is written or named; and, though there is never a guarantee of a proper direction, nor an escape to an outside of the plunging of writing or naming, history and one's name are always written or

named. "Invisible Man" names the impossibility of naming, which is not a dialectical resolution of the problem of the proper name, but a plunging of names in general. Declaring an identity by stating one's name, thus, is an affirmation of the irresolvable and unending plurality and difference constitutive of every name. Though there is never an external platform or stable ground to stand on—a scaffolding exogenous to and capable of providing relief from the plunging—a proper name is nonetheless impossibly determined and written in the immanence of an uncertain and trembling future.

This plunging of I-You throws the chronological progression of the novel—and this essay's following of the plummeting lead/light novel—into *abyme*: Both reader and narrator are "ruined" into the plurality and difference of one another from the instant

"I" is written/seen; the "frightening possibilities" (507) and "abysmal pain" (579) of identity unbounding, of Self being (having always been) destabilized into selves, mark the abyss of infinite reflection. All of which occur—have always occurred—at the same time, and as such, *are* time, which is always shown, in boomerang fashion, to be history. *Invisible Man*, then, is an open-ended, continually disruptive, unaccountable, and aporetic history of naming. At no point can Invisible Man be named; at every point "he" and "you" are abyssally apposed. The syntactical object of the grammar of identity is shown to have always been incomplete, divided, chaotic, "without substance," and, in short, ruining from the (non)start. Which is precisely the absurd condition, as Invisible Man impossibly declares, of the (dis)possession of your self in writing.

1. A substantial number of literary critics agree with Ellison. Below I will be focusing on Houston Baker's influential reading of the Trueblood episode, but I cite here several other representative readings sympathetic to a heroicized reading of the novel. See Baker; Lyons; Savery; Schafer. Most of the essays in Hersey's collection, as well as each of the other major editions of collected essays on Ellison and *Invisible Man*, place the novel in the tradition of the *Bildungsroman* and thus share Lyons' and Savery's assumptions about Self-realization and instrumentalizable writing. Each reading generally emphasizes the narrator's progression toward a possession of self through a period of confusion and disintegration. See the essays by Singleton, Bone, Schafer, Fraiberg, Horowitz, and Kaiser in Reilly, as well as the full-length studies by O'Meally, McSweeney, and Schor.

The list of the "alternate set of critics"—those who, in my estimation, take Invisible Man's invisibility and anonymity seriously—is much shorter. They will be primarily represented by Kimberly Benston's investigation of the problematics of naming in *Invisible Man* (a reading I make much use of in this essay), and I also briefly mention Thomas Schaub's reading of masking. Alan Nadel's discussion of invisibility and allusion has been helpful, too. See Benston, "I Yam"; Schaub, "Ellison's Masks"; Nadel.

2. Doing so is not to evaluate declarations of identity on either moral or aesthetic grounds. These statements occur; people are either convinced or not of their veracity; and it is certainly not for me to condemn or praise their iterative force or the socio-political consequences of the statements. Rather, my aim is to articulate what I see as the activity occurring in *Invisible Man* on and about and through the relation among declarability, identity, and occurring in general.

3. I develop my discussion of the aporia of naming in *Invisible Man* out of Jacques Derrida's *Aporias*, esp. 20-42. While in this essay I do not formally treat the question of the possibility for an ethics in relation to aporetic naming, the problem of such an ethics is nonetheless implicated. My final section, "Epilogue," states the grounds from which an ethics could be articulated. For a more explicit treatment of the ethicity of aporias, see Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, and my own "Kant, Terror and Aporethics in *Gravity's Rainbow*."

4. The racial coding of the scene does not provide relief from the epistemological consequences of this encounter. At no point in the novel—nor, it could be shown, in any of Ellison's writings or interviews—does a given racial history or point of view resolve into the capacity for true sight. All are "brothers" in blindness; no one can see clearly.

## Notes

5. The phrase *the condition of impossibility* appears frequently and in varied forms in contemporary literary analyses. I am using it here in Nietzsche's sense. Such claims to true sight, writes Nietzsche, "always demand that we should think of an eye that is completely unthinkable, an eye that is turned in no particular direction, in which the active and interpretive forces, through which alone seeing becomes seeing *something*, are supposed to be lacking; these always demand from the eye an absurdity and nonsense" (*Genealogy* 3:12).

6. While I primarily focus on Benston's essay, Thomas Schaub's "Ellison's Masks" could be read alongside Benston's as a kind of "Unmasking Maskability." Schaub reads Ellison's masking not as a process of masterful illusion-production—the work, say, of a sublime magician, in which, as one reading of Rinehart would go, Rinehart the master maintains a private, essential, or core Self and uses masks to manipulate the public marketplace—but as a potentially unending series or collection of masks upon masks.

7. See Gates, *Signifying*. I am referring specifically here to Gates's justification of signifying(g) as a viable mode of literary and cultural critique in African American imaginative works found mostly in his "Preface" and "Introduction." But, as is obvious, Gates's articulation of the tradition of signifying(g), especially as naming explicitly intersects with signifying(g), is deeply relevant to my study's interest in identity formation. If, as I will argue momentarily, the ontological and epistemological consequences of the act of naming and the function of names are inseparable from the activity of declaring identity—that, in short, the problem of naming is the "proper" category of the problem of identity—then signification—in any tradition, but perhaps particularly in a "people" who identify themselves as descendants of catechretically named ancestors—is likewise inseparably linked to identity claims through the problematics of naming.

8. Slavoj Žižek asks a very similar question to Invisible Man's (and Kimberly Benston's) regarding the problem of naming: "In other words: how do we formulate the determining role of a certain particular domain without falling into the trap of essentialism?" Or, again: "How do names refer to the objects they denote?" Starting with Saul Kripke's theory of "antidescriptivist" naming, which argues that "a word is connected to an object or a set of objects through an act of 'primal baptism'" (rather than through an internal, "descriptive" resemblance of the object to the name), Žižek moves beyond anti-descriptivism's overlooking of "the retroactive effect of naming itself" to emphasize that "it is the name itself, the signifier, which supports the identity of the object." The "signifier" that retroactively constitutes reference is Lacan's *point de capiton* (the quilting point, or "nodal point"), which is a "kind of knot of meanings" that never guarantees an extra-linguistic referent, but which serves, in its signifying function, as guarantor of reference by "unify[ing] a given field: . . . it is, so to speak, the word to which 'things' themselves refer to recognize themselves in their unity."

The identity of a given object is constructed retroactively and contingently by an activity of designating which never guarantees an internal resemblance between object and name—we never "reach the point at which language starts to function immediately as 'language of the Real'"—and which consists of a unified field of signifiers. This unified field comes to achieve referential status as a "pure" signifier—that which we refer to when we speak of an object as such—which "gives unity and identity to our experience of historical reality itself." The "pure signifier" at the same time "designates" and "constitutes the identity of a given object beyond the variable cluster of its descriptive properties."

While Žižek's use of Kripke and Lacan rejects (as does, I argue, *Invisible Man*) the "essentialist illusion" of names properly referring to extralinguistic objects, the Žižekian-Lacanian "nodal point" effectively reinstalls a functional "Real" to refer to—a move which grants language a referential stability that, I argue, *Invisible Man* disallows (see Žižek, esp. 87-99).

9. I will ultimately distinguish my reading of the problem of naming in *Invisible Man* from Benston's—primarily through what I consider to be *Invisible Man's* participation in a logic of the aporia—but this sets up what immediately follows. The gist of my difference from Benston's logic lies in his use of an ethical register which seeks to promote an eventual (re)possession of an African American literary and cultural aesthetic. I argue that the traditional humanist understanding of action, identity, and language to which Benston is appealing is the very target of *Invisible Man's* polemic: It is this form of humanist essentialism that leads to an evacuation of genuine agency, a conception of institutionalized/able power, and an instrumentalization of language—none of which are supported by the irreconcilable activity of and in *Invisible Man's/Invisible Man's* name/naming.

10. This is to say nothing of the activity of the *reading* of what "was to have been recorded." I use the scare quotes to emphasize, *pace* Foucault and Derrida, the impossibilities and potentialities of the moment(s) of meaning at the site of reading. Does a name get named when it is uttered? When an observer hears it? When that observer writes it down? When a reader encounters it? As I am arguing and will argue more explicitly below, each of these questions is posed and unanswered

("plunged") throughout *Invisible Man*. This activity constitutes, in part, the condition of the impossibility of the name.

11. For responses that condemn *Invisible Man*'s withdrawal into political nihilism, see Klein; also Rosenblatt 184-99. For an historicizing account of *Invisible Man*'s critical reception, see Schaub, *American* 91-115.

12. By *concept* I am referring to the notion of the boundedness of a concept. That is, when one says *concept* one is assuming a coherence or unity of parts, or a contained or formed or completed idea. One of Nietzsche's primary critiques was of the ideal of unity in the concept ("Every idea originates through equating the unequal"), and Gilles Deleuze in particular has pursued relations between "difference" and concept, claiming that any concept of difference based on resemblance or identity was Platonic (and, so, anachronistic), and that a concept of difference unrelated to resemblance must be thought. My concept of the "condition of impossibility" follows Deleuze to the extent that difference defines the concept of the self, and of the self's relation to its proper name. This is also what I am arguing is occurring in *Invisible Man*. See Nietzsche, "On the Truth"; Deleuze, esp. 262-304.

13. It might be useful here to give a brief definition of *plunge*, most of which is taken from the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. To *plunge* is (intransitively) 'to throw oneself into a given state or condition'; or, alternatively, 'to move forward and downward violently, to descend steeply.' Both usages derive from the Latin, *plumbicre*, 'to sound with a plumb,' referring to the activity of sounding for true verticality and/or water depth by dropping a lead weight suspended from the end of a line—a "Plumb Line." Plunging, then, maintains two contradictory movements simultaneously: to throw oneself as a "plummet" (a lead Plumb Line "bob") to establish true verticality or to measure the depths; and the potentially boundless activity of plummeting violently while being led by a malleable, ductile "bob" that is "readily persuaded or influenced" (*American Heritage*).

14. See Derrida, *Margins* 262.

15. "Forgetting" here offers another instance of the problem of naming in *Invisible Man*. The narrator authentically has forgotten his name, has become estranged from his name, which implies that, at least at one point, *Invisible Man* operated as if his name resembled "him"—declared his identity. "Now," however, *Invisible Man* "begins" a plunging of his proper name and of names and naming in general, which comes to yield a realization, though an impossible realization (as I argue below), that *Invisible Man* and "his name" were *always* in an aporetic relation. The narrative is always conditioned by the anonymity of *Invisible Man*, and this, at the least, forces readers to appose anamnesis to anonymity. This apposition is nothing that can be resolved: The name exists (tremblingly) alongside the impossibility of a name in an aporetic—not dialectic—condition of difference and contiguity.

16. *Tod*'s name doubles as an explicit reference to the plunging of naming. *Tod*, meaning 'death' in German, signals the radical undoing of nomenclature in general: Naming, like all semiotic systems, both convokes the performative activity of any linguistic utterance and formalizes the movement unto death. History and death, of course, are inseparable and mutually constitutive: One cannot name without marking the named—and being marked by the name in the naming—with death. In this sense, death disrupts and unbounds all systems of naming and identification.

17. This scene, with its "bits of paper" and movement underground alludes to the *Aeneid*, specifically the encounter with Sybil and the subsequent visit to the underworld. Ellison is thereby intensifying his critique of the epic heroic quest, which is clearly implicated in his critique of the notion of coherent identity. If *Invisible Man* were functioning in, or repeating, epic conventions of a quest for knowledge, then the narrator would be given the promise of his name in the subway. Instead, the fragmented and contingently "whirling" bits of paper suggest the disintegration and/or incoherence of the written self or name, as well as his encounter with the "zoot-suitors" which, as I argue below, yields a vision of undefinability. The narrator's descent to the underworld reveals further evidence of the namelessness of history and the (im)possibilities therein. In short, if the narrator were following the path of Aeneas to seek his proper name, then what he found instead was the plunging of names in general. My thanks to Adam Kitzes, who pointed out this allusion.

18. For a more explicit articulation of this position, see Benston, "Facing."

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