

A Portrait of the Artist as an Invisible Man

Ralph Ellison and the Authentication of Fiction Through Autobiography

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Introduction

Ralph Ellison and the “Autobiographical” of Fiction

In the summer of 1954, two years after the publication of *Invisible Man*, Ralph Waldo Ellison joined American writers Alfred Chester and Vilma Howard in a Parisian café to be interviewed about art and his novel. The eighth in a series of conversations with authors for *The Paris Review*, befittingly titled “The Art of Fiction,”¹ the interview would be published in the spring of the following year, touching upon topics like “Negro folklore” and the writing process. In a short written introduction to the interview, Chester and Howard admit that talking to Ellison was “like sitting in the back of a huge hall and feeling the lecturer’s faraway eyes staring directly into your own.” Reinforcing this professorial approach, it was Ellison, the interviewee, who began the interview as follows: “Let me say right now that my book [*Invisible Man*] is not an autobiographical work.” Ellison is, of course, correct in saying that his novel is not autobiographical in the sense that Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* or Booker T. Washington’s *Up from Slavery* are. At most, *Invisible Man* is semi-autobiographical, belonging to that category of narratives that blur the borderlines between fiction and autobiography, a classification it shares with, among others, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* by James Joyce.² Conveniently for Ellison, the interviewers proceeded by asking him whether or not he was “thrown out of school like the boy in [his] novel,” to which he could respond in the negative, although he admitted that “like him, [he] went from one job to another” (2). He could not have denied, however, that he, too, as a young man, failed to earn his graduate degree, moved from the Deep South to Harlem, and had, at some point, worked in a paint factory.

¹ Contrary to what some critics, for example Lyne 321, have idly assumed, it was therefore not Ellison but *The Paris Review* who titled the interview “The Art of Fiction,” as it appears in *Shadow and Act*.

² For a brief, introductory discussion of the autobiographical nature of *Portrait*, see Johnson xii-xv.

If we are to posit that a rather significant portion of *Invisible Man* is, indeed, autobiographical, we may also infer that, for Ellison, this was a conscious choice. This, in turn, raises the question as to *why* he decided to ground the narrative of the invisible man, as well as much of his earlier fiction, like the short stories “Boy on a Train” and “Hymie’s Bull,” in the experiences of his own life. The reasoning behind the “autobiographical” of the novel is the main focus of this paper, in which I will argue that Ellison made use of his own experience – particularly as an adolescent growing up in the South and a young adult in New York City – to authenticate his fiction. In doing so, he was not only being loyal to the centuries-old African-American autobiographical tradition, but also adhering to a theory that writers such as Ernest Hemingway had, that, to make literature, “[p]eople in a novel, not skillfully constructed characters, must be projected from the writer’s ... knowledge, from his head, from his heart and from all there is of him” (*Death in the Afternoon* 164). Additionally, Ellison’s semi-autobiographical novel can be seen as a precursor to the literary tendency toward narrative reportage, or “the literature of fact,” that would reach its climax in the 1960s as a result of American novelists’ struggle to keep up with a society that was growing increasingly complex and changing far more rapidly than they could do justice to in traditional fiction.

In order to contextualize the ensuing discussion of Ellison’s use of autobiography to authenticate his fiction, which focuses primarily on *Invisible Man*, a brief introduction to the history of the autobiographical genre is provided, paying special attention to its place in the African American literary and cultural tradition, as well as its complex relation to fiction.

The Evolution of African American Autobiography

It is widely understood among scholars that the African American literary tradition began with the slave narrative. Cultural historian H. Bruce Franklin, in his 1977 article

“Animal Farm Unbound,” even goes so far as to contend that it was the “first genre the United States of America contributed to the written literature of the world” (qtd. in McDowell 37). The pivotal text within that tradition remains the memoir of Frederick Douglass, first published in 1845 as *A Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*. Recounting his coming-of-age as a slave held in bondage, and most importantly the subsequent triumph over his oppression, it stands tall as the text that has exerted a significant and ongoing influence not only on African-American literature, but also on American narrative as a whole. What sets it apart from earlier narratives is, in the words of Robert B. Stepto, the fact that “it alone authenticates the narrative” (29). Whereas the other former slaves’ accounts had to rely on validation through a number of appended documents signed by “slaveholders and abolitionists alike” (28), the “new and major thrust” in the *Narrative* of Douglass is “the creation of [a dynamic energy] that binds the supporting texts to the tale while at the same time removing them from participation in the narrative’s rhetorical and authenticating strategies” (29). Owing to its ability to authenticate itself, it became, as William Andrews notes, “the great enabling text of the first century of Afro-American autobiography” (qtd. in McDowell 37). Indeed, it “created a popular demand for other fugitive slave narratives,” Deborah E. McDowell explains, paving the way for others’ experiences with racial oppression to enter the literary mainstream. Along with music and folklore, it was literacy, the written word, that became the medium through which slaves, ex-slaves and their descendants could give public voice to the traumatic experience of racial discrimination, and to begin to claim their freedom, individuality and citizenship.

An autobiographical tradition that would last for centuries, particularly within the African American community, was thus established. It remains alive today, as exemplified by the forty-fourth President of the United States, Barack Obama, who had already published two autobiographical books prior to becoming the first African American to hold office. Its

influence extended far beyond the borders of the genre, however, shaping the literature of a multitude of authors-to-be who would, in turn, contribute their own distinctive and modern views, allowing it to evolve continually. “This form of revision,” Henry Louis Gates, Jr., writes, “is a process of *grounding* and has served to create curious formal lines of continuity between the texts that, together, comprise the shared text of blackness, the discrete ‘chapters’ of which scholars are still establishing.” The autobiographical motif is one, indeed the most prominent, of those “shared modes of figuration [that] result . . . when writers *read* each other’s texts and seize upon topoi and tropes to revise in their own texts” (10). Much like the experience of “invisibility” described by the narrator in the prologue to *Invisible Man*, artists who firmly ground themselves in a particular tradition are, “instead of the swift and imperceptible flowing of time, . . . aware of its nodes, those points where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead.” That is to say, mastery of tradition allows them to “slip into the breaks and look around,” and then to improvise and innovate. “That is what I hear in Louis’ music” (8), the invisible man concludes, referring, of course, to Louis Armstrong, the trumpeter and internationally imitated innovator whose “every note,” Laurence Bergreen writes, “was amplified by history” (433).

Genuine Forgeries: Fictional Autobiographies and Autobiographical Fictions

Philippe Lejeune, a French specialist in autobiography, once described the literary form of autobiography as “retrospective narrative in prose that a real person makes of his own existence when he emphasizes his individual life, especially the story of his personality” (qtd. in Stanton 10). The degree to which such a narrative can be “truthful,” especially considering the fact that it is often written largely from memory, is a subject of much debate among scholars, and a discussion that extends far beyond the scope of this paper. Further complicating the genre are novels that are based, to a certain extent, on the lives of their authors. These cannot be classified as “true” autobiographies, nor are they “pure” fictions. Instead, they belong to the category of the “autobiographical novel,” which is a literary technique rather than a sub-genre of autobiography or, for that matter, a genre of its own. Unlike such so-called “autobiografictions,” a fictional autobiography does fall under the umbrella of autobiography because it resembles one in form. It is a novel consisting of “a fictional character [giving] a retrospective account of his life” (Cohn 30n.24), whereas an autobiographical novel is generally not as straightforward about its autobiographical nature. Indeed, Ellison always insisted that the story of the invisible man is not his own. To remark, like Valerie Smith, that “the novel is in no way the story of his own life” (*Self-Discovery* 90), however, is to overstate the matter, for the life of the protagonist does in many ways, big and small, resemble that of the author. Furthermore, what makes *Invisible Man* the pre-eminent text for a discussion of Ellison’s use of autobiography to authenticate his fiction is that it is simultaneously a fictional autobiography and an autobiographical fiction.

In the same way that Charles Dickens allowed the protagonist-narrator of *David Copperfield* to write his own autobiography, as it were, so too is the invisible man given the opportunity to put down on paper his life story and thus “give pattern to the chaos” (*IM* 580) that is his past. He begins his narration of that life story with his high school graduation at the

age of eighteen or nineteen (Shaw 117), followed by the infamous Battle Royal scene in which he is faced with the first and physically most brutal humiliation in the narrative. A promising Southern student like Ellison, the invisible man is invited to deliver his lauded graduation speech at a gathering of the most respected white townsmen. On arrival, however, he is grouped together with some of his schoolmates, all of whom are then expected to fight among themselves for the entertainment of the townsmen. It is not until after a series of similarly atrocious and suggestive humiliations that the invisible man, injured and with blood in his mouth, is allowed to give his carefully crafted and meticulously memorized speech. While Ellison himself had not been witness or victim to a similar event, his tendency toward realistic depictions of ultraviolence was, no doubt, fueled by his own experience with interracial conflict. In his 1946 review of *All Brave Soldiers*, John Beecher's portrayal of his time in the Merchant Marine, Ellison firmly criticized those authors who, in their books about black and white life, consistently held back from accurately depicting interracial conflict. Having himself experienced "explosive racial tension aboard Merchant Marine craft," as Lawrence Jackson writes, the Battle Royal scene marked Ellison's refusal to "give a false picture of health to Americans while burying deeply the cancerous tumor" (328).

Two years later, while in his junior year at a college similar to the Tuskegee Institute that Ellison attended in the 1930s, the next inglorious event awaits the invisible man. Invited by college president Dr. Bledsoe – who bears strong resemblance to Tuskegee Institute president Robert Russa Moton – to drive a white philanthropist by the name of Mr. Norton through the area around the campus, he inadvertently leads his passenger to the house of Jim Trueblood, a black man who, supposedly against his will, committed incest with his daughter. Intrigued by Trueblood's misfortune, probably because of the incestual desire for his own daughter (Smith, *Self-Discovery* 118), Mr. Norton wishes to have the events narrated to him. As soon as Trueblood has finished his expertly crafted narrative, the philanthropist, feeling

faint as a result of the heat and the contents of the story, begs the invisible man to drive him away before he temporarily loses consciousness. After meeting chaos in a local tavern where in-house prostitutes and a large number of mentally disabled and temporarily unattended war veterans are wreaking havoc, not sparing either Mr. Norton or his escort, they eventually find their way out of the bar and back to the campus, where a doctor is sent for by Dr. Bledsoe to examine the head injuries of Mr. Norton. Thus informed of the day's events, the college president believes the protagonist ought to be disciplined for the damage caused to the school, and proceeds by sending him to New York City to find work, a punishment that equals not a temporary, as the nineteen-year-old naïvely presumes, but rather a permanent expulsion.

Although Ellison traveled away from college on a voluntary basis, he, too, went to New York City to seek work, with the intention of earning enough money to pay for his fall tuition. Like the invisible man, he would not return, though he was unaware of this at the time. The Men's House where the invisible man rents a room, to name just one other similarity, is clearly modeled after the Harlem YMCA where Ellison spent several months following his arrival in New York. Inventing such parallels between his experience and that of his protagonist allowed Ellison to work into the narrative his own authentic first impressions upon arriving in New York City, when he "took in all the stature and glamour of the world's modern Negro metropolis" and rode the underground train for the first time in his life (Jackson 161). He reproduced part of his experience of roughly the first seven years in New York City and condensed it into the fifteen months that the invisible man lives above ground following his arrival in the metropolis. In doing so, as Patrick W. Shaw points out, Ellison altered the chronology of a number of actual historical events, such as the Harlem riots, by shifting them from one decade to another (117).

After the invisible man has recovered from a violent incident that occurred while working in a paint factory, the sum of his humiliations leave him angered and disillusioned so

that he joins the Brotherhood, only to realize that it is yet another entity that sees him as a tool to be used for their own gain. Ellison has often been criticized for his depiction of this group of social activists that clearly resembles the Communist Party he was himself once involved with and soon grew critical of due to their rigid doctrine, anti-intellectualism and favoring of obedience over talent (Jackson 203). In his review of *Invisible Man*, Irving Howe notes how, “writing with evident bitterness,” Ellison makes “his Stalinists so stupid and vicious that one cannot understand how they could have attracted him.” In doing so, Ellison “undermines the intention behind it,” Howe writes, “[by] making the Stalinists seem not the danger they are but mere clowns” (21-22). Contrariwise, a more balanced portrayal of reality, and another parallel to Ellison’s own experience, can be found in the depiction of the Harlem riots near the end of the novel. Indeed, Ellison had reported the Harlem riot of 1943 for the *New York Post* and was subsequently able to reimagine it in vivid detail in *Invisible Man*.

Taking up residence underground after being “hurt to the point of abysmal pain, hurt to the point of invisibility” (*IM* 579), the invisible man realizes that he needs to “reaffirm all of [his experience], the whole unhappy territory and all the things loved and unlovable in it, for all of it is part of [him]” (580). Converting the experience into a narrative allows him, like Jim Trueblood, to do just that, to control the meaning of his life. As such, autobiographical writing becomes a means of revealing, as Valerie Smith writes, “a coherence to his life and method to his humiliations” (*Self-Discovery* 115). It is the process of “[giving] pattern to the chaos” (*IM* 580) that provides him with insight he may not otherwise have attained.

Such benefits of autobiographical writing, along with the ability to “[invert] his relation to the figures of authority who have dominated him” (Smith 110), do not limit themselves to the novel’s fictional autobiographer. By embedding details of his own life, Ellison, too, was able to redefine his experience. He erased his personal shame of having graduated from high school at the age of twenty by putting the protagonist in college at

nineteen. In his 1981 introduction to the novel, he writes that for a while he had “structured [his] stories out of familiar experiences and possessed concrete images of [his] characters and their backgrounds” (xxxii). Examples include the short stories “Hymie’s Bull” and “I Did Not Learn Their Names,” which, as John F. Callahan writes in his introduction to *Flying Home*, “refigure Ellison’s experiences hoboing the freights in the early thirties” (xxxix). When the story of the invisible man emerged in his mind, however, Ellison was “confronted by nothing more substantial than a taunting, disembodied voice” (Ellison xxxii). It turned out, nevertheless, to be a “most willful [and] self-generating novel” (xli). This was due to the fact that “everything and anything [in his experience and environment] appeared as grist for [his] fictional mill,” from “details of old photographs” to “political activities observed during [his] prewar days in Harlem” (xxxv). As such, the “voice of invisibility issued from deep within our complex American underground” (xxxvi) and simultaneously “resonated most deeply” for Ellison, as Lawrence Jackson writes, “in part because it was his own” (320).

Despite the many similarities between the author and his fictional character, the story of *Invisible Man* is, at the same time, one that its artist-narrator, like James Joyce’s literary alter-ego Stephen Daedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, could never have written. In her introduction to Joyce’s *Künstlerroman*, Jeri Johnson writes:

However sophisticated Stephen’s aesthetic may be by the end of the novel, that aesthetic will not account for [the] multiple meanings, for the symbolic realism of the novel, for its duplicitous language. . . . Joyce has forged a vivid, evocative, plausible, sincere, even at times ironic portrait of Stephen, a portrait which in teasing out the duplicities of language exploits the potential meanings latent in the actual history of his own life. (xxxviii)

This applies to both author and protagonist of *Invisible Man* to such an extent that it becomes evident that Ellison had “refined his ideas of consciousness,” as Lawrence Jackson writes,

“through readings of James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, [which] was hard-won intellectual turf” (258). Like Joyce, Ellison becomes “an artist or a poet in Aristotle’s terms, not a historian” (Johnson xxxix). Here, Johnson is referring to Aristotle’s famous contribution to the discussion of the “truth” problem that troubled ancients and medieval theorists. He claimed that the difference between the historian and the poet is not that the former writes in prose and the latter in verse, but rather that the historian relates what has happened and the poet what may happen or what may have happened. In writing *Invisible Man*, Ellison has therefore not relayed what has been – it is, after all, not his autobiography – but written a “genuine forgery,” as Johnson calls *Portrait* (xxxix). Embedding details of his own life thus allowed him to set up a framework that serves to authenticate *Invisible Man* without the limitations imposed by a reliance on mere historical or autobiographical fact. It enabled him, like Joyce, to give shape to a narrative that *might* be, one that in the words of Irving Howe successfully “[captured] so much of the confusion and agony, the hidden gloom and surface gaiety of Negro life,” showing that, “for all his self-involvement,” Ellison is capable of “extending himself toward his people” (22).

Dominating Reality: *Invisible Man* and the Rise of the Nonfiction Novel

Speaking of a crisis in the contemporary American novel, Ellison remarked in “Brave Words for a Startling Occasion,” his address at the presentation ceremony of the National Book Award in 1953, that “the explosive nature of events mocks [novelists’] brightest efforts” (102). “After a long period of stability,” he continued, “we find our assumptions concerning the novel being called into question,” with “controversy [raging] over just what aspects of American experience are suitable for novelistic treatment” (103). Twenty-two years later, E. L. Doctorow, in his acceptance speech for the 1975 National Book Critics Circle Award, claimed that “there is no fiction or nonfiction – only narrative” (qtd. in Rogers 9). The period in between the ceremonies saw the high-water mark of a literary tendency toward narrative reportage, or what was later to be called “the literature of fact,” the “nonfiction novel” or “new journalism.” In a society that was changing rapidly and growing increasingly complex, writers were struggling to give narrative form to the modern urban experience. As John Hollowell writes in *Fact & Fiction*, “events that seemed before beyond our wildest fantasies became a part of everyday reality” and were “more fantastic than the fictional visions of even our best novelists” (3).

Not unlike the artistic shift toward Realism and Naturalism in the nineteenth century, many writers of the twentieth century who sought to properly represent the fantastical modern experience turned to writing nonfiction, while others blended their fiction with forms of reportage, thus merging fictions with “everyday reality” in an effort to create plausible narratives. They were, as Philip Roth wrote in 1961, having a hard time “trying to understand, then describe, and then make *credible* much of the American reality” (qtd. in Zavarzadeh 73). Indeed, it was credibility, or authenticity, that writers were particularly struggling with. One consequence, as Hollowell writes, was that the use of the “familiar technique of authorial omniscience ... declined,” suggesting “a reluctance to affirm the Godlike knowledge that the

technique implies” (9). Though Ellison was only “vaguely aware” of it at the time, as he noted in his ceremonial address, “it was this growing crisis which shaped the writing of *Invisible Man*” (103). Indeed, while the rising tide of socially committed nonfiction in the twentieth century would not reach its peak until the 1960s, many authors of the postwar period had already been experimenting with narrative forms that reflected, as Hollowell writes, “a broadened vision of existence” (17). Despite the “stylistic and thematic differences of the writers,” he notes, “their works . . . reflect shared assumptions and techniques that are the direct products of the turbulence of recent life in America.” In a chapter titled “Novelists and the Novel in a Time of Crisis,” Hollowell offers five main elements that, he says, “characterize the nonfiction novel and its writers” (15). Cross-checking Ellison and *Invisible Man* against these characteristics places both firmly in, or indeed as forerunners of, the New Journalism movement and reveals another means by which the narrative form of the novel serves to authenticate the story.

The “nonfiction novel,” Hollowell writes, “combines aspects of the novel, the confession, the autobiography, and the journalistic report,” an accurate description of *Invisible Man*. Indeed, the overlapping narrative form of the novel is a fictional autobiography, with a confessional prologue and epilogue framing the story, and a protagonist both enduring and documenting his experiences as if he were a journalist. Furthermore, the fact that Ellison, too, has incorporated elements of his own life in the narrative gives rise to a complex duplicity that turns both author and protagonist into writers of a “nonfiction novel.” When the invisible man ends his story with “coverage” of a race riot, for example, we know it must be closely based on the Harlem race riots of August 1943, which Ellison covered as a freelancer for *The New York Post*. This, in turn, encapsulates two other characteristics of “nonfiction novel” writers: they have “temporarily turned away from fiction [to create] documentary forms” and

they decline to “invent fictional characters and plots in order to become instead [their] own protagonist, frequently as a guide through a region of a contemporary hell” (Hollowell 15).

One other characteristic element that pervades “nonfiction novels,” as well as *Invisible Man*, is “[a] sense of ultimacy or a concern with ‘last things’ [such as the] increasing depersonalization of man in mass society, the threat of cultural anarchy, [and] the fear of the obsolescence of literature, often with the writer as ‘last man’” (Hollowell 15-16). With no grand-scale apocalypse looming, the “ultimacy” in this *Invisible Man* is personal rather than cultural. The protagonist has been depersonalized to the point of invisibility and ends up seeking solitude in the abandoned cellar to address those “last things.” He goes underground, he says, to “try to think things out in peace, or, if not in peace, in quiet” (*IM* 571). It is therefore not until he writes his autobiography that he is able to comprehend his invisibility and recognize himself as a free and self-reliant individual.

“The nonfiction novel is at least a tentative solution to the problems that confront writers of realistic fiction,” Hollowell concludes, and “has proved to be an appropriate narrative form for the radically altered reality of America in an era of intense social change” (16). Before the tendency toward nonfiction writing reached its climax, however, Ellison had expressed his concern about the lack of balance in contemporary writing, in the sense that writers focused too much on the domination of reality at the cost of the laws of art. He considered it his task to write a novel whose scope was broader and deeper than the “tight well-made Jamesian novel, which was, for all its artistic perfection, too concerned with ‘good taste’ and stable areas,” and “the ‘hard-boiled’ novel, with its dedication to physical violence, social cynicism and understatement” (“Brave Words” 103). In search of inspiration, he returned to “the mood of personal moral responsibility for democracy which typified the best of our nineteenth-century fiction” (102) and which, he felt, had been missing from American

prose after Mark Twain, with the notable exception of William Faulkner. With *Invisible Man*, he had tried to revert to those fundamentals.

One of the many by-products that grew from writers' desire to "dominate reality" in fiction was the social protest novel. Though not necessarily a recent invention, it gained momentum in the early twentieth century, especially after the 1930 publication of Richard Wright's immensely successful novel *Native Son*. African-American authors and critics in particular considered the novel to be a vehicle through which societal change could, even should, be accelerated. After all, the printing press had become substantially more efficient in the 1930s and 1940s, allowing for a sizable increase in audience numbers. As a result, in an effort to influence this predominantly white audience, much of the African-American literature published in the 1930s and 1940s was marked by themes of social remonstrance. Such prose was, nevertheless, often criticized by more aesthetically oriented authors and critics, such as James Baldwin, who felt that those books classified as "protest novels," including *Native Son*, were lacking psychological complexity and credible characters.

Invisible Man was criticized, usually from leftist camps, for its "excessively individualistic ... outlook," lacking a "strong social vision" (Butler xxii). As Larry Neal writes in "Ellison's Zoot Suit," the greater part of anti-Ellison criticism "springs from a specific body of Marxist and black neo-Marxist thought," commonly designated as "social realism" (81). Within that mode of thought, it is not uncommon for all literature that has entered the social sphere to be considered propaganda. One of the harshest critical attacks on Ellison came from Irving Howe in a 1963 article published in *Dissent* magazine, titled "Black Boys and Native Sons." He accused Ellison of "abandoning the task of the Negro writer," evoking Richard Wright as "the embodiment of the truest, most relevant exponent of black freedom in fiction." Howe praised Wright for his "penchant toward what is termed 'protest' literature," and then proceeded to "castigate both Ellison and Baldwin for their failure to carry

on the 'protest' tradition as exemplified by Wright's *Native Son*" (Neal 82). In his equally famous rebuttal titled "The World and the Jug," Ellison opposed the notion of novels as "weapons" proposed by Wright and supported by Howe, finding representations of black life in protest fiction "inordinately bleak [and] more sociological than literary" (Smith, "The Meaning of Narration" 190).

By separating himself from the relation to Wright, as imposed on him by Howe, Ellison defended his right to create "*true* novels [that] arise out of an impulse to celebrate human life and therefore are ritualistic and ceremonial at their core" (emphasis added; Ellison, "The World and the Jug" 114). In doing so, he also denied any debt to earlier black writers such as Wright or Langston Hughes, and preferred to locate himself, as Smith writes, "in the tradition of American literary craftsmen and moral writers like Twain, Faulkner, Hemingway, and T. S. Eliot" (190). Placing his fellow authors of past and present along a familial divide, he considered Wright and Hughes mere "relatives," whereas Ernest Hemingway, André Malraux and William Faulkner were "ancestors." Thus, in a time where many writers were rushing toward the various modes of thought associated with what we now call "new journalism," *Invisible Man*, a complex union of autobiography and fiction, was Ellison's attempt to restore the balance that he deemed to have been lost in contemporary writing as a result of the immense and rapid changes of urban life in the early twentieth century.

American Realism, Modernism and the Literary Ancestors of Ralph Ellison

Modernism was, as Hugh Kenner remarks in *The Mechanic Muse*, “the invention of people who had come to the capitals from remote places, to be struck with sudden comprehensive novelty” (28). While rural life remained relatively static during the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, the urban experience was rapidly changing, a result, for the most part, of increasingly influential technological advancements. City life in America, now “shaped by rapid transit, and later by a telephone network,” was becoming “episodic,” delivering its experience in “discrete packets.” This new “[order] of experience,” Kenner writes, required new ways of writing (11). For many artists who had come to the busy capitals from those distant and relatively unaffected places, “the world of commodity and of the mass media” proved to be “a challenge rather than a threat,” in the sense that it provided “a new source of imagery and structuration” (Perloff 74). Not surprisingly, the distinctly urban Modernist movement, like many of the modern technological inventions, “sought to emulate human actions by means at once complicated and bizarre” (Kenner 11). It resulted in a tendency toward formal experimentation, shifting away from techniques of nineteenth-century realism and giving rise to notions such as stream-of-consciousness and fragmentation, deliberately obscuring narratives to resemble the complex and perplexing modern experience. As with the literary tendency toward nonfiction, Ellison sought to maintain a healthy balance between tradition and experimentation. Indeed, while few today would argue that he was a Modernist writer, Ellison cannot be said to have rejected tradition in favor of experimentation, which is often considered characteristic of Modernism. Moreover, he always insisted, as William Lyne writes, “on his right to choose Euro-American literary ancestors (especially against those who would have him replicate Richard Wright)” and explicitly identified, among others, James Joyce and Fyodor Dostoevsky as having directly influenced *Invisible Man* (321). When Ellison was just starting out, however, he was studying the works of T. S.

Eliot and Ernest Hemingway, two writers who would be of particular importance to his development as a serious writer. While Eliot's work taught him the importance of working within a tradition of, and interacting with, authors past and present, from Hemingway he learned about the value of autobiography in writing credible fiction.

Ellison's apparent candor regarding his indebtedness to his literary "ancestors" was thus in all likelihood influenced by Eliot, who in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" argues that "no artist of any art ... has his complete meaning alone" and that "[h]is significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists" (2320). As a result, Ellison, standing on the shoulders of such giants as Hemingway, Eliot and Joyce, was hesitant to acknowledge his own literary successes. After all, to write in a tradition is, as Eliot remarks, to approve of the idea that "the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past" and therefore also to be aware of the accompanying difficulties and responsibilities. At the same time, artists must be conscious, Eliot notes, of the fact that the dead writers are "that which they know," despite their "'remote[ness] from us because we know so much more than they did'" (2321). As Ellison wrote in a review of William Attaway's *Blood on the Forge*, a "true work of art is at the same time an encounter with the past and a challenge to the future" (qtd. in Jackson 273). This notion ties in with the previously discussed process of "grounding," which "serve[s] to create ... formal lines of continuity" (Gates 10) that comprise not only "the shared text of blackness," but of literature as a whole. Eliot's words served as a reminder to Ellison that a lack of balance between tradition and experimentation would disrupt that process, and throughout his writing career he would continue to write within the tradition of authors that he so admired.

During his years at the Tuskegee Institute, Ellison "began to read as a writer" (Jackson 148). He could relate to Hemingway's literature of action because it "guaranteed more accurate depictions of human behavior" than American social science as taught to him in

college courses, which he considered to be “simultaneously easing racial borders while furthering racist assumptions” (145). Literature was “precise, specific, and individual – group representation led to sloppy generalizations” (146). It was originality and individuality in particular that attracted him. He decided to approach intellectual issues, literature and the arts as an individual, disregarding any racial bias that artists might show in their works. It allowed him to identify with the protagonists of Hemingway’s short stories, despite the “unflattering descriptions of black characters.” Originality, on the other hand, was indispensable in the process of “extending the established aesthetic conventions” (147). “All art is only done by the individual,” as Hemingway sums up his thoughts in *Death in the Afternoon*, “[and] all schools only serve to classify their members as failures” (85).

Hemingway claimed that to separate “mere writing from art,” the artist should avoid what he termed “fakery” at all cost, and create “real living people” instead of caricatures (Jackson 147). To go “beyond what has been done or known” and “[make] something of his own” (*DA* 85), the prose writer, he believed, should find originality within himself:

For a writer to put his own intellectual musings, which he might sell for a low price as essays, into the mouths of artificially constructed characters which are more remunerative when issued as people in a novel is good economics, perhaps, but does not make literature. People in a novel, not skillfully constructed characters, must be projected from the writer's assimilated experience, from his knowledge, from his head, from his heart and from all there is of him. (164)

From this perspective, to be “faking” it, writes Robert C. Hart, is to write about “what one has no knowledge of through direct personal experience,” and to adopt Hemingway’s view of truth in fiction is therefore to write autobiographically. It echoes the concept of “genuine forgeries” such as James Joyce’s *Portrait* and Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, as well as the difference between the reporter and the creative writer, a distinction that diminished with the

mid-twentieth century tendency toward the “literature of fact.” Indeed, “truth in fiction,” says Hart of Hemingway’s perspective, “is not factual truth, not ... a report of what *has* happened, but, in something like Aristotle's sense, an account of what *could* happen within the limits of the possibilities of life as we know it here and now” (315).

The gap in the African-American literary body that Ellison, with *Invisible Man*, had tried to bridge was that of a *true* depiction of “Negro life.” Because neither “American fiction of the twenties nor or the fifties,” as Robert G. O’Meally writes, “can be understood outside the perspective provided by the nineteenth century” (161), he was inclined to seek a middle ground between Realism and Modernism, perhaps symbolized by the “ancestry” of Ernest Hemingway and T. S. Eliot. Ultimately, he had found that his self-imposed literary “ancestors” were, in their own way, too restricted. To discover, instead, a form that he could adopt to adequately describe his own experience, he had to “slip into the breaks,” as the invisible man phrases it, “and look around” (*IM* 8), so that he could move forward and improvise. *Invisible Man* was the result of that experimental attitude, which he considered to be the chief significance of his “not quite fully achieved attempt at a major novel” (“Brave Words” 102).

Conclusion

The fiction writer, compared to the autobiographer, historian or journalist, is generally at a disadvantage when attempting to portray life realistically. After all, nonfiction writers deal primarily with facts and memory, with what is or what has been, whereas the fiction writer attempts to credibly describe what might be. The practice of blending fiction and autobiography, however, allowed Ellison to have his proverbial cake and eat it. He was able to tell his own story and simultaneously make the “extraordinary imaginative leap” of writing a novel that goes far beyond the tale of the individual by “hitting upon a single word [invisibility] for the different yet shared condition of African Americans, Americans, and, for that matter, the human individual in the twentieth century, and beyond” (Callahan, *IM* xvii). Writing *Invisible Man*, he had looked into the deeper currents of life, which he believed gave artists “a chance of having [their] work last a little bit longer” (“A Completion” 810).

Thematically, *Invisible Man* grew more naturally from Ellison than had his previous literary endeavors, for the most part because he was drawing on the experiences of his own life, and creating characters that were based on people he knew personally. On the one hand, he was writing in an autobiographical tradition that had been established by the earliest slave narratives, and remains alive today. On the other hand, however, he had no intention of merely writing his own autobiography. The genre, and perhaps his life also, was too restricting: it would not allow him to transcend his own experience. That was, after all, what he aimed to do, and he sought to accomplish that by writing a highly intellectual novel that, like the oral narrative of Jim Trueblood, stretched between comedy and tragedy, which he felt was the “underlying mode of the American experience” (817). Instead, he would have the invisible man write *his* respective autobiography, and by projecting his protagonist, in a Hemingwayesque fashion, from his assimilated experience, “from all there [was] of him” (*DA* 164), he was still able to explore the meanings latent in his own history.

Albert Murray, long-time friend and intellectual sparring partner of Ellison, remembers him saying that “stories endure not only from generation to generation but also from age to age because literary truth amounts to prophecy,” and that “[t]elling is not only a matter of retelling but also of foretelling” (xxiii). Indeed, along with, or perhaps in service of, his ambition of achieving universal significance, Ellison wanted *Invisible Man* to be “truthful” most of all. The “autobiographication” of a narrative, through means such as he had learned from the fiction of James Joyce and Ernest Hemingway, allowed him to create a “genuine forgery” that was both plausible and a realistic representation of contemporary “Negro life.” At the same time, the novel’s enduring legacy is not only a result of the transcension of his own experience, however, but also of the African-American experience. Through his metaphor of “invisibility” he was able to shift the focus from the confinements of race toward the individual in a universal sense.

Finally, as a consequence of the dominant apocalyptic mood of literature in the mid-twentieth century, many authors increasingly sought to dominate reality – to be “truthful” – in their narratives. While some prompted toward journalistic endeavors, and others toward social protest, Ellison would not sacrifice aesthetics in favor of credibility, as he believed many of his colleagues had done. Seeking a middle ground between the artistic perfection of the nineteenth century and the modern representations of reality, he freed himself from the restrictions that he felt limited contemporary American fiction. As opposed to many of his fellow African-American writers, he dared to “leave the uneasy sanctuary of race to take [his] chances in the world or art” (qtd. in Bellow xii).

Autobiography thus proved vital to the writing of *Invisible Man*, a work suffused with reflection, as suggested by Louis Armstrong’s song “What Did I Do to Be So Black and Blue.” It was a most self-willing novel, as Ellison often remarked, proving Saul Bellow’s point that *Invisible Man* was “the discovery by an artist of his true subject matter” (ix).

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