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MAGIC AND THE PRESTIGE IN RALPH ELLISON'S
INVISIBLE MAN

Abstract: *Invisible Man* is a theatrical novel. *Invisible Man* is an American novel, about the American experience. An experience, Ellison instructs, “in which the possibilities are many”. Specifically, *Invisible Man* is a novel about what becomes *possible* when the line between appearance and reality becomes blurred, and all that is left is the “mask” of reality, codified by ritualistic acts of concealing and revealing the “joke” of the present. In other words, *Invisible Man* is not so much about “race,” “racial authenticity,” “democratic equality,” “marginalization,” or the existential claims to *the lived experience of being black*. Ostensibly, it has these elements, but they are all mere ruses for something else, for the “joke” of these. And, by direct indirection, Ellison is telling us something about the manner, method, mode and articulation/disarticulation—that is, deployment—of the “joke” in the “theater of appearances” that is America. The novel is, in short, an examination of “what was really happening when your eyes were looking through”. In this sense of the “joke,” of the play between appearance and reality in the presence of the mask and its theatricality, *Invisible Man* is a novel that at its heart is concerned with *magic*.

Keywords: Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, theatrical/secular magic, Existentialism, Ritual, Masking, Race

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МАГИЯ И ПРЕСТИЖ В РОМАНЕ РАЛЬФА ЭЛЛИСОНА
«НЕВИДИМКА»

Аннотация: «Невидимка» – театральный роман. «Невидимка» – роман американский и об американском опыте, «возможности которого многочисленны», как учит нас Эллисон. Точнее, «Невидимка» – роман о том, что становится *возможным*, когда размываются границы между видимостью и реальностью, и от реальности остается лишь «маска», обусловленная ритуальными действиями сокрытия и разоблачения «шутки» настоящего. Иными словами, в «Невидимке» на первом месте не «раса», «подлинность расы», «демократическое равенство», «маргинализация» или экзистенциальная заявка на то, чтобы изобразить *переживание опыта своей принадлежности к чернокожим*. Очевидно, все эти элементы присутствуют, но это лишь уловки, за которыми стоит что-то еще, раскрывающее «шуточный» смысл всего вышеперечисленного. И прямым намеком Эллисон говорит нам нечто о характере, методе, природе и рождении/вырождении – то есть разворачивании – этой «шутки» в «театре иллюзий», который представляет собой Америка. Коротко говоря, роман рассказывает, «что происходило на самом деле, пока вы смотрели в другую сторону». Если говорить о «шутке», об игре на границе видимого и реального, скрытого под маской, и о театральности, «Невидимка» – роман, ключевая роль в котором отводится *магии*.

Ключевые слова: Ральф Эллисон, «Невидимка», театральная/секулярная магия, экзистенциализм, ритуал, маска, раса

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just because you
cant see d stone dont
mean im not building.

you aint no mason. how
d fuck would you know

—Ishmael Reed, “dragon’s blood”

“Could we,” I said, “somehow contrive one of those lies that come into being in case of need of which we were just now speaking, some on noble lie to persuade, in the best case, even the rulers, but if not them, the rest of the city?”

“What sort of a thing?” he said.

“Nothing new,” I said, “but a Phoenician thing which has already happened in many places before, as the poets assert and have caused others to believe, but one that has not happened in our time—and I don’t know if it could—one that requires a great deal of persuasion.”

“How like a man who’s hesitant to speak you are,” he said.

“You’ll think my hesitation quite appropriate, too,” I said, “when I do speak.”

“Speak,” he said, “and don’t be afraid.”

—Plato, *Republic* (414b-c)

Introduction— Theatrical Magic and ‘Real’ Magic

I knew that I was composing a work of fiction, a work of literary art and one that would allow me to take advantage of the novel’s capacity for telling the truth while actually telling a “lie,” which is the Afro-American folk term for an improvised story.

—Ralph Ellison, “Introduction,” *Invisible Man*

We are trading and 'tanning' the explorers... 'to tan', to put on, to give, to haze, as it were, through physical or mental testing. 'The explorers,' those who are not indigenous to a region or an area, those who wander, and through their wandering, come to look upon themselves as 'wanderers' (and extol this as a virtue). We are 'tanning' the explorers, and we do so by 'trading' ourselves.

Invisible Man is a theatrical novel. Ellison himself has gone as far to say, “When American life is most American it is apt to be *theatrical*.”¹ *Invisible Man* is an American novel, about the American experience. An experience, Ellison instructs, “in which the possibilities are many” [Ellison 2003: 108]. Specifically, *Invisible Man* is a novel about what becomes *possible* when the line between appearance and reality—“between the discontinuity of social tradition and that sense of the past which clings to the mind”—becomes blurred, and all that is left is the “mask” of reality, codified by ritualistic acts of concealing and revealing the “joke” of the present [Ellison 2003: 107]. In other words, *Invisible Man* is not so much about “race,” “racial authenticity,” “democratic equality,” “marginalization,” or the existential claims to *the lived experience of being black*. Ostensibly, it has these elements, but they are all mere ruses for something else, for the “joke” of these. And, by indirection, Ellison is telling us something about the manner, method, mode, articulation and disarticulation of the “joke” in the “theater of appearances” that is America. It is, in short, an examination of “what was really happening when your eyes were looking through”.

In this sense of the “joke,” of the play between appearance and reality in the presence of the mask and its theatricality, *Invisible Man* is a novel that at its heart is concerned with *magic*.

Straightaway, it is important to make clear just what sort of “magic” is being referred to here. In his introductory comments to *Modern Enchantments: The Cultural Power of Secular Magic*, Simon During offers us helpful clarification on the concept of “magic”. During writes,

The magic I mean is not the magic of witches or Siberian shamans—not, in other words, what one writer on the subject of the occult calls “real and potent magic”—but rather the technically produced magic of conjuring shows and special effects. This magic, which stakes no serious claim to contact with the supernatural, I will call “secular magic” [During 2001: 1].

¹ Ellison, Ralph. “Change the Joke, Slip the Yoke.” [Ellison 2003: 108].

The concept of “conjuring” introduced within During’s explanation will be instructive later. For now, thinking of *Invisible Man* as a work of “secular magic” helps us to understand just what occurs within the American landscape—its masking, its theatricality, its concealing as a manner and mode revealing.

It is important to get a few things clear about “magic” before we continue. Firstly, it must be noted that what is being referred to is not a specific form of “magic” (card tricks, sawing a woman in half, flying in the air, etc.), but the specific “act of theatrical magic” as the exchange between performer and audience—it is a certain contract enacted by the ritual of the show. There are certain parameters, certain expectations which constitute, in short, a social/cultural reality within this space/time. It is also important to note, as Darwin Ortiz does, that the magic act, though theatrical, is not “simply about deceiving. It’s about creating an illusion, the illusion of impossibility” [Ortiz 2006: 15]. What Ortiz means is that the magical act is not one in which the viewing audience actually *thinks* something metaphysical has occurred—we would, then, be in the realm of the occult—but a space, an exchange in which the audience knows what they have witnessed is a trick in that is not possible, yet they have experienced it *as possible*.

The exchange between the magician and the audience is one of antinomic phenomenal experience—an experience of the impossible *as possible*—which is only possible within the active relation between the two: the audience has to actively *not* suspend their belief in reality (no one can actually make a coin disappear or actually saw a woman in half and put her back together) for the suspension of belief would break the exchange and the magic act, and the antinomic phenomenal experience would end. Additionally, the magician must not break the ruse by showing his hand by disclosing the nature of the trick itself. What is important in the exchange is not only the continuance of belief, but its continuance within the experience of rupture (of “normal” human reality).

The “reader,” here is the audience, and must understand that, for Ellison, what occurs in the American landscape are not merely random “events”, but *scripted* moments of *exchange*. In the context of novel, these “moments,” too, are scripted and not necessarily to be followed in terms of “journey,” but truths to be discovered within the confines of a narrative. In either case, what we are to discover along the way in these scripted moments are the ways in which there is both “trading” and “tanning”.

What is important for the novel generally and for black existentialism, specifically, are the questions: “what exactly is being concealed?”, “what

is being revealed?”, “what is being “traded””, “who is being “tanned” in the exchange?” And, “just what *is* the “joke”?” These questions, for Ellison, are answered in the exchange between the audience and the performer, reader and novelist, on the stage of the ritual that is social order: Americans “trade” and “tan” one another from within the specific modes of social/cultural exchange—“race,” “racial authenticity,” “democratic equality,” “marginalization,” and the *lived experience* of being black. It is what the “black” performer or the writer *shows* and what he *conceals*, it is the fact that “white” Americans *know* this—that something is being shown, and something else concealed—are consciously aware of it, and it is in this awareness that the stage is set for the theatrical magic act to be consummated: sometimes the “black” appears as a *Negro*—erudite, refined, middle-class, lawful, true-believer, virtuous—and sometimes as a *Nigger*—malcontent, and in vast and infinite possibility for aggression, violence, chaos, sexual assault, and lawlessness. At its height of theatricality, both the *Negro* and the *Nigger* show up in the *same person*, in the same performer! (One can think of the multiple figures of Bill Cosby appearing simultaneously and the chaos that ensued to get a quick idea of this.)

The “black” performer/writer manifests himself as a folkloric legend, entertainer, bawdy liar, the vaudeville performer, Great Agitator, Great Integrator, misguided true believer, Historical Actor, trickster, magician... musician—bluesman, jazz man, band leader—Afro-American, African-American, black American, citizen-equal, brother-builder-partner of the Nation. The “black” performer is *all* of these; the “black” performer is *none* of these. What he is, though, is always counted on for infinite pliability and infinite possibility in his capacity to forgive all-the-while both the performer and the audience knows, relies on the fact that though he may ultimately want revenge, will not strike to get it, directly. Part of the theatricality of the exchange is the believability in the possibility of the transgression of law itself—in revenge, in the possibility of violence—but with the full knowledge that the price of the ticket assures one’s safety.

The question remains: though we know who the “white” audience is and what they expect—and have paid to ensure—what does the “black” performer himself want, what does he expect? In short, *who* is the performer? *What* or *who* peeks from behind the *Negro* and the *Nigger*? *What* or *who* is performing the act—charging for entrance and collecting the tickets? Is he like the black and blackface minstrel performer Bert Williams who famously quipped, “Nobody in America knows my real name and, if I can prevent it, nobody ever will”? [Williams 1970]. Does the performer exist at the inter-

section of expectation(s) and his performative recombination of the liberty of invisibility? Or, is there truly *no one* behind the act, the performer lost behind the visage? In the end, perhaps, *no one* really knows just *who* or *what* the “black” performer really is, and *no one* really cares.

Black existentialism finds itself at a critical impasse. Who or what are we describing, and for whom? Is what is being described being revealed or further concealed? Is it really an up-close magical act, or does the black existential writer believe there is more, in America, in the West, than a magical act—perhaps, something like objective facts about a subjective life? Nevertheless, when approaching a “black” text, or a “black” life, there are certain expectations—certain things to go over and discuss. The viewing “audience” knows there will be some mixture of the *Negro* and the *Nigger* in the “black” performer, for they have placed it there; the viewing audience knows that what is being discussed is not so much material reality, but the staging of material reality, as theory, as discourse, as metaphor. The viewing audience knows they will be accused, perhaps even charged for something or some state of affairs, but that they will not be held liable for remuneration. The performer and the knowing audience has to know the depths of the absurdity of the exchange, of the American form of theater. American cultural forms demand the performance of “forgiveness” for the past and continued “sins” against the mother and the father. Yet, “forgiveness” also demands both continual “discourse,” and a continued silence of the crime and the innocence of the criminal.

This, for Ellison, is the theater of his novel: the *antinomic phenomenal experience* in which “whites” can at once believe in the *Negro* and also know the *Nigger* is lying. It is this antinomic phenomenal experience that produces the image of the “happy slave” and infinite amounts of archetypes of “blackness”. For example, the absurdity of a white man darkening his face and reddening his lips is only matched and surpassed by the “black” performer doing the same. But, the Minstrel Show and the Negro “mask” is one of the enduring cultural models we have in America]

The “white” performer in blackened face has transformed himself into the *image* of the *Nigger*; but, the “black” performer in blackened face has transformed himself into the image of the image, concealing already darkened skin in the *performance* of the impossible. What, then, is being discussed in *Invisible Man* and within black existentialism is conjuring, rather than metaphysics. That is, we are concerned with the *experience* in which the impossible is possible, not the metaphysics of its transcendence—the “black” performer offers the performance of a *imago* or social role, that op-

erates as, but is never akin to the figurative rendering of the immortal black soul.

It is just not this *antinomic* doubling—in which both performer and audience willingly participate in a ruse that at once contradicts ordinary experience, but is a ruse precisely because one understands ordinary experience—that is the foundation of American culture that interests Ellison, but the “joke,” that is, the theater of *antinomic* experience, as such—it not so much the ruse in the appearance of sawing a woman in half, but the act of leaving her on, in parts, for full and permanent display. Rather than being stifling, this “joke” is the source and site of the creative possibility of the novel as form and “black” cultural life itself. Ellison’s “joking” is itself also a double: of the seriousness of the experience of racism on the one hand; and, a tongue-in-cheek aesthetic of the novel form on the other. Of the tongue-in-cheek nature of a “joke,” on one hand; and, the seriousness of technique in the construction and telling of a “joke” on the other. *Invisible Man* is a bi-play between the seriousness of circumstance and of craft, but also the tongue-in-cheek of circumstance and that of the “joke”.

Take, for a quick example, the opening scene of the Chapter One. The narrator sits with his family at his dying grandfather’s side. His grandfather, a man the narrator thought to have been a meek man (a bit “Uncle Tomish”; a *Negro*), who having been himself born a slave was nevertheless thought to have believed in the principles of “democracy” so much that he refused to fight for his rights and land during Reconstruction, instead giving up his gun. Yet, at the end of his life, he tells his family the following:

Son, after I’m gone I want you to keep up the good fight. I never told you, but our life is 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 [Ellison 1980: 16].

The grandfather had lived within a cognitive space of a performance in which he had convinced not only “whites”, but also his own family that he had not only “forgiven” the Nation, that he had believed so strongly in the Nation that he was willing to give up the protection of himself, his family, and his land-rights for the sake of the *principle*—not its actualization—of democracy. Yet, at the end of his life, at the end of his “theatrical act”—what in magic is termed “the Prestige,” the moment of reveal where the magician

takes the woman out of the box whole, or brings the coin back from its invisibility—the grandfather did not reveal himself as a *Negro*, an Afro-America or African-American, as a brother-in-arm, but as a *Nigger*, a “spy,” a “traitor”. He had revealed the *secret* behind the illusion to his audience. He was no longer willing to “mask” and to play the “joke”. “The Negro’s masking,” Ellison tells us, “is motivated not so much by fear as by a profound rejection of the image created to usurp his identity. Sometimes it is for the sheer joy of the joke; sometimes to challenge those who presume. . . to know his identity”²

The narrator’s grandfather, in other words, ceased the fulfillment of his role in the magic act—he showed the viewing audience the trick. He had broken the contract, the exchange between viewing audience and performer, and like any good audience, his family was shocked, appalled: “They thought the old man had gone out of his mind. . . [t]he younger children were rushed from the room, the shades drawn.” [Ellison 1980: 16]. His family was so shocked and appalled, that the narrator was “warned emphatically to forget what he [his grandfather] had said.” Significantly, his grandfather died *immediately* after these words, not giving the narrator a chance to question him or his grandfather a chance to explain; rather, leaving his last words as a “riddle to be solved”.³

Or, take for example the opening lines of the novel where Ellison informs the reader, and quite directly, that they are to be part of an elaborate theatrical magical act. His famous opening lines,

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allen Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me [Ellison 1980: 3].

Notice how so much of the language concerns perception—the perception of the viewing audience on the “black” performer. The audience “sees” what they want—they are willing participants in whatever image or

² Ellison, Ralph. “Change the Joke, Slip the Yoke” [Ellison 2003: 109].

³ For more on the grandfather as trickster see [Trimmer 1978].

figure emerges from the other side of their projected perception. And, there is the “black” performer, a man of “substance” and consciousness; we, the viewing audience, are not quite sure *how* he “sees” himself, what we “know” is only by inference: he is *not* a spook, and he “might even” possess a mind. The distance between the certainty of how he is “seen” and how he “sees” himself leaves the narrator, at the outset, as ambiguous, but also itself a distorted mirror. We, the viewing audience, who imagine ourselves as sophisticated and having figured out the meaning of the novel, reflect back on this opening paragraph and conclude, along with much of the extant literature—especially in black existentialism—that these lines depict white racism and the forced invisibility of black people within it. We see the line, “I am invisible simply because they refuse to see me” as concrete, and the novel as an existential meditation on tragedy, for it reveals the fact that though invisible, our narrator, in fact, *wants* to be seen. But, very few commentators look at this scene in relationship with Ellison’s essay, “Change the Joke, Slip the Yoke” and the conjuring image of the “mask” as the ritualistic mechanism for concealing and revealing. What the commentators focus on is the invisibility, but what, in this reading becomes important is the “mirror” and the “distorted glass”—the antinomic doubling: what is seen is not seen (e.g., the grandfather on his deathbed).

This is the *antinomic* image of the seen unseen. It is a “telling” that tells us that we are witnessing a “reality” that is to disguise reality—it is the surreal disguised as the real; as the “realism” of a photograph may be used to disguise the object the image has “captured,” the mirror distorts by presenting “reality” as a reversal of itself. This image is “joking” the viewer, and if the viewer is actually unaware of the joke it (the viewer, the image/performer, their relationship) becomes tragic; yet, if the viewer *is* aware of the “joke,” and *is* in partnership with it (remember: the audience is always part of the successful theatrical magical act), it becomes tragicomic. The *Invisible Man* is at once both tragic and tragicomic depending on who is viewing it, and if they are part of or victim to the “joke”.

Invisible Man gives a double layered experience—one in which the reader “sees” others in the story fooling themselves and feels solace or horror with them (in particular, with the narrator) actually believing that what is happening in the story is somehow *real*. And, the reader is drawn into the fold and fooled as well—they are fooled while watching others being fooled, and fooled into thinking they are not fooled. *Antinomic* doubling are those moments where two elements are literally mirrored in which the image is reflected only in a distorted manner—the image is the identical-opposite

of what stands in front of it. How would the audience “see” the narrator’s grandfather after hearing his deathbed confession—as an “invisible man” or as an image in a distorted mirror? And, what would it mean that the narrator attempted, throughout the novel, to make sense of these words—would they, do they make the audience question *if* narrator *really* think himself “invisible” or is there something more profound occurring, something *subtextual*? As such, *antinomic* doubling is the presentation of the same, reversed—it is not the simulacra, but an element more concerned with theatrical magic: it is an *illusion*.

These *antinomic* doubling elements that frame *Invisible Man* are those same ones that trick the inner constructing “eye” into seeing *any black* text as tragic and Heroic—for one is not possible without the other (one cannot *think* the tragic without the Heroic and vice versa); tricks the “eye” into believing that the grounding and formulating element of black existentialism *is* the black existential Hero, *the* exceptional individual, who through sheer will overcomes or is made aware of the inherent failure of his situation.

To really understand *Invisible Man* and black existentialism one has to understand the illusion and account for this *antinomic* doubling. One has to search out not the moments of directness, clarity or truth, but moments where, when reading between the lines, one comes to terms with what is being concealed, and thus, revealed, in these moments. There are two main *antinomic* moments in *Invisible Man* discussed herein: Ellison’s inversion of Kierkegaard’s *Sickness Unto Death*; and, The Grandfather’s Riddle, as broached earlier. In what remains we will discuss these seminal scenes. But, before we begin, I need to say something more about Western European existentialism, black existentialism and *antinomic* phenomenal experience.

Two Moments of the Antinomic Doubling

I. *Not All Sickness is Unto Death*

The first *antinomic* moment of *Invisible Man* is intellectual and sets the philosophical tone of the novel. Ellison writes,

My hole is warm and full of light. Yes, *full* of light. I doubt if there is a brighter spot in all of New York than this hole of mine, and I do not exclude Broadway. Or the Empire State Building on a photographer’s dream night. But that is taking advantage of you. Those two spots are among the darkest of our whole civilization—pardon me, our who *culture* (an important

distinction, I've heard)—which might sound like a hoax, or a contradiction, but that (by contradiction, I mean) is how the world moves: Not like an arrow, but a boomerang. (Beware of those who speak of the *spiral* of history; they are preparing the boomerang. Keep a steel helmet handy.) [Ellison 1980: 6; emphasis in original].

Here we can see Ellison doubling, layering meaning in indirect language, alluding to intellectual traditions, offering critique and corrections. He is “taking advantage” of us because right now, at the beginning of the novel the reader might not be aware of this doubling language, that they are part of a theatrical magical act in which nothing is what it seems to be, and only the opposite constitutes the “real” of what we take to be reality. But how and in what way are we being taken advantage of? What doubling is going on? How is he fooling us?

The narrator begins like any magician, showing you what you take to be an ordinary circumstance—an ordinary pack of cards, an ordinary box. He tells us, sure, Broadway in New York is full of light, who would contest that? But, the claim, like the pack of cards, like the box, is about to undergo a radical transformation of meaning. The definition of “light” and “dark” are about to be changed without clear indication—the magician is about to somehow change the condition in which the ordinary *becomes extraordinary* while still appearing to *be* ordinary. What's next: the switch of terms, “light” with “dark,” “civilization” with “culture”. And, the reveal: he has just given us a contradictory statement without telling just what has been contradicted or how it has been contradicted.

Ellison's paraconsistent antinomic doubling engages our idea of Western modernity with the fact of Western modernity. The West imposes itself and its thought as the progressive unfolding of an ethereal principle (call it Progress, Manifest Destiny, Divine light or Right, etc.). Yet, it is within this same progressive unfolding that we also have concomitant principles like that of chattel slavery, eugenics, and the death camps of techno-science.

When he claims his hole is bright, one of the brightest spots in all of New York, he does not literally mean bright as in that light which the physical eye takes in. Rather, the concept of “light,” here, is related to the “inner eye” referenced earlier in this chapter—not the physical eye, but “those eyes through which they look through their physical eyes upon reality”. For as the “inner eye” is that which constructs “reality,” and that through which “reality” appears as both concrete and stable, the “light” is that which “enlightens” or reveals the “reality” that has been constructed, or the “inner eye” itself.

As noted earlier, if the only way to understand *existence* is by *existing* itself, then, the “light” is that element which reveals our *existence*. For Ellison, then, the “light,” in showing our *existence*, is also the mode in which we *exist*—it is *civilization* itself.

Ellison, in posing paradoxical statements, juxtaposing scenes within distinctive uses of common terms, and his emphasis of the “joke” of the spiral of history, or of dialectics itself—this is not so much the “end of philosophy” as traditionally understood or the failure of Reason, but the inevitable outcome of Reason itself, the “darkness” of its “lightness” exposed *to* itself.

But Ellison does not stop there. He qualifies even further: a *civilization* itself is but the collected artifacts of a particular *culture*, which is why *civilization* can be understood as our *existence*, which can only be understood through our *existing*—what we *are* is revealed in what we *do*. Culture itself is what we do; civilization is what we, in fact, are. That is, the hyper-industrial-technologically-advanced-decadent-city is what America, in fact, *is*; and, is the result of a series of historical and ongoing choices and actions—the “mask” of civility and progress, which both projects the future and preserves the past—and is why in our “absolutely technical state... only a god can save us. The only possibility available to us is that by our thinking and poetizing we prepare a readiness for the appearance of a god, or for the absence of a god in [our] decline...”⁴ [Heidegger 1981: 57]. Or, so it seems. Maybe what we’re awaiting is a different civilizational model. But, again, “that is taking advantage of you”; maybe what we’re awaiting is not a different civilization, or a different culture, but the one we already *have*; maybe what we’re awaiting is what “America” already *is*, not decadent or in decline, but “black” and in denial, at odds with itself, which is why it *appears* decadent. Maybe *this* is the “*covert preparation for a more overt action*—“blackness” to “enlighten” the darkness we’ve *become*, “blackness” to illuminate “the blackness of my invisibility—and vice versa”. [Ellison 1980: 12].

Before that I lived in the darkness into which I was chased, but now I see. [Ellison 1980: 12].

The inner construction of eyes is the same referent to that which gives a culture its “light”—the particular construction of its people, those “superstitions and their rationalizations [that] become ritual as they govern behav-

⁴ Originally published in: Heidegger, Martin. "Nur noch ein Gott kann uns retten." *Der Spiegel* XXX (Mai, 1976): 193-219. Trans. by W. Richardson as "Only a God Can Save Us" in *Heidegger: The Man and the Thinker*, ed. T. Sheehan. Chicago, IL: Precedent Publishing, 1981: 45-67.

ior”.⁵ How we “see” one another is more about these rituals than it is about the physiological construction of the eye itself. Similarly, the darkness or brightness of a society has less to do with its technological advancement as it has to do with how a society deals with the contradictory elements of existence. Does a society merely attempt to “rationalize what they shun or are incapable of dealing with,” or does it face and act out of this contradiction?

Does it (the society, its culture) demand the linearity of a progressive unfolding of truth, or does it embrace contradictions which seem unresolvable both in and out of a life? The answer to this question reveals both whether or not we are a dark or light culture, but also whether or not we are tragic or tragicomic. How, though, does a culture built on contradiction deal with contradiction if not within the realm of its sublation—the wrapping up of contradictions within their overcoming in the unification of a whole?

In a sense, what Ellison is telling us, in the metaphor of a theatrical magical act, is that *we* as Americans simply *are* within the theatrical magical act [imagine, a theatrical magic act in which both performer and audience know the act is taking place, that there is an outside world, and nevertheless remain within the act, in a permanent *antinomic* state—the woman, sawed in half, remaining in the box on perpetual display.] Ellison reminds us,

Benjamin Franklin, the practical scientist, skilled statesmen and sophisticated lover, allowed the French to mistake him for Rousseau’s Natural Man. Hemingway poses as a non-literary sportsman, Faulkner as a farmer; Abe Lincoln allowed himself to be taken for a simple country lawyer—until the chips were down. Here the “darky” act makes brothers of us all. America is a land of making jokers. We wear the mask for purposes of aggression as well as defense, when we are projecting the future and preserving the past. In short, the motives hidden behind the mask are as numerous as the ambiguities the mask conceals.⁶

And, what remains is just this: there is (an American) history that is shared but separate; a series of (American) cultural responses that are shared but separate; (an American) intellectual reflection in the form of rejection that is shared but separate—all of these take place within the “black” performer and his “white” audience. The *Negro* and the *Nigger*, then, are both traps if one wishes to remain in the theatrical act in perpetuity, for both are

⁵ Ellison, Ralph. “*The Art of Fiction: An Interview.*” [Ellison 2003: 216].

⁶ Ellison, Ralph. “Change the Joke, Slip the Yoke” [Ellison 2003: 109].

constructed images of an illusory magical act that feels so perfectly ideal for the audience, and one that allows the “black” performer such a safe distance from the audience that no one wants to give up the illusion.

This is the true *antinomic* reality of the “black” performer; this is the *antinomic* condition that the narrator realizes at the end of the novel when he notes, “I’m coming out, no less invisible without it, but coming out nevertheless.” [Ellison 1980: 580]. This realization shapes the totality of the novel from the outset—he is, after all, surrounded by “hard, distorting glass”.

This realization leads Ellison to his critique of Soren Kierkegaard’s famous proclamation in both *Fear and Trembling* and *The Sickness Unto Death*: namely, estrangement from God (the Absolute) is the sickness unto (that leads to) *real* (not physical, but spiritual) death. Ellison, in a reversal of Kierkegaard’s claim, writes, “all sickness is *not* unto death, neither is invisibility.” [Ellison 1980: 14]. In this reversal Ellison is not critiquing the very idea of God (as in traditional atheistic existentialism), for Kierkegaard is not really talking about God, at least in the traditional theological sense, but rather the idea of Absolute other, ultimate reality. God for Kierkegaard is paradoxical: as that which is Absolute *and* other, God is *both* unknowable *and* the foundation of knowledge, necessitating “faith,” which we get to shortly. As Ellison notes at the end of the novel—“coming out, no less visible”—the failure of “visibility”—that is, the failure of appearing on the stage of world history—does not cast man into the wilderness of the unknown—or outside of History—or the night of the absolute—necessitating faith—but somewhere else.

Take the example, Kierkegaard’s allegory of Abraham and Isaac. Abraham, the father of Isaac is commanded by God to sacrifice his son as a sign of faith. Abraham and Abraham alone can hear God’s command. Abraham and Abraham alone can understand God’s command. If he speaks within the realm of man to other men about his command, he is unable to explain why God would command what contradicts what God had revealed through Moses—though shalt not kill—and what is a backbone foundation of/for human social order. What is required of Abraham, Kierkegaard tells us, is infinite resignation *to* the infinite unknowability of the absurd in which he is responsible, but unable to control the circumstances of his responsibility. For Kierkegaard, this infinite resignation is the moment or (k)night of faith, or the great leap over the abyss of unknowability.

Unable to speak to other men, and unable to reconcile God’s command with God’s revealed Law, Abraham is trapped within himself (a common problem of solipsism within the Western intellectual tradition from Leibniz to Descartes to Husserl) in relation to the Absolute. It seems that Abraham

cannot speak either to God or man, and can only act—the act itself his sign/demonstration. But, as Ellison notes in the reversal of Kierkegaard's central claim, Abraham's infinite resignation is not his (k)night of faith, but his inability to adequately deal with the internal contradiction of his "blackness". In other words, Abraham is in a bind of an *antinomic* space of utter contradiction where he is practically "black"; his (k)night of faith, then, was his moment of "passing" as/for faithful servant, pretending to *be* what he cannot be, the one who, through faith, circumvents contradiction and antinomic absurdity.

And, what of Isaac? Isaac, the son, the child in whom and through whom Abraham not only becomes, potentially, both the outcast (if he follows through with the act) *and* the man of faith (in his willingness to follow God's law)? Isaac is neither faithful nor transgressive: his mere existence as Abraham's son alone cast him both outside of God's Law and man's law. Isaac is, in Ellison's terms, the "mask" through which Abraham "jokes" or plays at *becoming* (outcast or man of faith). It is *this* antinomic position that Isaac's "blackness" is manifested as the distorted/distorting glass.

Both Abraham *and* Isaac present us with an *antinomic* condition that cannot be resolved, though Kierkegaard only considers Abraham's perspective. It is Abraham who is in a tight space and does not know how to "move without moving"; it is Abraham, in whom the *antinomic* contradiction is eventually overturned, by the murder of another, not Isaac, but a black ram. In principle Kierkegaard's problem was that he believed that the non-aligned spirit was in despair [*was* despair], that Abraham was despair, and that such despair would lead, necessarily, to his spiritual death were it not for his faith. But, what of Isaac's *potential* death, and the black ram's *actual* death? Was the potentiated threat of non-alignment more weighted than the actual death of the black ram, and the potentiated death of his only son? For Ellison, this sickness, this non-alignment of the spirit, though it may lead to the despair of ambiguity—of Abraham's faith, of Isaac's supplication, and the black ram's actual death—does not lead to its death. In the overturning of Kierkegaard, Ellison is claiming that rather than leading to death, such a condition results in an aesthetic expression, in particular the idiom of the blues. The blues, Ellison writes,

[I]s an *impulse* to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism.⁷

⁷ Ellison, Ralph. "Richard Wright's Blues." [Ellison 2003: 129].

Ellison writes specifically of the blues in *Invisible Man*, in the figure of Jim Trueblood, a sharecropper who lives down the hill from the narrator's university. Jim Trueblood is a seemingly tertiary character, but the lesson he teaches is critical for the novel. In the short: Jim Trueblood has a contentious relationship with the school, its professors and graduates who are embarrassed by Trueblood's normative transgression—incest and impregnation of his daughter. Here's the rub: the white benefactors for the school protect Jim Trueblood from the school, their professors and their graduates.

One afternoon, our narrator drives one of the white benefactors to Jim Trueblood's shack. On the visit, the white benefactor, Mr. Norton, meets Jim Trueblood and insists on hearing his incest story. At the end of the story, Mr. Norton gives Jim Trueblood a crisp one-hundred-dollar bill. In his essay, "To Move without Moving: An Analysis of Creativity and Commerce in Ralph Ellison's Trueblood Episode," Houston Baker argues that the "truth" of Jim Trueblood's story is ambiguous—because he is paid by the white benefactors and offered protection against the university, it is unclear, for Baker, if Trueblood is actually telling the truth, or if there is a "truth" to tell [Baker 1983: 834]. It is unclear if Trueblood is telling Mr. Norton what he wants to hear about black male sexuality in exchange for protection and for money, or if he is telling Mr. Norton what actually happened.⁸ Given this fact, it is unclear what, exactly, the transgression would be: the actual incest or the lie of the incest for the exchange of power and money.

Trueblood, thus, becomes the quintessential bluesman, riffing off reality, telling a story that cannot be factually verified, but nonetheless carries a certain weight concerning antinomic living. Trueblood as the bluesman tells us something of how to live within chaos, live within its contradiction

⁸ But, what *is* clear about the exchange is this: central to the novel itself is the exploration of the black phallus. Houston Baker has gone as far as to say that "an artist as perceptive as Ellison recognizes the black phallus as a dominant symbol of the sometimes bizarre social rituals of America and incorporates it into the text of a novel." [Baker 1983: 833]. One could think of the Trueblood episode and Mr. Norton's willingness to pay to hear the transgression of the black phallus; or, the Battle Royal scene, where our narrator is made to box, bare chested and blindfolded, other bare chested, blindfolded black boys (for the prize of a scholarship to a Negro college), all-the-while also attempting to hide his tented pants as a naked blonde woman is paraded before them, pretending not to notice the V-shaped American flag tattoo above her privates. One can also think of the scene with Sybil, a woman who attempts to seduce our narrator into her rape fantasy. Or, the scene with young Emerson, who attempted to seduce our narrator with the truth and with honesty. At each stage, and in each scene, the black phallus is of central concern and is on theatrical exhibition for consumption. More will be said of this in chapter four.

that doesn't require "faith" or the Absolute. The ambiguity of Trueblood's story points to what Houston Baker refers to as the "creativity" of the "commerce" itself—the tanning and the trading of the audience, but also "reality" itself. In a critical moment of Trueblood's story, he notes how his wife having "caught" him with his daughter, chases him out of the house with an ax, and, how, after escaping into the woods, he began to sing the blues. Trueblood reflects,

I feels bad. I tells them how it happened in a dream, but they scorns me. I gits plum out of the house then. I goes to see the preacher and even he don't believe me. He tells me to git out of his house, that I'm the most wicked man he's ever seen and that I better go confess my sin and make my peace with God. I leaves tryin' to pray, but I caint. I thinks and thinks, until I thinks my brain go'n bust, 'bout how I'm guilty and how I ain't guilty. I don't eat nothin' and I don't drink nothin' and caint sleep at night. Finally, one night, was early in the mornin', I looks up at the stars and I starts singin'. I don't mean to, I don't think 'bout it, just start singin'. I don't know what it was, some kinda church song, I guess. All I know is I *ends up* singin' the blues. I sings me some blues that night ain't never been sang before, and while I'm singin' the blues I makes up my mind that I ain't nobody but myself and ain't nothing I can do but let whatever is gonna happen, happen [Ellison 1980: 66].

Like Abraham himself, caught between sinning by following God's command, and sinning by ignoring God's command, Trueblood is caught between being guilty and not being guilty, and when he tries to pray, tries to dissolve himself into the Absolute in a leap of faith, he is not brought to God—there is no black ram to substitute for the absolute chaos of his "blackened" condition—but ends up "singin' the blues." This is the moment of Trueblood's transcendence, not *beyond* his situation, but deeper *into* it; it is in this moment that Ellison, through the blues, alters or distorts the meaning of transcendence from the erasure of subjectivity to an absolute obedience to one's own life without falling into despair. It is in this moment, looking up at the stars that Trueblood recognizes that "I ain't nobody but myself," and in this he also recognizes that "whatever is gonna happen" is gonna happen. As Baker notes, it does not matter if Trueblood is telling the "truth" or if he "trading" and "tanning" Norton, the principle stands as a radical alteration of/to the perfervid individualism of Christian existential faith with the blues idiom as the central locus.

II. *The Grandfather's Riddle/Curse*

The second *antinomic* doubling moment comes with *The Grandfather's Riddle/Curse*. The grandfather's advice speaks to the three paradoxes of *Invisible Man* (and of black existentialism): the paradox of advice, the paradox of the past, and the paradox of identity.

To recap our earlier discussion: At the end of his life, the narrator's grandfather calls his family to his side for a last word, what is thought to be a last sacrament of sorts: the saying goodbyes, prayer, perhaps a confession of what he could have done better—been a better father, a better husband, so forth—and, perhaps, to seek absolution. His last words, as discussed earlier, though, were a last rite, but not the sort that was expected. His last words were a *reveal*, a confession. He announces himself as what he is and has always been; he announces his wisdom to be passed down through subsequent generations. In short, what he offers is both theatrical self-disclosure and a genealogical map of inheritance: “Son, after I'm gone I want you to keep up the good fight. I never told you, but our life is a war...[I]earn it to the younguns”

A critical element for understanding *Invisible Man* is Ellison wrestling with lineage and authoritativeness concerning the past. The grandfather and his “sphinxlike” riddle, though, open up a question of “the ambiguity of the past,”—that is, “how should the theatrical performer think about the past?”⁹ This sounds like an oxymoron, for within a theatrical magical act, there is no time, time is actually frozen, as the laws of physics and the normative social laws are suspended. So, how should a theatrical “black” magical performer in whom both the *Negro* and the *Nigger* are each always performative possibilities think about time and space—about lineage and history? Should he think of the past as something to be overcome in the present, not negotiated, but *conned*, tricked, like the grandfather, in which one pretends not to know what one knows?

For Ellison, the question of the past for a “black” theatrical performer is complicated by the fact that his audience of Anglo-Americans, too, are grappling with questions of their own past in Europe. Who or what is an American? An Anglo-American? Coupling these two complexities with the past—both “black” and “Anglo”—creates the need and presence of the

⁹ Ellison, Ralph. “Change the Joke, Slip the Yoke.” [Ellison 2003: 110].

“mask” as cultural icon. Ellison notes in “An Extravagance of Laughter,” “after two hundred years of grappling with its racial, religious, and geographical diversity, [the nation] is still in the process of achieving a full measure of self-consciousness...”¹⁰ Part of “achieving this full measure of self-consciousness” is coming to terms with the question of authority concerning the past, both culturally and for the individual—who, in other words, speaks for and represents the present and the future? In confronting this dual paradox (of both “black” and “Anglo”), the grandfather’s advice gives the narrator dual options, none of which seems acceptable.

Option one:

[W]henver things went well for me I remembered my grandfather and felt guilty and uncomfortable. It was as though I was carrying out his advice in spite of myself. And to make it worse, everyone loved me for it. I was praised by the most lily-white men of the town. I was considered an example of desirable conduct—just as my grandfather had been. And what puzzled me was that the old man had defined it as *treachery*. When I was praised for my conduct I felt a guilt that in some way I was doing something that was really against the wishes of the white folks, that if they had understood they would have desired me to act just the opposite, that I should have been sulky and mean, and that that really would have been what they wanted, even though they were fooled and thought they wanted me to act as I did. It made me afraid that some day they would look upon me as a traitor and I would be lost. Still I was more afraid to act any other way because they didn’t like that at all. The old man’s words were like a curse [Ellison 1980: 17; emphasis in original].

Ellison is presenting here the ambiguity of the “Negro” and the paradox of white desire. Here, again, “reality” as presented is an inversion of itself. The narrator tells us, “I was praised by the most lily-white men of town... what puzzled me was that the old man had defined this as *treachery*.” The narrator, like Abraham, wants to follow the Law of the Absolute, but, like Abraham’s condition, the Law contradicts itself, but Ellison’s narrator does not quite know where to leap in his “faith”. The true ambiguity or anti-nomic experience of America is that no one really knows what he wants. Ellison reminds us at the end of the novel that “one of the greatest jokes in the

¹⁰ Ellison, Ralph. “The Extravagance of Laughter.” [Ellison 2003: 634].

world is the spectacle of the whites busy escaping blackness and becoming blacker every day, and the blacks striving towards whiteness, becoming quite dull and gray. None of us seems to know who he is or where he's going." [Ellison 1980: 17].

In other words, the Law contradicts desire, our telling of history contradicts conscious experience of it. If the narrator gives his white audience what they desire, it will ultimately harm them, for what they desire is an illusion of reality counter to their own unconscious desire. Yet, it takes a certain kind of conscious violence to remain in a permanent unconscious state—it is this inherent violence that keeps the woman in a pine box on permanent display; or, “blackness” trapped between the *Negro* and the *Nigger*.

Option two:

[L]ike almost everyone else in our country, I started out with my share of optimism. I believed in hard work and progress and action, but now, after being “for” society and then “against” it, I assign myself no rank or any limit... [Ellison 1980: 576].

At the end of the novel, the narrator suggests ambiguity as the answer to his grandfather's riddle/curse. Rather than trying to control “reality,” to manipulate it, our narrator offers “reality” unbounded as infinite possibility. Like Trueblood-as-bluesman he suggests that he is neither *for* or *against* reality, nor is he beyond it. He merely exists within it, and in this existence of letting “whatever is gonna happen, happen,” “sees” his reality as infinitely possible. The difficulty, though, of this position is that it is not quite the bluesman position, for Trueblood finds currency in himself, in his capacity to allow reality to be what it is, and to remain who he is within this chaos. The narrator, here, though, suggests that he is without normative constraint—even that of his own self-willed blues performance. Rather, he is more like Isaac, thrown on a slab, indifferent to his father, the blade, God, or society.

Neither position really seem possible for living. On the one hand, the performer is tasked with maintaining a dream-like world for his audience, and in doing so, tasks himself with always being the performer. On the other hand, he becomes the performer who no longer believes in the performance, in the illusion, the performer whose magical act, for him no longer confirms reality, but challenges the very fact of belief itself. His choice seems to be, to become a constant performer who knows the truth of “reality” but must

shade it; or become the performer who no longer believes there is a “reality” to shade.

Throughout the novel, the character named the “Vet” appears and gives the narrator timely advice. At one moment, he tells the narrator,

“[F]or God’s sake, learn to look beneath the surface,” he said. “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 straightjacket or a padded cell. Play the game, but play it in your own way...Learn how it operates, learn how *you* operate...It’s really a crude affair. Really pre-Renaissance—and that game has been analyzed, put down in books. But down there they’ve forgotten to take care of the books and that’s your opportunity. You’re hidden right out in the open...They wouldn’t see you because they don’t expect you to know anything... [Ellison 1980: 154; emphasis in original].

The “Vet’s” advice straddles the two options. The “Vet” suggests that the narrator play both sides to his advantage, but also maintain his fundamental self-perception. In other words, perform without becoming the performer. The character of the “Vet” functions within the novel as its conscience, or as an omniscient narrator who shows up to steer the narrator, but also the plot as well.

Implicit in the “Vet’s” advice is the acknowledgment that as a performer, the audience does not, *will* not, cannot really root *for* him, cheer *for* him; rather, the audience is always rooting and cheering for the idea of the illusion that he and his performance represents. This is the crucial element of the “Vet’s” advice and crucial to the grandfather’s riddle/curse—the performer represents both his performance and the illusion his performance offers. It is never the performer that is visible, but the stage in which his actions are pronounced. As such, the narrator must come to understand that *he* will never be visible as the constituent agent of his action, *he* will not be cheered or congratulated; *he*, in a sense, is contrary to his performance, *he* is a threat to the illusion he provides.

To “look beneath the surface” and “come out of the fog” simply means to know that one is on-stage, that one, perhaps cannot control the fact that one performs, but one can recognize the performance and know *he* is not the performer or performance, that *he*, as James Baldwin notes, can get through life by knowing “the worst things about it” [Baldwin 1963] and with what Ralph Ellison terms the “extravagance of laughter.”

Conclusion—The Prestige

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* is perhaps the greatest up-close magic trick ever accomplished in the space of an American novel—it *is* America in aesthetic form. Everyone either hailed the book a masterpiece of American literature—it is, after all, on every major American literary reading list—or it is has been marked as a book of its time, not radical enough to be translated from the 1950s into the 60s and 70s—a critical example of this was recounted in Ellison's 1967 visit to Grinnell College where, when receiving an honorary doctorate, he was “confronted by a student who disagreed with the ending of *Invisible Man*,” who, after arguing that the novel needed “a more revolutionary ending,” called Ellison a “Uncle Tom.” [Tracy, 2004: 44-45]. Perhaps *this* was both the greatest criticism and greatest accomplishment of the book: as being filled with both metaphors, but also with straightforward indirect, it offered itself as a self-conscious performer, aware of theatricality of his act, to an audience who either accepted or rejected the performance

The novel shows us, as a case study for black existentialism, that we have to be mindful of indirection, be on the lookout for cultural clues, and always diligently ask ourselves, “why is the author telling us what he or she is telling us?”, “what is being shaded?”, “what is being spoken?”, “is this frank speech, or are we being “tanned”?” And, if so, “*what* is being “traded”?”

I'd brought along a skin of wine that we'd been given as a gift. It was so strong that we usually diluted it in water twenty to one. The Cyclops tossed it back and then demanded more.

“I like you, Greek,” he said. “I'm going to do you a favor. What's your name?”

“My name is Nobody,” I told him.

It turned out that the favor he intended was to eat me last. But when the wine had knocked him out, I put my plan into effect. Heating the end of the pole until it was glowing red, we ran it toward the Cyclops like a battering ram, aiming it for his eye and driving it deep. The thing sizzled like hot metal dropped in water while I twisted it like an auger.

Polyphemus came awake with a roar, tore the spike from his eye and began groping for us in his blindness. His screams of frustration and rage brought the neighboring Cyclopes to the mouth of the cave.

“What is it, brother?” they called inside. “Is someone harming you?”

“It's Nobody!” bellowed Polyphemus.¹¹

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