Conflicts and Invisibility in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

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> I am an invisible man …. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me …. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me (Ellison 1965:7).

This opening statement has gained the same auspicious notoriety of Herman Melville's 'Call me Ishmael'. Its timbre has resonated around the world, carrying with it the longings of a generation struggling against the 'fragmenting, life-denying, de-humanizing conditions' (Wright 2003:178) that seek to deny their existence. As Ellison's protagonist explains:

> You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world, that you're a part of all the sound and anguish, and you strike out with your fists, you curse and you swear to make them recognize you. And, alas, it's seldom successful (Ellison 1965:7).

This essay will examine the web of worldliness investigated by Ralph Ellison in his seminal text *The Invisible Man*. Discussing, distorting and disseminating the concept of invisibility in 1950's America, Ellison both taunts and cajoles the reader to discover the cloak of invisibility that has covered African Americans through societal indifference, intolerance and ambition.

Since the anger and anguish of the alienated African American is not limited to the North American continent, this study readily bridges the Black Atlantic providing interesting and informative connections to the disenfranchised on our continent.

The Times reported that Ellison's text 'brought African-American experiences vividly into the literary mainstream and spurred a renaissance that continues to this day'. This comment is not unlike the response received by African writers such as Es'kia Mphahlele and Bessie Head who tore aside the veil that hid the life sores of Africanness inflicted by the distancing discourse of the white proletariat. Like Mphahlele and Head, Ellison fights his invisibility with his pen.

Ellison's protagonist recounts the transition from naïve southern youth to embittered northern liberationist, the personal journey from sightlessness to internal revelation, the pilgrimage from innocent people pleasing to mature destiny-driven determinism. His collision with a world that doesn't want to acknowledge his existence and the incumbent bruises, blackouts and blind rages drive him to inward harbours of isolation.

The cataclysmic conclusion created by the Harlem riot illustrates the boiling point reached when humanity's participants attempt to live in a world scratched raw by conflicting ideologies and forced invisibility.

Although Ellison insisted that *The Invisible Man* was not autobiographical, there exist many similarities between the author and his protagonist, self-titled 'Jack-the-Bear'. Ellison was born in 1913 as Europe was entering its devastating First World War, and America was gaining momentum as a significant economic and intellectual source of power and prominence, yet still scarred by their virulent history of slavery and its unsuccessful programme of Reconstruction. His grandparents were slaves who sloughed off the shackles of bondage for the hope of sharecropping and fed their children with the ripe promises of freedom and self-determined destinies. Likewise Ellison's parents determined that their children would escape the poverty and prejudice that ruled their lives. To illustrate their vision of a brighter future, Ellison's father named him after the influential writer Ralph Waldo Emerson to project upon his young son the possibilities of profound intellectualism and independent identity. Buoyed by the significance of this moniker, Ellison dreamed of becoming a 'Renaissance Man' enthusiastically developing his gifts in music and literature. His

fortitude earned him a music scholarship at the prestigious Booker T. Washington Tuskegee Institute of Alabama, but his financial limitations required that he hobo his way there by jumping trains.

Alabama proved to be a stifling world apart from the openness of the Oklahoman territory of his birth. Schooled and experienced in the cultural integration of Oklahoma where he lived in blended unity and understanding with Native Americans, Jews, whites and blacks, he recalls his non-segregated youth in *Shadow and Act*: 'At the time we were living in a white middle-class neighbourhood, where my mother was custodian for some apartments …' (Wright 2003:178). There he developed a firm friendship with another boy who shared his love for radios and mechanics, colour a non-issue. He recalls: 'but knowing this white boy was a very meaningful experience. It had little to do with the race questions as such, but with our mutual loneliness' (Wright 2003:179).

In the famous all-black Institute race didn't speak differences, but money screamed it. Ellison was shocked at the class consciousness that separated the financially secure from the economically desperate at the Institute. His frantic need to fit in and appear more than his pocketbook allowed is witnessed in a letter he wrote to his mother Ida complaining about his shoddy appearance: 'You know I travel with the rich gang here and this clothes problem is a pain' (Als 2007:5). This distaste for poverty is echoed in a 1964 interview:

> As a kid I remember working it out this way: there was a world in which you wore your everyday clothes on Sunday, and there was a world in which you wore your Sunday clothes every day. I wanted [that world] because it represented something better, a more exciting and civilized and human way of living …. I sometimes [glimpsed this world] through the windows of the great houses on Sunday afternoons when my mother took my brother and me for walks through the wealthy white sections of the city…and for me none of this was hopelessly beyond the reach of my Negro world, really; because if you worked and you fought for your rights, and so on, you could finally achieve it. This involved our American Negro faith in education, of course, and the idea of self-cultivation (Als 2007:5).

The polarity Ellison felt existed between black and white pocketbooks is evidenced in this section from *Invisible Man*:

> I looked for the counterman, seeing him serving a plate of pork chops and grits to a man with a pale blond moustache, and stared; then I slapped the dime on the counter and left, annoyed that the dime did not ring as a loud as a fifty-cent piece (Ellison 1965:147).

Ellison further argued in his book titled *Going for the Territory* that "the mystique of wealth is intertwined with the American mysteries of class and color" and that "the little man endures with a certain grace the social restrictions that limit his own mobility" (Ellison 1986:13-14).

The scourge of financial insecurity would change his life again (and ours) when his dream of an upwardly mobile education was cut short after his scholarship at Tuskegee was withdrawn, but not before English instructor MD Sprague inspired him to consider literature as a lyrical art form and introduced him to the anguished tragic heroes of Dostoevsky and Hardy, figures that he would craft in his own novel. His time at Tuskegee shaped the Southern college of the *Invisible Man* peopled with the Dr. Bledsoe's and Mr. Norton's of his own experiences whose falsehood and pretence inflame his main character. Their masked sightlessness filled his mind and mouth with bloody spittle similar to that which threatened to overwhelm the young invisible man after he was forced to box his schoolmates blindfolded for a pitiful offering thrown on an electrified rug. But like his protagonist Ellison travelled north with high hopes of success.

Arriving in New York's Harlem, Ellison fortuitously met influential black poet Langston Hughes whose generosity in developing young talented African American writers was renowned. This connection led to an introduction to Richard Wright who offered important writing opportunities to Ellison, like the Federal Writers Project which served as foundations for his text. Despite the Communist ideologies espoused by his new circle of friends, Ellison continued to drink in western literature, deeming Hemingway, not Wright, his literary father. Ellison raved about Hemingway's work and debunked Wright's significant influence in his literary development. He admired Hemingway '[n]ot because he was white, or more "accepted". But because he appreciated the things of this earth

which I love and which Wright was too driven or deprived or inexperienced to know …. But most important because Hemingway was a greater artist than Wright, who although a Negro like myself, and perhaps a great man, understood little if anything of these, at least to me, important things' (Als 2007:8). Ellison completely dismissed Wright when he later wrote: 'No, Wright was no spiritual father of mine, certainly in no sense I recognize …. I simply stepped around him' (Als 2007:7). He sniffed at the notion that being black meant writing black. 'Ellison never believed that blackness alone—its voice, its culture, its symbols, and its myths, was literary enough for a novel' (Als 2007:8) and criticized those 'who urge the Negro writer to keep to Negro themes and ideals' (Boyagoda 2007:93). By not adopting 'a minority tone', Ellison taps into the core of the universal Everyman and 'establish[es] a true middle-of-consciousness for everyone' (Als 2007:3).

> Where on earth did the notion come from that the world, and all its art, has to be reinvented, recreated, every time a Black individual seeks to express himself? (Allen 2007:26).

His acerbity became sharper, perhaps intimating about Wright who emigrated to Paris in 1946:

> So many of them talk and act like sulking children and all they can say about France with its great culture is that it's a place where they can walk in any restaurant and be served. It seems rather obscene to reduce life to such terms (Allen 2007:26).

Although Ellison would, for many years, surround himself with a cluster of wealthy white philanthropists and was notorious for his unwillingness to nurture young black artists, he never denied his African American heritage, peppering his text with 1950's black vernacular. In fact, he highlighted the essence of his planned masterpiece thus:

> The invisible man will move upward through Negro life coming into contact with its various forms and personality types; will operate in the Negro middle class in the left-wing movement and descend again into the disorganized atmosphere of the Harlem underworld. He will

> move upward in society through opportunism and submissiveness. Psychologically he is a traitor, to himself, to his people and to democracy and his treachery lies in his submissiveness and opportunism (Allen 2007:28).

Frantz Fanon's superb works *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) and *Black Skin White Masks* (1952) encapsulate Ellison's images of distorted identities and disenfranchisement. Fanon explains it aptly:

> A normal Negro child, having grown up within a normal family, will become abnormal on the slightest contact with the white world (Fanon 2004:463).

He continues:

> The Negro is unaware of it as long as his existence is limited to his own environment; but the first encounter with a white man oppresses him with the whole weight of his blackness (Fanon 2005:466).

The existential search for identity and meaning, often leading to a terrifying abyss of confusion and uncertainty, are the universal themes that Ellison tackles. Given the resultant flight or fight principle, Ellison creates a character whose barely controlled anger and aggression somewhat mirrors his own. Bitterness and contempt blaze through his pen. Norman Mailer describes Ellison as 'a hateful writer', explaining that reading his work 'is like holding a live electric wire in one's hand. But', he suggests, 'Ralph's mind, fine and icy, tuned to the pitch of a major novelist's madness, is not always adequate to mastering the forms of rage, horror, and disgust which his eyes have presented to his experience' (quoted in Allen 2007:25).

This uncontrolled frenetic anger is gruesomely described in the Prologue when a white man accidentally bumps Ellison's main character. Instead of apologizing for the innocent tap, the man curses him. The Invisible Man lashes out demanding an apology, but the insolent man continues to struggle and curse.

> *I kicked him repeatedly, in a frenzy because he still uttered insults*

> *though his lips were frothy with blood. Oh Yes, I kicked him! And in my outrage I got out my knife and prepared to slit his throat, right there beneath the lamplight in the deserted street, holding him by the collar with one hand, and opening the knife with my teeth—when it occurred to me that the man had not seen me, actually; that he, as far as he knew was in the midst of a walking nightmare! And I stopped the blade, slicing the air as I pushed him away …. He lay there, moaning on the asphalt; a man almost killed by a phantom. It unnerved me. I was both disgusted and ashamed …. Poor blind fool I thought with sincere compassion, mugged by an invisible man* (Ellison 1965:8).

Yet Ellison would argue that the mush of mankind is all lost in a void desperate for meaning and understanding:

> Thus one of the greatest jokes in the world is the spectacle of the whites busy escaping blackness and becoming blacker every day, and the blacks striving towards whiteness, becoming dull and grey. None of us seems to know who he is or where he's going (Ellison 1965:465).

Ellison beats the drum for everyone, recording our chafing at injustice and our fury at undeserved rejection. The cloak of invisibility is thrown over his main character by white and black hands which equally pummel his fragile self. From the classmates who pound him in the makeshift boxing ring, to the drunken whites who orchestrate the mêlée, to Mr. Norton who seeks his peccadillo cravings, to Dr. Bledsoe who hands him the fatal exit letters, from the crazed foreman at Liberty Paints, to the glass-eyed Jack of the Brotherhood, from the crazed Ras who screams for his lynching, to the white thugs who force him down the manhole. Each carve out their pound of flesh. Everyone attempts to deny his existence and ignore his personhood. In fact it was Dr. Bledsoe, the black college director of whom he first writes: 'He passed without seeming to see me' (Ellison 1965:123). The metaphor of invisibility morphs into the image of blindness speckled throughout the text:

- The young invisible man's blindfolded boxing;

- The statue of the empty-eyed founder at Bledsoe's college who is holding a veil over a kneeling slave which begs the question is he removing the veil or placing it over his eyes, giving the impression of hoodwinking him;
- The blind guest speaker who recounts the brave exploits of the founder;
- The crazed doctor at the Southern bordello Golden Day who declares that blacks are zombies and sleepwalkers;
- Dr. Bledsoe's statement that the moon is like a one-eyed white man;
- The blood-shot eyes of doctors who perform an electrical lobotomy after the paint factory accident;
- The glass-eyed Brother Jack who sucks out his life and fills it with his own; and
- The self-professed nymphomaniac Sybil looking for a sensual black rapist.

The image of distorted vision is repeated throughout the text to illustrate that invisibility is created by a sightless society whose self-reflection is fragmented by gazing in a fractured mirror. People can't look out if they can't look in. As such, they attempt to cover their psychological nakedness with garments snagged from other's artificial and insincere projections. Ellison captures the image of impersonation when his character, desperate to escape Ras' goons, dons a hat and dark glasses and unknowingly becomes Rinehart, a smooth quasi-religious hustler. Throughout the text, the Invisible Man impersonates a host of people, subjugating his identity for another's:

- The obedient Southern black at school and college (How had I come to this? I had kept unswervingly to the path placed before me, had tried to be exactly what I was expected to be, had done exactly what I was expected to do—yet instead of winning the expected reward, here I was stumbling along, holding on desperately to one of my eyes (Ellison 1965:122,123);
- The union worker / non-union worker at Liberty Paints;
- The respectful son to Mary;
- The militant civil rights Brotherhood leader who adopts a new name and persona and feeds the hungry crowds with useless lies: 'The new

> suit imparted a newness to me. It was the clothes and the new name and the circumstances. It was a newness too subtle to put into thought, but there it was. I was becoming someone else' (1965:271);

- The hip-hop gangster and Amen-spewing preacher Rinehart: 'At the first hat shop I went in and bought the widest hat in stock and put it on. With this, I thought, I should be seen even in a snowstorm—only they'd think I was someone else' (1965:389). 'And now I sat breathless asking myself how Rinehart would have solved the problem of information' (Ellison 1965:412) 'In short, I tried to manage things as I imagined Rinehart would have done' (1965:415); and
- Sensual black entertainer (1965:419) that Sybil calls 'Enormous brute 'n boo'ful buck' (Ellison 1965:425).

Ellison personifies the 'treachery' of submissiveness and opportunism through the deathbed warning of the protagonist's grandfather. Although a quiet obedient labourer who overcame his bosses with humble servitude, his grandfather condemned himself as a 'traitor and a spy' and spoke 'of his meekness as a dangerous activity (Ellison 1965:18). The invisible man found he was carrying out his grandfather's advice involuntarily.

> 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 would have wanted even though they were fooled and thought they wanted me to act as they 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 (Ellison 1965:18).

He was always seen as someone else, mistaken as the stereotypical reflection

of black America, their identity always rooted to the enslaved south. Scofield, a Harlem looter and shooter calls to the Invisible Man as they try to sprint away from the police: 'You know man, I think I seen you before somewhere. You ever was in Memphis' (Ellison 1965:444).

It is at the text's fiery conclusion, in the midst of the throbbing angry masses of the Harlem riots that the Invisible Man himself admits to his own blindness and namelessness (Ellison 1965:431, 436). 'Ahead I saw Dupre moving. He was a type of a man nothing in my life had taught me to see, to understand, or respect, a man outside the scheme till now' (Ellison 1965:440) and which he silently seems to add: 'A man like me.'

The veil has been over his eyes. He has heard voices, spoken the lingo, adapted the look and the act expected by both white and black society.

> I was pulled this way and that for longer than I can remember. And my problem was that I always tried to go in everyone's way but my own. I have also been called one thing and then another while no one really wished to hear what I called myself. So after years of adopting the opinions of others I finally rebelled. I am an invisible man (Ellison 1965:462).

It is the riot that brings together for the Invisible Man a firm sense of who he is:

> knowing now who I was and where I was and knowing too that I had no longer to run for or from the Jacks and the Emersons and the Bledsoes and Nortons, but only from their confusion, impatience, and refusal to recognize the beautiful absurdity of their American identity and mine (Ellison 1965:450).

He is finally able to embrace his heritage as a black man and secure his meaningful place in American society.

Yet it is in the darkness of the underground, the accidental escape into the depths of the earth that light dawns, and a revelation of independent, self-hood breaks through. Facing and conquering the fear of darkness that has crippled him from his youth, the invisible man lights the warm womb of

a New York basement with 1369 lights and is reborn a new man. 'I love light …. Light confirms my reality, gives birth to my form' (Ellison 1965:10). The spiritual symbolism is irrefutable. He emerges from the darkness having discovered and made peace with himself and the fragmented world around him.

The brilliance of Ellison's text is irrefutable. Every page is rich with symbolism that drops readers into the *Alice and Wonderland* rabbit hole of critical personal and societal introspection, compelling readers to investigate and analyse their own identity and demanding that they smell the stench of death and spring (1965:468). We are all frightened by the darkness within and terrified by the red-hot spotlight of self-examination, but nevertheless Ellison takes us there and forces us to look.

In conclusion, *Invisible Man* is a universal text resonating with the disenfranchised ensnared by the artificiality of impersonal modern society. It speaks to the blindness and invisibility of human beings who clothe their nakedness by impersonating a counterfeit image of reality neon lit with false importance. Yet it is also a testament of African American dislocation and dismemberment, portioned out by the carving knife of white determinism and arrogant superiority. Ellison brilliantly bridges the bitterness and pain inherent in invisible 'men' of all ethnicities. Like a soap-box preacher, he calls to everyone to know thyself, to acknowledge and appreciate who, what and where they are, to sculpt their identity with their own hands and be content with what they have independently crafted, a world, the invisible man suggests, in which diversity offers infinite possibility and true health (Ellison 1965:464).

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