

*STRUCTURES OF DISCONCERTING SPIRITUALITY IN RALPH ELLISON'S
INVISIBLE MAN*

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Abstract: The structural hierarchy of religious manifolds in Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man harbors retro-cognitive elements of encompassing punishment and redemption while also tinkering at will with expanded metaphors of pervasive spiritual premonitions. There is an intrinsic tether between the flesh and the soul which the author exploits and justifies through the re-enactment of multiple forms of mythology, placing great emphasis however on the moral and ethical corpus of Christianity and the manner through which it displays relevance regarding the harsh realities of African American life. According to my analysis, Black Christianity plays a pivotal role in the examination of intricate instruments which relate to Afro-American identity, a concern for their own destiny, and patterns of self-empowerment and personal sacrifice.

Keywords: religion, spirituality, identity, destiny, morality.

A key pillar of religious imagery would definitely have to brutally crave the need for some sort of compensative universe, an Earthly version of the Garden of Eden which must be well equipped to negate the various circles of hell which claimed dominion over the lives of blacks during the 1950s in a still segregated and highly racially biased America. In *Encyclopedia of the Harlem Renaissance*, Wintz and Finkelman strive to ascertain how the writers who fuelled the Harlem Renaissance harnessed the potentially limitless resources of religion and spirituality:

Overwhelmingly, depictions of religion focus on the storefront churches or on the rural south.....there is scant attention given to the mainline churches.....during this time period [...] The aesthetes of the Harlem Renaissance were fulfilling a role that artists have always filled: poking and prodding at the pretensions of official power.(Wintz 1042-1043).

From the invisible man's initially narrow and externally distorted perception, his place of learning, the unnamed Southern college we know to be a literary replica of the Tuskegee

Institute, is his Shangri-La, a Paradise mainly generated by hopeful and desperate impulses of perception:

I've recalled it often, here in my hole: How the grass turned green in the springtime and how the mocking birds fluttered their tails and sang, how the moon shone down on the buildings, how the bell in the chapel tower rang out the precious short-lived hours; how the girls in bright summer dresses promenaded the grassy lawn. Many times, here at night, I've closed my eyes and walked along the forbidden road [...] (Ellison, 1995: 34-35)

The imagery produced here is far from being a descriptive masterpiece of a redemptive Paradise on earth. It is only a mediocre but very personally charged distribution of affection in terms of adapting an average chronotope to provide solace in times of distress, to cradle beauty from within simplicity and the blessings of innocent youth. The pastoral construct is not even based on narrative synchronicity as it springs from retro-cognitive reenactment or recollection of a theoretically idyllic time. The perception is all the more put into question as it is triggered during a time of great emotional distress when the protagonist finds himself isolated in a hole of meager expectations, a personalized autarchic Purgatory he can call his own. Turning our attention to the details that matter in our protagonist's lost Paradise; we distinguish a proclivity towards the glorification of nature and its resources for life, youth and regeneration. Cosmologically he prefers the discretion and delicate mysteries of the moon to the power and harsh truths of the sun. There is an unmistakable Romantic element here, celebrating the darling buds of innocent love, treading on roads which are gracefully forbidden, hoping, dreaming at magical encounters beyond vaguely distant bridges. His recollection of that blessed space is a full-fledged return to innocence, to a time and space when his heart wound pound out of his chest going past the girls' dormitories, where love was above all spiritual laced with just the shy intent of carnality. This idyllic retreat is aesthetically relevant only to the protagonist, as a detached, pragmatic reading would only see normal natural elements, a cottage for Home Economics and even an insane asylum.

The solid counter-arguments that there is nothing magical or beautiful about the young man's world cannot be overlooked, yet we must bear in mind that the whole imagery is the unsullied product of the soul and the soul itself is trans-temporal and able to transcend spatial borders. We have inside us the breath of God Himself and therefore the connection between man and the heaven he had once been a part of cannot be fully severed. We hold within us a spark of divinity and this allows us to shape our external universe through the strength of our

internal fortitude. It is said that a child can find beauty in pretty much everything and this assertion is absolutely truthful. As we grow older and fall prey to the tyranny of sin we become jaded, emotionally compromised, and almost mechanical in our endeavors. We gradually learn to overlook the crown of wonders around us and use our minds to crush the joys of unconditional surrender to innocence. Ellison does not concur with Emerson's tendency to idealize and generate perfect versions of humans and untouched behavioral ethics.

Thus we trace Fate, in matter, mind, and morals. – in race in retardations of strata, and in thought and character as well. It is everywhere bound or limitation. But Fate has its lord; limitation its limits; is different seen from above and from below; from within and from without. For though Fate is immense, so is power, which is the other fact in the dual world, immense. If Fate follows and limits power, power attends and antagonizes Fate. (Emerson, 1889: 360)

Sadly enough any transcendent experience is short lived in connection with the harsh realities of human condition. Just like Adam before him the invisible man will be forced to accept his Fate and abandon Paradise, head towards the great unknown. His expulsion is subtly suggested through the utilization of the symbol of the apple: "Something tinkled against the porch and I picked it up, gazing at it from time to time. It was a hard red apple stamped out of tin." (Ellison, 1995:53). Accessing the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge will automatically entail a forfeiture of his educational benediction yet we must consider the true nature of his action. His only sin is that of exposing the truth about the respectable Mr. Norton and his legacy of shame in a world of injustice controlled by the cruelty of evil men. The wealthy white Northerner is not to be regarded as an empty shell of a man, an over-vilified demonic spawn dispossessed of love and desire for beauty and redemption. He too had had his version of Heaven, his personal corner of redemption but through no other fault than his own he had torn it all asunder. His paradise was not a when or a where, it was a who - his daughter:

There is another reason, a reason more important, more passionate and, yes, even more sacred than all the others," he said, no longer seeming to see me, but speaking to himself alone. "Yes, even more sacred than all the others. A girl, my daughter. She was a being more rare, more beautiful, purer, more perfect and more delicate than the wildest dream of a poet. I could never believe her to be my own flesh and blood. Her beauty was a well-spring of purest water-of-life, and to look upon her was to drink and drink and drink again . . . She was rare, a perfect creation, a work of purest art. A delicate flower that bloomed in the liquid light of the moon.

A nature not of this world, a personality like that of some biblical maiden, gracious and queenly. I found it difficult to believe her my own ... (Ellison, 1995: 42)

His daughter was indeed his religion, an innocent and powerless goddess-like figure he considered to hold sacred value. The word sacred is deliberately produced twice to stress the nature of his fatherly admiration. Her beauty is professed via numerous methods of description of emphasis; she is even awarded elemental status linking her to water and pure life. The moon motif is once again utilized to maximum effect affording the girl a connection to the cosmos itself. Through the eyes of her father she is no less worthy than the pure maidens of the Bible; somewhat suggesting that God Himself was watching over her with infinite love and protective grace. Yet in spite of all that, she was nothing but a pile of bones in a theoretically expensive casket rotting somewhere on consecrated ground, in a cemetery of her father's choosing. One hypothesis would be that God loved her so much He wanted her back in Heaven and therefore called her name a little bit earlier than expected. But the world of *Invisible Man* is not the realm of fairytales, and the horrible truth is that she had fallen prey to her father's twisted love. Norton's connection to Trueblood and the impact the black man's story of incest has on him is a dead giveaway of the respectable white man's dark side of sexual abomination and murder against his own flesh and blood. Norton is worse than Trueblood because the black man was at least admitting guilt, he was somewhat repentant, humble and he had not claimed his daughter's life. The same cannot be said for Norton who chooses to hide behind the mask of respectability and status, and not just run from his sin but ignore it altogether. He was responsible for the destruction of his Paradise.

There are two very distinct ritualistic methods of recounting incest referring to the tales of Norton and Trueblood. The first perpetrator opts for a solemn approach, admitting to nothing, yet he encrypts the truths in a series of insinuations and associative assertions which blatantly expose his true nature. His discourse does indeed contain some elements of guilt but he by no means accepts responsibility for being the source of his daughter's condition; he just utters a bit of self-criticism absurdly theorizing he could have helped her more. To put it in a nutshell he felt unrest at being unable to heal her from the malediction he had inflicted, he felt no guilt or at least did not admit to any for destroying her in the first place. In a world where rich individuals constantly surround themselves with yes men, Norton has the grotesque audacity to view himself as some sort of victim and expect those around him to comfort him or empathize with him:

‘She was too pure for life,’ he said sadly; ‘too pure and too good and too beautiful. We were sailing together, touring the world, just she and I, when she became ill in Italy. I thought little of it at the time and we continued across the Alps. When we reached Munich she was already fading away. While we were attending an embassy party she collapsed. The best medical science in the world could not save her. It was a lonely return, a bitter voyage. I have never recovered. I have never forgiven myself. Everything I’ve done since her passing has been a monument to her memory.’ He became silent, looking with his blue eyes far beyond the field stretching away in the sun. (Ellison, 1995:43)

Norton’s speech is viciously deceptive and brutally arrogant, piercing through to the very moral marrow of the readership. He twice claims his daughter was too pure for the world we live in, somehow suggesting that there is some kind of upside to her demise. There can never be a glass-half- full mentality when it comes to the death of an innocent human being. The truth was she was indeed pure but defenseless and the evil inside him had inadvertently or possibly even deliberately sought to obliterate that irreplaceable beauty. He had become the Reaper for his own flesh and blood; he had sacrificed her on a slab of his own darkness and spiritual weakness. With respect to the manner in which he communicates with the invisible man we can’t help but be appalled by the arrogance of topographic enlistments. He talks of Italy, Munich, the Alps or sailing around the world to a man who had suffered the indignity of a racially degrading Battle Royal for the right to study in Sweet Home Alabama. He mixes vague compulsions of guilt with the Luciferian arrogance of someone who claimed to have put the world at his daughter’s feet but somehow it had not been enough. A summary inventory of the allocation of words employed to suggest feelings of pity and victimization concludes that Norton is centered on how the tragedy affected him personally rather than the impact it had on his daughter. He should be suffocating in self-loathing, instead he believes that through some meager deeds of philanthropy he can honor the memory of his daughter.

Trueblood is himself a corruptor of innocence and destroyer of youth but what differentiates him from Norton is his genuine desire to repent and make amends. The gravity of his grotesque deed is also toned down by the fact that he possesses limited mental functions linked to a primal formula of expression, and also the very real possibility he may not have been aware of his actions as a result of dreamscape confusion:

Won't nobody speak to me, though they looks at me like I'm some new kinda cotton-pickin' machine. 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, way early in the mornin', I looks up and sees the stars and I starts singin'. I don't mean to, I didn't think 'bout it, just start singin'. I don't know what it was, some kinda church song, I guess. (Ellison, 1995:65)

An indispensable difference between Norton and Trueblood is that the black man is not afforded the luxury of getting away with what he has done. Throughout his community he becomes ostracized, a marked man sharing partial similarities with the destiny of the biblical villain Cain. The contribution of the dream element in the equation opens the door to a series of theories regarding regression to a primal, tribal self, a trans-temporal journey to an ancient time when his action may not have been taboo or frowned upon. The hypothesis of mystical participation cannot be entirely negated as the dreams are a known facilitator of communication and transport between our world and the realm of the supernatural. His inability to pray may very well entail some sort of demonic involvement (possession or just torment), however the evidence to support this assertion is limited to this singular element. There is an inner struggle inside him between good and evil, between a genuine admission of guilt and the rejection of any wrongdoing, an inward skirmish which is finally settled by a surprising intervention of divine musical redemption. Trueblood's ability to once again commune with God is indicative of a symbolic absolution indicating that no man is beyond God's reach and mercy no matter how heinous the crime, as long as he repents and asks for divine clemency.

While acknowledging and somehow appreciating the sinner's genuine willingness to offer himself freely like a lamb to the slaughter in order to make amends for his grave ethical and spiritual transgression Ellison abruptly fragments Trueblood by comparing his offering with the greatest sacrifice in the history of creation, that of Jesus Christ. Trueblood admits to being a weak flawed, man and this humility is perhaps a redeeming factor in his ultimate salvation. Through pain comes purification and the wound he receives appears to generate some great ease and equanimity. The fact that Jim Trueblood has abandoned any and all

Luciferian arrogance, associating himself with an inferior being on the tiers of creation is yet another vector of redemption working in his favor. He views himself as a crushed, beaten down dog and even the positioning of the tail seems to suggest meekness and humbleness. He considers himself unworthy of God's love and grace and only such a clean state of spiritual modesty could facilitate the divine resources able to free him from his abominable burden. The second blow of the axe is not permitted to occur as the sacrosanct hand of God stops the wife Kate from the taking of life. The Lord's holy intervention in order to avert the execution of a man, though not directly evident and initiated within vastly differential circumstances does indeed resemble the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac where God stops Abraham from ending the life of his son.

The biblical associations do not stop here as they confer meaning to the spilling of blood, vengeance and judgment in Ellison's novel. Referring to God's interdiction to spill blood we are made aware that: "Whoever sheds man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed: for in the image of God made He man." (Genesis 9:6). Vengeance and judgment should also be left outside the realm of our limited intellectual jurisdiction: "Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, says the Lord." (Romans 12:19), while on the issue of judgment it is stated: "Judge not, that you be not judged." (Matthew 7:1). The whole ordeal of incest and the need for punishment is finalized by an irresistible need to return to the wisdom of God. Kate displays outward despair and invokes divinity twice, struck by the realization that she had been so close to committing a mortal sin that was in no way equipped or authorized to deal with her husband's carnal crime.

The Jim Trueblood incident possesses not one but two main pylons of social and spiritual disgust. Putting the obvious repugnant nature of the incest aside we are compelled to notice and dutifully analyze the shocking reaction of the God fearing white folks of the community:

Things got to happenin' right off. The niggahs up at the school come down to chase me off and that made me mad. I went to see the white folks then and they gave me help. That's what I don't understand. I done the worse thing a man could ever do in his family and instead of chasin' me out of the county, they gimme more help than they ever give any other colored man, no matter how good a niggah he was. Except that my wife an' daughter won't speak to me, I'm better off than I ever been before [...] But what I don't understand is how I done the worse thing a man can do in his own family and 'stead of things gittin' bad, they got better.

The niggahs up at the school don't like me, but the white folks treats me fine. (Ellison, 1995: 67)

The world around the sharecropper appears to make no sense. It is as if he is living in a bizarre world where moral values are ferociously overturned, and his fellow blacks generate the only viable resource for normal Homo sapiens behavior. The whites' commendation of his grotesque act may initially come across as lacking analytical and argumentative structure but if we are to call upon a justificatory methodology based on extreme racism we will reach the conclusion that everything adds up. The whites of the community adore Trueblood because his despicable action confirms their extremist ideologies concerning racial inferiority and the soul-deprived bestiality of black people. Their patterns of absurd illogicality not only reject the fundamental core of the Christianity they so fondly profess and boast with, they flirt with a dangerously-lurking mutation of over-pragmatic Satanism. To arbitrarily and unjustly reject an essential part of God's creation for displaying a so-called inferiority, to view some of thy neighbors as *untermenschen* is a substantial indication of strong tumor of evil and hatred growing inside the members of that white community.

We cannot overlook a regression to a tribal, pre-spiritual time when survival meant the killing or neutralization of that which was different from the members of your pack by any and all means necessary. Returning to current social and spiritual expressiveness Ellison uses his narrative to take a stand against racism and the proliferation of evil; it tries to counteract the jaded schadenfreude of some whites who expect to earn some sort of tribal validation and distasteful sense of accomplishment based on the misfortunes of their accursed rivals.

I heard the high thin laugh again. "You're nobody, son. You don't exist – can't you see that? The white folk tell everybody what to think – except men like me. I tell them; that's my life, telling white folk how to think about the things I know about. Shocks you, doesn't it? Well, that's the way it is. It's a nasty deal and I don't always like it myself. But you listen to me: I didn't make it, and I know that I can't change it. But I've made my place in it and I'll have every Negro in the country hanging on tree limbs by morning if it means staying where I am." (Ellison, 1995:143)

In stark opposition to Trueblood, we are made aware that religion can also play a pivotal role in comprehending a possible logic of sacrifice in the decision making process of Tod Clifton. He treads down the path of martyrdom by taking upon himself the humiliations and

stereotypes his people had been plagued with for centuries and in an act of bravery he confronts the enforcers of unjust authority:

Alter ego, a man whose integrity leaves nothing out. It is Tod, not the narrator, who opposes Ras, but at the same time admits to being tempted by his emotionally releasing rage; and it is Tod who turns, as the last act of his life, against the authority which has always opposed and oppressed him. It is Tod, then, as has been shown, who carries the black identity, and the human dilemma; he may be the vicarious bearer of the narrator's repressed identity. (Wilner, 1970: 256)

The world of the novel finds substantial crediting in the holy word of the Bible: "Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity." (Ecclesiastes 1:2). The universe of *Invisible Man* and perhaps even the world we live in today is a world which is profoundly deprived of verity. The truth is our instrument for freedom according to Jesus Christ, but as long as it is in the hands of the iniquitous and the vile we can never truly be free. At times the truth is known to us but it is useless as it is unofficial and unrecognized by forces outside our constitutional jurisdictions. Bledsoe describes a world where the wealthy are not only the gatekeepers to our destinies, but also the proliferators of our twisted sentimental education. His discourse achieves brutally grotesque borders by ideologically aligning itself to putrid thought methodologies which predicate that if you repeat a lie often enough, it becomes the truth. The power of Bledsoe's dark deception and the authority of evil in general reside in an innovative, intricate new mechanism of delivering lies. Repeated exposure to evident lies has made certain intelligent individuals impervious to the smoke of ideological deceit. As a consequence a new method of lying has been devised based on the deliberate delivery of sacrificed essential truths.

Ralph Ellison perceives Fate as an elemental manifestation of nature itself. While avoiding arbitrary justifications of restorative causality, the author recalibrates the functionalities of destiny so as to incorporate complex meanings within unstoppable natural symbolism. Nadel decrypts this methodology and asserts that:

Fate is Nature, which is good, and failure to see that good in any given event is the failure of human understanding to penetrate the underlying natural cause. [...] The implication here is that all human remedy and redress is attitudinal. Some may regard this as rationalizing, but that may not be a bad choice for problems which admit no other solution. (Nadel, 1988: 113)

Throughout the development of the novel Ellison utilizes a systematization based on oppositional, counteractive ideological symmetry. For every factor of relevant generative action there is an equal and opposite reaction. Every idea good or bad is balanced out and criticism is mostly achieved via irony or indirect discrediting based on viable, substitutive argumentative structures. The novel's protagonist is a powerhouse in terms of positive energies and the author allocates an uncanny mélange of villains in order to counteract, neutralize or even convert him to the proverbial dark side of the force. A pivotal structure of evil masterminds exists behind the intended destruction of our hero, doing evil's handy work above and beyond the call of duty. The proliferation of this effective propaganda will eventually fail in the case of our protagonist and he will rise up against the coming storm fully aware that what does not kill you is bound to make you stronger.

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