CRITICISM IN RALPH ELLISON'S *INVISIBLE MAN*

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Abstract: 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.

Keywords: : power, adventure, folklore, improvisation, myth

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.

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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 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

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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.

A race riot erupts, and, still carrying his briefcase, which now contains, besides his diploma, several other mementos of his adventures, he falls down a manhole into an abandoned, bricked-up cellar. There he closely examines the papers in his briefcase and realizes how fully he has been betrayed by those who had professed to help him. And yet he discovers, too, that not only "could you travel upward toward success but you could travel downwards as well." He will remain down there, bathed in stolen light from the power company and in blues-idiom music; he will compose his memoirs in his hole at the edge of Harlem, in hibernation. "Please, a definition: A hibernation is a covert preparation for a more overt action." If others cannot or will not see him, he at least will see himself. His narrative, full of irony, insight, and fury, shows that he has attained self-awareness – even a certain wisdom – and that he has been able to act, to write this stunning book.

The shape and style of *Invisible Man* bespeak its determination to step toward the universal through "the narrow door of the particular." The novel resounds with black folklore, in which, says Ellison, "We tell what Negro experience really is. We back away from the chaos of experience and from ourselves, and we depict the humor as well as the horror of our living. We project Negro life in a metaphysical perspective, and we have seen it with a complexity of vision that seldom gets into our writing." (*Going to the Territory*, p. 283)

Blues, spirituals, sermons, tales, boasts, and other black American folk forms influence the characters, plot, and figurative language in this teeming novel. The striving young man is drawn toward the freedom of consciousness and conscience by the magic horns and voices of the folk. Nonetheless, he himself is never so much a blues hero or Br'er Rabbit as he is like Br'er Bear, outmaneuvered until the end by Br'ers Fox and Dog – in his case Bledsoe; Brockway, the factory supervisor; and One-Eyed Jack, who recruits him for the Brotherhood. Like the befuddled butt of many a folktale, this young man seems determined to be somebody's greenhorn, somebody's fool.

The novel is built not only upon the foundation of black lore but also of black literature. It is a benchmark black novel that seems aware of the entire tradition of African American letters. In it one overhears the black and white tricksters (slaves and slaveholders) of slave narrative locked in combat. One senses again the slaves' desperate yearning for education, mobility, and individual and communal freedom. There are particularly strong echoes of works by Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, Zora Neale Hurston, and Richard Wright, all of whom wrote prose portraits of tragicomic characters, "articulate heroes" in search of broader freedom.

But the power of *Invisible Man* is more than that of a repository of black influences. As if in defiance of the single-minded critic, Ellison adapted symbolism and rhetorical strategy from any and every source he felt would enrich the texture and meaning of his work: Sophocles, Homer, Dostoevsky, Malraux, Joyce, and Freud all figure in *Invisible Man*. Some allusions and symbol clusters fade out like wistful jazz riffs; others recur and provide the novel with structure. But no single critical "method" can explain this capacious novel, which owes as much to the symbolist tradition of Melville and Hawthorne as it does to the vernacular tradition of Mark Twain and Hemingway. This is not a "realistic" novel or an understated "hard-boiled" novel, or a symbolist romance (it is not, in any case, to be *only* so categorized); instead, it is an epic novel of many voices, an experimental narrative constructed upon the author's mastery of American language; as he describes it,

> "a rich Babel ... a language full of imagery and gesture and rhetorical canniness. .. an alive language swirling with over three hundred years of American living, a mixture

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> of the folk, the biblical, the scientific, and the political. Slangy in one instance, academic in another, loaded poetically with imagery at one moment, mathematically bare of imagery in the next." (*Shadow and Act*, pp. 103-104)

The Invisible Man embodies this confluence of traditions. He is a modern Odysseus, a latter-day Candide, a "black boy" comparable to Wright, a black and obscure Jude, a Yankee yokel, a minstrel endman. Of the several secondary characters who also embody a rich mixture of allusions, two stand out: Trueblood and Rinehart. Both are significant influences on the protagonist's growing awareness.

It is Trueblood, the sharecropper, whom the hero encounters when giving Mr. Norton, the white trustee, a tour of the college environs. "Half-consciously" the student drives over a hill into a section of the black community built during slavery and, at Norton's "excited command," stops in front of Trueblood's shack. Trueblood had, in earlier days, been invited to entertain white guests of the school, but no more: he has brought disgrace to the black community by impregnating his own daughter. "You have looked upon chaos and are not destroyed!" says Norton. "No suh! I feels all right," says Trueblood. Not just willingly but "with a kind of satisfaction and no trace of hesitation or shame," Trueblood recites the exuberant tale of his forbidden act; it is a private performance for the student and Norton, whose face, at story's end, "had drained of color." Shaking, the white man gives the farmer a hundred-dollar banknote: "Please take this and buy the children some toys for me," the northern philantropist says.

Rinehart enters the narrative late in the novel. To escape two followers of Ras, a black nationalist whose organization rivals the Brotherhood, the Invisible Man puts on glasses with lenses so dark that they appear black; he is immediately mistaken for Rinehart. "But . . . where's your new hat I bought you?" a young woman asks. To complete his disguise he buys the widest white hat in stock at a local store and is mistaken for Rinehart all evening: Bliss Rinehart, gambler and pimp; Rine the lover and cool "daddy-o"; Rine the briber and "confidencing sonofabitch"; Rine the numbers runner; Reverend B. P. Rinehart, "Spiritual Technologist . . . No Problem Too Hard For God." The Invisible Man is stunned by Rinehart: "Could he himself be both rind and deer? What is real anyway? . . . The world in which we lived was without boundaries. A vast seething, hot world of fluidity, and Rine the rascal was at home."

Trueblood and Rinehart make their homes in quite different worlds. Trueblood has remained in the South, in a log-cabin homestead dusty with slave history. By contrast, while Rinehart may once have preached in Virginia, he has become a master manipulator of a chaos that is distinctively northern in scope. Indeed, what these black men have most in common is that both have stood before teeming chaos and have survived. Rinehart has embraced chaos. Trueblood has faced his crime of incest – the sin associated with confusion, degeneracy, and death, from Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* to Freud's *Totem and Taboo.*

Both characters bring to mind the African American musical form, the blues. Trueblood has done wrong (but he didn't mean to) and is bashed in the head by his wife, who leaves him for a time and spreads the tale of his wrongdoing until even the preacher calls him "the most wicked man" he has ever seen. Yet Trueblood tells his story until it achieves a certain cadence, and it ends with song:

> "Finally, one night, way early in the mornin', 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 kinds church song, I guess. All I know is I *ends up* singin' the blues. I sings me some blues that might 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. I made up my mind that I was goin' back home." (p. 66)

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Trueblood is what Albert Murray has called a "blues hero": a resilient improviser who confronts the low-down dirtiness of life, the "changes" and the "breaks," and who manages with style and grace to keep on.

Rinehart is no blues man in this broadly heroic sense. "Rinehart, Rinehart," thinks the Invisible Man, "what kind of man is Rinehart?" His name is a name from a blues song often sung by Ellison's old friend from Oklahoma, blues singer Jimmy Rushing: "Rinehart, Rinehart, / You're a most indifferent guy." But instead of evoking terror or pity, instead of putting confusion into perspective, as does Trueblood, Rinehart personifies confusion. He is the no-good "sweet-back," the evil mistreater that the blues bemoan. Trueblood sings the blues as a cathartic statement to assuage a tragic predicament, but Rinehart dispenses the blues to others: he distributes travail and thrives of it.

Trueblood's classical ancestors include Oedipus the King, but Rinehart's forebears are shape-changing tricksters. His middle name, Ellison has written, is Proteus. Yet both characters capture the note and trick of African American life, and both function in quite specific ways. Trueblood's tale is a lesson and a graphic warning, from which the Invisible Man learns that "there's always an element of crime in freedom." Trueblood's breaking of the incest taboo (even if, as he insists, he was asleep while doing so) suggests that the Invisible Man can also break the law and so extend the definition of what it means to be black and what it means to be human. Rinehart's lesson is that the world is much more ambiguous – and, again, full of possibility – than any narrow-minded, strict, schematic thinkers like those in the Brotherhood can know. "Underground" in Harlem there are operators undreamed of by One-Eyed Jack and his "brothers." Some, like the unscrupulous Rinehart, prosper in the dark maze. Others, like the "hip" young man the narrator sees in the subway station, have also been ignored by the Brotherhood: "Men out of time, who would soon be gone and forgotten. . . . But who knew but that they were the saviors, the true leaders, the bearers of something precious? . . . What if history was a gambler, instead of a force in a laboratory experiment, and the boys his ace in the hole?" (p. 441) Rinehart the trickster is a figure of escape and of possibility whose presence suggests that beneath the surface of the American commonplace there burns a bright and raging world.

Invisible Man is a complex and richly comic novel in which the hero discovers a great deal about American history and culture. In the end he sees that he has been a fool, that, like Trueblood and Rinehart, he must confront chaos with strength and resiliency – and mother wit – or it will engulf him. When he plunges underground, he vows to stop running the course that Bledsoe and others had set for him and can say with Trueblood: "I ain't nobody but myself . . . I made up my mind that I was goin' back home."

Invisible Man shares great familiarity within the creative context of the Afro-American narrative. Its primary method of authentication is its ability to formalize the art, link strategy to context and expound its own historical fiction. Progression is non-linear, prompting ground breaking assertions that a self, an independent form of humanity can exist outside imposed, preconceived definitions of reality.

Ellison's protagonist is a more subtle, stealthy version of Rinehart. He is a failed college student, a factory worker, a public speaker and most importantly an artist who produces a "simulated autobiography". The intent of his undertaking is paramount to the understanding of *Invisible Man.* The persona of the artist strives to break loose from the figures of authority sabotaging his development, and expand his identity, to achieve spiritual autarky, free from the constricting noose of his ill willed friends and countrymen.

The protagonist is on a quest for an adequate identity. The act of naming can bestow power or weakness. Its ramifications concern themselves with control and self-control. The striking realization that one can name oneself and subsequently trigger a desirable response from society is intoxicating and liberating at the same time, as is the case with his understanding

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of Rinehart: "Could he be all of them: Rine the runner and Rine the gambler and Rine the briber and Rine the lover and Rinehart the Reverend?... The world in which we lived was without boundaries. A vast seething, hot world of fluidity." (Ellison 1995: 498)

Invisible Man is a splendid uplifting of moderation and self-discovery. It is a novel of power, adventure, folklore, improvisation, myth and personal growth; "a raft of hope, perception and entertainment" attempting to present a tiny glimmer of the complicated splendor that is America. The novel advocates for civil and constitutional rights but above all else it advocates for the right to embrace and accept our own humanity. It tells stories of injustice and abuse, pain and solitude, preferring irony and denouncing anger. Social realism, allegory and symbolism usher in the promise of a powerful narrative and the outspoken herald of truth regardless of the cost and consequences. Ellison manages to create an effective image of 1940's Harlem which stands as a unifier of all the undertones of African-American life. Through his vision he anticipates the e(in)volution of Marxism, the emergence of the Black Panthers, America's cultural revolutions and a steadfast desire to accept and tolerate individual identities, pluralism and multiculturalism. Ralph Ellison summons all existing relevant ideologies but embraces only temperance and balanced thought. His ideological novel is a manifesto of tranquility, patience and equanimity in the face of relentless adversity.

Ellison is one of America's gatekeepers of moral history. His influence on the Afro-American novel and the American novel as a whole may have hastened the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement. He carried inside his writing the intellectual turmoil of his generation and set the standard for a new moral and artistic comprehension of 1960s America. His objective was not to portray a coherent image of individual identity, or of black identity but the identity of the American rainbow, the melting pot of intimidating complexity. His verbal flow and communicative fortitude served as a release valve for the creative energies of his countrymen. The great American writer acknowledged Faulkner, Melville or Hawthorne but above all he paid homage to the almost sacred pieces of paper (the Constitution and the Bill of Rights) which had dictated the moral imperatives shaping the beautiful destiny of his beloved America. His patriotism was not uncommon for an individual living in 1940s and 50s America; what was oddly inspiring however was the fact that he managed to unreservedly love a country that had at times rejected and humiliated him because of the color of his skin. *Invisible Man* is a novel of trust and belief in the ideals for which America stands. Had it not been for Ellison's patriotism and trust in America's pledge of liberty and justice for all his novel would never have been written; because despite his façade of irony and pessimism Ralph Waldo Ellison is a true believer that change will come, that he himself can make a difference through his work and generous humanity. The novelist's responsibility and debt to society cannot be overlooked or ignored towards the realm of perdition. Both form and content must coexist and serve the author's creative infrastructure, a convergence hub where literature and democracy become intertwined creating not only mentally endowed characters but also intelligent, opinionated citizens/readers who have the courage and mental clarity to change society for the better.

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