

*The Visible Invisible Man (March 2005)*

In Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, the invisible man repeatedly draws our attention to how he captures the attention of discerning individuals. Supposedly, this is not the sort of attention he craves. What he really wants, he tells us, is for others to take an interest in him, but not only so to better discern if he is useful or a threat.

Unfortunately, "[n]o one really wished to hear what [he] [. . .] called himself" (573). We have reason to believe, however, that the attention he does receive is exactly the sort he craves—or, rather, the sort he can enjoy and still live with. For not only does he consistently show in his account that he attends to whether or not people take "special" (301) notice of him, he shows he prefers they not interact with him in a manner that makes it difficult to at some point leave them behind.

When the invisible man drives Mr. Norton about town, he remembers an experience from his early school years that influenced him profoundly. He recalls having seen photographs of black men and women who appeared "almost without individuality, a black mob," along with "striking" white people who possessed "dear [. . .] features" (39). Believing his association with the Founder's college has already provided him with some status, he obviously hopes that the distinguished white man, Mr. Norton, will reinforce his preferred sense of himself as "not just another face in the crowd." However, Mr. Norton makes him feel as he wasn't actually "seen" by him, that is, as if Mr. Norton saw "only [his] [. . .] surroundings, [him]self, or figments of [his] [. . .] imagination—indeed, everything and anything except [the invisible man]" (3). He says things *which seem* to suggest that the invisible man matters to him, that his particular identity, who he is and who he will become, is important to him. For example, Mr. Norton says that his own "fate" (44) depends upon the nature of the invisible man's progress through life. He also suggests that an intimate connection exists between the two of them—"So you see, young man, you are involved in my life quite intimately, even though you've never seen me before" (43). However, the invisible man detects something about the way they are interacting which has him doubt how much he actually does mean to him. He gauges that Mr. Norton talks to him "like someone in a book" (44) would, and if he means here that Mr. Norton is not speaking to him in a manner which suggests that specific context he is in, the specific person he is talking to, interest or affect him enough to determine his delivery, he is exactly right.

Mr. Norton likens the invisible man to a “cog” (45), and he does deal with him as if he were just another “cog in a machine” (396). We know this in part because of how he interacts with Trueblood. Though Mr. Norton is described at first as an easy-going gentleman, we know he cannot remain thus while talking with Trueblood. Trueblood truly fascinates him, for he presents him with proof he has long been searching for: specifically, that it is possible to “survive” (51) having incest with one’s daughter. Upon discovering this, he suddenly is no longer the gentleman with the “easy, informal manner” (37), and instead becomes an impassioned, “excited” (52) man. He tends to Trueblood; he makes him comfortable, and encourages him to tell his tale. He also truly attends to him—while Trueblood tells his tale, Mr. Norton listens to him with due care.

The invisible man attempts to draw Mr. Norton’s attention several times while Trueblood is speaking, but is repeatedly ignored. Specifically, we are told that he “ignored [him] [. . .], [as he] star[ed] into Trueblood’s face” (51), that he “was listening to Trueblood so intensely he didn’t see [him]” (57), and that, after he tries once again to get his attention, “[h]e didn’t even look at [him]” (61). And the invisible man is not pleased that Trueblood is the sole focus of Mr. Norton’s attention. In fact, very likely the real reason he is so upset that Mr. Norton gave Trueblood a hundred-dollar bill is because the sum does fairly represent the considerable interest Mr. Norton took in him. Trueblood, therefore, and not the invisible man, is someone Mr. Norton had “never seen [. . .] before” (43) yet took a particular interest in.

After subsequent misadventures the invisible man fears Mr. Norton was “angry at” (98) him. However, Mr. Norton shows again how little the invisible man affects and/or interests him by telling Mr. Bledsoe, “the boy [was not] responsible,” and that “[he] may send him away, [as] [they] [. . .] won’t need him now” (103). Unlike Mr. Norton, however, Dr. Bledsoe suspects there is something amiss in the invisible man’s account of what befell him—and rightly so, for the unusual adventure began when the invisible man “suddenly decided to turn off the highway, down a road that seemed unfamiliar” (40). Dr. Bledsoe is described as looking the invisible man “up and down” (141); he understands the invisible man as someone who has produced an “accident” of a magnitude not seen in “seventy-five years” (103); and he therefore attends to him very closely to determine how much of a threat the invisible man represents, and how best to deal with him. He also “looks [the invisible man] in the eye,” and speaks “sincere[ly]” (143) to him; and though it is possible he is simply

performing here, taking care to appear sincere would also imply that he is not taking the invisible man lightly.

Dr. Bledsoe sees the invisible man as someone who could ruin his empire; and though he pretends there is little the invisible man can do to destroy him, the subsequent interest he takes in him suggests he is much more concerned about the invisible man's potential to ruin him than he lets on. Thereafter, Dr. Bledsoe's eyes are always on him, even if he appears interested in other things. We are informed that Dr. Bledsoe "passed without seeming to see [the invisible man] [. . .] [,] [but] as he reached his door he said, 'I haven't changed my mind about you, boy. And I don't intend to!'" (148). So unlike Mr. Norton, who lost what little interest he had in the invisible man as soon as they parted ways, Dr. Bledsoe remains interested all the while he remains at the Founder's college. We therefore have reason to suspect that the invisible man found Dr. Bledsoe's attention more reparative than he did punitive. And even though Dr. Bledsoe set him up to be ruined in New York, since Dr. Bledsoe's plot involves making the "most important men in the whole country" (163) aware of him, in this, yet again, he supplies means for the invisible man reason to believe himself hardly just another face in the crowd.

In the letter, Dr. Bledsoe identifies the invisible man, not as an ordinary cog, but as an extraordinarily "rare" "case" (191). And we know that the invisible man will soon be closely attended to by someone else who finds him rare and special—this time, an important white man, one of the leaders of the Brotherhood, Jack. When Jack first meets the invisible man he provides him with the sort of attendance he hoped to receive from Mr. Norton but that Trueblood received instead. Just as Mr. Norton shows urgency in his desire to hear Trueblood's tale, Jack "hurried" after the invisible man, making a "puffing, bustling effort" (285). Mr. Norton provided Trueblood with attention, and Jack gives the invisible man the same. He "watches [him] [. . .] intensely" (290), and also "flatter[s]" (288) the invisible man, saying he "ha[dn't] heard such an effective piece of eloquence [. . .] in along time" (289). Jack admits he was looking for someone to play a role, but also that he had been "waiting for months" without finding anyone "who could do what [the invisible man] [. . .] had done" (304). And just as Mr. Norton provided Trueblood with money, we know that Jack will provide him sufficient funding for *him* now to be in possession of hundred-dollar bills, a fact he draws his and our attention to by providing Mary with one of them.

Just as Dr. Bledsoe attends to invisible man in a way Mr. Norton did not, Jack

attends to the invisible man in a way that many of his Brothers *do not*. When the invisible man first meets a gathering of the Brotherhood, they barely notice him. He writes, “no one paid me any special attention. It was as though they hadn’t seen me, as though I were here, and yet not here” (301). Though he will later conclude that the Brotherhood “didn’t see either color or men” (508), some of them likely ignored him owing to his being black, and therefore, to them, his being indistinct by nature. We are told they assume he must know how to sing since (to them) “all coloured people sing” (312). Jack, however, knows differently; with irritation he tells his Brothers that the invisible man “*does not* sing” (312). And though the invisible man doesn’t actually describe how he reacted to Jack’s defence of him, since he admits that he “resented having others think that [coloured people] [. . .] were all entertainers and natural singers” (314), we should again imagine him as feeling both flattered and well attended to.

Soon the invisible man is deemed atypical by both the community he serves and by his fellow Brothers. He becomes the “focal point of [. . .] many concentrating eyes” (336) as he speaks to crowds, a fact not lost to the editor of “a new picture magazine,” who seeks an interview with “one of [their community’s] [. . .] most successful young men” (396). Though the invisible man replies to the request by stating that he desires nothing more than to be “a cog in a machine” (396), he still agrees to the interview. As a result Brother Westrum declares he is an “individualist” (401), someone who aims to stand out from the rest of the brethren. Soon the rest of the Brotherhood—Jack, most notably—come to see him as a threat. The invisible man describes how, after providing Clifton with the “funeral of a hero” (466), they awaited in a room, ready to interrogate him. Jack, just as Dr. Bledsoe once was, is described as “studying him with his penetrating eyes” (462). To this point Jack had largely assumed the invisible man would perform the role expected of him; now, however, evidently fearing the invisible man might topple the Brotherhood, he takes a “new interest” (473) in him, and attends to him just as or even more closely than he had upon first encountering him.

Jack is infuriated with the invisible man. Just as Mr. Norton “forgot himself” when he met Trueblood, Jack is so infuriated by the invisible man’s behavior he lets up his “father[ly]” (470) guise and, greatly assisted by the loss of his false eye, becomes more easily identified as either a “Cydopean” (474) monster or an odd barnyard animal (476). Appropriately, the invisible man finds himself disgusted by Jack. He is in fact through with him: he understands Jack now as someone who

doesn't give a damn about human life, and wants nothing more to do with him. He declares he "would never be the same" (478), but at least in respect to the sort of attention he craves, we have reason to believe he doesn't subsequently change all that much: for he is this purportedly forever-altered individual when he writes his account, and yet we notice just how well he still remembers and chooses to attend to instances where he is ignored or well attended to. Though he will in his imagination "merge into one single white figure" the likes of "Jack and Mr. Norton" (508), he more effectively distinguishes the two men from one another. That is, one of them—Jack—is portrayed as having taken a keen interest in him, while the other—Mr. Norton—as none at all.

By deciding to end his account with a description of how he finally succeeds in capturing Mr. Norton's attention, he makes Mr. Norton seem an elusive prize-animal he long sought and finally bagged. It is appropriate that he decides to end both his description of his surface life and of his account with this encounter, for in the way he describes it he shows it was not insubstantial for him. The invisible man tells us that "seeing [Mr. Norton again] [. . .] made all the old life live in [him] [. . .] for an instant" (577). He "smile[s]," (577) at first, but soon regards Mr. Norton "with mixed feelings" (578). He likely remembers (if he ever really forgot: he tells us at one point, "I can neither file nor forget" [579]) Mr. Norton's lack of attentiveness; and it may be his remembrance of it that is behind his ultimately successful attempt to agitate, mock, and terrorize him. He asks Mr. Norton, "Don't you know me?," and "You see me?" (578)—but of course he already knows the answers to these questions—no, he doesn't. He revenges himself upon Mr. Norton by making him feel like a "cornered animal" (578), but he also provokes him into displaying a reaction which unambiguously shows him affected by, as fully registering, and not being able to simply presume, the invisible man's presence. In response to the invisible man's question, "[A]ren't you ashamed?," Mr. Norton becomes "indignant," is lured into exclaiming "ASHAMED!" (578), and hastily retreats from him.

Evidently, the invisible man is greatly affected by being ignored, but those who attend to him with some kindness also distress him, for he cannot then so readily extricate himself from them. Those who show themselves monsters, like Dr. Bledsoe and Jack, are more or less cleanly left behind. He thinks of revenging himself upon them, but having done their worst, and being mostly finished with him, it is his option if he wants to relate to them further via revenge (something he either chooses

not to do [with Dr. Bledsoe], or for but a brief period of time [with Jack]). They, however, no longer pursue him. Those who have cared about him and/or he engages more intimately with, such as Sybil and Mary, however, trail him (literally so, with Sybil) as he flees through the streets of New York.

The invisible man guesses that Sybil, as with everyone else, wants to use him—in her case, to make him into her “entertainer” (521). However, he admits she does feel “true affection” (529) toward him; and, after he pretends to have raped her and ends the “game” (523) he wants no part of, they engage in more affectionate, intimate play. She compliments his laugh, and tells him she had “never seen anyone like [him]” (525). He asks her if she is “sure” (525), but unlike the time he asked Mr. Norton the same question, the invisible man is likely asking the question in earnest, for he had up to this point described her as someone who was not “kidding nor trying to insult [him]” (517). Though he replies that “it’s good to be seen” (525), his mind is elsewhere, something she is not so drunk not to espy. She accuses him of being mostly interested in trying “to get rid of her” (525), and she’s right, he is—only this doesn’t prove such an easy thing to do. And quite possibly, what lies behind her ludicrous success in trailing him through the streets of New York is the invisible man’s desire to use the episode to dramatize his difficulty in getting her out of his head. That is, he ditches her, and as a result feels the need to in some way convey the guilt he experienced in doing so.

The invisible man knows he has reason to feel guilty: not only does he suggest that Sybil to some extent cares about him and that she can engage with him sincerely, the invisible man overtly acknowledges *he* made use of *her*. *He* is the one who made her drunk, and who enjoyed imagining the humiliation George would ostensibly experience upon seeing the message he inscribed upon her belly. In addition, he is the one who suggested they continue meeting with one another, and he cannot convince himself that it was not within his power to do otherwise. In fact, he comes to understand the entirety of his encounter with Sybil either as something he “had [. . .] done to her” or as something he “allowed her to do” (525).

It is also likely that the invisible man felt guilty upon leaving Mary, for though he knows she also intended to use him, he is well aware that he owes her plenty for having for some time treated him with generosity. He suspects, in fact, that he was the one who hadn’t treated her fairly. Specifically, he gauges that he actually inflicted upon her the crime he is so primed to damn others for, for he involved himself with her but “had never seen her” (297). In addition, as he prepares to leave her, he tries to

de-personalize their relationship, to de-humanize her, by trying to persuade himself that their relationship was nothing more than one of “landlady [to] [. . .] tenant” (322). And though she doesn’t trail after him, an object he associates with her most certainly does—namely, “Mary’s broken bank and coins” (539-40). He tries to rid himself of the bank, specifically because it would “remind [him] [. . .] of [his] [. . .] last morning at Mary’s” (320), but is unable to unload it. It seems appropriate that the package remain with him, however, for even once he has left her, and even though he fears associating with her threatens engulfment—that is, to transform his singular identity into but a component of her own (316)—he seems drawn to return to her, perhaps because he believes himself still in her debt.

Who he is really indebted to, though he isn’t capable of admitting this to himself, is Jack and the Brotherhood, for just after admitting that Mary represented a threat to his singular identity he pretends that he would have preferred to stay with her, but, alas, the Brotherhood forced a parting of ways (315). And the Brotherhood may therefore be responsible for helping him ease the “feeling of dread [he experienced owing to his awareness] that [he] [. . .] had to meet her face to face” (322). But of course, as the dingy package suggests, he is never quite successful in leaving her behind. We know, for instance, that he finishes his account by suggesting he will exit his hole and perform a “socially responsible role” (581).

Granted, it is possible that he may actually be thinking here of attempting to satisfy *both* Mary’s *and* his grandfather’s expectations of him, for though Mary’s “silent pressure” (259) to do the same surely afflicts him, his grandfather is someone who also wanted him “to keep up the good fight” (16) in pursuit of a more moral world. And most certainly, his grandfather is another person he cannot quit, even though he was someone whose advice is persistently described as having made the invisible man “fe[el] guilty and uncomfortable” “whenever things went well for [him]” (16). In the hole, he even admits to being “plagued by his deathbed advice” (574); advice given to him by his grandfather (through his father)—someone who ostensibly did not mean him harm—proves even more inextricable than Mary’s possessions prove to be (though maybe—just).

Those who come closest to seeing the invisible man in the manner he proclaims he desires, therefore, may actually end up causing him more distress than those who value him for averse reasons. I understand, however, that no one in his account is portrayed as being uninterested in using him, but I actually believe that he in fact never wants to meet such a person, for he would be drawn to abandon him or her at

some point, leaving him/her still with him as a source of intractable guilt. He would abandon him/her because his life consists of “phase[s]” (576) which have him repeatedly departing places that once meant something to him. Each phase features a locale, wherein he finds a comfortable home. He makes clear that his hole is not “damp and cold,” but rather “warm and full of light” (6); he for sometime experiences the Founder’s college as a “calm[ing],” “pleasur[able]” place, wherein he felt “sheltered” (111); and the Brotherhood provides for him both security and a “dean and neat” (332) apartment he is delighted with. In each locale his actions garner attention that distinguishes him from others. (Even in the hole he feels sure he has an audience interested enough in what he has to say to slog through five hundred plus pages of his “rav[ing]” [581].) And at some point he eventually dislodges in pursuit of a new one. (True, Dr. Bledsoe will force him out of the Founder’s college, but *he* is the one who chooses to depart for New York immediately, who feels rejuvenated once he arrives in the North [156], and who never decides to revisit the South.)

Why he patterns his life so, I cannot be sure. If I were to hazard a guess, I would suggest he has difficulty staying with any one person or place without at some point feeling more smothered than comforted. The individuality, the sort of visibility I believe he covets, then, can be obtained when significant people within an organization deem him very different from everyone else, but also lost if he lingers around too long within one. He is therefore a visible man, and should only be thought of as invisible in that he is rarely in the same place for long. We must note, however, that he is no Rinehart, for he imagines this slippery rogue as obligated to enmesh himself in relationships and “games” (523), and the visible invisible man can’t be having any of that.

#### Work Cited

Ellison, Ralph. *The Invisible Man*. New York: Vintage, 1995. Print.