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978-0-521-31369-8 - New Essays on Invisible Man

Edited by Robert O'Meally

Excerpt

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Introduction

ROBERT O'MEALLY

. . . You just write for your own time, while trying to write in terms of the density of experience, knowing perfectly well that life repeats itself. Even in this rapidly changing United States it repeats itself. The mystery is that while repeating itself it always manages slightly to change its mask. To be able to grasp a little of that change within continuity, to communicate it across all these divisions of background and individual experience, seems enough for me. If you're lucky, of course, if you splice into one of the deeper currents of life, then you have a chance of your work lasting a little longer.¹

–Ralph Ellison

. . . The racial turmoil as we know it . . . was only a distant thunder, not necessarily promising rain. In that state of nervous calm, Ellison could produce a novel which, regarding the character and fate of American Negroes – indeed the character and fate of our whole multi-racial society – was both a summation and a prophesy.²

–F. W. Dupee

PUBLISHED a mere thirty-five years ago, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* shares with older classic works the odd quality of seeming to have been in place for much longer, if not forever. It is a novel that encompasses much of the American scene and character; though told by a single Afro-American and set in the contemporary South and then in modern New York City, its references are to the First World War, to Reconstruction, to the Civil War and slavery, to the founding of the republic, to Columbus, and to the country's frontier past. *Invisible Man* delves deeply into what R. W. B. Lewis, an early commentator on the novel, has termed "our representative native theme": "For if there is an American fiction it is this – " wrote Lewis in 1953, "the adventures likely to befall a centerless individual en route through the flow and conflict of illusions toward some still undisclosed cen-

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ter."³ (Lewis's phrasing brings to mind the convincing argument, on the part of Ellison critics, that this novel of the "adventures" of a "centerless individual" is a book of the blues.)⁴ Not only does this novel summarize, in artistic terms, so much Americana, but its allusions to world literature and its structural underpinnings in myth and ritual, transcending particular place and time, grant the work resounding depth and scope. Some recent critics have even seen in *Invisible Man* a strange *precognitive* power:⁵ Its young hero's mix of idealism and alienation, his escapes into music, marijuana, and gadgetry; the book's study of interracial angst and urban riot; its exploration of the relation of the "Woman Question" to the Afro-American freedom struggle; its dangerous, false-faced establishmentarians in politics, education, and business; and its equally lethal "saviors" like Ras and Rinehart – all seem to belong to an era *after* the one in which the novel first appeared.

Invisible Man recalls, and often makes specific reference to, the beginnings of the novel as a literary form: to Cervantes, Fielding, Defoe and, more significantly, to works by great nineteenth-century novelists, Twain, James, Dostoevsky, and especially Melville,⁶ who provides one of the book's epigraphs. Like *Moby Dick*, *Invisible Man* is a capacious novel, one that tries many things: Both are rhetorical tours de force containing letters, sermons, fights, songs, political speeches, dreams, and descriptions of private homes, meeting halls, offices, brothels, bars, and churches. Ellison's is a realistic novel evoking particular places in exact detail; but it is also a surrealist work, challenging its reader to fit together its baffling dream pieces. As tradition-conscious and summarizing as this novel is, it manages, through eloquent, experimental play with form and idiom, to seem even younger than its years. And like *bovaryism*, *invisibility* is a metaphor that has moved from its original literary context to become a key metaphor for its era.

As one critic has pointed out, *Invisible Man* is probably the finest first novel since Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*; it is much more mature than the first novels of Faulkner, Hemingway, and Fitzgerald,⁷ and indeed compares with their best work. How did this first novel by an unknown writer come to be known as a classic in so short a time? To demystify this classic-making process some-

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what, we should observe that its publisher, Random House, marketed it as a special achievement right from the beginning.⁸ The book's first edition, issued in the spring of 1952, proclaimed it "a monumental novel, one that can well be called an epic of modern American Negro life." Advance copies were sent to reviewers considered able to deal with such a complexly challenging work, with such a *novel* novel. Journals shaping any book's initial public reception – *The New York Times*, *The New Republic*, *The New Yorker*, *Time*, *The Saturday Review* – all reviewed the book prominently (*The Times* reviewed it twice) and with unanimous, if not unqualified, favor. Many reviewers considered the book somewhat overwrought and prolix, but virtually all recognized its importance as literature. When the novel was first published, Wright Morris announced grandly that it "belongs on the shelf with classical efforts to chart the river Lethe from its mouth to its source."⁹ Influential quarterlies assigned the book to such prestigious scholar/writers as Richard Chase, R. W. B. Lewis, and Delmore Schwartz, who were, if anything, even more enthusiastic than the newspaper reviewers. Schwartz apologized that "the language of literary criticism seems shallow and patronizing when one has to speak of a book like this . . . It is a book which ought to be reviewed by William Faulkner, the author of *Light in August*."¹⁰ (This apt comparison of *Invisible Man* and *Light in August* is made by several of Ellison's first reviewers.)

The building of this monumental novel can be traced through its various editions. The second, third, and subsequent hardcover printings carried some of the aforementioned reviewers' heady commentary, along with glowing praise songs by Langston Hughes, Kenneth Burke, and F. W. Dupee, who called *Invisible Man* "the veritable *Moby-Dick* of the racial crisis."¹¹ By July 1953, Signet's fifty-cent paperback edition had made the book available "in over 100,000 bookstores, drugstores and newsstand outlets throughout the country."¹² That first paperback proudly proclaimed the novel the winner of the National Book Award and "The Blazing Best Seller of the Year." (Altogether *Invisible Man* stayed on the best-seller lists for sixteen weeks. By 1982, it had sold out twenty hardcover printings and seventeen Vintage paper-

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back printings.) Modern Library and Penguin editions have made the book readily available throughout the English-speaking world, and it has been translated into at least fifteen languages.

Special editions further confirmed the book's staying power and coming classic status. In 1980, the Franklin Mint Library brought out a limited edition in gold and leather, illustrated, signed, and prefaced by a "special message" from Ellison tracing the magic book's genesis. Then in 1982 Random House celebrated the book's birthday with a handsome "Thirtieth Anniversary Edition" containing a still fuller introductory essay by the author. Again the work was reviewed everywhere with approval, this time with even more of the hushed awe befitting a revered text. Some reviewers who had grown up with the book said that they admired it more with each rereading and that the book's unmistakably great sections (the battle royal, the episodes involving Trueblood, Tod, and Rinehart, the riot) now totally eclipsed those fictional experiments that seemed forced or that otherwise did not work. *The Washington Post's* reviewer of 1982 was among many stating that "*Invisible Man* has as much claim to being that mythical, unattainable dream of American literature, the 'great American novel,' as any book in our literature."¹³

The National Book Award was only the most prominent prize the novel won. It also received the National Newspaper Publishers Award (1952) and *Chicago Defender's* award as the work "symbolizing the best in American democracy" (1953). In 1965, a poll by *Book Week* of two hundred prominent authors, critics, and editors judged *Invisible Man* "the most distinguished single work" published in the previous twenty years. The recipient of fifteen honorary degrees – along with the American Medal of Freedom (1969), the French Chevalier de l'Ordre des Artes et Lettres (1970), and the National Medal of Arts (1985) – Ellison has been among the most decorated of American writers.

Even more than these honors and awards, however, the academy, both in America and abroad, has given momentum to *Invisible Man's* ascent toward classic heights. By the mid-sixties, with the mounting awareness of the book as more than a best-seller, as a work of literature, along with pressure provided by the Afro-American freedom movement and by the revolution in college

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curricula, *Invisible Man* was quite often assigned in English and humanities courses as well as in fledgling American and Afro-American studies courses. And it has stayed on reading lists ever since, even showing up at times on creatively constructed syllabi in the social sciences. Most readers now probably first encounter the novel not through word-of-mouth recommendation (which was doubtless the case in its best-seller days), but as a homework assignment. Since 1970, master's and Ph.D. dissertations on Ellison and his novel have proliferated. Scholarly articles, anthologies of articles, a casebook of relevant readings, and since 1979, book-length studies have helped teachers and students appreciate the work. All of this academic scaffolding has been part of the classic-making process. In 1974, Jacqueline Covo's annotated bibliography, *The Blinking Eye: Ralph Waldo Ellison and his American, French, German and Italian Critics, 1952–1971*, offered comprehensive evidence that *Invisible Man* had done what its last sentence proclaims in rhetorical form: "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?"

Upon the widening shelf of Ellison criticism, one sees a bit of everything. One could fairly chart the shifting course of critical history from 1960 to 1986 by reviewing the critical approaches to this novel.¹⁴ Ellison himself is one reader of the novel whose judgments, though by definition privileged, cannot be discounted; in fact, he has been among his own best critics. He has provided two Jamesian or Shavian¹⁵ prefaces to his work, and he has written two superb essays, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke" and "The World and the Jug" (both reprinted in his first book of essays, *Shadow and Act*, 1964), specifically in response to critical pieces on his novel. And Ellison, who is interviewed quite frequently in print (two interviews appear in *Shadow and Act*), sometimes uses those occasions to counterstate a particular misconception of his novel or otherwise to offer hints as to how he wants it read. Not surprisingly, he is most irritated by those critics who overstress the book's narrowly racial or political aspects, those who prefer to see it not as a novel at all but as a sociological case study, as a document of protest, or as an untransformed report of his personal or political reminiscences. Some critics, for instance, have disliked the novel's "attack on the Communist Party"¹⁶

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(though Ellison has pointed out that the Brotherhood is neither identified in the novel as the Communist Party, nor is the party the only white-controlled American party to betray the black community). Other critics have complained blankly that not all Negroes act like the ones in this book.¹⁷ Some have dispraised the work as an intolerably arty production, far too indirect for a time of engaged struggle; others have left-handedly praised it as the long-awaited conclusive evidence that, culturally speaking, the Negro has *arrived*. Granville Hicks, for one, says: "What such a novel as *Invisible Man* does do is to demonstrate that the American Negro is deserving of not only political and economic but cultural equality."¹⁸

Fortunately, from the beginning, there have been critics who have considered *Invisible Man* not as some sort of demonstration but as a work of art. There are fine studies of the novel's position within both the traditions of American vernacular literature of Twain and Hemingway and the tradition of American symbolist literature of Melville and T. S. Eliot. Several critics have discussed the novel's connections with works by Frederick Douglass and Richard Wright – and with the tradition of Afro-American narrative – as well as with works by Faulkner, Joyce, Malraux, and Dostoevsky. The novel's uses of black folklore and blues have frequently been studied; in a fine recent book, the Trueblood section of the novel is closely read in light of the economics of the blues.¹⁹ Myth-and-archetype critics, New Critics of various kinds, critics concerned as much with historical and cultural contexts as with the naked text itself, psychological critics, structuralists, deconstructionists, and even a Marxist deconstructionist – all have contributed positively to the Ellison canon.

In the present collection, no attempt has been made to be sweepingly representative or comprehensive. The editor and other critics have, however, heeded Ellison's warning that "for the novelist, of any cultural or racial identity, his form is his greatest freedom and his insights are where he finds them."²⁰ Taken together, these critical pieces, all of them appearing here for the first time, pay attention to this novel as a literary form: to its strategies as an elaborated picaresque tale about a character who, as Ellison says, "possesses both the eloquence and the insight into the inter-

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connections between his own personality and the world about him to make a judgment upon our culture."²¹ Valerie Smith and Thomas Schaub examine the book's narrative strategies in light of its literary antecedents and influences, as well as its political and intellectual backgrounds. John Callahan and John Wright underscore the fact that this is a novel about a gifted public speaker, and that as such it is a meditation not just on the challenges of political leadership but on the special callings of the artist. And they are mindful of Ellison's position that "writers . . . help create or reveal hidden realities by asserting their existence";²² thus he has spoken at times of the "sacredness" of the novelist's task.

According to Ellison, the American novel is bound up with "our problem of nationhood";²³ several of the essayists here are concerned with the Americanness of this novel and with what Callahan terms its "unabashed patriotism." Wright reminds us, too, that *Invisible Man* is a postwar novel that meditates not just on modern wars but most specifically on America's Civil War and on certain of its unresolved dilemmas. ("I guess," Ellison observes, "that all my work is grounded in a concern with the hidden aspects of American history as they come to focus in our racial predicament.")²⁴ Along with other key paradigms for reading *Invisible Man*, Berndt Ostendorf considers the impact of jazz on the novel, which he sees as a masterpiece of modernism. Ellison's work, the essays and stories as well as the novel, leaves no doubt that for him jazz and other forms of music are much more than a casual influence. One is reminded of Mrs. Ellison's statement to a group of students in the 1950s that when her husband, a former music major in college and professional musician, "can't find the words at the typewriter, he goes upstairs and plays the trumpet."²⁵

The pieces included here help explain the novel's fantastic appeal and what one critic termed its "strenuous circulation." F. W. Dupee wrote that *Invisible Man* is probably "one of the most thoroughly read, really *read*, novels of the time, thumbed to pieces in libraries, passed from hand to impatient hand among friends of just about every race, place and every age beyond the first stages of literacy."²⁶ How had Ellison found just the frequency on which to "speak for" such a widely diverse group of readers? He did so by performing the artist's primal magic of starting with an area of

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experience that he knew intimately – that of a talented black American youngster, deeply versed in the vernacular, who tries to take a major leadership role in a post–World War America that seems dead set against him – and by scoring that blues-toned experience in terms that were as eloquent and comprehensive as possible.

It is important to note that this did not mean writing specifically for white readers (as some black critics have charged).²⁷ “Too many books by Negro writers are addressed to a white audience,” Ellison has said. “By doing this the authors run the risk of limiting themselves to the audience’s presumptions of what a Negro is or should be; the tendency is to become involved in polemics, to plead the Negro’s humanity” (SA, 170). Rather than do this, Ellison focused his novel on issues affecting black Americans, on the lingering problem, for example, of finding black leadership that was effectively responsive to the black group’s own needs and wishes. As a writer rather than a politician or social scientist, Ellison also felt called upon to celebrate those Afro-American styles and values that have sustained the group and to destroy with words those aspects of Afro-American life that have *not* been sustaining. In this sense, and in the sense that certain in-group jokes and games must be explained by black American critics to white readers, Ellison seems to have written *Invisible Man* for a *black* audience.²⁸ The black writers Kenneth McClane and William J. Harris both told the editor that everything that happens to them as blacks in America seems to have been covered, in one way or another, by *Invisible Man*.

Why then, some critics have asked, all the fancy quotation of white “masters” of the novel form; why all the straining after universality? Here the answer is simple: Like Duke Ellington, whose raggiest dance numbers (let us leave aside the symphonies) can contain the most complex chords, structural innovations, and interpolations from classical composers, Ellison uses everything he knows, not to prove anything to anybody but to exploit as fully as possible the artistic materials he is conjuring – to render Harlem with enough accuracy that Harlemites who read the book would recognize the place, and also to express emphatically what he once termed “the ‘harlemness’ of the national human predicament.”²⁹

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Nor does this mean that Ellison's novel is exotic by design or in any way hostile to nonblacks; it merely means that as with early jazz, played at first by black musicians for black dancers and for themselves, nonblacks who wanted to get with it had to enter deeply into its rich spirit. And like good jazz, the novel beckons readers of all backgrounds. For example, even though the book's Harlem cart pusher who calls himself "Petie Wheatstraw" (having appropriated, for the moment, a black folkloric name sometimes taken by blues musicians and storytellers) speaks in thick Afro-Americanese to remind *Invisible Man* of his southern "colored" roots, the lingo itself is so alluringly exuberant that it is irresistible – both for *Invisible Man*, who at first is put off by all such talk, and for the reader. That the Petie Wheatstraw encounter is framed not just as a decorative refrain but as part of an initiation ritual – of the youngster entering the realm of grown-up complexity, of the "green" newcomer traveling from the old (down home) world to the new (urban) frontier – makes it not only a general American experience but one that is repeated worldwide. Likewise, *Invisible Man*'s other large quests – for freedom that is neither so formless as to be chaotic (witness Rinehart) or so tightly controlled as to be mechanical or oppressive (witness Bledsoe) and, above all, for a personal identity he can live with – surely these are not only Afro-American quests. His musings in a Harlem rooming house sound like those of modern youths around the world:

I had no doubt that I could do something, but what, and how? I had no contacts and I believed in nothing. And the obsession with my identity, which I had developed in the factory hospital had returned with a vengeance. Who was I, how had I come to be? Certainly I couldn't help being different from when I left the campus; but now a new, painful, contradictory voice had grown up within me. . . . I throbbed with guilt and puzzlement. I wanted peace and quiet, tranquility, but was too much aboil inside.³⁰

The other crucial point to make here is that in his novel Ellison reaches out to the reader by raising a sheaf of intellectual issues that have disturbed and intrigued people of all backgrounds forever: What is the shape of history? What is the true relation of science, art, and politics? How does one account for human motives for action? How does one know the self? The other? By

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drawing such questions out of the vernacular experience of a black American character, Ellison manages to “splice into . . . the deeper currents on life,” to show the universality of blackness.

That *Invisible Man's* memoirs are framed in a traditional form, as a novel, serves as a lure to all readers familiar with that form to enjoy its formal aspects and its “sheer narrative ride.”³¹ This novel's extraordinary fullness of allusions to other novels, and to other works of many kinds, literary, philosophical, psychological, political, also invites the reader deeper into the text. Poe, for example, is mentioned in *Invisible Man's* opening lines, and the novel is a kind of elaborated detective story, with the bewildered protagonist oddly cast (like Oedipus) as both detective and criminal. In time he learns that there really is a connection, as the “crazy” veteran has told him, between criminality (recall here that Tarp's crime was saying no to a white man, and Tod's was that he “thought . . . he was a man”) and freedom. And as Ellison has often pointed out, a voice reminiscent of Dostoevsky's underground man's voice sounds in *Invisible Man's* Prologue, the “sick” and “guilty” words expressed this time by a brown-skinned latter-day maker of notes underground. Classical literature, fairy tales, early novels, works by major modern writers and thinkers including Freud, Marx, Eliot, Wright, Malraux, Hemingway, Faulkner – all provide allusions in *Invisible Man*. To readers who know the works alluded to, they give a cluster of reference points, familiar plots of ground to stand upon; they also send readers with initiative and curiosity to the library to look up unknown references. Indeed, this novel beckons readers not just into its own pages but into a lifetime of serious study. It is in this context, I should add, that the “obscure” references to black life and lore make all the sense in the world: Here too the point is to communicate intimately with those sharing the author's particular cultural background, and also to invite those who do not share this background to realize that black American life has its own contour and mystery and to *do some homework*.

Humor is a key – perhaps it is the master key – to the highly successful communication process of this novel. Even those who are uninitiated into Wheatstraw's word magic, or Poe's, can enjoy this book as a skillfully spun narrative and as one that is, even on