Mythic Guilt and the Burden of Sin in Ellison's *Invisible Man*

STUART NOBLE-GOODMAN

AS JIM TRUEBLOOD BEGINS his tale of incest in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, the protagonist hears something rattle against the porch upon which the three men are sitting. Leaning down, he picks it up, noting that "It was a hard red apple stamped out of tin" (53). Trueblood has just taken a bite of a plug of tobacco, and this passing detail introduces the motif of original sin in the novel, a motif Ellison employs both allusively and metaphorically as one nexus in his elaborate and complex thematic scheme. The fall from grace serves both as a paradigm for the northern migration of the invisible man—from the edenic, blissful innocence of the Tuskegee-like southern college for blacks to the decadent metropolis, where he will learn the hard lessons of racism firsthand—and in a wider sense, as an extended metaphor for the commodification of minorities and women in America. This essay will discuss the ways in which the religious myth of the Fall informs the cultural history of African Americans in terms of the American myth of class mobility, and how the dynamics of that myth as perceived by blacks and whites respectively in turn raises questions about the modernist perspective in the novel.

The narrator's pastoral description of the college and its grounds indicates his understanding of it as edenic, filled with limitless possibilities for an ambitious young black man like himself just beginning the process of 'raising himself up.' He describes how "the grass turned green in the springtime and how the mocking birds fluttered their tails and sang, how the moon shone down on the buildings . . . the bridge of rustic

logs, made for trysting, but virginal and untested by lovers" (34). The world of the college is, in the narrator's mind, pre-lapsarian, untainted by and insulated from white mythic sin. But of course this innocence is double-edged; although pre-lapsarian, the narrator has no real self-knowledge, no identity beyond vague notions of the grand figure cut by Booker T. Washington, the narrator's hero. The fateful meeting that the narrator unwittingly arranges between Norton and Trueblood will result in his expulsion from this sacred space, but with disgrace comes precious knowledge of self and world. Ultimately, the radically dichotomous treatment that he and Trueblood receive as a result of this transgression—from both the white and black communities—reveal much about Ellison's view of the dynamics of the cultural power structure.

The Trueblood scene is pivotal to the ensuing action of the novel, serving as a sort of narrative engine that sets in motion the chain of events leading ultimately to the invisible man going underground and recounting his story, thereby constructing a viable identity. As I noted, the invisible man finds a tin replica of a red apple on Trueblood's porch, emblematic of the forbidden fruit of which Trueblood has partaken, and to which Norton (a pun on Northern), the New-England millionaire-trustee, guiltily and enviously aspires. Ellison shows us through various details that Norton has an incestuous attraction to his daughter. He lyrically describes her as a "being more rare, more beautiful, purer, more perfect and more delicate than the wildest dreams of a poet. I could never believe her to be my own flesh and blood. . . . She was rare, a perfect creation, a work of purest art. . . . I found it difficult to believe her my own" (42). His description emphasizes the psychic distance that he's able to maintain between his fantasy and 'true' blood relationship to his daughter. Thus when Norton hears the invisible man haltingly acknowledge Trueblood's act, Norton's reaction is immediate and violent: " 'Not that!' No . . . ' he said, with something like horror"

(49). His need to experience this tabooed fantasy sends him into a frenzy that the invisible man cannot fathom:

> "Would that be the man?" Mr. Norton asked.
> "Yes, sir. I think so."
> "Get out!" he cried. "I must talk with him. . . . Hurry!"
> . . . He clambered out and almost ran across the road to the yard, as though compelled by some pressing urgency which I could not understand. (50)

Norton's motive in insisting on speaking with Trueblood is purely vicarious and voyeuristic—he is both thrilled and horrified that this man has actually carried out his deepest fantasy and yet lives to tell about it: " 'You did and are unharmed!' he shouted, his blue eyes blazing into the black face with something like envy and indignation. . . . 'You have looked upon chaos and are not destroyed!' " (51) At some level, Norton feels that his incestuous feelings toward his daughter are responsible for her death, an act of divine retribution. Attempting to assuage his psychosexual guilt, all of his philanthrophic gestures "since her passing [have] been a monument to her memory" (43).

The style of the Trueblood narrative is incantatory and ritualistic, emphasizing its religious undertones and, for Norton, the ritualistic aspect of the taboo being violated: "He cleared this throat, his eyes gleaming and his voice taking on a deep, incantatory quality, as though he had told the story many, many times" (53). He *has* told this story many, many times, most notably to the white sociologists whose pseudoscientific theories of race superiority are bolstered by such 'evidence.' Trueblood is a conventional type character, the black storyteller steeped in the oral tradition. This connection to the oldest narrative lineage links Trueblood to an earlier, pre-Christian time, perhaps as a teller of mythic, polytheistic tales of violence, passion, and, among other things, incest, the primal tribal taboo. As he begins the story, he adds details, both aural and visual, that enhance the edenic, pastoral qualities of his narrative, evoking sleepy images of life with his lover on the timeless Mississippi, when they "lived in a two-story

house 'longside the river, and at night in the summertime we used to lay in bed and talk, and after she'd gone off to sleep I'd be awake lookin' out at the lights comin' up from the water and listenin' to the sounds of the boats movin' along" (55). He describes the sensual atmosphere that night in his cabin:

> Anyway, I could hear'em breathing' and though I hadn't been it made me sleepy. Then I heard the gal say 'Daddy,' soft and low in her sleep and I looked, tryin' to see if she was still awake. But all I can do is smell her and feel her breath on my hand when I go to touch her. She said it so soft I couldn't be sure I had heard anything, so I just laid there listenin'. (54)

After evoking this imagery, Trueblood goes on to recount his tale of incest, and his narrative parallels the biblical account of the Fall while opening up a relationship between sexual knowledge and Anglo sites of political and economic power.

The setting of the dream is the "Big House," the slave-owner's (God's) residence, containing the white woman's bedroom, the symbolic site of forbidden knowledge and the lure of transgressive interracial sex. He immediately violates the moral code by entering through the front door ("I know it's wrong, but I can't help it" he says, perhaps echoing something Eve might have said to Adam in her account of events), and as his dream continues, he finds himself, like Eve near the Tree, irresistibly drawn into the bedroom. Everything in the room is white, emphasizing both his intrusion and the dreamlike aspects of his description, another parallel to Eve's biblical account. A psychological battle ensues in which he attempts to adhere to the social and moral codes with which he's been inculcated, while being drawn by the powerful sexual attraction of the white woman. Ellison fills the scene with symbolic images: the female body becomes a grandfather clock with "crinkly stuff like steel wool on the facing" (58), offering the possibility of escaping the time-bound traditions of oppression, and a flock of white doves, the universal symbol of peace (in this case between races), emerges from the bed. When Trueblood's wife Kate wakes up to find him fornicating with her daughter and goes berserk with maternal

horror, Trueblood tries to extenuate his guilt by couching the act in unconscious terms: "Naw, Kate. Things ain't what they 'pear! Don't make no blood sin on accounta no dream-sin!" (62) Trueblood sees his act not as a matter of volition, but merely the result of uncontrollable circumstances—the cold, the atmosphere that night, and perhaps most tellingly, Matty Lou calling his name and moving against him, her proximate sexuality. The irony of the situation resides in the dynamics of Trueblood's plea. His actual sin is, of course, incest with his daughter, but his conditioned response is to transpose the act with his dreamed-of sin, sex with a white woman. In his confused state, the latter seems to him the more egregious act, and the logical motive for Kate's rage. Tellingly, there is a substitution of the black female body for the white fantasy body—the fantasy itself is generated by white power structures, but the reality of the transgression and its destructive force target the black community.

Ellison, however, further complicates this dynamic by giving us several clues that this 'dream' is really pure wish fulfillment. Trueblood notes with satisfaction that he was Matty Lou's "favorite over the old lady," and that she "looks just like the ole lady did when she was young and I first met her, only better lookin' " (54). Musing on his daughter's budding womanhood, he jealously envisions "the gal and the young boy what was startin' to hang 'round her. I didn't like him and he kept comin' through my thoughts an I made up my mind to warn him away from the gal" (54). And finally, Kate's telling line as she waves the shotgun at her husband: I done warn you, Jim" (61). Apparently Trueblood's inclinations towards his daughter have not gone unnoticed.

Kate's 'warning' represents divine injunction against the eating of the fruit, and underscores her role as the agent of God's wrath. Trueblood decides to submit to his punishment; "I makes up my mind that I'm goin' to take whatever she gimme. It seems to me that all I can do is take my punishment" (62). This detail recalls Adam's resignation to divine retribution. But there is also a subtle distancing here; there

is no sense of a sin against the father, and no hint of redemption. If anything, this is a moral code drawn from the tribal laws informing the Hebrew bible. Trueblood steels himself for the blow of the ax, but at the last moment flinches aside, affirming life over sacrifice, asserting that "Anybody but Jesus Christ hisself woulda moved" (63). Trueblood asserts individuality over ideology; he is not Jesus Christ, he is fallen man, and acts accordingly. As Kate starts to swing the ax a second time, "all of the sudden I sees it stop like somebody done reached down through the roof and caught it" (64). God mercifully intervenes, and echoing perhaps the type and result of the family trial Abraham was forced to endure with his son Isaac, Trueblood is spared.

The sharecropper is expelled from his home for his act, and wanders alone, replicating the myth of the outcast sinner, reminiscent of Lot and his daughters. And although we should not push too forcefully on this point, his plight seems in part to reflect the biblical story of Noah, whose son Canaan witnessed him drunk and naked, and as punishment was relegated to a position of eternal servitude, the Christian mythical justification of black slaver. Trueblood attempts to analyze his actions, and can find no answer, "I thinks and thinks, until I thinks my brain go'n bust, 'bout how I'm guilty and how I ain't guilty" (65). While wandering along, he has a revelation: "I makes up my mind that I ain't nobody but myself and ain't nothin' I can do but let whatever is gonna happen, happen" (66). Trueblood is willing (true-to-his-blood, true to his self) to accept the price of his transgression, and just as Adam is rewarded with the possibility of redemption, Trueblood will also be rewarded. He is able to establish a stable identity, or to put it another way, accepts the identity that his violation of what Freud called the primary cultural taboo has placed upon him, that is, a sinner, a beast. Indeed, as he tells his tale, he admits that he enjoyed the act, and admission presented through familiar images of black spiritual traditions:

> —and to tell the honest-to-God truth I found out that I didn't want to go neither. . . . It's like when a real drinkin' man gets drunk, or like when a real sanctified religious woman gets so worked up she jumps outta her clothes, or when a real gamblin' man keeps on gamblin' when he's losin'. You got holt to it and you caint let go even though you want to. (60)

What's significant here is the relationship between Trueblood's self-awareness and society's opinion of him. Society deems his action morally reprehensible—the dominant culture under which he exists considers incest a venal act. But it is precisely because the inclination to incest is universal that it is taboo. It is, after all, the same inclination that Norton has but represses. Desire and the approbation of the object or fulfillment of that desire go hand in hand; authoritarian prohibition of an action concomitantly encourages its pursuit. Thus Eve partakes, and thus Trueblood indulges. Everyone is implicated in this scene; Matty Lou is also an active participant, as she "gits to movin' herself" before Kate wakes up and discovers them. Certainly the invisible man takes an active part, initially damning the dream "to hell" and yet, as the tale closes, admitting to himself that as he listened, he had "been so torn between humiliation and fascination that to lessen my sense of shame I had kept my attention riveted upon his intense face" (67). Norton has already acknowledged his guilty relationship to blacks, with his ludicrous insistence that the invisible man tell him his fate: " 'Will you promise to tell me my fate?' . . . 'I'll try, sir.' . . . 'Good.'[says Norton]" (44). One can just imagine Norton anxiously sitting by his phone in Boston waiting for the invisible man's call to inform him of his fate. What Norton's directive amounts to is a restatement of the white man's burden, and certainly this scene plays out various strands of imperial/colonial ideology. Ellison is playing a cruel joke here; in many ways, Norton's cultural fate really does depend on the invisible man, on the invisible man's full membership in that culture. Actually, however, Norton's basis for this assertion is his repressed wish to atone for his dreamed-of sin with his daughter, the basis

of his propitiatory philanthropic relationship to the Negro. Finally, as readers we are thoroughly engaged with Trueblood's account, probably more so than any other part of the novel. There are no limits set on the sphere of implication—we are all to some extent guilty of participation in the spectacle. Ellison uses our implication as occasion for social comment; we read without decrying the inherent hypocrisy and irony of Trueblood's tale, and as readers we reaffirm the stereotype of black incest.

As Trueblood's tale ends, Norton is trembling from his vicarious experience, almost post-coital in its intensity. He opens his wallet (avoiding this time the picture of his daughter), and gives Trueblood the enormous sum of one hundred dollars, telling him to "buy the children some toys" (68). The irony here is scathing—buying children toys is the furthest thing from his mind. Trueblood has acted out Norton's deepest fantasy for him, and the trustee is paying for the experience, fulfilling his end of the racist bargain.

More centrally, what Trueblood has accomplished is validation of the racial stereotype of black sexual bestiality. This stereotype was apparent as an element in Trueblood's dream when Mr. Broadnax surprises him with the woman in the bedroom (actually Norton's daughter) and, echoing a comment that might be directed at dogs, says "They just nigguhs, leave'em do it" (58). That is, the fantasy life of the powerless is harmless psychological totemism, fully circumscribed by white authority structures. Most importantly, Trueblood has taken the burden of Norton's repressed sin on himself and is rewarded. The relationship between Norton and Trueblood is the source of the biting irony of the scene; the narrator is horrified by Trueblood's tale not because of its moral depravity, but because he thinks that "they'll say that all negroes do such things" (58). Which is exactly right. In his naiveté, he misses the point—yes, Ellison says, people do this, my people, your people, all of us, but because of cultural power structures, the burden of the myth rests squarely on black

shoulders. Trueblood is true to himself, to his humanity, not true to his black incestuous blood.

The responses of the black and white communities to Trueblood's act reveal the ways in which white culture creates mythic guilt and then projects the fears resulting from that guilt onto the black man. The black community's response mirrors the narrator's; led by Bledsoe (Trueblood cities only ["The nigguhs up at the school" (67)] they try to run Trueblood out of the county for subverting black culture, while the white community comes to his aid, enabling him to prosper as never before. Trueblood is mystified by the turn of events:

> That's what I don't understand. I done the worse thing a man could ever do in his family and instead of chasin' me out of the county, they gimme more help than they ever give any other colored man, no matter how good a nigguh he was. (67)

Trueblood has no idea "how good a nigguh" he's become in the eyes of the white community. With his action, he has accomplished two things: he has justified the moral and physical superiority whites feel over blacks, and he has seriously undermined the prestige of the college ostensibly fighting for black equality. Trueblood has offered himself not only as the bearer of the burden of Norton's prohibited fantasy, but as a receptacle for the sexual guilt of the whole white community, enabling it to maintain the moral superiority essential to the dehumanization of blacks, an acceptance for which he's handsomely paid.

The invisible man, on the other hand, is summarily expelled from the college for his part in bringing about the interracial psychological orgy. Outside the sphere of white protection, he must confront Bledsoe, the Uncle Tom president of the college who is in fact driven by his lust for power and readily willing to sacrifice his people for his personal gain. Bledsoe has a realpolitik grasp of the structure of race dynamics, and plays the dominant-culture game with a vengeance, becoming the de facto enforcer of Anglo versions of

race relations. As he tells the narrator, "Your poor judgment has caused this school incalculable damage. Instead of uplifting the race, you've torn it down . . . you[ve] dragged the entire race into the slime" (138). In this instance, Bledsoe is as blind to reality as the narrator. The invisible man buys completely into the myth of white cultural superiority, and ironically justifies his expulsion, although he knows he's blameless. He assumes the same fatalistic posture as Trueblood: "I had violated the code and thus would have to submit to punishment. Dr. Bledsoe is right, I told myself, he's right; the school and what it stands for have to be protected" (145). It is this fatalistic, and eminently Christian vision of fallen man that Ellison rejects.

In fact, Ellison feels that the true mission of the school is reprehensible. It is the insular southern college for blacks that maintains that status quo of repression, a calculated half-measure that provides just the pastoral, edenic setting to pacify any potential agitators or activists (the intelligentsia-in-training), following that "promise which, like the horizon, recedes ever brightly and distantly beyond the hopeful traveler" (187). It is an institution whose motto might be, in the apt words of Ellison, 'Keep These Nigger's Runnin'.'

The destructive partnership between the guilty, backhanded white paternalism symbolized by Norton and the reality of the hatred and racism prevalent in America is even more starkly revealed in the Battle Royal scene, where Ellison introduces themes related to the cultural myth of social mobility upon which the viability of the American Dream as a myth depends. The Battle Royal encapsulates the drive toward psychic and sexual emasculation of the black male and the confinement of his individuality within the limits of racial stereotypes.

The narrator's mixture of fascination and horror at hearing Trueblood's tale is the same ambivalence he experiences at the southern smoker, an ambivalence generated by the emasculation outlined above. Ironically invited to give a speech on humility "at a gathering of the town's leading white citizens"

(17), he finds himself forced to engage in a blindfolded brawl with other fellows from the black community. Orchestrating black-on-black violence is an old colonialist tactic, and this microcosm reflects the larger historical traditions of race relations. Before the battle the youths are forced to watch the sensuous dancing of a naked blond white woman with an American flag tattooed just above her crotch. The narrator feels confusing desires, emblematic of the perversion of his natural sexuality in the interest of vicarious white sexual gratification. He is unable to escape the confines of stereotypical black sexuality ingrained in him, and both his mind and libido race around in frantic circles:

> I wanted at one and the same time to run from the room, to sink through the floor, or go to her and cover her from my eyes and the eyes of others with my body; to feel the soft thighs, to caress her and destroy her, to love her and murder her, to hide from her, and yet to stroke where below the small American flag tattooed upon her belly her thighs formed a capital V. (19)

This lewd parody of the familiar victory sign is accompanied by taunts and abuse from the townsmen, who utilize the embarrassed yet natural excitement of the youths to gorge themselves on another sexual taboo—cross-racial rape. Exposing a naked white woman to black men is imaginatively equivalent to the physical act, emphasized by Ellison as the boys stare hungrily and ashamedly, erections prominent, at the nude woman. The reaction of the drunken crowd is epitomized in the response of a fat bald merchant, who "with his arms upheld, his posture clumsy like that of an intoxicated panda, wound his belly in a slow and obscene grind" (20). The violence that the boys are forced to visit on each other is wildly cheered as the crowd vents its racist rage at the young men for transgressing the interracial sexual taboo. The whites control the action, utilizing the boys as the medium for the ritualistic, controlled violation of the taboo. They project their self-created myth of the black buck/rapist onto the innocent sexuality of the invisible man and his companions.

The men, like Norton, uphold their end of the cultural bargain, rewarding the adolescents with change and bills, a gratuity Ellison savagely satires by having the money (much of which is fake) tossed onto an electrified carpet, much to the delighted amusement of the crowd, which again roars as the boys jump and scream as they're shocked. The invisible man himself is given the greatest reward, a new briefcase which contains a scholarship to the college for blacks, presented with the superintendent's assurance that the narrator will "lead his people in the proper paths" (32). The moral collapse of the white civic vision is complete; the exploitation of both the woman (whom these pillars of the community actually attempt to rape) and boys is carried out in satisfaction of the cultural taboos created by the dominant culture and projected onto the minority, sustaining their sense of moral superiority. This is why the invisible man is attractive to them; he represents the minority willing to perpetuate the racist ideals of the majority, accepting the scholarship to go off to his segregated college and lead his people on the path of humility, the ironic subject of his valedictory speech. The moment he fails to toe the racist line, substituting the phrase "social equality" for "social responsibility" (the foundation of the myth of class fluidity), the smoker resounds with a thunderclap of silence. He recants, and is allowed to continue after a stern warning from the audience: "We mean to do right by you, but you've got to know your place at all times" (31). Which is just what the invisible man attempts to maintain, a sense of his place in relation to white authority, a desire enabling him to suppress his humiliation with the exhilaration of imagined possibilities offered by the scholarship.

Ellison explores the ways black sexual stereotypes are used to physically and socially emasculate the black man, but he also offers the obverse of that myth, a counter-myth to the white stereotype. The primary configuration of the counter-myth is natural, virile black sexuality coveted by the lustful white woman who is sexually frustrated with her apathetic white mate. Ellison brings these two myths together in the

sexual experience of the narrator, exposing the fallacies of each through the narrator's responses to them.

The invisible man's entrance into the sexual world of the white woman is forecast by the war vet from the Golden Day, who, musing on the possible experiences the urban North holds for the narrator, concludes that "you might even dance with a white girl!' " (150) The invisible man recoils from this notion, but on the evening he joins the Brotherhood, he's "challenged" to dance with Jack's mistress Emma, the sophisticated and sexually vibrant hostess. Yet the stereotype is still firmly in place here in the enlightened North, and indeed, is taken a step further. Emma, thinking him out of earshot, asks, "But don't you think he should be a little blacker?" (295) It is significant that the first question he's asked after his initiation is his opinion on the "state of women's rights" (303). He doesn't have one—yet—but his first sexual encounter with a white woman quickly formulates one for him.

He is invited home for coffee and an 'ideological discussion' by the wife of one of the rich supporters of the Brotherhood. To the invisible man, she is "the kind of woman who glows as though consciously acting a symbolic role of life and feminine fertility" (399). She is a thoroughly sexual creature; when she offers him the choice of wine or milk, he takes wine, finding the idea of accepting milk from her "strangely repulsive" (402). Her stereotyped seduction of him is a parodic farce; her description of the effect he has on her could be that of a well-heeled gorilla:

> I don't really mean primitive. I suppose I mean forceful, powerful. It takes hold of one's emotions as well as one's intellect. Call it what you will, it has so much naked power that it goes straight through one. I tremble just to think of such vitality. (403)

She perceives him not as an individual, but as an agent of primal sexual force. This perception effects a racial emasculation, stripping him of any real human dignity or worth. This is not a genuine sexual encounter; it is the ritualized playing

out of "forgotten stories of male servants summoned to wash the mistress's back; chauffeurs sharing the masters' wives; Pullman porters invited into the drawing room of rich wives headed for Reno. . ." (406). Like the Battle Royal, this perversion of natural, healthy sexual relations produces confusion: "I wanted both to smash her and stay with her" (405). Circumscribed by myth, paralyzed by the impenetrable fusion of biology and ideology, he remains, only to receive another blow to his individuality; for when the lovers are discovered by the husband, he is not challenged but ignored as though he is . . . invisible:

> I heard the sound and looked up to see the man looking straight at me from where he stood in the dim light of the hall, looking in with neither interest nor surprise. His face expressionless, his eyes staring. There was the sound of even breathing. Then I heard her stir beside me.
>
> "Oh, hello, dear," she said, her voice sounding far away. "Back so soon?"
>
> "Yes," he said. "Wake me early, I have a lot to do."
>
> "I'll remember, dear," she said sleepily. "Have a good night's rest. . . ."
>
> "Night, and you too," he said with a short dry laugh. (407)

In the world of these rich white "sympathizers," he's just a walking phallic symbol, not a person as such, posing no threat, but existing to be exploited and then discarded. This is the basis for his hallucinatory dream of castration by all of his oppressors at the end of the novel. They merge into one menacing figure, and by castrating him, relieving him of the cultural burden of skewed black sexuality, they "free" him, and he escapes the mythic cycle of taboos and attains a vision of common, shared humanity, but only at the terrific cost of his individuality.

His second encounter, with Sybil, is even more degrading and pathetic, a resounding failure on several counts. The wife of a Brotherhood strategist, Sybil gets quite drunk, enabling her to admit to the invisible man her secret fantasy, held "even when [she] was a little girl" (508) of being raped by an "Anonymous brute 'n boo'ful buck" (517). With profound

irony, she insists that this famous lecturer on "The Woman Question," a paragon of male sensitivity and sympathy, beat and rape her, in violation of every social and ideological taboo he's ever faced. Again paralyzed by the wildly contradictory situation, he can only feel sadness and pity for this woman who secretly stylizes herself as a nymphomaniac stuck with a husband who's "forty minutes of brag and ten of bustle" (510) At this late stage, however, he begins to understand his race relationships:

> She had me on the ropes; I felt punch drunk, I couldn't deliver and I couldn't be angry either. I thought of lecturing her on the respect due one's bedmate in our society, but I no longer deluded myself that I either knew the society or where I fitted into it. Besides, I thought, she thinks you're an entertainer. That's something else they're taught. (507)

Ultimately, the only gesture he is able to make is to inscribe her glossy white body with a red-lipsticked perversion of a white cultural myth: "SYBIL, YOU WERE RAPED BY SANTA CLAUS . . . SURPRISE" (511).

For his part, the narrator has selfishly hoped to ply Sybil with alcohol in order to pry from her privileged information on the Brotherhood that could be used for his own purposes. He discovers that she knows nothing, and both their attempts to exploit one another are dismal failures. His own attempts to express some genuine, caring emotions toward Sybil are undermined by his absorption in rejecting the racial stereotypes, and both of them become caricatures as the scene collapses under the weight of its ideological burdens.

Set over against these women is the figure of Mary, the Harlem matron, who takes the invisible man into her home after his treatment at the paint factory hospital. Mary is the only maternal figure in the novel, symbolically linked to Christ's mother and one of the very few characters in the novel without some secret scheme to exploit the narrator. Upon discovering him, dazed and weak on Lenox Avenue, her motive for assisting him is the Golden Rule:

> you needn't worry, son, I ain't never laid eyes on you before and it ain't my business and I don't care what you think about me but you weak and caint hardly walk and all and you look what's more like you hungry, so just come on and let me do something for you like I hope you'd do something for ole Mary in case she needed it, it ain't costing you a penny and I don't want to git in your business, I just want you to lay down till you get rested and then you can go. (246)

Mary expresses a genuine Christian viewpoint which is Ellison's ideal of human transaction. Yet the biblical Mary is, in a sense, pre-Christian, and her namesake in the novel expresses a value system based on mutual respect, not any necessarily Christian code. Mary explicitly rejects intraracial violence in favor of mutual aid and self-determination. In Mary, Ellison provides us with a foil against which we can examine all to the other interpersonal relationships in the novel. She possesses a seemingly infinite capacity for giving and an abiding faith in the fundamental goodness of humanity, a belief that blacks can achieve equality and freedom. In the marijuana-induced dream of the Prologue, the invisible man is told by the old slave woman that freedom lies in loving, and that although she hated her master, she also loved him through the sons she bore him. There is a complicated relationship here, but it provides a brief sketch of the politics of the interracial dynamic. The old woman speaks of the love/hate relationship she has with her master, emblematic of the relationship between the cultures at large in terms of myth and counter-myth. She expresses freedom in terms of love, but because of the mythic taboos placed on each culture, love becomes sex. In his incestuous dream, Trueblood images freedom, flying over the town, the warm tunnel, hot like the engine room of the college (the invisible man's mistaken locus of freedom) through sex with a white woman. The invisible man wants to stroke the blonde dancer where her legs form a capital V for victory, or social emancipation. For the black man, breaking the taboo of sex with a white woman is an act of freedom. As the vet at the Golden Day asks on the bus to Washington, "And what will be his or any man's most easily

accessible symbol of freedom? Why, a woman, of course . . . he can inflate that symbol with all the freedom which he'll be too busy working to enjoy the rest of the time" (151). For the white man, the ritual transgressions are also a means of temporarily escaping the taboo of interracial sex, safely acted out in a controlled situation. This love/hate/fear relationship is sexually-oriented, and in Mary, as her name suggests, Ellison is presenting a symbol of unsullied, redemptive, universalized love, a love that empowers people to escape taboos, to recognize the ideal, shared human community which precludes racist stereotypes.

The key to Mary's vision of black equality, the source of its strength and, for Ellison, its rightness, is her insistence on the importance of cultural memory in defining the struggle:

> And I tell you something else, it's the one's from the South that's got to do it, them what knows the fire and ain't forgot how it burns. Up here too many forgits. They finds a place for theyselves and forgits the ones on the bottom. Oh, heap of them *talks* about doing things, but they done really forgot. No, it's you young ones what has to remember and take the lead. (249)

Ellison gives to Mary the clearest statement in the novel of the need to incorporate class and race into one's ideology, to resist cooption and the perpetuation of the cycle of the privileged elite throwing out just enough wealth to placate those below them. She instinctively appreciates the value of cultural heritage, of the original reason for the struggle, the "fire that burns." Her perspicacity allows her to exist, if not outside, at least to the side, of the mythological constructions which hobble the invisible man and stymie his search for a viable identity.

The religious and cultural myths outlined in this essay work on the premise of engendering guilt about the past. The Christian myth offers the promise of post-Fall redemption, and the cultural myth offers the promise of social mobility through the Protestant ethic. Minorities are faced with the ever-receding promise of equality if they will only work hard enough. This vision is based on a positivist faith in linear

progression, away from the past and into the future, the continued rise toward freedom and equality. Ellison disputes this positivist vision and challenges its teleology, substituting in its stead a cyclical or recurrent history of repression orchestrated by a wealthy elite.

Because of his ignorance of Mary's cultural wisdom and his belief in a positivist view of history, the narrator does everything he can to forget his past. Even before the Trueblood incident, he describes his hate for the "black-belt people, the 'peasants' " (47) who remind him of their common link in slavery. That is, he strives to forget precisely that moment which should be his wellspring of strength. He is determined to shed this 'bumpkin' past, and is offended by a counterman in a New York diner who offers him pork chops and grits for breakfast. He is amused and embarrassed by the "crude, high, plaintively animal sounds" of Trueblood's quartet singing spirituals in the chapel. And in his fantasy of vengeance following the revelation of Bledsoe's treachery, he imagines accusing the president of being a "shameless chitterling eater . . . a sneaking chitterling lover" (259), an accusation that would shatter Bledsoe's "white" demeanor and result in his shameful explusion from the college.

The narrator's absorption in the myth of class fluidity enables him to ignore the reality of Bledsoe's hypocrisy and feigned obsequiousness in the interest of material gain, a gain for which Bledsoe is willing to "have every Negro in the country hanging on tree limbs by morning if it means staying where I am" (141). The narrator is willing to rearrange events and circumstance to fit his desperately-held vision of the possibility of self-improvement, to blind himself to political and social realities. This vision, in the context of the cultural power structure, encourages individual competition over moral and social responsibility, starkly revealed in the Battle Royal, which the narrator finds repellent not because of its moral turpitude, but because he's afraid the brawl will "detract from the dignity of [his] speech" (17). It is in fact the topic of his speech, supported by mealy-mouthed platitudes

and racist clichés, which lacks dignity. He gladly accepts the humiliation of the smoker in light of the scholarship and the success it promises. Norton expresses the same sentiment in his assertions about the narrator being "his fate," and the progressive vision is described in detail by Reverend Barbee in his chapel speech, which characterizes the development of the college as a "glorious story" of how "A great seed had been planted," making the invisible man ponder the "continuity of the dream" and assessing his (superficially) endangering actions as "an act of treason" (130). Against what?, we may ask. After he's expelled from the college, despite Bledsoe's explicit reminder of the rigid dichotomy between what is and what should be, the narrator clings to his myopic vision, promising to "pay [his] debt as quickly as possible and return to building [his] career" (145).

This linear vision is, of course, a cornerstone of the American Dream, and it consumes the invisible man's imagination, forming the essence of his blindness. He constantly fantasizes about the future, of riches to be gained and fame to be won, if he will only work hard and follow orders, subject himself unquestioningly to an authority whose machinations are far beyond him. He ironically pictures himself as eventually becoming Bledsoe's assistant:

> In my mind's eye . . . [Bledsoe] was joined by another figure; a younger figure, myself; become shrewd, suave and dressed not in somber garments (like his old-fashioned ones) but in a dapper suit of rich material, cut fashionably, like those of the men you saw in magazine ads, the junior executive types in *Esquire*. (160-61)

He sees the American social and political landscape in terms of a game to be skillfully played accepting Bledsoe's creed and rejecting the advice to the vet on the bus, to "play the game but don't believe in it" (151). Bledsoe incarnates his idea of success:

> He was the example of everything I hoped to be: Influential with wealthy men all over the country; consulted in matters concerning the race; a leader of his people; the possessor of not one, but two Cadillacs,

> a good salary and a soft, good looking and creamy complexioned wife. (99)

The narrator has completely abandoned his cultural tradition; for him, success is not envisioned in terms of economic progress or making real political or social gains for his people, but as becoming a vehicle for maintaining the status-quo, consulted on matters of race because he is de facto unqualified to be consulted on or lead anyone or anything else. Juxtaposed with this empty aspiration are the material symbols of white affluence, the big Caddy and a light-skinned woman. His cooption is so complete that he's devoid of any sense of cultural pride, prey to the lure of the trappings and trinkets of white culture dangled in front of him. It is not until the end of the novel, after Tod Clifton is murdered, that he finally gains the ability to see, for people of color, the moral, social, and economic bankruptcy of the American Dream.

When the narrator joins the Brotherhood, he still refuses to accept the implications of his previous trails, of the value of individual experience in assessing the present. Instead of expressing skepticism when Brother Jack tells him that he must "put aside [his] past," forget what he learned in college, and handing him a slip of paper with a name written on it, flatly states, "This is your new identity" (301-02), he endures it all happily focusing on his dream of a successful future. The invisible man accepts the Brotherhood's historical construct of socio-political progress, which is really just another version of the same oppressive cultural myth he's already encountered; both are linear, positivist, and stress homogeneity as a goal. He articulates the party line succinctly in his conversation with the magazine editor—"I'm a cog in a machine" (387). He submits to the Brotherhood's abusive treatment after Wrestrum's ludicrous accusation (just as he did with Bledsoe), again refashioning events to fit his distorted vision: "They had to investigate the charges against me, but the assignment was their unsentimental affirmation that their belief in me was unbroken" (398).

It is the racially-motivated murder of Tod Clifton, his closest friend in the Brotherhood, that forces the invisible man to reevaluate his position in the power structure, leading ultimately to his renunciation of the Brotherhood's ideology and his realization that he is invisible. By analogy, this move is also a rejection of the democratic principles of fair representation; no one speaks for the narrator, no one even sees the narrator, for he is invisible and therefore silent. After Clifton's murder, the narrator arranges and speaks at his friend's funeral. Instead of affirming the status quo, as he had done in all of his previous speeches, his speech at the funeral stresses the racial dimensions of the tragedy. For the first time, he is acting as an individual, as a black man. He is severely reprimanded, and in a climactic moment, Brother Jack admonishes, "You say nothing unless it is passed by the committee. Otherwise I suggest you keep saying the last thing you were told" (459). This confrontation, in which Brother Jack reveals in part the real agenda of the Brotherhood, forces the invisible man to examine the place of blacks in the Brotherhood's cultural ideal, which ignores race as an issue. He realizes that far from acting like a madman in quitting the Brotherhood and peddling the Sambo dolls on the street, Clifton clearly discerned his relationship to the Brotherhood, and on a larger scale, to the dominant culture within which he existed. The Sambo dolls metaphorically express the black man dancing to the white man's music, the unseen white hands manipulating the naive black puppet who "lives under the sunshine of your lordly smile" (422). In the economies of the white paternal culture, the invisible man exists to be exploited. Ironically the Brotherhood, preaching communism, only reifies this structure, and finds the narrator useful only insofar as he helps it fulfill its organizational objectives in Harlem and downtown. He realizes, finally, that he is merely "a tool. A tool at the very moment I had thought myself free" (541). No matter his alliances, he cannot gain membership to the dominant culture; he is not, and never will be a part of it, as long as the myth of social mobility structures the Amer-

ican socio-economic landscape. Clifton, at last, refused to buy into the myth by rejecting its premises, and for his dissent he's murdered. By selling the dolls, by renouncing the Brotherhood and its program, Clifton affirms his individuality and right to self-expression. Faced with inescapable oppression, Clifton, in striking the cop, orchestrates his own death in one final act of self-determination, the only act left to him. As the invisible man realizes, Clifton is attempting to jump outside of history, breaking the bonds of cultural mythology. The awesome power of these forces is revealed by the ultimate failure of Clifton's counter-cultural gesture; his attempt to jump outside history costs him his life, and so becomes an endgame with no escape.

It is this final lesson that the invisible man takes to heart, and at last discovers the truth that Mary had known all along: "I was my experiences and my experiences were me, and no blind men, no matter how powerful they became, even if they conquered the world, could take that or change one single itch, taunt, laugh, cry, scar, ache, rage or pain of it" (496-97). In these words lie, I think, a key to understanding the meaning of the narrator's dream of castration. By castrating him, by taking away his manhood, his source of identity, they have made him "free of illusions," aware of his subservient, emasculated position in the cultural hierarchy and able to see through the myth, recognizing the possibility, the necessity of a true shared humanity that fully actualizes the transcendent ideals of the democratic vision. Which is not to say that he has gained any measure of power; indeed, he realizes all the more how truly powerless he is, in real social and political terms. But he is given a measure of awareness, and out of that awareness springs, however futile it might seem, the seeds of his final actions.

Herein lies the invisible man's motivation for going underground, to recount his story, to construct an identity, his own specific, unique being, through the writing of the narrative. His narrative is an attempt to "affirm the principle on which the country was built and not the men . . . because . . .

the principle was greater than the men, greater than the numbers and the vicious power and all the methods used to corrupt its name" (561). By revealing the inner workings of the system, the narrative itself becomes a social action, an exposure of the unseen, mythic forces at work in maintenance of the dominant culture's power, a culture which sees the masses not as Jefferson did, as an amalgamation of individuals, but as a monolithic natural resource to be used and discarded. As the invisible man asks in the Epilogue, "Whence all this passion toward conformity anyway?—diversity is the word. Let man keep his many parts and you'll have no tyrant states" (563). In his hallucinatory dream, the narrator realizes this possibility, a united egalitarian yet diverse and individual union. It is this final perception of the dichotomy between what is and what should be, of the possibility of true cultural and social redemption after the Fall, that prompts his final haunting question. For if the transcendent ideals of the democratic vision can ever be fully realized, then it must be true that on some frequency, the invisible man does speak for all of us.

Work Cited

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