

## Identity, Ideology, Redemption: Voices from *Invisible Man*

アイデンティティ、イデオロギー、贖罪

— 『見えない人間』からの声—

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**Abstracts:** *Invisible Man* (1952), by the African-American writer Ralph Ellison (1914-1994), is one of great novels of the twentieth century. Ellison's novel is among the few (the only?) that accurately captures the storms of shifting ideologies that today characterize global culture, with all the spiritual isolation left in its wake. By offering an aesthetic vision of America's racial and ideological misadventures, Ellison opens new ways to consider--and to perhaps accept--some of these more difficult realities, for everyone, everywhere. Through his nameless narrator, identified only as "Invisible Man," Ellison lifts the vision, allowing the reader to relax and to breathe in a fresh perspective. I will mention only a few of the dazzling characters Ellison presents, mainly for their place in the culture's tapestry of beliefs, from universal and nationalistic ideologies to a freedom from limits. As all great artists, Ellison asks questions and suggests potential answers. *Invisible Man* offers a genuine redemption, one that is within everyone's grasp.

**Keywords:** redemption, oppression, segregation, discrimination, racism, nationalism, covenant, black nationalism, Jazz, art

**要約:** 本論では、20世紀の偉大な小説のひとつであるアフリカ系アメリカ人作家、ラルフ・エリソンの著作『見えない人間』(1952)をとりあげる。エリソンの小説は、現代のグローバル文化を特徴であるイデオロギーの激変とそのあとに残された精神的孤立とを正確に捉えた数少ない(唯一の?)小説である。エリソンはアメリカの人種やイデオロギーによる不運な出来事を芸術的に表現し、こうした困難な現実について、誰もが、どこにおいても、考えうる、そしておそらく受け入れることができるような新しい道を切り開いた。「見えない人間」と呼ばれる名前のない語り手を通し、エリソンは、読者が安堵して息をつくことができる新しい視野を取り入れ、新たなビジョンを示す。エリソンは、普遍的あるいは国家的なイデオロギーに始まり、その限界からの解放に至るまでのさまざまな信念の文化的なタペストリーの中に魅力的な人物像を配置している。本論では、その中の数人についてのみ取り上げる。すべての偉大な芸術家と同様に、エリソンは問いを投げかけ、それに対する可能な回答を提示する。『見えない人間』は、誰もが理解可能な純粋な贖罪を提供しているといえる。

**キーワード:** 贖罪、抑圧、人種分離政策、差別、人種差別主義、国粋主義、契約、ブラックナショナリズム、ジャズ、芸術

### 1. Introduction

*Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?*

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

Ralph Waldo Ellison (1914-94), the African-American writer, will continue to live on in his remarkable influence. Though *Invisible Man*, the only novel Ellison published in his lifetime, focuses on the African-American experience, the view is universal--the ferment created in tension between minority and majority cultures, whether the minorities are racial, religious, political, gender, or those who simply cannot play the game. Ellison is the artist of mass perspectives and the fragility of identity in the constantly changing reality that characterizes the world today.

First published in 1952, *Invisible Man* came just before the crest of America's revolutionary wave of civil rights for minorities. *Brown versus Board of Education* (1954), the Supreme Court ruling desegregating the nation's public schools, was two years away. A year after *Brown*, Rosa Lee Parks (1913-2005), a seamstress on her way home by bus, would be arrested in Montgomery, Alabama for refusing to move from the Whites' Only section. Parks' cautious young pastor, Martin Luther King Jr. (1929-68), was then obliged to lead a bus boycott that would push the Civil Rights Movement along and lift him to international prominence. The US government would also begin to enact: The *Civil Rights Act of 1964* would make it illegal to discriminate racially in jobs, housing, and in the public service industry (restaurants, stores, hotels); *The Civil Rights Act of 1965* would abolish all voter literacy tests; and the Supreme Court would strike down the last state law forbidding marriage between blacks and whites, in *Loving versus Virginia* (1967). The Johnson Administration (1963-68) would also create *Affirmative Action* to help minorities go to college, *Head Start* to help preschool children learn to read, and *Job Corps* to help young men from the inner city gain work skills. Later in the decade race riots would scorch the American landscape, leaving sections of its largest cities burned to the ground.

*Invisible Man* speaks to all these changes and beyond. As all great literature, it suggests questions and possible ways to be human, with the bedrock of certain truths about human life underlying it all. Alienation, disillusionment, fear of abandonment is common to all (though admittedly the oppressors have enjoyed more leisure to contemplate these vexations than the oppressed). All have been traumatized by excessive categorizations or have felt the sting of ready-made constraints based on race, religion, ethnicity, age, gender, or whatever. What can a person do, when after trying most of the available ideologies that will give form to personhood, none seems to fit? Baseball, soccer, and Jazz may remain the same, but everything else is in perpetual flux. The nameless narrator is every man and woman's inner life; his traumas--and repeated personal and social betrayals, are

everyone's traumas. The reader's sympathy is with the hero, of course, one of the most humane and sane voices in modern literature. In the end, *Invisible Man* is on track for redemption. Yet, because all categories are shattered, one is never sure about nature of his redemption. Is it personal, communal, secular, religious, all the above? Readers may find themselves agreeing with the last line of this great work of art, that on the lower frequencies he speaks for us. Below I will touch on only three of the many explorations of the novel: 1) What is race? 2) What is identity? 3) What is redemption?

## 2. What is race?

*When I discover who I am, I'll be free.*

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

Ellison's quote above has been used and overused over the decades, often as a condemnation on society that has prevented self-discovery. Ellison's equation of self-discovery with freedom arises from an altogether different context, however, an hilarious one: the narrator's attempt to regain consciousness in the hospital of Optic White Paint Factory in New York City--his first day on the job--after a boiler exploded in the basement while he and his boss were arguing. The doctors wrote questions on pieces of cardboard as he lay senseless in a glass enclosure where they had administered electrical shock treatment: WHAT IS YOUR NAME? WHAT IS YOUR MOTHER'S NAME? WHO WAS YOUR MOTHER? WHO WAS BUCKEYE THE RABBIT? BOY, WHO WAS BRER RABBIT? These questions resonate in the story: Can a person ever discover who she or he is, based on questions people do not know how to ask, and what does it mean to be either conscious or free?

Ellison said he organized *Invisible Man* as a Jazz composition, which makes plot summary difficult, but I will attempt an overview to consider the few important questions I mentioned above. The novel begins and ends with the narrator in a basement that had been boarded up and abandoned in the nineteenth-century. To entertain himself he has tapped into a nearby electric line to light his one thousand, three hundred and sixty-nine light bulbs, twenty four hours a day, free of charge from Monopolated Light and Power (and this number of bulbs, by his own admission, is only the beginning). He also wants to have five radio-phonographs (at present he only has one), to not only hear, but to feel with his whole body, Louis Armstrong's

“What Did I Do To Be So Black And Blue.” The genius of Louis Armstrong (1901-71) is in making poetry out of the invisible, he tells the reader, since only the musicians can see the music. Invisibility (or chaos) sparks ingenuity, Invisible Man’s message from the beginning. The nameless narrator quickly moves to the story’s central motif, which he said he received in a dreamlike state after smoking a marijuana cigarette:

“Brothers and sisters, my text this morning is the ‘Blackness of Blackness.’”  
 And a congregation of voices answered: “That blackness is most black, brother, most black...”  
 “In the beginning...”  
 “At the very start,” they cried.  
 “...there was blackness...”  
 “Preach it...”  
 “...and the sun...”  
 “The sun, Lawd...”  
 “...was bloody red...”  
 “Red...”  
 “Now black is...” the preacher shouted.  
 “Bloody...”  
 “I said black is...”  
 “Preach it, brother...”  
 “...an’ black ain’t...”  
 “Red, Lawd, red: He said it’s red!”  
 “Amen, brother...”  
 “Black will git you...”  
 “Yes, it will...”  
 “...an’ black won’t...”  
 “Naw, it won’t!”  
 “It do...”  
 “It do, Lawd...”  
 “...an’ it don’t.”  
 “Hallelujah...”  
 “...It’ll put you, glory, glory, Oh my Lawd, in the WHALE’S BELLY.”

Invisible Man is in the whale’s belly, his basement dwelling, and his saga will parallel something of Israel’s eight-century BCE prophet. YHWH (the God of Israel), in the first verse of the book of *Jonah*, commands Jonah to go to Nineveh (near modern-day Baghdad) to convince the non-Hebrew inhabitants to turn from their evil ways. Jonah, though his name means *dove* in Hebrew, is neither peaceful

nor submissive. The second verse says that Jonah did indeed “rise up,” but went in the opposite direction, to Joppa (near today's Tel Aviv), where he paid for passage on a boat bound for Tarshish (probably the farthest known port, near the Straits of Gibraltar) to get away from YHWH. In this test of wills, YHWH sent a storm and the boat’s crew, despairing of their lives, each prayed to his god. The shipmaster had to awaken Jonah, sleeping soundly in the hold, to pray. The crew decided to “cast lots” to see who had brought the misfortune; of course the lot fell on Jonah, who explained that the storm was indeed because of him and asked the crew to throw him overboard. At first the crew refused, out of compassion for Jonah, and tried in vain to row to shore. Finally, after praying to Jonah’s God to forgive them, they threw Jonah into the roaring sea, which immediately calmed. “The LORD provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah; and Jonah remained in the fish’s belly three days and three nights,” begins the second chapter of this short four-chapter story. Jonah’s beautiful poetic praise to YHWH for saving him from the ocean’s torrents, reminiscent of the *Psalms*, fills most of what follows and here we find a jewel of wisdom: “They that observe lying vanities forsake their own mercy.”

*Invisible Man* is partly an exploration of what is or what is not a lying vanity. All ideals, when used for one's own selfish advantage, can become vanities. Jonah’s anguish at the end stems from a mixture of feeling useless after fulfilling his mission and disgust for the inhabitants, who respond to his message (everyone, including the cattle, repents in sackcloth with fasting); this moved YHWH:

*God saw what they did, how they were turning back from their evil ways. And God renounced the punishment He had planned to bring upon them, and did not carry it out.*

Jonah, no longer wanting to live, built a booth or shed outside the city, where a plant (the King James Bible says "a gourd") shaded him from the scorching sun. This cheered Jonah up for a while, but the plant or gourd, withering after eaten by a worm, returned him to a state of utter despair. YHWH then charged the forlorn prophet to look a bit higher, in the final verse of this delightful story:

*Then the LORD said: “You cared about the plant, which you did not work for and which you did not grow, which appeared overnight and perished overnight. And should not I care about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand*

*persons who do not yet know their right hand from their left, and man and beasts as well.*

Most of the novel, therefore, takes place with Invisible Man splashing around in the ocean--urban America--before he lands in the basement. In Ellison's scheme, minority groups (here African-Americans) are the chosen people--keepers of the covenant, who are irritated over YHWH's calling to convey certain truths. If Invisible Man is in the whale's belly, where in the novel is the voice of YHWH? Readers listen for YHWH, who first spoke through his paternal grandfather, a former slave, on his deathbed, exhorting Invisible Man's father:

Son, after I'm gone I want you to keep up the good fight. I never told you, but our lives is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open.... Learn it to the younguns.

This shocked Invisible Man's parents. Thinking the old man had gone insane, they warned their children never to speak of it. The grandfather's exhortation was for negation: *Never allow them and their ways to become your reality.* The conflict is won by attrition through forced insincerity toward the dominant culture. It was not a message to change anything or bring anyone to repentance, as the Civil Rights Movement would become. Nor is there any ideal--or illusion--that the two cultures, white and black, could ever join on equal terms with mutual respect and understanding. Keep hating them in this war, but do not show it; destroy them by agreeing them to death. They may swallow you, as the whale swallowed Jonah, but that will destroy them in the end. Though this is the first time YHWH speaks, the reader understands that YHWH's message is progressive, with the grandfather's words as one piece of a revelation that culminates in Invisible Man's own prophetic vocation.

Like Jonah before him, Invisible Man bolted, seen in his search for substitute father figures, each (and I count five) making his own claim on Invisible Man's inner life. The father figures are false prophets. Since everyone he meets had internalized Nineveh's (mainstream's) fluid and superficial values, none can really care anything about him. After he gave a well-received speech at his high school graduation, the white male elite of his Southern town invited Invisible Man to speak

at a horrifying racist extravaganza, “The Battle Royal,” where fighting black boys were featured as entertainment while a young naked white woman danced on stage (this extravaganza reflects real events in the American South in times past). At the finale, and to an inattentive audience, Invisible Man gives a ludicrously naive speech on race relations, yet even here he unwittingly follows his grandfather’s advice, to “overcome them with yeses”:

“We of the younger generation extol the wisdom of that great leader and educator,” I shouted, “who first spoke these flaming words of wisdom: A ship lost at sea for many days suddenly sighted a friendly vessel. From the mast of the unfortunate vessel was seen a signal: 'Water, water; we die of thirst!' The answer from the friendly vessel came back: 'Cast down your bucket where you are.' The captain of the distressed vessel, at last heeding the injunction, cast down his bucket, and it came up full of fresh sparkling water from the mouth of the Amazon River. And like him I say, in his words, ‘To those of my race who depend upon bettering their condition in a foreign land, or who underestimate the importance of cultivating friendly relations with the Southern white man, who is his next-door neighbor, I would say: “Cast down your bucket where you are--cast it down in making friends in every manly way of the people of all races by whom we are surrounded...””

The white male elite, pleased the young man knew his place, gave Invisible Man a new leather briefcase and a scholarship to a Southern black college, where he internalized all the noble social values of the college’s founder for African-Americans to live up to white mainstream expectations:

I believed in the principles of the Founder with all my heart and soul, the hand of his benevolence to helping us poor, ignorant people out of the mire and darkness. I would do his bidding and teach others to rise up as he wished them to, to teach them to be thrifty, decent, upright citizens, contributing to the welfare of all, shunning all but the straight and narrow path that...the Founder had stretched before us.

After Invisible Man finished third year at college, Dr. Bledsoe, the African-American president of the college (and his first father figure), asked him to chauffeur Mr. Norton, one of the rich white trustees, on a short sightseeing trip of the countryside. Stopping by an old cabin Mr. Norton was curious about, they met the owner, Jim Trueblood, a sharecropper who had disgraced the black community by fathering a child on his daughter (through no fault of his own, as Trueblood explains

in great detail). Utterly horrified by the story, Mr. Norton, now half-conscious, asked for whiskey and Invisible Man drove him to the Golden Day, a local bar and brothel, where a group of mentally ill African-American veterans were enjoying a day outing with the Veterans' Hospital staff. Here, through a nameless veteran, YHWH created the storm:

"You see," he (the nameless veteran) said turning to Mr. Norton," he (Invisible Man) has eyes and ears and a good distended African nose, but he fails to understand the simple facts of life. *Understand*. Understand? It's worse than that.... Already he's learned to repress not only his emotions but his humanity. He's invisible, a walking personification of the Negative, the most perfect achievement of your dreams, sir! The mechanical man!"

Mr. Norton stood abruptly. "Let us go, young man," he said angrily.

"No, listen. He believes in you as he believes in the beat of his heart. He believes in that great false wisdom taught slaves and pragmatists alike, that white is right. I can tell you *his* destiny. He'll do your bidding, and for that his blindness is his chief asset. He's your man, friend. Your man and your destiny..."

The mariners who reluctantly threw Jonah overboard were much kinder than Dr. Bledsoe, whose motives for expelling Invisible Man are mixed: from fear of the truth, to thwart Invisible Man's sincere ambitions, to teach him a the hard lessons from life on his own, or from sheer meanness. The next morning, the dejected Invisible Man boarded a bus for New York City and found the nameless veteran on the bus too, on his way to Washington D. C.'s Saint Elizabeth's Hospital, transferred at Bledsoe's behest. The veteran's second message is prophetic, more in harmony with his grandfather's, but with a twist:

"Come out of the fog, young man. And remember you don't have to be a complete fool in order to succeed. Play the game, but don't believe in it--that much you owe yourself. Even if it lands you in a strait jacket or a padded cell. Play the game, but play it your own way--part of the time at least. Play the game, but raise the ante, my boy. Learn how it operates, learn how *you* operate.... You might even beat the game.... You're hidden right out in the open..."

"Now is the time for offering fatherly advice," he said, "but I'll have to spare you that--since I guess I'm nobody's father except my own. Perhaps that's



the advice to give you: Be your own father, young man. And remember, the world is possibility if only you'll discover it."

The veteran's advice is a mixture of Buddhist wisdom and Emersonian self-reliance: 1) do not look outside yourself for any answers; 2) and you already have all you need (invisibility) to save yourself. He also expounds on the grandfather's meaning to "overcome 'em with yeses" as playing the game for your own advantage without the game becoming your reality. Invisibility, then, is self-generated transformation: to become the creator of yourself, to be your own father. Though Invisible Man's prophetic mission *may* give birth to a new social vision eventually, he will become his own father, however reluctantly.

Invisible Man arrived in New York City with Bledsoe's letters of recommendation, ostensibly asking some of the college's trustees to give him a summer job to save enough to finish his last year of college. Invisible Man wondered, after delivering six of the seven letters, why none of the trustees had responded. With only one more letter and his despair increasing, he made an appointment to see Mr. Emerson, the final white board member. Emerson's son, out of seeming compassion that Invisible Man later interpreted as deliberate cruelty, showed him Bledsoe's recommendation:

My dear Mr. Emerson:

The bearer of this letter is a former student of ours (I say *former* because he shall never, under any circumstances, be enrolled as a student here again) who has been expelled for a most serious defection from our strictest rules of deportment....

This case represents, my dear Mr. Emerson, one of the rare, delicate instances in which one for whom we held great expectations has gone grievously astray... Thus, while the bearer is no longer a member of our scholastic family, it is highly important that his severance with the college be executed as painlessly as possible. I beg of you, sir, to help him continue in the direction of that promise which, like the horizon, recedes ever brightly and distantly beyond the hopeful traveler.

Respectfully, I am your  
humble servant,

A. Hebert Bledsoe

Invisible Man's grandfather had earlier prophesied his downfall in a dream, where in his leather briefcase given by the Southern whites he found a large envelope; inside was another letter and on and on, like a Russian doll set, with his grandfather saying, "Them's years." The final letter, engraved in gold letters, read: "To Whom It May Concern. Keep This Nigger-Boy Running."

### 3. What is identity?

Invisible Man, listless for months after his discharge from the Optic White Paint Factory hospital from a head injury, has rented a room from Mary, a kind-hearted woman in Harlem. One evening while out for a walk he stumbles on the eviction of an elderly African-American couple. A large, angry crowd gathers as the eviction officers put their belongings on the street. Invisible Man intervenes with a captivating speech, temporarily halting the crowd from attacking the eviction officers. A riot still breaks out, but he impressed members of the local Brotherhood. One of the white leaders, Brother Jack, ran after the fleeing Invisible Man to recruit him as a spokesperson; at a coffee shop Brother Jack expounded some of the Brotherhood's ideology:

"The old ones, they're agrarian types, you know.... History has passed them by. Unfortunate but there's nothing to do about them. They're like dead limbs that must be pruned away so that the tree may bear young fruit or the storms of history will blow them down anyway..."

"But look---But I *like* them," I said. "I like them... they're folks just like me, except that I've been to school a few years."

He wagged his round red head. "Oh, no, brother; you're mistaken and you're sentimental. You're not like them. Perhaps you were, but you're not any longer. Otherwise you'd never have made that speech.... You might not recognize it just now, but that part of you is dead! You have not completely shed that self, that old agrarian self, but it's dead and you will throw it off completely and emerge something new. *History* has been born in your brain."

The Brotherhood, an eerie organization, is mainstream's rationalistic tendencies. Minorities, often objects of its research (and oppression), understand this subtle web more than most. Though the Brotherhood is a more extreme representation, a parody of a socialist philosophy, it also pantomimes the thinking

patterns that saturate modern life (in education, government, business, and jurisprudence). Everyone, to some degree, is part of it, plugged into the global village. The reader also realizes how half-baked mass assumptions derived from science (pseudo), now secularism's oracle of Delphi, become sacred truths.

Ellison's Brotherhood occupies a central place in the novel (more than half). Believing he has found a home in this sophisticated world of precision in comprehending all aspects of life, Invisible Man has in reality found Nineveh. While Jonah despised Nineveh's inhabitants, Invisible Man is attracted to them--their rhetorical maze of illusion. At first glance, Jonah's flight seems a flight from responsibility, from YHWH's purposes. Yet, Jonah sailed away with a mixed crew, each praying to his god, so his flight is also from the shared meaning, history, and traditions of his own people. Jonah, in short, was running from himself. Just how far Invisible Man can run from himself is a central question. How much can a person change and what is the price of such a change?

Thrilled he has a place in "history" among "some of the best minds in the country," he accepts his new name (which the reader never knows) and, after an indoctrination period, a leadership position in Harlem. None of Invisible Man's evolving realizations are untrue. All his insights are genuine, yet all are incomplete. Below he reflects on his good fortune, to transcend his own race:

I thought of Bledsoe and Norton and what they had done. By kicking me into the dark they'd made me see the possibility of achieving something greater and more important than I'd ever dreamed... For the first time, lying there in the dark, I could glimpse the possibility of being more than a member of a race.

#### **a. Sacrificing for the whole**

James Baldwin (1924-1987), the African-American essayist, wrote: "Race is a political rather than personal or human." If race indeed is political, why is it political and what are the underlying motives behind the politics? This question goes to the heart of group-egoism, as Sigmund Freud (1921) pointed out, reflected in the various forms of slavery and genocide throughout human history. Predictably, the Brotherhood, even as it denied that race had any reality in its march to a new age, revealed a mind-set that sanctioned racial attitudes. From Brother Hambro, a white lawyer and the Brotherhood's chief theoretician (all real leadership roles in the

Brotherhood are held by white intellectuals), Invisible Man finally saw something of the Brotherhood's sinister motives:

"...It's unfortunate, Brother, but your members (the African-American Harlem members) will have to be sacrificed...."

"Sacrificed?" my voice said. "You say that very easily.... But shouldn't sacrifice be made willingly by those who know what they are doing?"

He shrugged. "Change is achieved through sacrifice. We follow the laws of reality, so we make sacrifices."

"So the weak must sacrifice for the strong? Is that it, Brother?"

"No, a part of the whole is sacrificed--and will continue to be until a new society is formed.... That it's impossible *not* to take advantage of people.... The trick is to take advantage of them in their own best interests."

I sat forward in my chair, suddenly conscious of the unreality of the conversation. "But who is to judge? Jack? The committee?"

"We judge through scientific objectivity," he said with a voice that had a smile in it.... "We're scientists. We must take the risks of our science and our will to achieve. Would you like to resurrect God to take responsibility?" He shook his head. "No, Brother, we have to make such decisions ourselves. Even if we must sometimes appear as charlatans.... At the proper moment science will stop us..."

What we call "racism," Invisible Man began to comprehend, is the surrendering of one group on behalf of the dominant culture, to shore up majority cohesion. Every culture, with its unique language of good and evil as Friedrich Nietzsche (1885) pointed out, is an anchor to prevent the loss of identity, memory, and meaning. The language of patriotism--the oaths, salutes, pledges, uniforms, flags, anthems, statues, monuments, ideals of sacrifice to preserve a way of life--is just one of its manifestations. Citizens hope they have some choice in the sacrifices they make, but those enslaved and segregated have no choice. At first dazzled by the Brotherhood's slick philosophy that opened a new way of thinking, Invisible Man learned a bitter lesson in on the subtleties of majority domination; he also learned an important lesson about himself: he could not sacrifice the weak (members of his race) for the Brotherhood.

Sacrifice and leadership, I thought. For him it was simple. For *them* it was simple. But hell, I was both. Both sacrificer and victim. I couldn't get away from that, and Hambro didn't have to put the knife blade to his own throat. What would he say if *he* were the victim?

Like his grandfather, Invisible Man had been a spy for the enemy's camp. Though still with many questions, Invisible Man is released from the Brotherhood's scientism that skewered all reference points. He is ready to take a giant step toward his prophetic vocation.

## **b. Race politics**

Invisible Man is never tempted by racial ideologies, preferring instead the sophistication, orderliness, certainties, even the "otherness" of the Brotherhood, which for a time takes him outside himself. Black nationalism is everywhere in Harlem, however, from Marcus Garvey's (1887-1940) earlier stint. On the day he arrived in Harlem, Invisible Man heard "Ras the Exhorter" preaching a fiery message on black unity. After joining the Brotherhood, he found that Ras is its mortal enemy. Ras was more popular than the Brotherhood until Invisible Man's speech at the eviction that brought in a flood of new black members. Originally from the Caribbean, as was Garvey, Ras is bewildered why any black-Americans could join the Brotherhood:

"Why you with these white folks? Why? "You my brother, mahn. Brothers are the same color; how the hell you call these white men *brother*? ...We son of Mama Africa, you done forgot? You black, BLACK! ...You got bahd *hair*! You got thick *lips*! They say you *stink*! They hate you, mahn. You African. AFRICAN! Why you with them?

"...I ask both of you (Invisible Man and Clifton, a black youth leader), are you awake or sleeping? What is your pahst and where are you going? Never mind, take your corrupt ideology and eat out your own guts like a laughing hyena.... No! Ras, he be here black and fighting for the liberty of the black people when the white folks have got what they wahnt and done gone off laughing in your face and you stinking and choked up with white maggots."

Ras' insights are both true and incomplete, as all insights in the novel are. What is race and what does it mean to have a racial designation? Invisible Man is

clear about his ambivalence in the beginning: “Black will git you... an’ black won’t... It do... an’ it don’t.” Race may put you in the whale’s belly, but what else can it do? “Blackness” finally catches up with Ras the Exhorter, who becomes Ras the Destroyer during a riot that nearly destroys Harlem. Dressed in African garb, and riding an old white milk-wagon horse, Ras successfully takes on the riot police with only a spear and shield, maneuvering his horse around the stunned officers. Ras wants to kill Invisible Man, even as Invisible Man tried to reason with him:

“They (the Brotherhood) want this to happen,” I said. “They planned it. They want the mobs to come uptown with machine guns and rifles. They want the streets to flow with blood; your blood, black blood and white blood, so that they can turn your death and sorrow and defeat into propaganda.... It goes, ‘Use a nigger to catch a nigger.’ Well, they used me to catch you and now they’re using Ras to do away with me and to prepare your sacrifice. Don’t you see it? Isn’t it clear...?”

“Hang the lying traitor,” Ras shouted. “What are you waiting for?”

...And that I, a little black man with an assumed name should die because a big black man in his hatred and confusion over the nature of a reality that seemed controlled solely by white men whom I knew to be as blind as he, was just too much, too outrageously absurd. And I knew that it was better to live out one’s own absurdity than to die for that of others, whether for Ras’s or Jack’s.

Ras threw his spear, just missing Invisible Man, who tossed it back, piercing Ras through both cheeks, as in an African religious rite. Ras’ followers chased Invisible Man, who fell into the basement, the place where race has finally put him--the whale’s belly.

### **c. The great Rinehart**

Before the riot, and after his disillusionment with the Brotherhood, Invisible Man was forced to avoid Ras’ thugs. To disguise himself, he put on a white hat and sunglasses and was mistaken for “Rinehart,” a person he never meets. Rinehart knows people everywhere, from every walk of life, both black and white: policemen, businessmen, prostitutes, gamblers, hit men, gang members, drug-peddlers, even pious Christians, who adore their Reverend. Invisible Man later found Reverend Rinehart’s leaflet:

Behold the Invisible  
 Thy will be done O Lord!  
 I See all, Know all, Tell all, Cure all.  
 You shall see the unknown wonders.  
 --REV. B. P. Rinehart,  
 Spiritual Technologist.

The old is ever new  
 Way Stations in New Orleans, the home of mystery,  
 Birmingham, New York, Chicago, Detroit, and L.A.

No problem too Hard for God.

Come to the Way Station.

BEHOLD THE INVISIBLE!  
 Attend our services, prayer meetings Thrice weekly  
 Join us in the NEW REVELATION of the OLD  
 TIME RELIGION!  
 BEHOLD THE SEEN UNSEEN  
 BEHOLD THE INVISIBLE  
 YE WHO ARE WEARY COME HOME!  
 I DO WHAT YOU WANT DONE! DON'T WAIT!

With Rinehart as his epiphany, Invisible Man contemplated himself outside any fixed identity, in a transcendent place, beyond even the Brotherhood's skewed universalism that purportedly transcended race:

It was too much for me. I removed my glasses and tucked the white hat carefully beneath my arm and walked away. Can it be, I thought, can it actually be? And I knew that it was. I had heard of it before but I'd never come so close. Still, 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? Could he himself be both rind and heart? What is real anyway? But how could I doubt it? He was a broad man, a man of parts who got around. Rinehart the rounder. It was true as I was true. His world was possibility and he knew it. He was years ahead of me and I was a fool.... The world in which we lived was without boundaries. A vast seething, hot world of fluidity, and Rine the rascal was at home. Perhaps *only* Rine the rascal was at home in it. It was unbelievable, but perhaps only the unbelievable could be believed. Perhaps the truth is always a lie.

Invisible Man found a personification of what his grandfather and the nameless veteran had spoken of, a modern-day Jonah who had learned YHWH's hard lessons of life without divisions. Rinehart was choking them to death with "yeses" and he was his own father, a self-generated man beating the other side at their own game, even raising the ante. As a parody of Saint Paul, who was "all things to all men," Rinehart manifested some terrifying possibilities. Few could transmute themselves daily into so many different personalities unless absolute necessity pushed them, but necessity had not pushed Rinehart. Chaotic modern life may appear to keep the lid on forces that bubble from a deeper place, but only a metamorphic person like Rinehart, who lifted the lid, could experience the possibilities. The lie was the truth, just as Franz Kafka's riddles showed how the opposite of what one expected to be true. In Rinehart, audacity overcame all determinisms, even the powerful and potent racial determinism. The African-American poet Zora Neale Hurston (1903-60), *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942), also shed light on Invisible Man's evolving insight:

Now you've been told, so you ought to know. But maybe, after all the Negro doesn't really exist. What we think is a race is detached moods and phases of other people walking around. What we have been talking about might not exist at all. Could be the shade patterns or something else thrown on the ground--other folks, seen in shadow. And even if we do exist it's all an accident anyway. God made everybody else's color. We took ours by mistake. The way the old folks tell it, it was like this...

#### **4. What is redemption?**

*They who cling to empty folly forsake their own welfare.*

--*Jonah 2:9*

The book of *Jonah*, a story of a prophet who redeemed a city but whose own redemption remained equivocal, haunts American apocalyptic literature--or literature that forecasts a national future (Bloom 2000). After YHWH gave Jonah a stern admonition to wake up and look a little beyond himself, we are left only to imagine Jonah's response, since the story ends with YHWH's admonition. I suggest, given his temperament, only a fifty/fifty chance exists that Jonah responded positively. YHWH had become too much of a nuisance, first by sending him on a mission he did



not believe in and then by expecting Jonah to appreciate the great work of redemption. The supreme irony is that Nineveh so whole-heartedly repented, with only the half-hearted Jonah preaching. Is redemption for the prophet only one of perspective, to look at life and YHWH's purposes differently? The question the reader asks Invisible Man: Will his message only be a transformation of perspective?

Ishmael in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1865) is another Invisible Man (Ishmael may not be his real name; he only *asks* us to call him Ismael). Before the *Pequod* set sail, Ishmael attended a church service in New Bedford, Massachusetts where Father Maple gave a sermon from the book of *Jonah*:

“...and vomited out Jonah upon the dry land,” when the word of the Lord came a second time; and Jonah, bruised and beaten--his ears, like two sea-shells, still multitudinously murmuring of the ocean--Jonah did the Almighty's bidding. And what was that shipmates? To preach the Truth to the face of Falsehood! That was it!

“This, shipmates, this is that other lesson; and woe to that pilot of the living God who slights it. Woe to him whom this world charms from Gospel duty! Woe to him who would not be true, even though to be false were salvation! Yea, woe to him who, as the great Pilot Paul has it, while preaching to others is himself a castaway!”

Father Maple brought out a central truth from *Jonah*: the message, itself divine, has a life of its own, and those who carry it may be castaways even as those who receive it are transformed. Is this not also part of America's experience, as a preacher of equality without equality as a social reality? Ishmael is the lone survivor of the *Pequod*. Rescued by *The Rachel*, whose captain was searching for his son after Moby Dick's rampage, Ishmael had held on to Queequeg's (his dear cannibal shipmate from the South Pacific) coffin, floating in the vast ocean. Ishmael, the castaway, had prophesied America's future--its mixed blessing to all other nations, of its unrealized ideal of equality. Jesus of Nazareth, offering his own identification with Jonah, said fundamental realities would change, though the “signs” of this change are not what one expects:

Then certain of the scribes and of the Pharisees answered, saying, “Master, we would see a sign from thee.” But he answered and said unto them, “An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet, Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so shall the Son of man be three days

and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh shall rise in judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah...”

The signs, of course, are the scientific proofs Jesus will never offer. YHWH is in opposition to Nineveh and The Brotherhood and does not enter its fluid objectivity; its scientism has excluded YHWH, as J. H. van den Berg (1964) pointed out:

...God has been removed from reality so thoroughly that it is impossible for Him to appear. If within this conception of nature God is still expected to appear, it will have to be assumed that He can appear as a physical fact among other physical facts.... For in the first place, reality--has been reduced to a system of scientific facts; this means that God has been removed from this reality. And in the second place, if He is then, after all, requested to reappear in this reality, which has become foreign to Him, in the shape of an “objective” fact among other “objective” facts, then this means that God dies.

After spending three days and three nights in the whale’s belly, Jesus was confident of a resurrection. Invisible Man, as he waited for a resurrection (in whatever form), returned to YHWH’s original voice, from his grandfather, to mull over the meaning of it all, and began to see the sweep of American history in a remarkably positive light:

Did the man (his grandfather) say, “yes” because he knew that the principle was greater than the men, greater than the numbers and the vicious power and all the methods used to corrupt its name? Did he mean to affirm the principle, which they themselves had dreamed into being out of the chaos and darkness of the feudal past, and which they had violated and compromised to the point of absurdity even in their own corrupt minds? Or did he mean that we had to take the responsibility for all of it, for the men as well as the principle because no other fitted our needs? Not for the power or for vindication, but because we, with the given circumstances of our origin, could only thus find transcendence?

Principles are invisible, similar to the covenants between YHWH and his people, the Mosaic or the Messianic. The great political covenant, the Constitution, has been broken by every American generation, again and again, but from the people it was broken over is YHWH’s message, because the message always comes from the downtrodden. Invisible Man--as Jonah, Jesus, and Ishmael before him--still must

preach his message and it will be one of transcendence. Yet, in contrast to the others, including America itself, Invisible Man will experience redemption *before* he preaches; this will ensure he is not a castaway. He knows more than he will tell, and we have to step far back to begin to consider how great or how obvious his message is.

Ralph Ellison knew the book of *Jonah* is read on Yom Kippur, Judaism's Day of Atonement, an ancient observance that may predate even the First Temple period (950 BCE to 587 BCE). Though Christian redemption finds its origins here, it differs greatly in its meaning and application in a ritual that requires a personal identification. Yom Kippur comes ten days after Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. Observant Jews neither eat nor drink for one full day (twenty-five hours). The Kol Nidray, sung on the evening of Yom Kippur, is a release from all the promises one has made to oneself and to others that could not be kept, a recognition of human limitations, the anguish of desiring to follow one's good intentions yet falling short. The book of *Jonah* is read the following afternoon. Yom Kippur, then, is a purging or cleansing before renewal, a release from previous failures in order to embrace new responsibilities and possibilities.

Invisible Man, emptying out before regeneration, remembers two statements by Louis Armstrong: "Open the window and let the foul air out" and "It was good green corn before the harvest." But Armstrong would never let the foul air out, he tells the readers, because it would have broken up the music and dancing. The foul air, then, is the creation of meaning out of chaos, "tohu-wa-bohu," Hebrew for *unformed and void*, from which God created the world (Genesis 1:3):

*When God began to create heaven and earth--the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water--God said...*

If Invisible Man becomes his own father, the nameless veteran's advice, then it remains a potential for everyone, and the message is the person. Even if the corn is good and green, the harvest will definitely come. Invisible Man has not quite matured in his new being, but it is forming, from a wind from God. Like Jonah and Jesus of Nazareth, Invisible Man does not expect very much: Jonah did not think Nineveh would change and Jesus, while certain of his resurrection, believed only a remnant would know the truth.

## 5. Conclusion

What will happen next? Some critics say *Invisible Man* will never come out of the whale's belly because he lacks a political ideology or a Mother Muse to pull him out--he is too traumatized to leave on his own--but I think this underestimates one of the most intelligent characters in literature. Others may say *Invisible Man* is humanity's destiny of absolute solitude, alone with the stimulation of technology: his 1,369 light bulbs and five phonographs--the nineteen-fifties' versions of the iPhone, DVD, and World-Wide-Web. This is equality that has no meaning, with people identified not by race but by web addresses and credit card numbers, absolute in their privacy. *Invisible Man* envisions more than that.

If Ellison's truths are harder (and they are), and a person can only find herself or himself after labored distancing from social phantoms, then how does this distancing come about? Is it only through multiple traumas that one is dislodged from "lying vanities?" If so, the only place *Invisible Man* could be is in the whale's belly in order to regenerate. What if *Invisible Man* had found a place in Bledsoe's college administration, in the Brotherhood, with Ras the Exhorter, or in the myriad of the other possible "homes" in the novel? *Invisible Man*, then, would be like most of us as we wander through life. Does it take a trauma to wake us up? Ellison suggests that YHWH is in the storm.

Despite some of its hard truths, Ralph Ellison's novel is profoundly encouraging and humanistic: A spiritual place in this world exists for everyone, an interior home free of all storms. If redemption is personal, then it is certainly not ideological. Yet redemption does not have to be apolitical. It all depends on what one makes of any spiritual triumphs. After all, Jonah redeemed an entire city without knowing how. We know the contours of his message and it has to do with the "lower frequencies." *Invisible Man* will not become another Rinehart, nor will he ask anyone else to either, but his own personhood may become an art. Louis Armstrong raised Jazz to an art, America's only original art, through the force of his personality. Can an aesthetic vision be redemptive? We could become more fully human, as *Invisible Man* will, if only we knew his secret for unlocking the lower frequencies.

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