From Acceptance to Autonomy: Ralph Ellison's Engagement with Black Freedom in *Invisible Man*

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African-American authors traditionally have faced many difficulties in achieving a balance between artistic concerns of developing their craft and sociological concerns of creating written responses to the oppressive conditions that African-Americans face in the United States. In many ways, African-American authors are like all other writers: their primary concern is writing good literature, even if the masses reject them. Though all artists suffer isolation associated with their craft, African-American authors have special concerns. After all, the existence of Black authors defies notions of innate Black inferiority that continue to plague American society. Therefore, Black authors labor under a special burden; they continually challenge the notion that African-Americans are incapable of writing good literature. Of course, this burden threatens the integrity of the craft as African-American authors juggle these dual concerns.

In Steven Marcus's review of Richard Wright's The Outsider, published in 1953, he expresses his own contention that discussions of the humanity of African-Americans in the novel is problematic for Americans, black as well as white (Gates and Appiah, p. 35). In his critical assessment, this problem finds historical antecedents in the widely held belief among the Europeans that Africa alone among colonial territories had no recognizable culture. While the European colonizers did not regard other Third World peoples as cultures as equal to their own, the fact that European writers found it necessary to denigrate non-African colonialized cultures made it more difficult for these writers to assume the innate inferiority of these peoples (Gates and Appiah, p 35). As a result, complexly human depictions of non-African colonized peoples have always existed in European literature whereas human depictions of Africans have not. Marcus contends that this attitude of Europeans towards Africans continues within the American context in which the idea of African-Americans as subhuman is never seriously challenged.

In Marcus' estimation African-American novelists are immediately challenged by two problems, one genre oriented, the other sociological. The novel itself, he reminds us is a product of modernization. Since the novel structurally depends on modern conceptions of personhood, a crucial task for African-American writers is the challenge of deconstructing the widely held assumption that African-Americans are not complex modern individuals (Gates and Appiah, p. 35).

While, in retrospect, many of the implications of Marcus' statements are problematic, themselves a reflection of the types of racist assumptions about African-Americans which he wishes to destroy, they do serve the purpose of bringing to the surface valid questions about the responsibility of the African-American novel writer to make a valid attempt to prove the full humanity of his artistic subjects. How does an African-American author seek to develop fully autonomous characters without avoiding discussions of the experience of racial oppression by Black Americans in the United States? In Marcus' estimation, black authors have traditionally responded to this task in one of two ways. One is to write protest fiction. While protest fiction may prove useful in building moral arguments bringing to the surface White guilt, the determinism inherent in naturalism, the literary progenitor of protest fiction, sacrifices the possibility of autonomy in order to address ethical concerns about racism (Gates and Appiah, p. 36). The other approach exemplified in Wright's The Outsider, would be to write an existential fiction that asserted the autonomy of the African-American individual, while avoiding discussions of African-American culture and experience (Gates and Appiah, p, 36). Since the conception of full humanity espoused in the genre of novel requires autonomous individuals making choices against the backdrop of a complex culture, informed but never directed by

experiences, neither option commonly chosen by African-American authors challenges the notion that African-Americans lack full humanity. A successful African-American novel in Marcus' estimation would illustrate how Black Americans maintain autonomy in spite of the attempt of racism to deny them the power of choice (Gates and Appiah, p.3 8). This attempt would not be complete, however, without a discussion of the complexities inherent in Black culture.

Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man, first published in 1952, represented a landmark in the history of American fiction. The first African-American fiction to be acclaimed as universal, its reception has helped to dispel the notion that Black writers were incapable of producing aesthetically and thematically complex narratives. For Ellison and other African-American writers in general this was no small victory. Given the historical fact that Blacks everywhere were subject to continuous discrimination based upon their alleged intellectual, cultural, and moral inferiority, Ellison's well received attempt to write a universal yet particular fiction was quite remarkable.

Critical readings of Ellison's text differ based upon the critic's assumptions about the text itself. Common interpretations focus around the individual's ability to differentiate himself within "society", others focus on Marxist notions of human beings struggling against socialization into the industrial machine, and still others on black existential responses to the absurdity of racial oppression. While the preceding themes are certainly embedded in Ellison's text, one central theme resonates through all of them and is the focus of our study: the theme of individual autonomy. The idea of Black autonomy contradicts the American notion of the innate inferiority of blackness. Therefore, in common usage, the terms of Blackness and freedom

are considered metaphorical opposites.

The genius of Ellison's fiction lies within his attempt to reconcile these culturally absurd notions, blackness and freedom. The question Invisible Man primarily addresses is this one: How does an individual within a group whose incomplete humanity is assumed, and inability to choose for himself is taken for granted, develop full autonomy in spite of the social constructions which seek to deny him the power of choice? Given Ellison's own racial heritage and the historical significance of racism in America, seeing this novel only in terms of the African-American search for autonomy is quite tempting. This interpretation undermines the significance of Ellison's search for the meaning of autonomy. Ellison's narrative though focused on the African-American search in particular, provides a testing ground for the concept in general. If it is possible for people considered to be subhuman by every societal standard to exercise control over their lives, this certainly would prove that autonomy is possible for those who are considered free by society, and may also provide viable solutions for persons who find themselves seemingly trapped within oppressive conditions throughout the world. The real genius of Ellison lies within his confidence that he can successfully undertake a dual task; challenging notions of black moral and intellectual inferiority in particular, while addressing the problem of individual in general. If Invisible Man is successful, he will have satisfactorily answered this question.

Before we explicate Ellison's text, aided by relevant literary criticism, a thorough but brief discussion of the concept of autonomy is necessary. What we discover about autonomy by asking critical questions to sharpen our understanding of the concept, will provide the model for examining Ellison's text. Technically, the term personal autonomy, derives from two Greek

stems which combine to mean self-rule. Literally it means to live by one's own laws (Christman, p. 27). Living by one's own law is inclusive of several other concepts including self-government, self-determination, and independence.

While the conception of autonomy sounds quite simple, understanding what this term actually implies is more complicated than is initially obvious. Further complicating our understanding of autonomy is the common notion that autonomy requires non-oppressive government and non-discriminatory social patterns . Since the America of Ellison and his contemporaries was clearly socially discriminatory against African-Americans with laws specifically endorsing this oppression in many parts of the United States, especially in the South, the question of whether the plight of African-Americans represents a special case needs to be addressed conceptually as well as in our explication of the text.

According to Joel Feinberg, in The Inner Citadel: Essays on Individual Autonomy, autonomy has four closely related meanings. One focuses on the capacity of self-government which can exist in a matter of degrees, another on the actual condition of self-government, another on the ideal of character derived from the conception of self-government, another to the idea that one has sovereign authority to govern oneself within one's own moral boundaries.

It is obvious that degrees of capacity for self-government must exist for autonomy to be possible for all human beings. If this were not so, more intelligent people would have greater potential to be autonomous while those endowed with less gifts would have less possibilities to become completely autonomous (Christman, 29). Capacity for self government simply means that one is as competent as another person to live their own lives according to their own values as they choose. According to this understanding, it is possible for someone with less native talent

to be more autonomous in his or her actual life than someone with greater natural abilities (Christman, 29).

Enslavement poses a critical question for the conception of autonomy. Clearly if someone is the unwilling slave of another, with no opportunity to exercise rights, maintaining the idea that this person governs himself or herself is problematic. The idea of self government presupposes luck. When possibility whether hidden or obvious is turned into activity a person is said to have governed himself. At first glance, the preceding notion would lead one to conclude that good luck is always necessary for the development of self-government. While this is usually true, in certain cases unlucky circumstances can contribute to autonomy, they force the person to depend on himself and permanently develop habits of self-reliance (Christman, p. 31). Normally, opportunity is available to most people; autonomous people maximize these.

Assuming that sovereignty over the self exists, autonomy contains the following characteristics that can be seen as a reflection of sovereignty. Individuality is important because autonomous people cannot be defined exhaustively by their relationship to other people (Christman, p. 31). Autonomous people are not entirely subject to social forces or the force of other people's personalities. Autonomy requires that tastes, opinions, ideals, goals, values, and preferences are integrated into oneself. This does not mean that autonomy requires the concept of *tabula rasa* in which people come to events with neutrality or that environment cannot influence one's values. Were this so autonomy could not be possible (Christman, p. 33). The concept of autonomy does not require one to be totally a self-made man, it simply asserts that the parts of life that seem pre-determined such as genetics, class origins, religion do not negate the possibility of one choosing a life of his own. Authentic self-selection requires a person to be able

to subject his opinions and tastes to rational scrutiny. Through this process a truly autonomous person can alter convictions without guilt or anxiety (Christman, p. 36).

Moral authenticity is special category within the notion of self-legislation. An autonomous person has morals and principles rooted within his or her character; they are not merely uncritically inherited. A morally autonomous person does not mindlessly conform to authority, he is committed to a process of continually reconstructing his own value system. For these values to be truly rooted in character, he or she will not abandon these beliefs even under intimidation (Christman, p. 36).

While the concept of autonomy has been briefly outlined carefully avoiding some of the complex speculative philosophical problems involved, it does not illustrate how autonomy is achieved. A brief discussion of the process will aid in our explication and interpretation of Invisible Man. By developing an understanding of the process of autonomy formation, we can look for such development in Ellison's characters.

Diana T. Meyers, in Self. Society, and Personal Choice argues that autonomy is not only possible for every person, regardless of circumstances but also that it can be achieved, and evaluated at every stage. In her estimation, developing autonomy requires personal integration. Personal integration is the level of maturity in which one operates from values that are internalized as their own rather than from values that are external. Without personal integration a person exists essentially in inner conflict. Therefore, he or she cannot make choices but is trapped by a need to react impulsively to one of the sources of the inner conflict. Thus the main goal of developing autonomy is to secure an integrated personality. To do so, people must have control over their own lives, act spontaneously when situations require immediate decision, and

do so without losing a sense of control. An autonomous person is able to live in dynamic interplay with his or her environment without it affecting his innermost feelings and convictions.

For Ellison's Invisible Man to deal effectively with the humanity of Black people confronting their actual experiences in America while maintaining autonomy over their lives, he must demonstrate the following things. First of all, the concept of autonomy requires that a person be in control of his or her destiny. How can one be in control of his own destiny when society determines to take away such choices? He must also illustrate how African-American culture provides adequate testing grounds for building a competently autonomous self without destroying the power of choice for the African-American individual.

The beginning of Invisible Man contains a narrative that has now become a classic, representing some of the most recognizable verses to date.

I am an invisible man

> No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids-and I might even be said to possess a mind. **I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to** see **me.** (emphasis mine) Like bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorted glass. **When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination-indeed, everything and anything except me.** (emphasis mine)

> Nor is my invisibility exactly a matter of a biochemical accident to my epidermis. That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those I come in contact. A matter of construction of their inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality. I am not complaining, nor am I protesting either. It is sometimes advantageous to be unseen, although it is most often wearing on the nerves. Then too, you're constantly being bumped against by those of poor vision. **Or again you often doubt if you really exist...** (emphasis mine) **You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world, that you're a part of all the sound and anguish, and you strike out with your fists, you curse and you swear to make them recognize you. And alas, it's seldom successful,** (emphasis mine) (Ellison, 3,4)

The preceding verses lend themselves to a number of readings. Perhaps the most popular way of interpreting the preceding verses is to see them as an ironic metaphor for the Black experience in a White America. Since the color contrast between blackness and whiteness seems to lend itself particularly easily to traditional Western Neo-Platonic conceptions of darkness and light, ignorance and illumination, irrationality and reason, it is easy to see how physical darkness became established in the American mind as representative of subhumanity. Since people refused to see the protagonist's humanity, interpreting every encounter with him through the lens of their social construction (that of physical metaphor for sub-humanity), his physical difference has the opposite effect than one would initially imagine; instead of heightening other people's awareness of him, his physical visibility renders him invisible to

them.

In this way, Ellison is a fundamentally modernist writer. His literary vision is founded on the modernist humanist principle of contradiction. In his estimation, the quality of human existence is demonstrated in its ability to reveal complex, contradictory interpretations. Because the protagonist is himself consciously aware of his physical contrast to the outer world, but that outer world refuses to see him apart from a social construction that denies even the possibility that his personal consciousness exists, his encounters with this world must be perplexing, contradictory, even absurd. He is constantly aware that his own idea of himself is at odds with the version of himself that others hold. Since their version of himself significantly impacts his interactions with them, contrasting his self conceived identity, it becomes difficult for him to continue to viewing himself through his own eyes, rather than as they see him.

While this interpretation is indeed valid, upon deeper reflection, this interpretation is too limiting, ignoring deeper implications embedded in the text. If Ellison can be considered to be the best interpreter of Ellison, this common reading of the text was not the only one that Ellison intended for the reader. In *The Art of Fiction: an Interview,* that appeared in the Spring, 1955, volume of *The Paris Review,* Ellison explores deeper significance for the text.

> ...In my novel the narrator's development is one through blackness to light; that is, from ignorance to enlightenment: invisibility to visibility. He leaves the South and goes North; this as you notice in reading Negro folktales, is always the road to freedom-the movement upward...(Shadow and Act, p. 173) As illustrated by Ellison's understanding of his intention, the focus of the prologue of

Invisible Man, is not on the irony of physical differentiation of blackness being rendered invisible by societal attempts to deny humanity; instead, Ellison's statements focus on the narrator's own conscious participation in the process of individuation. In this process the narrator is forced to confront other people's construction of himself, differentiating between their conceptions of him, and his own understanding of himself. Of course this process is bewildering for him, because he must constantly reinterpret the varied versions of other peoples distortion of his humanity into terms consistent with his own version of himself. At times he authentically questions the validity of his own consciousness. For Ellison's protagonist, the struggle is not so much against the weight offerees seeking to interpret him as invisible, it is to become visible to himself, in spite of outside attempts to thwart that process.

In this sense, Ellison's conception of the journey from invisibility to visibility is relevant to our central question about autonomy. As we have discussed earlier, the version of autonomy accepted for this inquiry rests upon the assumption that autonomy formation is a process that can be measured in stages, illustrating the individual's attempt to become an integrated self. Each conflict within oneself about identity and meaning must be resolved so that one can choose according to one's own values, how to interact with the outside world. Thus, Ellison's conception of the individual journey from invisibility to visibility serves as metaphor for our own: the journey towards autonomy.

For Ellison's conception of this process to prove valid in general, and to prove relevant to our particular concern about developing fully human African-American characters, he must do a number of things. First he must show how his narrator comes to make sense of his own cultural heritage, a heritage, which the mainstream world seeks to deny, without falling prey to a non

critical acceptance of that culture. Next, he must show how he makes sense of the American attempt to deny his humanity, without necessarily accepting external definitions of humanity. Finally, he must illustrate his understanding of which parts of his cultural heritage represents himself, which parts of the external white world represent himself, and how he is able to make his own choices, considering all of the attempts within the Black American culture, and within the American culture to deny him these choices. If Ellison is able to do this he has successfully answered Marcus' concern about the difficulties African-American writers face in confronting the American notion of the innate inferiority of African-Americans, perhaps providing a model for other African-American writers to follow.

As illustrated by Ellison's revealing conversion in *The Paris Review,* the Invisible Man can be divided fairly easily into sections. The first deals with his narrator's first attempt at confronting his invisibility, or lack of autonomy. It focuses on the received traditions that seek to dictate his life to him in the South, whether they come from within the African-American community itself, or from Whites, who deny him choice either under the guise of benevolence, or through violent intimidation. The second part focuses on his journey North, in hopes that he will find freedom there. Instead he must face another level of received traditions, internally from the northern African-American community, externally from the northern white world. Only in learning to confront, analyze and decide for himself does he finally discover his own identity, and therefore gain his own personal freedom.

The narrator's process of developing autonomy follows the same pattern throughout the novel. First there is an event which shakes his confidence in the world he was led to believe in. Bewilderment, anguish, and frustration follow. After accepting the absurdity of the situation, he

begins to assess the situation critically, developing his own understanding, refusing to accept external definitions again.

Invisible Man opens with a chilling scene which serves as the beginning of the narrators confrontation with his invisibility. It is the scene of his grandfather's deathbed. Upon the nearness of death, his grandfather leaves advice which confuses and frustrates the narrator's primitive conception of the world. His grandfather who was born a slave, and had unashamedly conformed to the social mores of the South, seemingly without resistance, revealed his true character and beliefs in death.

> Our life is war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I gave up my gun back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open. (Ellison, p. 16)

What did his grandfather mean by asking him to keep up the fight? He acknowledged that his actions which portrayed him as humble towards white authority were not that way at all, when viewed from his perspective. Actually, he chose to fight with something other than a gun: his mind. This means that his grandfather was not actually controlled by his interactions with white authority, nor did he allow the outer world to conceive his identity for him. Much like the positive absurd hero found in Albert Camus' Myth of Sisyphus, who accepts the physical aspect of the punishment by the gods, because they have greater physical power than he, but refuses to

allow them to punish him, undermining them through the power of his imagination, the narrator's grandfather chooses to resist the authority of white society by gaining pleasure from playing the Uncle Tom.

Whereas the outer society had asked him to know his place, always paying deference to Whites because of his subhuman status, the grandfather refuses this conception of himself. Instead he turns the table by manipulating them through conforming to their image of himself, externally, all the while refusing to see himself through their eyes. The grandfather, unlike his grandson, is a fully autonomous person though his social status portrays him as otherwise. As a former slave, his experience as a servant was supposed to prepare him for uncritical acceptance of external values.

Even more, the brutal defeat of African-American attempts at social equality in the post-reconstruction Jim Crow era was supposed to have removed all impudence from every Black American. How could such refusal have survived in the Era of Lynching? Because of the grandfather's full autonomy the net force of this social movement could not destroy his sense of himself. As we have said earlier, if values are fully integrated into a person, he or she will not abandon these beliefs even under intimidation. The grandfather's speech is part of Ellison's attempt to demonstrate the full humanity of African-Americans.

Part of the grandfather's success was rooted in the misapprehension of himself by the external world. Because they refused to accept his humanity, they were able to be undermined. One of the prevailing myths about Black inferiority is the myth of amorality. In this myth, morality requires a certain level of reasoning, of which Blacks, of course are incapable. Like all other animals, they are morally neutral. Deviousness and cunning, like that exhibited by the

grandfather is simply overlooked because such capabilities would undermine the argument that blacks are amoral. Their surety of his inferior status, allowed him to undermine consciously them without them knowing it.

The narrator's own conception of himself pales in comparison to the maturity of his presumably illiterate grandfather. But his grandfather's words permanently affected him causing him to doubt the value of his interactions with the outside world. The first question the narrator asks is whether his high estimation among white people, based upon his conduct, was what they really wanted from him. Was his good behavior what they wanted from him, or did they really want him to exhibit self-destructive behavior? This question is very telling of the narrator's conception of himself. First of all, he seeks validation from the external world. Accepting the notion that White people set the standards for excellence and beauty, he seeks to please them before himself. Because of this uncritical acceptance of white authority, the narrator could not possibly have been prepared for the absurd events that followed his popular graduation day speech, in which he praised the value of humility.

Absurdity signifies the mood of the modern era, where artists and writers have tried to come to grips with the seeming meaninglessness of life. To the modernist, reality seems to defy depiction. In the past, the contradictions of human existence were simply smoothed over by rationalizations that sought to hide us from the absurdity of it all. If there is any scene in Invisible Man that represents confrontation with the absurd, it certainly is the Battle Royal Scene. In this scene, Ellison begins to deconstruct the narrator's confidence in white authority.

Everything about The "Battle Royal" is disturbing. At once all of the elite men who lead the city are shown to lack the kind of integrity that resonates through some of the worst types of

African-American characters found in Ellison's book. They are found drinking, carousing, and lusting after a young woman paid to dance naked for them. Among them were the city's most prominent pastors, lawyers, and judges who supposedly represented moral authority. Considering their moral significance within the community, their actions at the "Battle Royal" greatly shook the confidence of the narrator in the mythic notions of his society.

These men required the narrator to participate in this debacle, forcing him to fight with other young Black male youths for their own entertainment. The most disturbing scene involved these young men and the naked white woman. Their closeness to her body broke one the biggest taboos of the American South, Black men desiring white women. Obviously, these young men were a little unnerved by the situation. To their horror, different white authorities (all white people represent gods to the black boys in this scene) commanded them not to look, others to look. Not looking was dangerous because it denied the aesthetic, and moral superiority of white womanhood, it would be interpreted as an act of rebellion against the hierchical views of Southern society. Looking was just as suicidal because it exhibited a desire to have what society wanted to deny them; social equality. Together, these voices combined to represent a seemingly insurmountable wall for the young boys. Like all other absurd experiences they encountered the purpose was to force them to except the notion that white society was superior to their own, and that they did not deserve full participation in it because they were actually inferior to the Whites. The encounter with the absurd was designed to force the young boys to visualize themselves through the distorted lens of external construction.

The narrator's conscious engagement of this disturbing event offers proof that he is invisible to himself. In spite of all of the deconstruction of external value that is beginning to

take place within his own mind, the narrator's main concern is that this fight will interfere with him giving the speech that he was invited to give at the official event scheduled. Though the whites sought to dehumanize and humiliate him, the narrator was most uncomfortable with the other black youths around him. They were crude and physical, just the opposite of how he envisioned himself.

Why was he so uncomfortable with these young boys? Perhaps it was because he had internalized external versions of himself. Since Western Neo-Platonic ideas elevated the mind over the body, and whites were seen as a mental race and blacks as a physical race, the narrator's invitation to speak was a tacit admission that he was "special". His unconscious acceptance of these ideas, made him feel superior to his more physically endowed Black brethren, even he was denied full participation in the White world.

Because of his embryonic conception of himself, he failed to realize the full implication of the bitter irony of being reduced to a prize fighter by those who supposedly valued his mental ability. It is clear that how he viewed the other Black youths was just a reflection of how these white men viewed all Blacks. That this was so is evident in the statement of one of them who was concerned when he accidentally injected the word equality into his speech after the Battle Royal, "we mean right by you, but you've got to know your place at all times, (Ellison, p. 31)". Though these men did indeed acknowledge the narrator's intellectual gifts, they would only "help" him if he offered no resistance to their attempts to force their understanding of Black Humanity onto him.

As a reward for his compliance in their external authority, he was rewarded with a scholarship to a Negro college. Considering the humiliation he had to endure in fighting against

young men, whom he considered less than himself, for the sole enjoyment of men that he truly respected, this reward was tragicomic. He was actually being helped not because of his intelligence and actual worth but because these men could legitimate their ideas about Blacks being subhuman and only capable of uncritically accepting White authority in their lives. Thus the statement "some day he will lead his people in the proper paths, (Ellison, p. 32)" serves to strengthen the notion that White Americans are naturally authoritative in Black lives in the protagonist's own mind.

It is also clear from this statement that their primary motivation in helping him to attend college was to keep him locked within their conception of blackness, without being able to critically access the right to govern his own life. Because these men were so upset by the narrator's use of the term "equality", it is clear that they felt secure about the function of African-American college. If these colleges helped Black men and women to develop individual autonomy, somehow collectively African-Americans might reject an acceptance of an inferior societal status as natural. Their willingness to help the narrator illustrates their confidence that Black colleges will not do anything to awaken the notion of possible freedom within African-American individual.

The second stage of the narrator's conscious awakening comes while he is attending an unnamed Black college. He clearly expected to get an education: instead he got a startling awakening. Ellison's selection of the college as the location where the narrator will have his world shaken to its foundations is strategic because it is in this location that Ellison critiques the automatic authority of three institutions: the Northern white philanthropist, the African-American church, and the Black college president. These three institutions all have visions for African-

Americans which seek to deny them the power of choosing their own lives.

Northern white philanthropy is represented by Norton who is the school's chief benefactor. His character is representative of Northern white business interest which funds the majority of southern Black colleges. While on the surface this funding allows Blacks to attend college, furthering their opportunities in life, it comes at the cost of suppressing Black dissent against white authority. In other words, Northern white business elite sought to control the Black community through controlling a Black elite that accepted their authority to provide leadership for the Black community. Ironically, this motivation insures that education will not occur in institutions of higher learning since the critical skills needed to have a true education cannot be encouraged for the fear that Black individuals will be able to make their own decisions apart from white leadership.

The narrator's revelation occurs as he is given an opportunity to personally escort Mr. Norton. Until he looks beneath the surface, Norton appears to him to be like a god. Yet when, the narrator begins to consciously assess Mr. Norton's words and their real significance to himself, Norton is revealed to be a flat character. Eventually he begins to realize that Norton is not a god, at all. In fact, he is a weak person who relies on the established hierchical relation between Blacks and Whites to live his life by controlling the lives of his Black subjects. Once his shallowness is revealed, Ellison's narrator comes to understand that he is more capable of providing direction for his own life than Mr. Norton.

Now, the model has been established for the narrator's conscious development towards autonomy. In all future cases, the inherent rights of another person to lead him is seriously questioned. Each situation starts with the narrator's unconscious participation in his own

invisibility. The authority of others to lead his life is simply accepted uncritically. Next, an event happens that shatters his confidence in the individual or group of individuals. Finally, through critical engagement, he comes to understand that these individuals, whether they are Black or white, have no special skills that give them expertise in managing his life for him. Only he is capable of making the choices that govern his life.

But where does he gain these values? These values in Ellison's estimation come from an acceptance of and engagement of his own cultural heritage. While Ellison is far from being Nationalist in evaluation of Black cultural life as superior to White cultural life, his novel rests on the assumption that Black life contains enough valuable cultural material for a Black person to develop his own values. Challenging the notion that Black life is not complex and valuable, Ellison chooses his heroes from the most culturally Black African-Americans, unsophisticated (by White standards) rural folks. It is from these people that the narrator will learn to stop viewing his own cultural background through foreign lenses. Contradicting well established American mythology, Ellison gives the fullest development these supposedly unsophisticated characters.

The most disturbing of these, Jim Trueblood, is the one that from whom the narrator learns the most. As suggested by his name, Trueblood, represents Blacks of unmixed racial heritage who either through choice or lack of exposure to constant White social construction live Black lives without guilt. Trueblood's life poses ethical problems for any critical reader. After all, he is guilty of an incestuous relationship with his own daughter. Nothing could conjure up images of savagery more than that kind of situation. Thus, Trueblood's crime stands as empirical evidence that Blacks are subhuman. He is the kind of Black person that people at the

college hate the most. His very existence interferes with their attempts to prove that Blacks can meet White standards.

Yet Trueblood is the most authentic person that the narrator encounters in the entire novel. While Trueblood's actions are problematic by every conceivable ethical standard, his response to his crime reveals a mature self, exhibited nowhere else in the novel. In telling the story of how his incestuous relationship occurred, he reveals a strength of character that contradicts what we would think of such an individual. Like all autonomous persons, he makes choices from an integrated self. While his liaison with his own daughter was not completely by choice, his response to the situation, shows a humanity that is lacking in the narrator himself. Through his encounter with Trueblood, who represents the worst conceptions of Blacks that are conceived by Whites, the narrator is able to begin making sense of his cultural heritage in his own terms, rather than through White ones. Though his understanding of the worth of his own heritage is not fully developed at this stage, his estimation of Trueblood' character shows a growing maturation when compared to his response to being subjugated to fighting Black youths. No longer would he automatically respond with shame to the existence of common Black folk. He would instead grow to admire their freedom in living their own lives.

Because of the length of the novel it is nearly impractical to discuss every aspect of the novel and part of the narrator's growth towards autonomy. But our efforts are simplified because of the consistency of the narrator's growth in the novel. Each encounter builds upon the last so that we can gain an understanding of the process of development without looking at all or even most of the particular situations.

Ellison provides us enough information to assess his attempt to construct fully human

Black characters in the Epilogue. It is not explicitly clear whether the narrator's development in the Epilogue is finalized, or if a final arrival is possible. After all, he is still confronted with the fact that he is invisible. But it is not clear whether this invisibility is an invisibility to others or whether he is still is in someways invisible to himself.

What is clear that he has begun accessing the value of other peoples values. "When one is invisible he finds such problems as good and evil, honesty and dishonesty, of such shifting shapes that he confuses one with the other, depending on who happens to be looking through him at the time, (Ellison, 572). While this statement sounds discomforting, in Ellison's usage it is not. Through the narrator's own conscious understanding, Ellison illustrates how values that seem intrinsic lose universal meaning when the natural authority of those who hold them is questioned.

Equally revealing is the narrator's understanding of the cost of self-government: isolation. As long as his actions can be interpreted to fit into others' social constructions of him, people act as if they are truly concerned about him. If he chooses to reveal his true values, however, he will be discarded because honesty and self-direction is not valued. Because he has knowledge of this he is in control of his life. By choosing to conform outwardly to social construction, or outwardly resisting it, he can manipulate each situation to a predictable conclusion.

Such a conclusion is tragic if autonomy is confused with happiness. The narrator makes no claim that he is happy with the choices available to him, only that the life he lives does not interfere with making choices. His life can be as rich as anyone else, despite the difficulties involved. Besides, he no longer wanted to live any other life than the one he was already living.

It would appear from the conception of personhood espoused in Steven Marcus' literary

criticism and the conception of autonomy developed philosophically that Ellison does achieve the goal of writing a novel containing complex African-American characters. The development of a truly modern conscious protagonist flies in the face of assumptions of Black subhumanity. There are some problems with Ellison's formulation, however, that may reveal problems with Marcus' authority in determining the proper role for the Black writer.

Ellison's novel, for the most part, has weathered the storm among White critics who reflect opinions similar Marcus' understanding of the proper role of writing. The critical acclaim heaped upon him in 1952, with few exceptions has continued to this present day. His death in 1989, and his perception among White literary critics that he is the model for African-American writers to follow seem to ensure his permanence in the literary cannon.

African-American critics, however, challenge this hegemony of interpretation among White critics. Though many Black critics celebrated Ellison's novel when first published, the events of the 1960's caused Ellison's literary construction to come into question, especially by those critics who were heavily influenced by the Black Aesthetics movement. Throughout these turbulent years Ellison's individualistic approach in Invisible Man was seriously questioned in terms of its worth to the holistic liberation of African-American people. Ellison's refusal to espouse even a moderate variety of Black Nationalism, of course, helped to fan the furor against his ideology.

Jerry Gafio Watts, in Heroism & The Black Intellectual: Ralph Ellison. Politics, and Afro-American Intellectual Life, utilizes his professional training in sociology to critique many of Ellison's notions about humanity. While Watts finds many critical assessments of Ellison motivated by Black Nationalism too simplistic, he does think that many valuable and lasting

critiques of Ellison have risen from African-American intellectual engagement with Black Nationalism.

One the lasting effects of Black Nationalism is that it focused on the psychological effects of racism in ways that were discounted by Ellison (and perhaps Wright). For Watts, the intellectual worth of Black Nationalism was found in its critique of assumptions that Blacks lacked full humanity and in its refusal to deny the reality that the legacy of racism had significantly impacted Black psychology. For Post-sixties African-American literary critics, the full humanity of Black Americans is not in question. The long-lasting psychological effects of racism that seemingly permeated every aspect of American life is the real focus. For these critics an engaged consciousness does not guarantee the development of autonomy. In fact, an engaged conscious could actually further limit freedom, once the individual comes to realize the structural limitations on choice that racism affords.

As we have seen, African-American writers do labor under a special burden of making choices that are often conflictual. Some have chosen to use literature as a platform of protest, focusing primarily on ethical concerns. Others have chosen to ignore specifically Black concerns and focused on aesthetic value. Only a few, including Ellison, have consciously tried to address both concerns at once. This dual burden, in the end, is a significant task, especially when the ludicrousness of expecting Black authors to choose is taken into consideration. While Ellison's approach to developing autonomous Black characters is found wanting, it is a valiant effort that has set the stage for Black authors, such as Toni Morrison, who produce aesthetically and thematically complex Black characters without trying to prove their abilities to White literary critics. Without Ellison, these authors could not have existed. Most, however, reject the notions

espoused by literary critics like Steven Marcus, choosing instead to write to a growing, literate Black audience.

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