RALPH ELLISON'S PAINTFUL INVISIBILITY

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Abstract: *In Ellison's created world, as in American society, the quick pace of change, the caprice, the arrogance alongside the innocence, the newness and the general instability of institutions, and, above all, the impulse to recoil from the awful demands of American democracy – all keep Americans from seeing each other or even themselves. As Ellison notes, the complexity and diversity of American life, along with the development of the novel as form, have brought forth novels such as Invisible Man: "Picaresque, many-leveled… swarming with characters and with varied types and levels of experience." More than a "slice of life," Ellison's novel is an attempt at no less than a new definition of the national character, a modern national epic.*

Key words: *American society, democracy, life*

> *I found the greatest difficulty for a Negro writer was the problem of revealing what he truly felt, rather than serving up what Negroes were supposed to feel, and were encouraged to feel. And linked to this was the difficulty, based upon our long habit of deception and evasion, of depicting what really happened within our areas of American life, and putting down with honesty and without bowing to ideological expediencies the attitudes and values which give Negro American life its sense of wholeness and which renders it bearable and human and, when measured by our own terms, desirable.* (Ellison, 1964: xxi)

One of the "enduring functions of the American novel," Ralph Ellison wrote, "is that of defining the national type as it evolves in the turbulence of change, and of giving the American experience, as it unfolds in its diverse parts and regions, imaginative integration and moral continuity. Thus it is bound up with our problem of nationhood." In *Invisible Man* (1952), probably the most significant African American novel since World War II, Ellison gives his readers a terrifying and yet vibrant national metaphor: we are invisible.

"I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids – and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination – indeed, everything and anything except me."

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Ralph Ellison in 1973

Accordingly, the vision in Ellison's *Invisible Man*, and indeed throughout his fiction, is ultimately affirmative. Virtually all of his fiction – ten stories before the novel, eleven after – features a black youngster stretching toward adulthood. We see in this work the evolution of a central theme: the more conscious one is of individual, cultural, and national history, the freer he or she becomes. As a young writer, Ellison quickly became dissatisfied with the typical naturalistic scenarios in which characters struggling to survive the merciless American environment are eventually overcome by impersonal forces. To Ellison, this documentary fiction was dull – and failed to capture the richness and variety of American life as he knew it. Influenced by a broad range of writers, including Dostoevsky, André Malraux, and Ernest Hemingway began to focus on the person who, by force of character and will, manages to endure.

Invisibility can be perceived as a symbol of disempowerment, a maledict that scorches the path of leadership, exchanging ambition for difficulty. Structuring the functionality of life based on specialized moral concern, Ellison uncovers an immense reservoir of ambiguity and ethical distress. He merges the evolution of the narrative with systemic duties towards form and the traditional instrumentality from which the novel stems. Democratic eloquence must not be cast aside as it reenacts contemporary dilemmas which formulate the critical paradigms dealing with disembodiment, vernacular voices and social responsibility. Ellison's body of literature affirms a relentless fascination with America and its vulnerable complexities. His work is often enough constrained by principles rather than possibility, mystery rather than absolute certainty. He takes it upon himself to deny others the right to define his nation as they could distort its complex legacy and cultural wealth through mal-intent or sheer lack of knowledge. Language plays a pinnacle role throughout his literary creations, varying in complexity, lyrical power or finalized impact. Ellison's attitude towards this tool of lingering creation alludes to a less charged anticipation of linguistic support. Its picaresque cravings are flat out diversions overlapping enforced projections of travel carrying alongside manifestations of the American Dream. His episodic reviews and recalibrations refine a well written narrative that matures inside the craft of the author. Verbal invisibility is often subjected to the myth and delusional architecture of the labyrinth. One cannot help but identify the unnamed protagonist in *Invisible Man* with the great Hercules bearing in mind the tasks and trials both must undergo in order to secure their own identity and sense of self.

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The narrative of Ralph Ellison is often deemed deceptive. The themes of identity or freedom are initially perceived as apolitical and without much controversy attached. Yet with each stroke of the pen he becomes more and more radical, gaining momentum embracing fear and rejecting it at the same time. He writes like a man possessed, an individual plagued by his dualism as a Negro and as an American. Ellison eventually embraces his duality and has a profound epiphany: "You cannot have an American Experience without having a black experience […] Talk about cultural pluralism! It's the air we breathe; it's the ground we stand on" (Dickstein, 2002:197).

Ellison's increasing maturity as a writer coincided with a gradual shift in his political perspective. During the late 1930s he was an enthusiastic supporter of many Communist party tenets, but by the mid-1940s he was publicly denouncing the party. He was first drawn to left-wing politics by his mother's involvement with the Socialist party in Oklahoma; by his own experience of poverty, segregation, and hard times; and by the impact of such events as the Scottsboro and Herndon cases and the civil war in Spain. André Malraux's political, critical, and fiction writings also affected Ellison profoundly and further stirred in him the prospect of participating in a concerted effort by revolutionary artists, intellectuals, and the people to redeem a world torn by war and depression.

From 1937 to 1944, Ellison wrote over twenty book reviews for such radical periodicals as *New Challenge*, *Direction*, and the *Negro Quarterly*; in 1940 the *New Masses* printed at least one piece by him every month. In the 1930s, Ellison joined the chorus of critics calling for realism as the literary mode appropriate for the radical writer. Mirroring the Communist party position of the day, Ellison's criticism often described black Americans as members of a state or nation (like a Russian soviet) within the United States. The literature of black Americans (the subject of about half of his reviews of the 1930s and 1940s) was, he believed, an emerging national literature that should serve to heighten the revolutionary consciousness of black people. The black writer should instill in his audience not merely "race consciousness" but awareness of class. Ideally, the revolutionary black writer should inspire black working people to unite with workers of other "nationalities" against the bourgeoisie, white and black.

While the Great Depression years brought tremendous difficulties, they were also, in Ellison's words, "great times for literature," times for "the conscious writer" to study his society's laws and to examine its' citizens' emotions "stripped naked." Furthermore, the writer could perceive the great American themes of tomorrow shining "beyond the present chaos." The black writer's particular duty was to overcome the handicap of living in racist, capitalist America and to teach his readers to do likewise. His greatest responsibility, said Ellison, echoing James Joyce's phrase, was "to create the consciousness of his oppressed nation."

Later, in *Flying Home* (1944), *King of the Bingo Game* (1944), and *Invisible Man* (1952), Ellison would present his own black protagonists threatened with liquidation in modern industrial society. His heroes' resiliency, memory, and luck, however, help them to "fuse" with "new elements" in their environment; they are reborn better able to deal with the churning world of airplanes and factories. In 1948, Ellison described the bemused protagonist of *Invisible Man*, which he was then writing, as "a character who possesses both the eloquence and the insight into the interconnections between his own personality and the world about him to make a judgment about our culture." Ellison's early desire for conscious heroes in American writing foreshadowed his eventual break with many of his literary and political friends, including Wright.

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But in his literary essays of the early 1940s Ellison champions Wright as living testimony to the shining possibilities within the black communities. Against all odds, Wright had made himself into a highly conscious activist and writer. For Ellison, Wright's early novellas, published as *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), constituted his best fiction; their power came not from overt Marxist or Kirkegaardian theorizing but from the folklore-rich language itself. And in the review "Recent Negro Fiction" (1941), Ellison held up *Native Son* as "the first philosophical novel by an American Negro. This work possesses an artistry, penetration of thought, and sheer emotional power that places it in the front rank of American fiction." Wright's autobiography, *Black Boy* (1945) prompted Ellison to compare it with works by Joyce and Dostoevsky, and with the blues.

That Ellison was finding his own direction in writing is clear from his fiction of the 1940s. And in critical essays of the 1960s he explains his early dissatisfaction with *Native Son* and *Black Boy*. Recognizing that Bigger Thomas in *Native Son* represents black humanity smoldering under the ashes of despair and white oppression, Ellison nevertheless cannot accept Bigger as an adequate portrait of the African American. To him this character is little more than an ideological formulation, a sociological mortar shell fired at the guilty conscience of white America. Blacks themselves knew that life in the ghetto is not as dimensionless and dull as Wright paints it. Native Son is too deterministic and anchored in Marxist ideology.

"In *Native Son* Wright began with the ideological proposition that what whites think of the Negro's reality is more important than what Negroes themselves know it to be. Hence Bigger Thomas was presented as a near-subhuman indictment of white oppression. He was designed to shock whites out of their apathy and end the circumstances out of which Wright insisted Bigger emerged. Here environment is all – and interestingly enough, environment conceived solely in terms of the physical, the non-conscious. Well, cut off my legs and call me Shorty! Kill my parents and throw me on the mercy of the court as an orphan! Wright could imagine Bigger, but Bigger could not possibly imagine Richard Wright. Wright saw to that." (*Shadow and Act*, p. 114)

In 1944, when Ellison's disagreement with radical American leftists was already strong, the war policies of the American Communist party impelled Ellison and many other blacks to leave the organized left entirely. When the party lent what Ellison called its "shamefaced support" to segregation in the armed forces, many blacks became bitterly disillusioned with the radicals' vaunted goodwill toward minorities.

Invisible Man is critical towards every race, social class and gender present in the novel, without any sort of discrimination. The nice God fearing white folks who offer the scholarship following the shame and humiliation of a "battle royal", the "respectable" Dr. Bledsoe who attempts to destroy the life of a fellow black man to maintain status and satisfy his demented principles regarding life are met with harsh criticism and irony. Ellison is the enemy of extremism. Ras the Exhorter who is the artistic representation of Black Nationalist leader Marcus Garvey is conveyed as mad, dangerous and unstable. The Brotherhood which is nothing more than the Communist Party comes across as deceptive, manipulative and eager to exploit the black uneducated masses, which is of course in antithesis with the principles of social equity and justice it promotes. Ellison's aversion in the novel towards the Brotherhood is explainable partly due to his negative experiences as a member of the Communist Party. Even the sacred concept of fatherhood is tarnished beyond any redeemable value. Jim Trueblood's appalling story of incest shakes the very foundations of human sanity and is a testament to humanity's capacity to perform abominable acts. And it is not only the story itself

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that is grotesque but also the manner in which it is revealed. Trueblood has very little remorse for his heinous act and he even manages to discover redemption through music:

"I looks up and sees the stars and I starts singin'. I don't mean to. I didn't think 'bout it, just start singin'. I don't know what it was, some kinda church song, I guess. All I know is I *ends up* singin' the blues. I sings me some blues that night ain't never been sang before, and *while I'm singin' them blues 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* [emphasis added]. I made up my mind that I was goin' back home and face Kate; yeah, and face Matty Lou too" (66).

The protagonist's decision to renounce his wholehearted support for the Brotherhood is based on his discovery that the radical group is cynically self-serving and, ultimately, racist. The Brotherhood sacrifices Harlem's interests for the sake of "international" goals and tries to mold the Invisible Man into their conception of the Good Negro: one passively willing to use his energy and his art (which is his oratory) exactly as the party commands. In the novel the Brotherhood stands, to a large extent, for the American Communist party. But Ellison also wanted the Brotherhood to be seen in a larger context: the party was not the only group of white American political activists to betray their black countrymen for narrow political ends.

With the publication of *Invisible Man*, Ellison moved suddenly into the front ranks of American writers. His novel evokes visions and tensions peculiar to American life as African Americans know it: Ellison's brown-skinned, nameless seeker suffers and scoots, forth and back, through a thicket of briars well known to American blacks. Yet *Invisible Man* is a modern masterpiece that, as Wright Morris has written, "belongs on the shelf with the classical efforts man has made to chart the river Lethe from its mouth to its sources." Richly expressing the meaning of life in Harlem (and the Southern background of that life), Ellison manages to describe what he says he finds in the work of the painter Romare Bearden: "The harmlessness of the human condition." *Invisible Man* is a deeply comic novel, with moments of terror and tragedy; it is a Bildungsroman in which a young man awakens to consciousness by piecing together fragments and symbols from history, myth, folklore, and literature, as well as his own painful experience.

Set in the approximate period 1930-1950, *Invisible Man* is the story of the development of an ambitious young black man from the provinces of the South, who goes to college and then to New York in search of advancement. This greenhorn at first wants no more than to walk in the footsteps of Booker T. Washington, whose words he quotes at his high school graduation and at a smoker for the town's leading white citizens. At the smoker he is given a new briefcase and a scholarship – emblems of his expected ascent up the social hierarchy. But first he is required to fight blindfolded in a battle royal with other black youths. Significantly, he and the rest are turned blindly against one another for the amusement of their black controllers.

This battle royal scene shows the protagonist to be not just blind but invisible. Obviously, the white town bosses see him not as an individual of promise but as a buffoonish entertainer, a worthless butt of their practical jokes, or, at best, a good colored boy who seems to know his place. In this sense the ritual purports to initiate him as their agent on guard for the status quo wherein he and his people will remain powerless. The youngster's invisibility also consists of his trust in the myth of advancement, American style. This confidence that he will rise to success (reminiscent of Horatio Alger and Booker T. Washington) renders him willing and eager to suppress his own will and words – his own identity – to be whatever they say he must be to get

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ahead. That night he dreams that his grandfather tells him to open the briefcase, which contains a document reading: "To Whom It May Concern, Keep This Nigger-Boy Running." Here is the full excerpt:

"That night I dreamed I was at a circus with him and that he refused to laugh at the clowns no matter what they did. Then later he told me to open my brief case and read what was inside and I did, finding an official envelope stamped with the state seal; and inside the envelope I found another and another, endlessly, and I thought I would fall of weariness. "Them's years," he said. "Now open that one."

And I did and in it I found an engraved document containing a short message in letters of gold. "Read it," my grandfather said. "Out loud."

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

I awoke with the old man's laughter ringing in my ears. (It was a dream I was to remember and dream again for many years after. But at that time I had no insight into its meaning. First I had to attend college.) (Ellison, 1995:33)

To keep the poor black man running is to keep all the viciously oppressed blacks running, destroying any semblance of stability and peace in their unfortunate lives. In this respect the plight of the African Americans reminds us of the suffering and injustice the sons and daughters of the people of Israel have had to suffer throughout millennia of discrimination, walking the earth as outcasts, hoping and praying for one beautiful day when they would have the right to freely pursue their happiness. The repetitive nature of the dream, its accuracy in determining and anticipating events before they occur suggests some sort of supernatural intervention whose purpose can only be to combat injustice and duly warn an innocent of the uphill battles to come.

But the youngster remains naïve. He goes off to college but is expelled when he makes the fatal mistake of taking a visiting white trustee to a section of the local black community (and, metaphorically, to a level of black reality) never included in the college-town tour. Bledsoe, the college president, sends the hero packing to New York, first giving him a set of private letters of introduction that, he finally discovers, also courteously request that he be kept running – and jobless.

Eventually he does find work in New York, first in a paint factory, where he is discharged after being seriously hurt in an explosion – one that ultimately jars him into a new self-awareness and courage. He gives a moving speech at the eviction of an elderly Harlem couple and is hired by a predominantly white radical political organization called the Brotherhood. The group seems to confirm his childhood wish by telling him he will be made the "new Booker T. Washington ... even greater than he." But the Brotherhood also sets him running. Despite his success in Harlem, the downtown "brothers" withdraw support for his program.

Why do they sell the hero out? First of all, because he has proven so successful with his uses of such vernacular forms as marching bands and stump speeches that the "scientific" Brotherhood fears that he, and the black community at large, have become dangerously independent in their power. The second, even more cynical, motive here involves Invisible Man's having performed his mission of stirring up Harlem; now, withdrawn from the community, he can perform the Brotherhood's other task of discouraging his followers so that they turn against not only him but also each other. He and the other Harlem leaders are set up to reenact the action of the blindfolded fighters of the novel's first chapter: to self-destruct while the white bosses, this time wearing the colors of the radical Left, protect their power from a safe distance.

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