COMMUNICATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS AND SYSTEMIC PATTERNS OF LANGUAGE IN RALPH ELLISON'S *INVISIBLE MAN*

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Abstract

Ellison's novel performs the ultimate act of artistic eloquence by speaking for us, rather than against us, by employing a splendid uplifting of clarifying, communicative tolerance so as to facilitate the utilization of systemic patterns of language via felicitous and eclectic alignments of illocutionary and perlocutionary forces, making the readership see beyond the gregarious barriers of controlled language. This study aims to uncover the author's entire arsenal of communicational clarity, his propensity to generate a symphony of polyphonic voices that bring forth closure to the tableau of human interactions.

Key words: *language, communication, oratory, polyphony, eloquence*

Résumé

Le roman d'Ellison atteint le suprême niveau de l'éloquence artistique, tout simplement parce que celui-ci choisit de parler pour nous, plutôt que de parler contre nous; l'auteur parvient à une telle magnifique réussite en instituant aussi bien un splendide renouveau de la tolérance qu'il admet et qu'il entérine dans le processus de la communication qui, de par cela même, s'en retrouve considérablement illuminée. Ainsi, à travers des éclectiques et heureux alignements, à dessein établis parmi les forces illocutionnaires et perlocutionnaires, l'usage qu'il fait des modèles systémiques du langage en devient-il hautement aisé. Les lecteurs se voient donc, de par ce fait, permettre l'atteinte à une perspective qui outrepasse aux grégaires barrières qu'avait, depuis toujours, élevées l'usage fait du langage maintenu sous un contrôle. La présente étude nourrit l'ambition d'élucider la totalité de l'arsenal des moyens par lesquels desquels l'auteur élève le processus de la communication à une limpidité aussi éblouissante, ainsi que de judicieusement illustrer le *desideratum* de celui-ci, à savoir de générer une symphonie des voix polyphoniques par laquelle le panorama des interactions humaines puisse être scruté de bien plus près qu'avant l'existence de l'oeuvre qui fait l'objet de notre étude.

Mots-clés: *langage, communication, oratoire, polyphonie, éloquence*

The art of speaking to the masses has long been an arduous preoccupation for statesmen, religious leaders and artists who have sought not only to seduce the minds and souls of the individuals flocking in disturbing predictability to hear their enlightened words of wisdom, but to conquer their humanity and independent judgment. Even on a lower level of human interaction verbal acts, illocutionary impulses are indeed camouflaged methods of attempting to imprint our thoughts and agendas upon the hopefully feeble and vulnerable intellects of others. We are by no means witnessing a contemporary acknowledgement concerning the ever-expanding

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realms of Homo sapiens communication, bearing in mind that this disconcerting reality has been made available to scholars since the culturally revolutionary times of Plato who defined rhetoric as: “The art of ruling the minds of men”. Ralph Waldo Emerson would later elaborate and improve on Plato’s theory and postulate that the ability to communicate is somehow intrinsically embedded in musicality thus converting the communicator into a powerful artist whose sweet melody tinkers with the strings and keys which govern the intricate mechanisms of the human psyche:

Him only we call an artist, who should play on an assembly of men as a master on the keys of a piano; who, seeing the people furious, shall soften and compose them; should draw them, when he would, to laughter and to tears. Bring him to his audience, and, be they who they may, coarse or refined, pleased or displeased, sulky or savage, with their opinions in the keeping of a confessor or with their opinions in their bank safes he will have them pleased and humoured as he chooses; and they shall carry and execute that which he bids them. (Emerson, 2010: 254)

This very bold propensity to reduce real human beings to automatic drones whose buttons you can push and trigger the desired, predetermined emotional response, associating the patterns of verbal control to the power a virtuoso has over his musical instrument would suggest we are and always have been living in a dystopian symphony of deception. Emerson’s conviction that a *magister ludi*, some twisted master of the game, raised from the very ranks of those who are now perceived as sheep, can exert control over the most complex of human emotions has vulgar and crippling consequences regarding the power and independence of our souls and free will. The visible accumulations of power and influence by certain individuals supported by the masses against the very interests of those masses would come to suggest Emerson’s allegations are perfectly valid and that communicational manipulation has a big part to play in the entire global equation. Ralph Emerson expands his incursions into the fundamental human need to communicate by venturing into philosophical realms dealing with the psychology of the masses:

The lust to speak marks the universal feeling of the energy of the engine, and the curiosity men feel to touch the springs. Of all the musical instruments on which men play, a popular assembly is that which has the largest compass and variety, and out of which, by genius and study, the most wonderful effects can be drawn. An audience is not a simple addition of the individuals that compose it. Their sympathy gives them a certain social organism, which fills each member, in his own degree, and most of all the orator, as a jar in a battery is charged with the whole electricity of the battery. No one can survey the face of an excited assembly, without being apprised of new opportunity for painting in fire human thought, and being agitated to agitate. (Emerson, 1889: 222)

To perceive a group, a gathering of people as a simple, easy to foretell monolith, where there is no spark of emergent humanity, or the faintest tendency to at least briefly walk against the current, uncovers a dark and malefic mindset guiding the so-called puppet masters in their concentrated efforts to undo the truth and verbally generate an imagery that must be built and implemented by the very people targeted by those nefarious, artificially created constructs. The word of God has the power to create and this must inadvertently raise the dilemma if the word of man has the power to destroy (our lives, dignity or moral principles). Manipulation through encrypted verbal abuse has the astonishing capacity to repeal a fundamental law of nature stating

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that there is always strength in numbers. Crowd psychology uncovers the fact that individuals tend to abandon their own individuality when part of a large group. The larger the group, the less important our individuality becomes and he who gets to verbally designate the trajectory of that identity-deprived gathering, the person who has their proverbial ear can conduct his orchestra of human victims, paint on the canvas of defeated humanity.

It is often said that a man is defined by his actions rather than his words. But what happens when a man defines and performs those actions through the power of his words? The end result is a skilled orator working for the betterment or the spiritual dismemberment of his target audience. Let us not focus on the negative aspects of rhetoric for the time being and place emphasis on those chosen minds who have dedicated their genius for the moral and spiritual progress of their fellow citizens of the world:

So now it seems to me that the arrival of such men as Toussaint if he is pure blood, or of Douglas if he is pure blood, outweighs all the English & American humanity… Here is Man, & if you have man, black or white is an insignificance. Why at night all men are black. The intellect, that is miraculous, who has it has the talisman, his skin and bones are transparent, he is a statue of the living God: him I must love & serve & perpetually seek & desire and dream on: and who has it is not superfluous. Let us not be our own dupes; all the songs & newspapers & subscriptions of money & vituperation of those who do not agree with us will avail nothing against eternal fact. (Emerson, 1960-1982: 329)

This excerpt again provides us with ideological similarities between Ellison and Emerson considering the triumphant power of the human spirit against any and all adversity. The feeble attempts of narrow-minded men to discredit and disregard a person on moronic grounds of so-called established racial inferiority, pale in comparison to the genius and vision of great leaders such as Toussaint L'Ouverture and Frederick Douglass. Though L'Ouverture may have commanded armies, while Douglass may have only used the power of his writing, both men have more in common than one might think. They relied on their intelligence, on their well-articulated, eloquent voices to inspire men and women to rise up, defy the status quo and gain control of their own destinies. It is of course predictable and self-evident that a malefic propaganda machine would resort to rudimentary methods of discrediting heavily reliant on racial prejudice, and purposeful denial of earned merits. Emerson uncovers the intricacy of this repressive system and points out the need to commend a person based on achievements rather than skin coloration. The virulent confirmation that all people have within them the potential for greatness because they are all the children of the same God beautifully combats bigotry in all shapes and sizes, advising readers to do the same and not buy into the unjust lies of those who will stop at nothing in order to retain their power and privileges.

From both a perlocutionary and illocutionary standpoint the manner in which Norton communicates, compels us to notice the condescending manner in which the rich white man addresses the poor, young black man, boasting an air of smug superiority that is hell-bent on making our protagonist feel culturally inadequate. In his arrogance he asserts that all black people are somehow connected to his uniquely singular destiny, a mass of blackness gravitating around the celestial wonder of wisdom that is Norton. One must not also overlook the non-verbal dimension of the

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communication between the two. The black man is reduced to the cliché of the obedient driver, transporting his boss from point A to point B, while the master gets to relax and gaze in pensive contemplation beyond the cigar he holds in his well-groomed fingers. The power hierarchy can be established through the simplest of otherwise insignificant contextual elements, both contributing and completing the structural communicational tableau of the scene in question. The discussion between Norton and the invisible protagonist carries on with its abusive illusory architecture as far as it can be deduced from the demented ramblings of a man whose utterances expose unsuccessfully camouflaged delusions of grandeur:

"You are important because if you fail I have failed by one individual, one defective cog; it didn't matter so much before, but now I'm growing old and it has become very important…"

But you don't even know my name, I thought, wondering what it was all about.

"(…) I suppose it is difficult for you to understand how this concerns me. (Ellison, 1995: 45)

From a linguistic standpoint Ellison's work is a beautiful, eclectic polyphonic cooperation between the communicative powers of both tradition and improvisation. Tradition provides the content of his literary creation, the core issues and moral credos which govern his generative apparatus, while the improvisation, the jazzy side of his work helps delineate the method through which he delivers these beliefs unto us. For the author of *Invisible Man* jazz is the ultimate form of both surrender and constructive confrontation in the act of creation itself. Improvising on the spot is equated to pure truth, there is no time to lie, there is only the opportunity to be faithful to your cause, open yourself creatively and just put everything on the line for all to see. His outlook on jazz is in fact the key element behind the decryption of his narrative:

There is a cruel contradiction implicit in the art form itself. For true jazz is an art of individual assertion within and against the group. Each true jazz moment (as distinct from the uninspired commercial performance) springs from a contest in which each artist challenges all the rest; each solo flight, or improvisation, represents (like successive canvases of a painter) a definition of his identity as individual, as a member of the collectivity and as a link in the chain of tradition. Thus, because jazz finds its very life in an endless improvisation upon traditional materials, the jazzman must lose his identity even as he finds it; how often do we see even the most famous of jazz artists being devoured alive by the imitators, and shamelessly, in the public spotlight. (Ellison qtd. in Callahan, 1995: 267)

Ellison's perception of jazz can indeed be transferred to a kind of musicality behind the writing itself, correlating literature with creative impulses, the mental flickers which at the end of the day produce art in its pure, unadulterated form. Communicating through one's art is indeed an overwhelming act of liberation, originality and in imaginative independence. There is however an underlying paradox that compels the creator to consider all the great minds who came before him, the sensitivities of the audience, the time, the context and the willingness and capability to remain true in your endeavor. A writer is not only in a competitive race against his contemporaries like the jazz maker is; he must also come to terms with the legacy of literary ancestors. From this standpoint, a writer only has a couple of actions available to him: he can improve, build on the heritage of his ancestors or blatantly deny and

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defy their memory by following his anxiety of influence. These two options may generate a slight drain on originality but hey by no means undermine it.

The dialogue between the novel's main character and Brother Jack regarding the circumstances surrounding Tod Clifton's death is the moment of absolute awakening for our protagonist. From a communicational standpoint, it contains limitations of content, expressive negativity and an outward demonstration of authority and control. Jack is not only being ironic, he is being visibly aggressive and controlling as the act of communication ensues. The previously artificial atmosphere of camaraderie and brotherhood is utterly abandoned, paving the way for subtle threats and exchanges of ideas that are subject to a strict code of conduct and boundaries which result from the employer-employee relation. The white Brother Jack reveals his previously camouflaged racist side, by more or less telling the invisible man to know his place and get with the program. The culminating moment of the conversation is the explicit prohibition to think, which is a combination between power, arrogance and the inability to maintain the veil of deceit for much longer. Upon experiencing the blinding realization that he has long been in the employment of evil, the unnamed protagonist, enraged by the assessment of the situation, reverses the conversational paradigm and begins to use irony as he converses with his morally challenged interlocutor. Jack however remains steadfast in his resolve to crush this act of defiance, augmenting the logic of communicative prohibition so as to include chronotopic fragmentation in addition to the previous ban on content and unsanctioned ideas. This newfangled awareness may appear to come at a relatively late stage of the novel but we must bear in mind that even in the beginning of the narrative, the invisible man was reluctant to accept the propaganda proliferated by the establishment.

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