The Acts of an Oedipus: Power, Language, and Sacrifice in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

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> In our analysis, the rhetoric of mastery is derivative of the primary form of rhetoric, which emerges from the periphery as a denunciation of those who usurp the center: the outsider, or the collectivity of outsiders, undermines the position of the insider. By the basic geometry of the center-periphery opposition, rhetoric is a "majoritary" phenomenon; the peripheral denouncers are more numerous than their central targets. But the essential features of the circle are derived from those of the mimetic triangle, where numbers are irrelevant. . . . The rhetoric of mastery retains the fundamental geometry of the mimetic triangle. . . (Eric Gans, *Signs of Paradox* [176])

> I was forced to [an] awareness [of my relation to American society as a whole] through my struggles with the craft of fiction; yes, and by my attraction (soon rejected) to Marxist political theory, which was my response to the inferior status which society sought to impose on me (I did not then, now, or ever consider myself inferior). I did not know my true relationship to America . . . but I did know and accept how I felt inside. And I also knew, thanks to the Renaissance Man, what I expected of myself in the matter of personal discipline and creative quality. . . . I rejected all negative definitions imposed on me by others. (Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* [XXI-XXII])

Ralph Ellison, novelist and essayist, could both see color and see through it. It was more important, finally, to see through it, he decided. Formed intellectually in the middle decades of the twentieth century, Ellison approached the phenomenon of race by demoting it, by insisting that the dignity of the individual outweighed the mess of ascriptive designations by which, increasingly, this or that ideological dispensation sought to define–and to restrict–the human being. In articulating his case for individual dignity, Ellison explored a number of explicitly anthropological themes, not least the centrality of language in the constitution of humanity and the dependency of undifferentiated or primitive communities on rituals of

sacrifice. Like a number of his contemporaries, Ellison sensed that modernity was in many ways a cultural atavism, in which hard-earned truths about justice and liberty were threatened by the seductions of myth, scapegoating, and transient solidarity wrought by hysterical masses at the expense of arbitrarily selected victims. Beginning in the mid-1940s, Ellison began the composition of a novel based on his sense that ethical progress required the acknowledgment above all of the individual, not exactly in the abstract, but outside the categories that clamored to subsume him. And yet, in Ellison's analysis, any awareness of the sanctity of discrete persons depended (quite tragically, perhaps), on a prior historical experience of domination. Before the new generation might be liberated from the structures of bondage, those structures must have existed, and must have produced, over a long period, the heightened contradictions that throw injustice into relief and permit its abolition. The story of freedom can only begin in the description of enslavement. But who is enslaved? And how, before tasting liberty, does he grasp his servitude?

2

Expelled from the Eden of the southern black college where he studies to be an engineer, the protagonist of Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1947) finds himself naked and helpless in that modern city-of-the-plain, New York, where every outsider, it appears, runs the risk of being someone else's victim and where the way "inside," the way to social integration and economic prosperity, either remains a mystery or stands arbitrarily blocked. The very notion of the "inside" or the "outside" falls into confusion. The city is the site of a perpetual and probably unassuageable crisis: "Moving into the subway, I was pushed along by the milling salt-and-pepper mob" (*Invisible Man* 157). The word *milling* is carefully chosen, implying as it does the relentless undifferentiation of the individual as the mass absorbs and crushes him. The Invisible Man feels "shock and fear" (159). His expectations do not match the stream of novel sights and encounters. Who belongs to what category, who is "in" and who is "out," and to which of the categories is it most advantageous to belong? Something so simple as a casual stroll down the sidewalk can provoke these dilemmas. The one who thinks himself "inside" discovers that he has been "outside" all along, and that the insiders plan on keeping him there until, finally, the scorned individual retains himself only, his ego a bastion against revilement by the world, its sovereignty peculiarly affirmed by the hostility ranged against it. It is a strange modification, not quite an inversion, of Emerson's idea of Self-Reliance: The Self-Reliance of the subject under siege, a mild form of paranoia, a neurotic tic as an adaptation to inimical conditions. Thus Ellison compares his protagonist, "ever so distantly," as he carefully puts it, "with the narrator of *Dostoevsky's Notes from the Underground"* (*IM* xix), one of the founding statements of that modern dilemma of the individual versus the system. Existence, according to Ellison, amounts to a great fatal labyrinth whose purpose, nothing less than the sacrifice of dignity to power, cannot be defeated by a contrary power, but only by guile, a kind of casuistry, in combination with moral integrity and a clever tongue. (And it would be hard to say which trumps which, morality or cleverness. "Let not the left hand know what the right hand doeth" seems to be

the appropriate formula.) As the ultimate minority is the minority of one, no one can avoid becoming enmeshed in one sacrificial trap after another, so that survival (psychic survival, at least) depends on the victim's discovery of how to overcome the particularly devious sacrificial trap of unwitting collaboration with one's persecutors. An individual's most insidious sacrificer, in the world of *Invisible Man,* is invariably himself; and the "pulverized individual" of the modern age does not salvage himself from sin, Ellison writes, "through his identification with the guilty acts of an Oedipus, a Macbeth or a Medea . . . but [rather] with those who are indeed defeated" (*Shadow and Act* 40). Ellison invokes metaphors of the bull in the arena or the fish on the line (40) to make his point.

Expulsion and isolation together constitute a trial by means of which the subject transcends his persecution and grows stronger. Ellison never calls it *Imitatio Christi,* but that is what it is in effect. Preparing for his first full day in the city, the Invisible Man thinks back on a homely image: "Family prayer . . . gathering around the stove at mealtime and kneeling with heads bowed over the seats of our chairs" (162). Finding a Gideon Bible in his room at the Men's House, he picks it up with the thought of reading in Genesis, but is too distracted by his desperation to do so. In his fascinating essay, "On Initiation Rites and Power" (1969), Ellison writes, apropos of *Invisible Man,* that "the narrator of the story goes through a number of rites of passage, rites of initiation," many of them physically dangerous and spiritually harrowing, with the result that he "achieve[s] a sense of self-consciousness through [his] own efforts" (*Going to the Territory* 40).

One such "rite" is the gruesome "Battle Royal." On the promise that it entails a college scholarship, the teenaged Invisible Man (in his "pre-invisible days" [*IM* 18]) enters what he believes to be a speaking engagement at a white businessman's club. When he shows up for the event, however, he discovers that, before he or anyone else speaks, he will have to don boxing gloves and duke it out, blindfolded, with a group of black toughs. The businessmen have set up a ring in the center of the dining hall. The atmosphere is gladiatorial and orgiastic. Before the fight, for example, the businessmen make the protagonist and his compeers watch a lewd performance by a blonde stripper, which shocks and humiliates them. In the perverse ethos of Jim Crow, it also sets them up, because it embroils them willy-nilly in a racial-sexual scenario in which they fill the role of lascivious onlookers. On the street, should any of them stare at a white woman, stripper or *bourgeoise*, he would run the risk of accusation and be under the lethal threat of the outraged mob. It is a formula for lynching. Structurally, then, the Invisible Man and his companions in the *imbroglio* would seem to be ocular abusers of the stripper, but of course they themselves form the real object of exploitation, as the businessmen, with lusty amusement, watch them watching the ecdysiast. One circle is contained within another. The fight itself is a bloody *mêlée,* anticipating the race-riot at the novel's climax:

> Everyone fought hysterically. It was complete anarchy. Everybody fought

> everybody else. Two, three, four, fought one, then turned to fight each other, were themselves attacked. Blows landed below the belt and kidney, with the gloves open as well as closed, and with my eye partially opened now there was not so much terror. . . . The smoke [from the cigar-smoking onlookers] was agonizing and there were no rounds, no bells at three minute intervals to relieve our exhaustion. The room spun around me, a swirl of lights, smoke, sweating bodies surrounded by tense white faces. I bled from both nose and mouth, blood spattering on my chest. (23)

3

Ellison creates a remarkably vivid image of the Girardian *crise sacrificielle.* "It was complete anarchy" and "everybody fought everybody else." The perfume of tobacco smoke sanctifies the spectacle like a wafting of incense and makes it all the more ritualistic. The *swirling* quality of the mix-up anticipates the metaphor of *milling* later applied to the scene of the Invisible Man's first day in New York. After the fight, the men invite the boxers to pick up their money, in the form of coins which they have scattered over the floor. When he grabs the first coin, however, the Invisible Man gets a nasty shock: The carpet has been electrified to provide additional entertainment for the gleeful audience. Bloodied and dazed and with no one listening, the Invisible Man nevertheless gives his speech.

Surprisingly, in the essay on initiation rites, Ellison describes the cruel joke in other than denunciatory terms. On the one hand, the "Battle Royal" constitutes "a rite which could be used to project certain racial divisions into the society and reinforce the idea of white racial superiority. On the other hand, as a literary person trying to make up stories out of recognizable experience, and as one who was reading a lot about myth and the function of myth and ritual in literature, it was necessary that I see the . . . situation as something more than a group of white men having sadistic fun with a group of Negro boys" (*GT* 49-50). Understood as the equivalent in a deritualized age of a "rite," Ellison argues, the "Battle Royal" corresponds to a type of practical joke known as a Fool's Errand, and such jokes fulfill the function, in a progressively deritualized society, of jolting the naive out of their naivety. They insult in the way that strengthens–of which phenomenon Ellison elsewhere eloquently speaks. Neither Ellison nor his Invisible Man wallows in the pity of the experience: both comprehend it under the notions of awakening and spiritual growth. (Forced growth, certainly, but growth nevertheless: *Was mich nicht umbringt,* as a certain hammer-wielder once said.) That is not to justify the affront, but rather to assimilate it to something positive and to wrest it from the intentions of those who stage it. "To become less–in order to become more" (354) is Ellison's formula. In a social world that conspicuously lacks explicit rituals, but which seems to be in the thrall of implicit ones, such diminutions of assumed status have an almost occult importance: to cull from the victim a disposition which is the opposite of victimary. The Invisible Man thus avoids the temptation

of what Eric Gans calls *victimary rhetoric,* that claim of "exclusion from the center" (*Signs of Paradox* 177) that has gradually become the dominant discourse of contemporary Western society. The Invisible Man appears to understand that, in Gansian terms, "the rhetoric of invidious comparison belongs to the context of social revolution" (177), whereas what he wants is not to overthrow the existing order by organized mass revenge, but simply the dignity of his independence from the mimetic mandates of the collective.

Significantly, Ellison at first conceived a superficially quite different novel concerning the trials of a black airman shot down behind German lines who becomes the ranking officer and therefore the *de jure* spokesman for the mass of other POWs. Part of the prisoner's struggle, as Ellison explains, would have consisted in his agonized attempt to receive, from those whom he outranked, acknowledgment of his actual merit while they–their perception deformed by color-prejudice–refused to make the (necessarily verbal) acknowledgment of that merit. Ellison crowds *The Invisible Man* with obvious Hegelian imagery, and his treatment of consciousness, although tricked out in Emersonian phraseology, derives from the Master-Slave dialectic in the *Phenomenology.*"Self-consciousness," as Hegel puts it, "exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged":

> The Notion of this its unity in its duplication embraces many and varied meanings. Its moments, then, must on the one hand be held strictly apart, and on the other hand must in this differentiation at the same time also be taken and known as not distinct, or in their opposite significance. The twofold significance of the distinct moments has the nature of self-consciousness to be infinite, or directly the opposite of the determinateness in which it is posited. (111 [Section 178])

As Ellison himself avowed autobiographically *apropos* of literary creation: "One ha[s] to be conscious" (*GT* 40), where *consciousness* means acknowledging the world, and where it especially means acknowledging the high-cultural world of letters in which insight about the anthropological verities is most carefully recorded. The Invisible Man's speech after the "Battle Royal" consists almost entirely of clichés, but these at least indicate that he is not an illiterate. He has set down his taproots, so to speak, in the intellectual soil. As consciousness is temporal and historical, the dialogue with the other that it requires must embrace those voices out of the past that are, in their peculiar way, the only thing that we know. In the ur-scenario for *Invisible Man,* the white POWs refuse to acknowledge their black superior; in modernity, with its conceit of originality, novelty, and autonomy, the present consciousness refuses to acknowledge the past consciousness. The delusion of self-sufficiency is, indeed, the very negation of consciousness; and at its center lies the implicit annihilation of the mass of previous persons. Since all knowledge is rooted in the past, discarding the tradition

is also the model of stupidity. Denial and stupidity go together in the Ellisonian scheme.

4

Invisible Man is a novel about truth, an attempt to represent the verities of the actually existing world. What might be called the ontologically pre-given world (the world before and despite theory) is whatever exists prior to perception and prior to evaluation (the excellence of a man, for example, or the evil of another); but truth in the human sense does not become truth until it finds precise verbal expression about which there is reasoned agreement in conformance with what is ontologically pre-given. Once that is achieved, truth only remains truth if it does not become a mere proposition. Ethical language, for Ellison, is language that remains in contact with the world. The existential problem that Ellison sets himself in *Invisible Man* is, then, precisely the problem of "conscience and consciousness" (xix) and the ability of the "hyperconscious [individual] to articulate the issues which [have] tortured [him]" (xix). Language, Ellison argues, ought to be the living medium of truth, of self-discovery, of friendship, and of reasoned communal bonds; but it has become, instead, the turbid medium of lies and the abused utensil of cynical power-seekers like those in the Brotherhood (of which more later), who traduce the protagonist in the second half of the tale. "For if the word has the potency to revive and make us free," Ellison writes in an essay on "Twentieth Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity," it can likewise "blind, imprison and destroy" (*GT* 24). Betrayed in turn by the president of his college, by the low-level managers of the paint factory where he finds his first job, and finally by the inhuman machinations of the Brotherhood (which exploits him, ironically, for his ability to speak), Ellison's hero becomes a universal figure standing for the struggle, in the twentieth century, between individual dignity and the systematic power of the ideological state or party. Ideology, by its nature, consistently sacrifices the actual to the potential, the existent to the non-existent. No area of life remains untouched by this struggle, not even those areas in which the quest for truth is nominally the commission.

Like all forms of rhetoric, ideology stems from an unassimilated resentment; it constitutes, as Gans has written, an "antidemocratic inversion of the Hegelian master-slave dialectic" entailing "terrible consequences" because "its real target is not the slave at all, nor even his proletarian counterpart, but his bourgeois employer" (189). Ellison knows what Gans knows. In the latter's words, there is "violence latent in this inversion" (189). The slave may rise up and subdue his master, but that does not institute justice; it merely reverses the roles. One must beware the seduction in the promise of liberation because envy given license becomes a quest for absolute revenge against the putative oppressors:

> The bourgeoisie is unfit any longer to be the ruling class of society, and to impose its conditions of existence upon society as an over-riding law. It is unfit to rule because it is incompetent to assure an existence to its slave within his slavery,

> because it cannot help letting him sink into such a state, that it has to feed him, instead of being fed by him. Society can no longer live under this bourgeoisie, in other words, its existence is no longer compatible with society. (Marx, *Communist Manifesto* 93)

As always in *myth,* what begins as critique ends up as accusation–and worse, as a call for annihilation. *Ecrasez l'infâme!* The Communist order that ultimately supersedes the bourgeois or capitalist order will be a paradise of equality and creativity, but it will remain founded upon "the vanishing of capital" (100). The family, as Marx says, "will vanish" along with the insult of property. The nastiness lies concealed under the useful vagueness of the verb *to vanish.* Revolutionary theory amounts, in Marx's rhetoric, to "a new social Gospel" (116), but one which despite the euphemism will be founded on murder.

5

Not all ideologies are ideologies of the Left, although they are invariably collectivist in character. The secondary reality of utopian doctrine can manifest itself on the Right as Fascism or the *Caudillo* state or, as is sometimes the case, in politically neutral garb. Once, as the story goes, there was Camelot, or the Golden Age. Once there was innocence. Then catastrophe happened and the long decline into disorder began. Or, in a variant of the tale, there was an illusion of innocence which was dispelled and about which the putatively disillusioned consciousness is now ambiguous. Ignorance, it weighs, might be bliss. Consider, for example, the brutally disrupted idyll of the Invisible Man's academic life. "It was a beautiful college," the Invisible Man reminisces: "The buildings were old and covered with vines and the roads gracefully winding, lined with hedges and wild roses that dazzled the eyes in the summer sun. Honeysuckle and purple wisteria hung heavy from the trees and white magnolias mixed with their scents in the bee-humming air" (34). So does the Invisible Man describe the outward form of his Eden. He uses a species of romantic imagery ("honeysuckle and purple wisteria") that might be drawn, say, from Margaret Mitchell, or some other Southern writer, an employment which itself makes the scene profoundly suspect. The beauty of the campus, which would seem to conduce to the intellectual development of the students, conceals a parochialism that turns out to be deliberately imposed and jealously guarded by Chancellor Bledsoe and the other officials of the institution. Tony Tanner has noted in "The Music of Invisibility" that as Ellison's protagonist "manages to extract himself from a series of fixed environments, so the author manifests a comparable suppleness by avoiding getting trapped in one style" (Bloom 48). I would emphasize the Invisible Man's changing perception rather than Ellison's shifting style. But the changes in tone, diction, and syntactical structure from section to section in the novel remain important. In his Introduction, Ellison insists on the "ironic" intellectual quality of his protagonist, whom he visualizes as a "blues-toned laugher-at-wounds who include[s] himself in his indictment of the human condition" (xviii). Indeed, then, the Invisible Man

intends the idyllic diction at the beginning of Chapter Two to denote a false perception, a delusion, which has since been rendered transparent. This does not preclude a genuine sense of loss, of course, but it insists on measuring the sweetness lost against the lucidity gained. When the train of memory reaches the limits of the campus, that point of transition "where the road turned off to the insane asylum" (35), the Invisible Man begins to underline the falseness of the foregone perception, or rather of the memory of that perception: "I always come this far [in the reminiscence]," he says, "and open my eyes" (35). After describing the contiguity of the campus and the local insane asylum, he remarks elegiacally that:

> It's so long ago and far away that here in my invisibility I wonder if it happened at all. Then in my mind's eye I see the bronze statue of the college Founder, the cold Father symbol, his hands outstretched in the breathtaking gesture of lifting a veil that flutters in hard, metallic folds above the face of a kneeling slave; and I am puzzled, unable to decide whether the veil is really being lifted, or lowered more firmly in place; whether I am witnessing a revelation or a more efficient blinding. (36)

In the context of the then-and-there, the implicit meaning of the statue is positive: education lifts the veil of ignorance from enthralled eyes so that, at last, they can see as eyes are meant to see. But a more powerful revelation comes into play to supersede the obvious one. The *opening of the eyes* in the profoundest sense has always been accompanied in Western literature by penetrating affliction, as in the case of Oedipus, for whom illumination is coincident with blinding and expulsion. In the context of the then-and-there, one accepts implicitly that, the veil of ignorance lifted, the "kneeling slave" will rise, to stand as an equal with the godlike Founder. Speaking of the august Founder (known by no other name), the college trustee Mr. Norton later says that "he had the power of a king, or in a sense, of a god" (45), a delivering god. Nevertheless, as a frozen image, the statue remains the depiction of a gross inequality: The genuflecting wretch who grovels beneath the erect Founder. From his "distance," Ellison's Invisible Man notes that, in its frozenness ("cold Father"), the image does not indicate its direction of movement. Is the veil being "lifted" or "lowered"? Is it a case of "revelation" or of "more efficient blinding"? If one means of Self-Reliance is, in Thoreau's term, *to front life directly,* is this what the slave will rise to do? Or will he merely front the Founder and so receive his ideas about life indirectly? The absurd conversation between the Invisible Man and Mr. Norton during the automobile ride that precipitates the former into his travails, bears on this. Norton wants the Invisible Man to tell him his "fate." "Only you can tell me what it really is" (42), Mr. Norton says. The trustee has also wished aloud that the Invisible Man might find for himself "a pleasant fate" (40). The invocation of that heavily weighted word, fate, reminds the Invisible Man of the classical notion of tragedy, where the cosmic dispensation takes the form of a destroying Ananke or

Nemesis. “How could anyone’s fate be pleasant? I had always thought of it as something painful. No one spoke of it as pleasant–not even Woodridge, who made us read Greek plays” (40).

6

In the *Oedipus,* Sophocles makes ironic use of the word *oida,* meaning both “to know” and (etymologically) “to see.” Oedipus seeks to know the identity of Laius’ murderer and through investigating the crime comes to know that the perpetrator is himself, whereupon, his eyes opened at last, he blinds himself and goes into exile from Thebes. What Oedipus thought of as real (his remoteness from the crime) has turned out, on close inspection, to be the very perfection of falsehood, for he is the criminal whom he has sought: When he had eyes, he was blind; and in the moment of knowledge, his every assumption about himself destroyed, he puts out his eyes as useless, depriving himself of the exterior vision. Thus Ellison’s allusion constitutes a sinister foreshadowing of the Invisible Man’s own unpleasant, but terribly insightful, fate. Destiny, in *Invisible Man,* consists paradoxically in the abdication of the self in favor of theories and ideologies about what one is or is supposed to be. One elects fate by rejecting oneself, by abdicating one’s moral will, by making some verbal formula one’s master. Ellison intends the statue of the Founder to represent fate in the form of man-made systems, even well-intentioned ones, that subsume the men who made them and issue not in liberation but in misery. The college itself forms part of such a system: although it was founded to fulfill the Emersonian program of Self Reliance, to make Americans out of ex-slaves, it actually functions to limit and restrain intellectual development. The black man is not delivered but preserved in the enchanting simulacrum of deliverance and therefore maintained in subjugation. Mr. Norton explains to the Invisible Man why his fate is important to him (to Norton): “You are important because if you fail I have failed by one individual, one defective cog” (45). In Mr. Norton’s eyes, the individual student is but a cog in the systematic machine; and once we have invoked machinery, we are close again to the metaphoric chain *milling* and *pulverization*. And what precisely does Norton forfeit if the Invisible Man should “fail”? The answer is not apparent. The statement seems purely rhetorical, a pious instance of self-assuagement. Like just about everyone else’s affirmations in the novel, Norton’s claim of charity turns out to be so much ideological double-talk. What he really believes in is not the reality of other people (or their dignity, which would follow), but the secondary reality of abstractions which demotes persons to “cogs” and makes a fetish of his own moral rectitude. The truth of the situation stands inadvertently revealed.

The Jim Trueblood episode underscores the “truth problem” that will soon turn Ellison’s protagonist into a scapegoat and drive him into exile, thus fulfilling the tragic program that the allusion to Greek drama has already anticipated. Trueblood is a sharecropper living near the college who has become notorious for a sexual assault on his own daughter. In a reductive but real sense, Trueblood is someone who tells the truth, in this case the truth

about his incestuous relation with his daughter. According to normative values, Trueblood should at the very least have become a pariah in the community; perhaps he should be charged, prosecuted, and, if convicted, punished. His wife thinks so; she vehemently berates him for his "wicked sin befo' the eyes of God" (67). Instead, however, he becomes the object of a perverse cult, supported by the local whites who find in his behavior the confirmation of their preformed and zealously held judgments about blacks. "That's what I don't understand," Trueblood says; "I done the worse thing a man could ever do in his family and instead of chasin' me out of the country, they gimme more help than they ever give any other colored man, no matter how good a nigguh he was. Except that my wife an' daughter won't speak to me, I'm better off than I ever was before" (67).

Mr. Norton, too, that follower of Emerson and trustee of the college, appears fascinated in a morbid and voyeuristic way by Trueblood's saga of incest. Immediately after hearing it, Mr. Norton announces to the Invisible Man his need for a "stimulant" (69), a strange way of referring to alcohol, whose effects are normally narcotic. The vet's words at the Golden Day, the bar-*cum*-brothel where Mr. Norton's craving for drink at last unluckily brings him, thus make a certain (insane) sense: "To some you are the great white father," the vet says to Norton, "to others the lyncher of souls, but for all, you are confusion come unto the Golden Day" (93). The vet, who prefigures what the Invisible Man will become (an ironist who at any rate *appears* insane to others), has a diagnosis for him, too, saying cryptically to Norton (and obliquely to the student) that the Invisible Man:

> has eyes and ears and a good distended African nose, but he fails to understand the simple facts of life. Understand. Understand? It's worse than that. He registers with his senses but he short-circuits with his brain. Nothing has meaning. He takes it in but he doesn't digest it . . . He's learned to repress not only his emotions but his humanity. He's invisible, a walking personification of the negative, the most perfect achievement of your dreams, sir! The mechanical man! (94)

So also has Doctor Bledsoe, the glowering, cynical President of the college, learned to repress his humanity. Acting like the tyrant that he is (the administrative personality filling the narrow limits of his office as though they were the walls of the universe itself), Bledsoe arbitrarily accuses the Invisible Man of having forgotten "how to lie" and then immediately chastises him for lying (139). Power, it seems, depends on a confusion of terms, on a certain distortion in the casual epistemology according to which people live their lives–and live them, in the main, successfully. Ellison suggests the etiology of Bledsoe's massive repression– the double racial standard intrinsic to Jim Crow–but the point is that *whatever its origin,* whether sociological, psychological, or economic, the repression still produces a

gross deformation, a pathology, and it eventuates in the radically unjust treatment–the betrayal, the denial–that Bledsoe metes out to the perfectly innocent young man. Bledsoe sacrifices the Invisible Man to power, to his (Bledsoe's) own power, and he says so quite explicitly during his combined tirade against and condemnation of the Invisible Man: "Negroes don't control this school," he catechizes, "nor white folks either. True, they support it, but I control it" (142). "Control" is the operative concept. Likening himself to the Founder, Bledsoe refers to himself royally (the Invisible Man is thus engaged in yet another "Battle Royal," this time with a black man, rather than white society, as his persecutor):

> I'm still the king down here. I don't care how much it appears otherwise. Power doesn't have to show off. Power is confident, self-assuring, self-starting and self-stopping, self-warming and self-justifying. When you have it, you know it. . . . When you buck up against me, you're bucking up against power, rich white folk's power, the nation's power– which means government power. (142)

The wronged youngster has threatened to publicize Mr. Norton's promise that no harm should befall him on account of the mishap at the Golden Day. Bledsoe tells the youngster that he can "go ahead, go tell [his] story" and so "match your truth against my truth" (144). Thus, along with the confusion of regular terms, power also insists on a radical relativism of claims. Truth becomes entirely perspectival, something to be imposed by *force majeure.* It all strikes the lad as a "disgusting sea of words" (144) and he echoes Pilate's ironic commentary on the trial of Jesus: "Truth, truth, what was truth?" (144). To complete his destruction of the erstwhile star-student, Bledsoe gives him the eight sealed letters which will insure the exile's incapacity when he arrives in New York, whither Bledsoe sends him on the false hope of his eventual return. But Bledsoe is one father who will not welcome home his prodigal son; he expels the Invisible Man irrevocably and the sorry emissary, cursed and foredoomed, shall never return. The Invisible Man, meanwhile, goes on playing the role of Oedipal scapegoat and self-immolating sacrifice: "Somehow, I convinced myself, I had violated the code and thus would have to submit to punishment" (147). Yet what the "code" might be has never adequately been explained except negatively through Bledsoe's sinister invocation of power, by which he seeks to realize his own possibilities at the expense of everyone else's. *Code* is Ellison's word for "theory" and for "ideology" insofar as these obfuscate reality and induce delusion in the subject. When Bledsoe refers to "*my* truth," rather than simply the truth, his aspiration toward the center at the expense of everyone on the periphery, his delusion of godhood, becomes obvious. Perhaps it is simply the case, as William Barrett has observed in *The Death of the Soul*, that power and possibility have assumed an ever more pronounced and dominant role in twentieth century thinking, until they have indeed become the dominant marks by which modern people would understand Being *in and of itself*, Being as *all that is*, including the *human* element in all that is. That, it might be said, is Bledsoe's ideology, however prettily or pragmatically he

puts it. In fact, he puts it brutally enough, but the whiff of justification hints at a certain unease in his declaration. Under this vision, the universe becomes nothing but a great Theater of Power in which the power-holder wishes to remain at center-stage. Anthropologically, this amounts to the arrogation by a single subject of the sign, which belongs, originarily, to the community as a whole. "The truth of the originary sign," Gans writes, "is the birth of the human":

> The sign is what protects the human community against its potential annihilation in mimetic conflict. In the face of this danger, its truth as a gesture of representation rather than a gesture of appropriation is not a foregone conclusion. It is only because the members of the originary community accepted this truth as the revelation of central Being that we are here to speculate about it. (42-53).

Bledsoe, usurping the unoccupied center, subverts the symmetry of the communal designation. He imitates the projected "central Being" whose presence guarantees reciprocal, hence peaceful, relations along the periphery. He imitates the master and can only sustain the imitation by coercing others to take the role of slave. This is the paradigm of the demonic.

The statue of the Founder, with its suggestion of the Hegelian Master-Slave dialectic later taken over by Marx, thus becomes the *Leitmotif* of Ellison's novel. If *Invisible Man's* first half, culminating in the expulsion, resembles the narrative of Paradise in Genesis, then the second half, culminating in the Harlem race-riot, fomented in large part by the Brotherhood, resembles a Dantesque *descensus,* a version of the Inferno in existential terms for the mid-twentieth century and still valid as a new century dawns. It also reminds us of the "Battle Royal" at the beginning of the novel, where the Invisible Man finds no succor in the Bible: "I turned to Genesis," he reports, "but could not read." If power is all, then truth is naught, and the Bible, despite its claims to revelation, is no longer truth, but mere verbiage. Morality disappears ("vanishes," as Marx would say), along with truth. In this context, we should contrast the figure of the Founder, towering over the slave, with the family image that the Invisible Man remembers in the moment when he finds that he cannot concentrate on Scripture–that of his father and mother and siblings *all* kneeling, with heads bowed, in prayer. They bow to no man, but to the victim-redeemer who renounces power and eschews any temporal kingdom.

Thus, in the context of racialized class-warfare and left-wing politics, Ellison's narrator finds that a certain Nietzschean prophecy has been fulfilled. Given that God is dead and that human existence amounts to no more than a ceaseless *bellum omnium contra omnes,* then

nothing remains but a coercive dissimulation of the misery. “A valid and obligatory designation of things is invented” which, enforced by the most powerful, others agree to obey; and when someone “abuses the fixed conventions,” perhaps by calling attention to their arbitrariness, “society will no longer trust him but exclude him”:

> What, then, is truth? [Nietzsche asks] A mobile army of metaphors, metonym[ies],and anthropomorphisms–in short, a sum of human relations,which have been enhanced, transposed, embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins. (The Portable Nietzsche 47)

Nietzsche is certainly cognizant of echoing Pilate, which ought to coax us not to take this widely current *aperçu* as endorsing what it describes. What it describes is the chaos that afflicts concepts, especially the ethical ones, when rhetoricians invoke the figures of power and class resentment. Thus do the college’s “Great Traditions” (37), which the Invisible Man formerly venerated, now appear to him under this type of revelation, as do indeed all institutions and the “sum of human relations,” as Nietzsche says. The Whitmanesque-elegiac passage following the initial description of the campus in Chapter Two refers to the protagonist’s disillusionment: “Oh, long green stretch of campus, Oh, quiet songs at dusk, Oh, moon that kissed the steeple and flooded the perfumed nights, Oh, bugle that called in the morning, Oh, drum that marched us militarily at noon–what was real, what solid, what more than a pleasant, time-killing dream?” (36). Note the metaphorical progression from Edenic verdancy, through the simple community implicit in choral song, to romantic visual imagery, and finally to military symbols like bugle and drum whose function is to transmit the signals of command. While it is true that the security of the college life has proven itself radically insecure, this does not mean, however, that the sum and total of the Invisible Man’s experiences there have been false. In dismissing it all as an unmitigated mendacity, he is being uncritical; he is allowing his resentment to revise his prior experience without any mitigation, and this amounts to a dissimulation of what in actuality must have been a complicated experience. But the point is that the injection of power-rhetoric into plain observation and casual reason deforms those activities and deprives the subject of stable concepts. Abused by a pervert (Bledsoe), the Invisible Man experiences a kind of ethical vertigo. Once again, is the Founder lifting the veil from the slave’s head or lowering it over him? By the time that he arrives in New York, the Invisible Man has come to suspect that he is lowering it, although he still naively clings to what he will later regard as an outmoded hope, namely, that he can rise by his own effort in a milieu that recognizes merit without reference to color. (Merit is a moral concept with no place in an order determined by

power.) He now indeed himself begins to employ military metaphors; ensconced in the Men's House, he says, "I began to plan my campaign for the next day" (163), a campaign–note the military, the *power* terminology–that is foredoomed to fail. Damned by Bledsoe's letters, which he foolishly disdains to inspect, he experiences one rejection after another until Emerson Junior reveals the crushing truth to him by showing him Bledsoe's declaration:

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> "The bearer of this letter is a former student of ours (I say former because he shall never again, under any circumstances, be enrolled as a student here again) who has been expelled for a most serious defection from our strictest rules of deportment.
>
> Due, however, to circumstances the nature of which I shall explain to you in person on the occasion of the next meeting of the board, it is to the best interests of the college that this young man have no knowledge of the finality of his expulsion. For it is indeed his hope to return here to his classes in the fall. However, it is to the best interests of the great work which we are dedicated to perform, that he continue undisturbed in these vain hopes while remaining as far as possible from our midst." (191)

Emerson Junior affirms that "you'll never return . . . There is no point in blinding yourself to the truth" (192).

But even Emerson Junior is out for something. His invitation to the Invisible Man to join his other "guests" at "the Calamus [Club]" is an overture to homosexual seduction. (Kerry McSweeney agrees [*Race and Identity* 71]). "Perhaps you'd like to be my valet?" the seducer asks. (192). The revelation, however, that the received values are false (in Nietzsche's sense) *is itself false*. The most indubitable truth is the ostensive truth, the *thing* or *condition* to which we point and which we all acknowledge. As Gans argues, propositional truths move us away from the immediacy of the ostensive, building up a linguistic reality that is "self-sufficient"; the proposition "locates the object within a linguistic model" (53) and so removes it from reality. Mischief occurs when the origin of the propositional object in the real world toward which we point loses its effectiveness. "Not only is language capable of misleading, but even when true, it constructs a fictional world separate from reality" (62). Ideology might well be described as the intensification of "deferral" to the point where the substrate of reality recedes into oblivion and a purely propositional reality takes its place. The discourses of power typically enact just such a break with reality. The Invisible Man, through no fault of his own save youth and confusion, tacitly accepts Bledsoe's claim that power is all and that he (Bledsoe) is the power. What is false is the claim that certain basic

intuitions, like the intuition that human relations ought to be reciprocal, correspond merely to palliative metaphors.

The only honest human being whom the Invisible Man meets on his disastrous first day in New York is the blues-singing push-cart man, who appears to take people as they are and to use language creatively and truthfully:

> "Well, daddy-o, it's been good talking with a youngster from the old country but I got to leave you now. This here's one of them good ole downhill streets. I can coast a while and won't be worn out at the end of the day. Damn if I'm a-let 'em run me into my grave. I be seeing you again sometime–And you know something?"
>
> "What's that?"
>
> "I thought you was trying to deny me at first, but now I be pretty glad to see you . . ." (175-76)

The theme of denial is once again Biblical or, more specifically, from the Gospels. To the Roman soldiers (at the behest of power), Simon Peter betrays the whereabouts of Christ and, in so doing, treats the non-arbitrary human relation as though it were arbitrary; this act leads directly to the death of Jesus on the Cross at Golgotha. The Invisible Man has himself been *denied* (a word whose root sense is "negation") by the falsely godlike Bledsoe; the push-cart man reveals to the Invisible Man that he, too, (the Invisible Man, that is), possesses the capacity to deny. But as the push-cart man affirms, the Invisible Man has not denied *him*. In treating the eccentric at least formally as a moral equal, the Invisible Man has observed the rule of reciprocity and has thus, if only tentatively, rejected the ideological substitute-reality of power, with its mandatory gesture of denial. This chance encounter, seemingly trivial, thus acquires major significance in Ellison's narrative, since it effectively models the (positive) situation which is typologically opposite to that which has thrust the Invisible Man into the New Babylon of *polemos* and deceit. Bledsoe despised the Invisible Man as something less than human (he calls him by the dehumanizing term *nigger* [139]) and wishes never to see him again. Bledsoe thus indulges in the exercise of unadulterated power, of *libido dominandi,* and becomes indistinguishable from the white authority behind Jim Crow. The push-cart man engages the exile in simple conversation, spiced by slang and song, and wishes (sincerely enough as one must believe) to see him again: "I be seeing you again sometime," he says, pushing his load of discarded blueprints down the street. But the model of open interaction, the blueprint for honest relations, remains unfulfilled. A promise of open relations is not the same as the establishment of them. Having exhausted his possibilities of upscale employment, the Invisible Man has recourse to the paint factory (the "Liberty" paint factory!) and ends up in the comic-hellish boiler room with the clownish

madman Lucius Brockway. If Mr. Norton had figured the Invisible Man as a "cog," then the Dantesque boiler-room seems to validate the metaphor. Like the workers in Fritz Lang's film *Metropolis*, which might well be one of the sources of Ellison's imagery, and where the social asymmetry is redeemed in the end by an act of charity, the Invisible Man's task is restricted to reading dials and twisting valves; he is little more than part of the machinery. The social structure at the paint factory grimly resembles that at the campus, as Ellison's protagonist latterly has come to understand it. The college has its Founder and the paint factory has its "Old Man" (208).

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The paint factory indeed has a legion of Old Men, from the alienating managers, to Brockway, to the Union members who, in one of the novel's many paradigmatic scapegoating scenes, arbitrarily and automatically treat the Invisible Man as an informer. Ellison once again poses the sacrificial question of the inside and the outside: "This fellow could be a fink, even if he was hired right this minute!" (221), the Union-members conclude in reference to the Invisible Man. The reasoning that they adduce to support the charge illustrates the breakdown in thinking that stems from the belief that power is all: "Maybe he ain't a fink . . . but brothers, I want to remind you that nobody knows it. . . . Hell, I've made a study of Finkism. Finkism is *born* into some guys" (221). Ellison stresses the spontaneous unanimity of the group, who assent volubly to the absurd allegations. Once again the Invisible Man becomes the object of "violent" (221) stares. He is the reviled center-of-attention.

The Invisible Man seems to have stepped into a position formerly occupied by Brockway, who works in the depths of the paint factory. Brockway is another eccentric, like the push-cart man, but he lacks friendliness; persecution has warped him until he shows as much hostility and self-absorption as Bledsoe. Bearing the signs of the scapegoat, he naturally attracts free-floating ire, and this warps him all the more. Brockway's cognomen of "Lucius" is, significantly, a classic slave-name, a Latin appellation imposed on his chattel by a master. The name is the mark of the master's power. Power corrupts, truly enough; it corrupts the perpetrator and the victim alike because it defers humanity for the sake of naked dominance.

Ellison hints at the psychic trauma that results in a phenomenon like Brockway. Abuse leads to confusion, a drastic breakdown of the ego. The Invisible Man himself endures something like this after the revelation of the content in Bledsoe's letter:

> I lay shaking with anger. It was no good. I thought of young Emerson. What if he'd lied out of some ulterior motive of his own? Everyone seemed to have some plan for me, and beneath that some more secret plan. What was young Emerson's plan–and why should it have included me? Who was I anyway? I tossed fitfully.

> Perhaps it was a test of my good will and faith–but that's a lie, I thought. It's a lie and you know it's a lie. I had seen the letter and it had practically ordered me killed. By slow degrees . . . (194).

It is on this occasion that he conceives the remainder of his life as "revenge." Brockway, too, moves between the two poles of humiliation and a desire for revenge, until those conditions finally set the limit to his consciousness. The old man sees all others as enemies and can find no opening into communion with his fellow men. He finally leaves the Invisible Man to die in a deliberately engineered explosion among the distillation equipment deep in the bowels of the factory. The Invisible Man remembers it later as "a fall into space that seemed not a fall but a suspension. Then a great weight landed upon me and I seemed to sprawl in an interval of clarity beneath a pile of broken machinery, my head pressed back against a huge wheel, my body splattered with stinking goo" (230). He is Norton's "cog," broken, he is Christ crucified, he is a slave stretched over a barrel, all at once. But he also intuits in it a "clear instant of consciousness" in which he "open[s] his eyes" (230). His electroshock therapy in the factory hospital confirms the vet's prediction that he would become, if he was not already, "a walking personification of the negative[,] a mechanical man!" (242)–and thus akin to a statue, to *the* statue, or rather to the portion of it that represents the slave. As always in Ellison's novel, insight springs from even as it is overwhelmed by humiliation.

Helped back toward health and sanity by Mary Rambo, his kindly landlady, the Invisible Man does not yet succeed in reintegrating himself with society (something which he in fact never quite does); he hardly even manages to reintegrate with himself (a capacity which he does possess). Mary belongs to the network of Gospel allusions that surfaces everywhere in Ellison's densely referential novel. She provides the exemplar of generosity and decency: "Other than Mary I had no friends and desired none. . . . Mary reminded me constantly that something was expected of me, some act of leadership, some newsworthy achievement; and I was torn between resenting her for it and loving her for the nebulous hope she kept alive" (258). Yet, in the moment, the Invisible Man remains oddly unaware of her. If wounding precedes strengthening, if we acquire consciousness through an offense to our dignity which arouses our resentment, the Invisible Man has not yet received a sufficient insult to have gained into the reality, the co-equality, of the other. He still imagines that *his* suffering is unique and fails to identify, metaphorically, with the bull in the arena or the fish on the line. He wanders the streets. He talks to himself. He is like some medieval fool setting himself on itinerant display. (And Ellison indeed invokes "the Fool's Errand," as we have seen.) But witnessing the eviction of the elderly couple by the marshals stimulates him to renewed consciousness and action. Eviction, a form of expulsion, is a mode of sacrifice, and it would be legitimate to say that sacrifice, the degree-zero of injustice, is the basis of the Invisible Man's consciousness once it springs forth out of his immiseration. Meanwhile a man in the crowd brandishes a weapon and threatens to shoot. The Invisible Man makes a speech. He calls on all parties to obey the "laws" (278), in both the moral and the legal

sense, law being the negation of power, a set of concepts to which everyone equally and convergently defers. The evictees have asked the police if they can spend fifteen more minutes inside their dispossessed apartment in order to pray there one last time. Their request, which the officials deny, links them to the familiar image that the Invisible Man remembers from his own childhood, of the family at prayer around the dinner table:

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> "Look at them [he says of the old couple], not a shack to pray in or an alley to sing the blues! They're facing a gun and we're facing it with them. They don't want the world, but only Jesus. They only want Jesus, just fifteen minutes of Jesus on the rug-bare floor. . . . How about it, Mr. Law? Do we get our fifteen minutes worth of Jesus? You got the world, can we have our Jesus?" (279)

Unfortunately, the Invisible Man also uses a spontaneous phrase–*what is to be done?*–which is the title of a notorious tract by Lenin, and this usage, as much as his nascent persuasiveness as a speaker, has the effect of drawing the sinister attention of the Brotherhood, who have infiltrated the crowd. (They have, as the Invisible Man says, an "ulterior motive.") The Brotherhood are, of course, the Communists, with whom Ellison, like so many other writers of his generation, had an early, later abrogated, relation. (Ellison's term is "rejected.") But their name links them to that other power-mongering conspiracy, the hooded brothers of the Ku Klux Klan, not imported but native to American shores: the proof of this is that, in the end, they take to lynching as readily and with as much monstrous gusto as their *lumpen* counterparts. In his projected earlier version of *Invisible Man,* according to Ellison himself, "the devil . . . was to have been a Machiavellian Nazi prison-camp official who spent his time pitting the black American against the white Americans" (*GT* 41). In the novel's realized form, the Brotherhood assumes this "Machiavellian" function. Brother Jack's initial conversation with the Invisible Man contains numerous indications of why Ellison rejected the ideas of revolution and class-warfare.

In the first place, Brother Jack's language conforms to a sacrificial, a mythic, rhetoric. Of the elderly couple being evicted from their apartment, Brother Jack says that "they're agrarian types" (290), or a class of people outmoded by history (whatever that might mean) on whom the Invisible Man "mustn't waste his emotions" (291). Marx, of course, had referred to *the idiocy of rural life,* and Lenin and Stalin had focused the early phases of the Soviet class-war against the *Kulaks,* the peasant-farmers. In the ideological dispensation of the Brotherhood, such people "don't count":

> [T]hey're already dead, defunct. History has passed them by. Unfortunately, but there's nothing to be done about them. They're like dead limbs that must be

> pruned away so that the tree may bear young fruit or the storms of history will blow them down anyway. Better the storm should hit them– (291)

Phrases like "the storms of history" and "there's nothing to be done" purge the situation of pathos and exempt potential interveners from *getting involved,* as one says. The old couple qualify only as "dead limbs," not again as *people* who have a fundamental claim on reciprocal relations with others. In refraining from his impulse to help them, the Invisible Man *denies* the charity advanced to him by the saintly Mary, who has nursed him back to health after the disaster in the paint factory. Ellison has invented a startling scene of false consciousness. The old ones are "incapable," says Brother Jack, "of rising to the necessity of the historical situation" (291). Note how the low-high, oblique-erect, metaphor in Brother Jack's diction corresponds formally to the *Leitmotif* of the Founder in relation to the slave. Is Brother Jack lifting the veil, or lowering it? If the Invisible Man feels fondly toward the old pair, Brother Jack claims, then he is "mistaken and sentimental" (291). What Brother Jack calls *history* (291) is the godlike abstract principle to which he is willing to offer other people, without compunction. But Brother Jack's implicit definition of the term *history* deserves examination, since it inverts the normative understanding of the concept. Normatively, history refers to the record of what has happened. History thus refers to the significant events that have shaped the present, that have resulted in the actual world, but it is not an agent or a force that itself acts; only men act, in varying degrees of incertitude about the future. But Brother Jack appears to mean by history a possibility that has not yet been realized, a known end, to attain which any means is permissible. The word *people*, too, is for Brother Jack a purely abstract term, since what he describes as "duty toward the people" necessitates the abandonment as "already dead" of individuals who remain, in fact, indubitably alive, often in dire straits. Then Czech dissident and later President Vaclav Havel once wrote, in an essay "On the Power of the Powerless" (1978), that it was a characteristic of totalitarian systems to treat power as though it were an anonymous force propitiated through dictatorially mandated ritual; in such societies "individuals are almost dissolved in the ritual," Havel argues, and the result is a kind of "automatism" (*Open Letters* 139-40). Everything is reduced to slogans, to mere words, and "all genuine problems and matters of critical importance are hidden beneath a thick crust of lies" (150). Endorsing the lie, a requirement of the system, conduces inevitably to a denial of the human. All of Brother Jack's, all of the Brotherhood's, terms are, in fact, instruments of *denial* both in the sense in which Ellison uses that term and in the sense in which Havel intends it in his description of Stalinist society in (then) Czechoslovakia. The Invisible Man's decision to work for the Brotherhood entails immediately that he should deny Mary, a woman to whom he owes a profound human debt. He must treat her as though she were dead, putting her outside the moral intuition that people confront each other in the mode of reciprocity, and that the breach of reciprocity puts the abrogating party illegitimately outside and above his community. The Brotherhood, in claiming to act on behalf of the oppressed even when it insists on ignoring their plight, itself appropriates the victimary role, and does so to justify a

planned revenge against the social order as a whole. Shortly after learning of the contents of Bledsoe's letter, the Invisible Man has succumbed to his own resentment: "I could hardly sleep," he says, "for dreaming of revenge" (195). But the dream of retribution directly makes a slave, an automaton, of the subject. Gans' discussion of the radical rejection of universality bears on this and is worth quoting:

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> Victimary rhetoric is able to blackmail traditional liberalism because it hides its ontology behind an empirical mask. The universalist opponent is ostensibly denied his discursive position only until such time as the victimary position has been abolished. What is not generally recognized is that the basis of this rhetoric is the denial of the universal as such, that is, of any discursive position not implicated in victimization on one side or the other. The claim to take such a position is ipso facto proof that one is on the side of the victimizers. (SP 181)

Brother Jack's exposition to the Invisible Man illustrates the analysis. Brother Jack claims that the present is a moment "of indecision when all the old answers are proven false" (306); he claims, using the apocalyptic language of Marx, "that we stand at a terminal point in history, at a moment of supreme world crisis" and "destruction lies ahead unless things are changed" (307). According to Brother Jack, in words echoing those of Rousseau and Marx, "the enemies of man are dispossessing the world!" (307). Despite the Brotherhood's insistence that its terminology is "scientific" (308), then, it more accurately resembles the language of an ancient power cult, of a devotion that requires a blood-offering on its altar. Obsolete social types like the elderly couple being evicted from their apartment might be "dead," but

> [I]t would be a great mistake to assume that the dead are absolutely powerless. They are powerless only to give the full answer to the new questions posed for the living by history. But they try! Whenever they hear the imperious cries of the people in a crisis, the dead respond. (306)
>
> There is a scientific explanation for this phenomenon . . . but whatever you call it the reality of the world in crisis is a fact. We are all realists here, and materialists. It is a question of who shall determine the direction of events . . . (307)

The Invisible Man vacillates between the seduction of Brother Jack's talk and his sense that its very abstractness is an insult, an attempt to make him once more a cog in a machine: "I

looked at them, fighting a sense of unreality . . . only this was real and now was the time for me to decide or to say I thought they were crazy and go back to Mary's" (308). He explains his debt to her. One of the Brothers asks what her "educational background" is and when the Invisible Man admits that "she's had very little" his examiner says of her that she is "more or less like the old couple that was evicted" (308). In the Brotherhood's terms, Mary exists no more than they do: "You must put aside your past," Brother Jack says; and then, touching the Invisible Man's glass with his own, he toasts (absurdly, chillingly) "to History" (309-10).

The Invisible Man's first assignment is to make a speech on the topic of evictions to a large Harlem audience. He proves himself a natural orator and soon makes real human contact with his audience. Sensing something close to a religious epiphany, he tells the audience, who are responding to him as though he were a preacher, that "I feel, I feel suddenly that I have become more human":

> Do you understand? More human. Not that I have become a man, for I was born a man. But that I am more human. I feel strong, I feel able to get things done! I can feel that I can see sharp and clear and far down the dim corridor of history and in it I can hear the footsteps of the militant fraternity. . . . I am a new citizen of the country of your vision, a native of your fraternal land. I feel that here tonight, in this old arena, the new is being born and the vital old revived. In each of you, in me, in us all. (346)

The repeated invocation of *feeling,* of *affect,* and the emphasis on the interpersonal (hence the reciprocal) character of the moment, arise authentically from the Invisible Man's best self; but they contradict the Brotherhood's ban against sentiment and individuality. *Feeling,* as a synonym of *empathy,* also guarantees that the Invisible Man has not entirely divorced his sense of the real from his intoxication by the propositional. He knows that real people are listening to them, that many of them originate in the same milieu as he, and that the religious style means something to them. The revivalist tone particularly rankles the Brotherhood. They, after all, are "realists" and "materialists." In a group-assessment after the event in which the novice agitator must submit to vituperative criticism by the other Brothers, the Invisible Man becomes the target of ritual chastisement. In a musty room at the center of his admonishers, the Invisible Man finds that he has taken on a whole new set of masters. A husky Brother who seems to enjoy abusing the new adherent of the cause eventually sums up the criticism in a single damning word: "'In my opinion the speech was wild, hysterical, politically irresponsible and dangerous,' he snapped. 'And worse than that, it was *incorrect!*'' He pronounced 'incorrect' as though the term described the most heinous crime imaginable, and I stared at him openmouthed, feeling a vague guilt" (349). Brother

Wrestrum (drop the W and exchange the U for two Os) agrees with his burly comrade: “I think the brother’s speech was backward and reactionary” (350). The Invisible Man looks into Brother Wrestrum’s face and sees “hate-burning eyes” (350), but he does not defend the element of *charity* in his speech that made the crowd respond to it. He denies, therefore, the immediate truth of what he has experienced. The *ad hoc* committee decides, therefore, that the Invisible Man must undergo ideological reconstruction (“training,” they call it [351]) under the politically trustworthy mentorship of Brother Hambro. Submitting to the imposition (like Oedipus submitting to expulsion), the Invisible Man deludes himself with the consideration that “my possibilities were suddenly broadened” (353). Later, however, he has other thoughts:

> Words, phrases, skipped through my mind. . . . What had I meant by saying that I had become “more human”? Was it a phrase that I had picked up from some preceding speaker, or a slip of the tongue? For a moment I thought of my grandfather and quickly dismissed him. What had an old slave to do with humanity? Perhaps it was something that Woodridge had said in the literature class back at college. I could see him vividly, half-drunk on words and full of contempt and exultation, pacing before the blackboard chalked with quotations from Joyce and Yeats and Sean O’Casey; thin, nervous, neat, pacing as though he walked a high wire of meaning upon which none of us would ever dare venture. (354)

The ad hoc committee corresponds to what Milan Kundera, in a commentary on Kafka, calls “the tribunal,” and which he identifies as a characteristic anti-institution of the totalitarian century:

> Tribunal: this does not signify the juridical institution for punishing people who have violated the laws of the state; the tribunal (or court) in Kafka’s sense is a power that judges, that judges because it is a power; its power and nothing but its power is what confers legitimacy on the tribunal. . . . The trial brought by the tribunal [moreover] is always absolute; meaning that it does not concern an isolated act, a specific crime (theft, fraud, rape), but rather concerns the character of the accused in its entirety. (*Testaments Betrayed* 227)

Internal dissensions, rivalries, and resentments characterize the closed society (the totalizing, sacrificial system) of the Brotherhood; so, too, do various opportunities for betrayal and for the staging of tribunals, in Kundera’s sense. The Invisible Man indeed runs afoul of this malevolent, well-nigh Kafkaesque anti-system, in which everyone constantly maneuvers to gain power by denouncing someone else. In a crucially important scene which

resembles the Union meeting in the paint factory, the Brotherhood's inner circle declares their new front-man guilty of subversion. No evidence exists to support this charge, or the accompanying claim that the Invisible Man has become an enemy of the organization, but the suspicion itself serves as sufficient grounds to convict him. "The Brotherhood is bigger than all of us," Brother MacAfee explains; "none of us as individuals count[s] when its safety is questioned" (405). In relation to Brother Jack's conception of history as, in its virtue, a new god whose arrival must be hastened, each member of the Brotherhood stands as the Bondsman stands to the Lord Hegel's dialectic, or as the slave to the Founder in the statuary icon. A comment by the historian of philosophy William Barrett will be appropriate here. Barrett notes that "Marxist manuals of philosophy refer to all philosophies that deal with the human subject as forms of 'irrationalism.' Their rationalism, of course, consists in technical intelligence, in the power over things (and over men considered simply as things); and this exalting of the technical intelligence over every other human attribute becomes demoniacal in action, as recent history has shown" (*Irrational Man* 274).

14

Sensing something rather like Barrett's insight, the Invisible Man's alienation from the Brotherhood now begins. One event in particular catalyzes this alienation. It is Brother Tod Clifton's death. It is with Clifton that the Invisible Man has formed his most human relationship during his period of subservience to the Brotherhood; the two fought Ras the Exhorter's gang together. But Clifton has disappeared and no one seems to know his whereabouts. While pounding the pavement in search of a new pair of shoes (a completely arbitrary impulse and yet one of his own), the Invisible Man notices a street-vendor selling obscene "Sambo" dolls on the sidewalk. This turns out to be Clifton, who has changed his status as radically as possible. The dolls themselves possess a symbolic significance related both to the Master-Slave dialectic and to the vet's description of the Invisible Man (Chapter Three) as an automaton, a "mechanical man." The manikin reduces the Master-Slave relation to its utmost hellish parody, with the Slave reduced to absolute thinghood; it is also, therefore, to be derived from the novel's *Leitmotif*, the statue of the Founder. But in its very obscenity it speaks to the Invisible Man, who has begun to comprehend that he has been dangled and exploited (like a hooked fish!) by the Brotherhood. Because Clifton is apparently an unlicensed vendor, the police intervene to shut down his operation. They arrest him, with undue force, pushing and jolting him:

> I could see the cop push Clifton again [the Invisible man says], stepping solidly forward in his black shirt, his arm shooting out stiffly, sending him in a head-snapping forward stumble until he caught himself, saying something over his shoulder again, the two moving in a kind of march that I'd seen many times, but never with anyone like Clifton. (436)

Here again Ellison depicts power, in the person of the policeman, coercing involuntary acknowledgment of its plenipotentiary commission by main force; but the attempt is not entirely successful, because Clifton talks back to his assailant (speech as the medium of self-assertion) and refuses to be summarily marched off. Instead of the frozen image of Hegel's Lord and the Bondsman, Ellison now gives his readers a macabre "dance." A reversal is in progress, through the medium of this "dance," and Clifton now indeed completes the Hegelian dialectic–whose first phase the statue signified by depicting the subjection of the Slave to the Master–by refusing the imposed status of thinghood; he wheels about and catches the cop with an uppercut, whereupon the cop falls backward into the street. One must visualize the statuary icon of slave and Founder yet again, but as if animated and in a moment of radical exchange, as if the kneeling slave had abruptly arisen to strike down the haughty Founder. Of course, the completion lasts only for a moment because the felled Master, the police officer, pulls his gun and fires with lethal effect. But the mere fact that the reversal has taken place, even though it has been only fleeting, grants it an irreducible importance in the sequence of Ellison's narrative. As a flock of epiphanic pigeons flies for cover at the sound:

> [Clifton] fell forward on his knees, like a man saying his prayers[,] just as a heavy-set man in a hat with a turned-down brim stepped from around the newsstand and yelled a protest. I couldn't move. The sun seemed to scream an inch above my head. Someone shouted. A few men were staring into the street. The cop was standing now and looking down at Clifton as though surprised, the gun in his hand. (436)

The reversal appears to have been reversed, but what cannot be reversed is the fact that the original configuration achieved its impression of permanency only through the application of power. Earlier, speaking of a gun-wielding marshal at the eviction of the elderly couple from their apartment, the Invisible Man had said: "He'll shoot us down . . . he thinks he's God" (279). Bledsoe, too, his nemesis, had thought himself God. The Invisible Man now explicitly questions the Brotherhood's dogmas. Attaining full consciousness at last, he sees a bunch of jive-speaking boys in a subway station (reminiscent in their speech of the push-cart man), and they provoke the thought that, maybe, the Brotherhood's idea of history is a sham. "What if Brother Jack were wrong? What if history was a gambler, instead of a force in a laboratory experiment, and [what if] the [jive-talking] boys [were history's] ace in the hole. . . . For they were on the outside, in the dark with Sambo, the dancing paper doll; taking it on the lambo with my fallen brother, Tod Clifton (Tod, Tod) running and dodging the forces of history instead of making a dominant stand" (441). The parenthetical "Tod, Tod" appears to be a cross-language pun on the German *Todt,* or "death." Death is real; it involves the living *via* the negation of their life. Death is violent, often enough, and messy. Yet the Brotherhood speaks of whole classes of actual people (like the old couple evicted from their premises) as

though they were already dead so that they can be erased from the memory as though they had never existed. The Invisible Man speaks eloquently at Clifton's funeral. The Brotherhood remain coldly, stonily, calculatingly, and dogmatically unimpressed. The speaker's emotional style is still unacceptably "incorrect" and is thus anathema considered in the context of the Brotherhood's goals.

15

The confrontation between the Invisible Man and the Brotherhood that Ellison sets out in Chapter Twenty-Two shows the Invisible Man asserting his "personal responsibility" (463), at long last, against their collective judgment about the idea of historical necessity. Crowds, like the Harlem crowd, are just so much in the way of "raw materials," Brother Jack explains, and what the Brotherhood demands is "sacrifice, sacrifice, SACRIFICE!" (475). Later, Brother Hambro tells the Invisible Man that the latter's recruits to the movement "will have to be sacrificed" (501). The Invisible Man retorts that "everywhere I've turned somebody has wanted to sacrifice me for my good–only they were the ones that benefited. And now we start on the old sacrificial merry-go-round. At what point do we stop?" (505). It dawns on the Invisible Man that the Brotherhood wants nothing less from him than that he should lie about the total human scene in Harlem:

> I was to be a justifier, my task would be to deny the unpredictable human element of all Harlem so that [the Brotherhood] could ignore it when it in any way interfered with their plans. I was to keep ever before them the picture of a bright, passive, good-humored, receptive mass ever willing to accept their every scheme. When situations arose in which others would respond with righteous anger I would say that we were calm and unruffled (if it suited them to have us angry, then it was simple enough to create anger for us by stating it in their propaganda; the facts were unimportant, unreal); and if other people were confused by their maneuvering I was to reassure them that we perceived the truth with x-ray insight. . . . [I]llusion was creating counter-illusion. (514-15)

It adds up to the Bledsoe betrayal all over again. "The facts were unimportant, unreal," the Invisible Man says. His job is "to deny." The verbal, the theoretical model, trumps facts, trumps the actual life of existing people. On the street, in a moment of self-loathing and conversion, the Invisible Man shakes with rage (507): "It was all a swindle, an obscene swindle!" (507). The race-riot follows, cleverly fomented by the Brotherhood who have all along exacerbated black-white tensions and have secretly goaded Ras the Exhorter toward violence. It is an apocalypse of lies, an orgy of immolation, and the only possible good to come of it, the burning of a rotten building whose landlord leaves a slum, is purely destructive, hence profoundly ambiguous. The Invisible Man himself stumbles into a sewer at the height of the *mêlée.* In the pitch darkness, he ritually burns various papers and

documents that signify the relations he is now decisively dissolving. These flickering subterranean flames become a kind of anti-sacrifice marking the climax of the Invisible Man's initiation into his own identity. "Here, at least, I could try to think things out in peace, or, if not in peace, in quiet. I would take up residence underground. The end was in the beginning" (571).

Invisible Man is a sprawling, dense novel, rich in metaphor, filled with manifold and erudite allusions, and any attempt to account for it remains necessarily limited and leaves a great deal to be said. Ellison wanted to write a "Black" novel, but also clearly he wanted to write a universal novel, as his introductory remarks about his literary relation to Dostoevsky, James, Eliot, and others make plain. In what, then, does the universality of *Invisible Man* consist? First and foremost, *Invisible Man* is a novel about the meaning of humanity for a century in which humanity suffered unprecedented assaults. As technically advanced as it might be, the twentieth century nevertheless saw a recursion to grossly sacrificial behaviors of the most primitive kind: the Turkish pogrom against the Armenians, the Nazi pogrom against the Jews, the Stalinist and Maoist pogroms against everyone. The West has stood against these affronts, but even in the United States there was, throughout the middle decades of the century, a recalcitrant middle-class resistance against the full integration of the nation's minority constituents. One does not want to relativize the totalitarian crimes of the last century into equivalency with the lesser but still significant problem of American racial intolerance. Not even during the worst period of Jim Crow did American Apartheid approach the systematic ferocity of the Holocaust or the gulag. But neither can the American case be left off the roster. All have a common root: for such crimes and such indignities have been made possible by fundamental distortions of reality which disrupt the transparent communication between consciousness and existence, including the existence of other conscious beings. The acknowledgment that the other person is a conscious identity like oneself constitutes the fundamental prerequisite to positive human relations. Sacrifice, the term which surfaces in the final chapters of *Invisible Man* as a no-longer-latent but indeed central theme, is the opposite of this crucial and humane acknowledgment of other people as formal equals.

16

Power, to return to it, requires sacrifice, or the repression and destruction of the other, if it is to produce its desired effect of aggrandizing its wielder. Language aids power in the sacrificial repression of the other by preparing the way for the initiation of force: by mucking up the clear perceptions on which true statements and just assessments depend. It is terribly significant, in this respect, that bigoted and repressive institutions such as slavery or Jim Crow could not exist silently in and of themselves, but required massive and sustained verbal justification, right down to their respective extinctions in the 1860s and 1960s. The argument made on behalf of Jim Crow, for instance, was that blacks were different–ontologically different–from whites, and so demanded separate legal

consideration. Every reasonable person knows intuitively that this argument was and remains false, and yet few understand precisely why and in what way it was false. The truth is that no person belonging to an excluded category was ever persecuted because he was different; rather, he was persecuted because he was obviously and in every way the same as his persecutors. His sameness is real; the claim of his difference is what is false. His ex-slave grandfather, says the Invisible Man, "never had any doubts about his humanity" (580). Since power rests on an implicit claim of difference (ontological Mastery and ontological Slavery), and since reality subverts this claim, power can only sustain itself as an unremitting assault against reality, entailing the destruction of others who refuse to be requisitely other. "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies," as the Invisible Man says, "I speak for you?" (581)

In *The Illusion of Technique* (1979), William Barrett writes a brief reminiscence of Philip Rahv, editor of *The Partisan Review,* the left-wing journal on whose staff, at one time, Barrett worked. Barrett recounts the central lesson of his early Marxist period: "THE ESSENCE OF MARXISM LIES IN THE CLASS STRUGGLE!" (346). This was drilled into him continuously, Barrett says. "My mentors were warning me, against my own temptations of mind, not to get lost in the subtleties of theory to the point that I lose sight of the human center of the whole doctrine. And this center, plain enough for the downtrodden and uneducated to understand, was the war between the haves and the have-nots" (346). That was during the Depression. Ten years subsequent, in the aftermath of World War Two, when Barrett had begun to nurse "some theoretical doubts about Marxism as a whole" (347), Rahv was telling him the same thing: "The 'existential core' of Marxism was the class struggle, and I must hold fast to that" (347). Note how Barrett's mentors, including Rahv, pared down the "theoretical subtleties" of their doctrine, insisting on what amounted to the power-struggle between the classes as the salient issue. Yet Marxism (including its contemporary derivatives) is nothing if it is not a complex theory of class-relations. The implication is clear enough: The theoretical side of Marxism (which can stand, if one likes, for any political dogma) functions to provide a rationalistic aura around the fundamentally untheoretical kernel of the doctrine, namely that an avant-garde must seize power in the name of "History." In his account of American Communism in the 1930s, Ellison remarks that the CPUSA "fostered the myth that Communism was twentieth century Americanism" (*GT* 296). But it became clear, Ellison writes, that "to be a twentieth century American meant, in their thinking, that you had to be more Russian than American and less Negro than either. That's how they lost the Negroes. The Communists recognized no plurality of interests and were really responding to the necessities of Soviet foreign policy" (296). Blacks "were made expedient" (296) in these machinations, Ellison concludes. His perception of Marxism's intellectual illegitimacy thus converges on Barrett's. "What strikes me now," Barrett latterly records as he continues to meditate on his own long-since-abrogated affiliation with Marxism:

> is the peculiar historical irony of those conversations. We were operating with the political tags of our childhood and adolescence that had already become obsolete. For us as children of the thirties the existence of the Soviet Union as the first socialist state still seemed a fragile and unlikely miracle; and we tended to look on the problems of Marxist socialism as those of coming to power, of a movement on the make. The abominations of Stalinism had seemed to us an accidental excrescence on the true nature of socialism. (347)

17

In retrospect, and after a kind of political conversion similar to that experienced by other ex-radicals such as George Orwell and Arthur Koestler, Barrett came to the conclusion that it was absolutely necessary "to detach the phenomenon of Marxism from those earlier delusions and see it in a larger and more significant perspective" (348), namely as the central expression of the idea of technique (of power) in the twentieth century, and as the source of massive error and colossal suffering. According to Barrett's analysis, Marxism translates the crudest version of science, science as the purely pragmatic investigation into and control over nature, to the human sphere. "Marx spoke of the conquest of human nature as the essential humanistic goal. Conquest implies war, and this particular war had to be total in order to satisfy human needs" (353). The Polish expatriate Czeslaw Milosz argues very similarly, in *The Captive Mind* (1953), that:

> Dialectical materialism, Russian-style, is nothing more than nineteenth century science vulgarized to the second power. Its emotional and didactic components are so strong that they change all proportions. Although the Method was scientific in its origins, when it is applied to humanistic disciplines it often transforms them into edifying stories adapted to the needs of the moment. . . . [Dialectical materialism] gives the illusion of full knowledge; it supplies answers to all questions, answers which merely run around in a circle repeating a few formulas. (200-201)

The rhetoric of the Brotherhood in Ellison's novel illustrates that Ellison shared and to some extent anticipated Barrett's insight, and that his appreciation of the intellectual trap constituted by so-called revolutionary thinking, by what I have called ideology, runs in parallel to that of Milosz. The Invisible Man gets caught up in the totalizing vision of the zealots. When the Brotherhood anathematize him, he divulges that, as he understands it in the moment, "there was a logic to what [they] said" (405). His anathematizers are wrong–and he is right–about his intentions in respect to their cause (he regards himself as still a part of the fellowship), but the Invisible Man is willing to be "made expedient" while they proceed to discover their error. Or so he thinks. But this very attitude contains the

implicit concession, made by the accused to his accusers, that something in the situation or even in his behavior might have produced the appearance of a crime, and that the accusers can therefore claim justification. Commentators on the grand political show-trials of the mid-century invariably record the insidious way in which the victims concede elements of the charge to their persecutors and so unwittingly follow the slippery path that leads into victimary self-immolation. In another comment on Kafka, Kundera notes that a certain induced "self-criticism" greatly aids in the conviction of those falsely accused: "It is not a matter of criticism (distinguishing good features from bad with the aim of correcting faults); it is a matter of finding your offense to let you help your accuser, let you help and ratify the accusation" (*TB* 211-12).

Of course, in the case of the accusers of Ellison's protagonist, they never discover any error on their part; no possibility of their being in error exists for them or could ever exist for them. They perfectly resemble those implacable judges of whom Kundera remarks that they judge because they constitute a power; and their power and nothing but their power is what grants efficacy to their judgments. The *ad hoc* committee consummately fills the role of those infinitely sagacious adjudicators of whom Milosz remarks that their philosophy gives them "full knowledge" and thus removes them forever from the humiliating tendency to error. Having exploited the Invisible Man, having commodified him, the Brotherhood simply throw him away. In Barrett's analysis, to switch back to him, it follows inevitably from the fundamental premises and real agenda of dialectical materialism that:

> All citizens must be organized effectively within the ranks of this struggle. Everything that exists–man as well as natural resources–is to be placed within the framework of technical-scientific planning. Human beings, as they fall within this framework, become calculable objects for management. Economics does indeed emerge here, as Marxists had wanted it, as basic to every social reality. And what is economics but efficient technical management? (353)

Indeed, the Brotherhood commodify the Invisible Man, just as they commodify the old and the sick and anyone else who fails to fit in their vision of the world. But, as Barrett points out, Marxism tends regularly to violate its own metaphysics and to produce its own antithesis. That is to say, despite its claim to satisfy human nature and to produce a new, authentic type of freedom, it issues in practice in gross repression, the *gulag,* and universal misery. People are "made expedient," to use Ellison's compressed but telling phrase. More recent events only confirm Barrett's diagnosis. At their first opportunity to throw out their ideologue-overlords, the people of the ex-Soviet Union and its satellite states did so, acting out the most remarkable political event in the twentieth century. As Havel notes, most people find living a lie intolerable, and both to obtain power and retain it, the political

followers of Marx exploited Titanic lies. They had to, since their assessment of ordinary people stood at radical variance with the ordinary person's assessment of himself. According to Marxism, the ordinary person is the despicable victim of "false consciousness" and therefore irremediably lacks the ability to tell whether he is happy or not (indeed whether his existence is justified or not); what pass for satisfactions (or justifications) in the bourgeois milieu are mere delusions. The ordinary person, needless to say, rarely shares this sinister and degrading conviction. Yet it remains possible, in the right circumstances, to convince people of their unhappiness by appealing to base motives like resentment. And resentment, in turn, demands an object. The consolidation of power requires, then, an external enemy, on whom the unhappiness of the ordinary person can be blamed. It requires a scapegoat, is sacrificial. "Socialist rhetoric," Barrett writes, "had battened on the image of the evil capitalist. The more you inflate this evil, the more you siphon off all other human evils into this one monstrous figure, the more your hearers become convinced that its mere disappearance must lead to some paradisiacal state" (357). Thus Marxist totalitarianism (and Marxism in power has never been anything else than totalitarian) resembles a species of "economic fantasy" (357). While it claims to redeem humanity from the alienation of private property, Marxism in fact profoundly alienates its subjects from reality itself: it produces a form of collective dissociation. The theory of class-warfare leads to both a rhetoric and a practice that sacrifices reality to abstract images deferred, inevitably, to the far future for their realization. Marxism is a rhetoric and a practice that sacrifices the actual to the potential. What motivates its advocates to initialize such a program?

The answer is power conceived of as a type of "original sin." That human beings have power fantasies is attested by myth, whose gods can be grasped, in one sense at least, as projections of power by means of which human beings experience representationally the transcendence of their limitations. But power is inimical to the net happiness of the community and therefore to the probable personal happiness of any given individual in the community. Law, as Plato demonstrates in *Gorgias*, is the consent by all the members of the community to limit their quest for power (the Invisible Man speaks of law when the elderly couple is being ejected); laws must exist because there are always some members of the community who refuse to curtail that quest. If the "Will to Power," as Nietzsche called it, is innate in human beings, a preconscious or unconscious urge, then society and its institutions become comprehensible as conscious attempts to address the anti-social, power-seeking component of the human reality. We inaugurate culture when we *abort* the gesture of appropriation. It follows from this that, despite the actual happiness made possible by society, all human beings will occasionally feel resentment at the rules which prohibit them, as individuals, from exerting their will, however they wish, over others. When Freud spoke of the inherent discontentment of civilization, he addressed the same phenomenon. The most just societies, those with the wisest laws and the fairest distribution of goods, should on this model produce, perhaps paradoxically, the highest frequency of resentment.

Thus the Dream of Power, of Personal Godhood, dies hard. And hence, I would argue, the

popularity of power-discourse among contemporary American intellectuals, a group uniquely unmoved by the pathos of mid-century Marxist totalitarianism and uniquely unaware (so it seems to me) of Marxism's apocalyptic meltdown. All of the contemporary variations of power-analysis–feminism, multiculturalism, "new historicism"–derive from the sentence in *The Communist Manifesto,* Part I, that divides the world into the Manichean categories of oppressors and oppressed:

> The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.

> Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open, fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or the common ruin of the contending classes. (79)

19

All of the variations of power-analysis similarly draw on Marx's notion that, in order to effect utopia, in order to hasten history toward its apocalypse, certain classes, especially the bourgeoisie, must be swept away (the phraseology belongs to Marx himself). As Camille Paglia, one of the more perspicacious debunkers of this type of contemporary discourse, puts it:

> Lacan, Derrida, and Foucault are the perfect prophets for the weak, anxious academic personality, trapped in verbal formulas and perennially defeated by circumstance. They offer a self-exculpating cosmic explanation for the normal professorial state of resentment, alienation, dithery passivity, and inaction. (211)

> Translations of Lacan and Derrida [and Foucault!] are pored over by earnest Americans, fatuously taking as literal truth statements that were merely the malicious *boutades* of the *flaneur*. . . . Our French acolytes, making themselves the lackeys of a foreign fascism, have advertised their intellectual emptiness to the world. (215)

Paglia's rhetorically dramatic comparison of structuralist/post-structuralist power-discourse to cocaine (Foucauldian discourse is the cocaine of academia, she says), which occurs in the same essay, deserves to be taken seriously. For verbal formulas, especially when obsessively

repeated, can have a kind of intoxicating effect; that is how delusions, based on verbal formulas, work. In a related assessment in *Out of Control*, Zbigniew Brzezinski has argued that the twentieth century has been the century of the "metamyth." According to Brzezinski, a "metamyth" is "a grand transcendental fiction . . . to be understood as an irrational but compelling blend of the religious impulse to seek salvation, of the nationalistic self-identification as being superior to outsiders, and of utopian social doctrines reduced to the level of populist slogans. Permitting escape from unsatisfactory reality through a commitment to an imaginary reality yet to be achieved, metamyth served to galvanize and channel mass passions . . . making feasible the infliction of death on a scale without precedent in human history" (19-20). A "metamyth," in other words, is the verbal preamble to a murder; it is as myth is to sacrifice. The claim that everything is power (central to Foucault's discourse, for example) validates the power-claims of the individual; if power is everything, then the individual cannot rationally be restrained and is licensed, a priori, to do what he will. Power corrupts, truly enough; but it corrupts first through psychic intoxication. It is no coincidence that the hotel where the Invisible Man's early meetings with the Brotherhood occur bears the name of the Chthonian. The chthonic is the Dionysian, the sparagmatic, the sacrificial; it is what delights in destruction and gorges itself on raw flesh and blood.

I come back, then, to the issues of power, language, and sacrifice in Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Humanity might be deviled by its secret "Will to Power," but it is simultaneously blessed by the conscious ability to override that Will. From this ability arise all those positive behaviors, stemming paradoxically from prohibitions, which human beings as ethical creatures have learned to assert as their central values: love, friendship, honesty, creativity. (I am tempted to say that all of these institutions, if that is what they are, stem from the Biblical injunction against the bearing of false witness, or, in Ellison's terms, *denial*.) It is too infrequently noted, however, that before an ethics can be formulated, certain axioms of an epistemological character have to be acknowledged. The most fundamental of these axioms was summed up by Heraclitus, the Ionian thinker of the sixth century B.C. "There is one world," Heraclitus said, "and it is the same for everyone." The same Heraclitus later hectored the Ephesians for failing to see the excellence of a certain Hermodorus, the best among them (as Heraclitus said), whom they had petulantly expelled, blaming him for their troubles. This world, endowed with its peculiar characteristics, is prior to anyone's assessment of it or desire in relation to it; it includes the human portion of the world. Human beings exist–they are not mere malleable stuff without intrinsic characteristics, without innate needs, as likely to do anything as nothing–and the precise characteristics of their existence must be acknowledged by every just society. The very term "just society" implies an acknowledgment of that selfsame objective anthropology. Every moral individual must, in some fundamental sense, acknowledge the reality of every other individual prior to any judgment about him. Again, the very term "moral individual" implies such an acknowledgment. We might judge individuals in varying ways (saint or murderer), but prior to the judgment is the fundamental acknowledgment of existence. Verbal formulas which

interdict this acknowledgment sacrifice reality to the most ignoble of whims, the desire, to wit, not to be a human being, but to be a god, from which all manner of evil swiftly follows. *Invisible Man* might be a "black novel," a "Negro novel," as Ellison calls it in his essays, but its significance transcends any mere ethnic category. Since it is the nature of sacrifice to seize on its victims arbitrarily, everyone is a potential scapegoat. In a digression on Hemingway, Ellison remarks apropos of Hemingway's interest in the bullfight as a paradigm of ritual violence, of scapegoating, that the apostle of *machismo*"might have studied that [same type of] ritual violence closer to home, [he might have studied] that ritual in which the sacrifice is that of a human scapegoat, the lynching bee. Certainly," Ellison concludes, "this rite is not confined to the rope as agency, not to the South as scene, nor even to the Negro as victim" (*SA* 37).

20

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