Invisible Man: Ellison’s Black Odyssey
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INVISIBLE MAN: ELLISON'S BLACK ODYSSEY

Some of the analogues and sources that have been claimed for Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man are A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, Notes from Underground, Richard Wright's The Man Who Lived Underground' and the Blues. To a certain extent these sources do clarify Ellison's novel, but they leave obscure some important incidents, like Jack's loss of his glass eye, and some characters, like Rinehart. Also, these sources do not sufficiently illuminate the most important theme in this novel: identity. The book that can most usefully be compared with Ellison's is The Odyssey.¹ If these two books present accurate pictures, this comparison suggests that for the ancient Greeks, but not for contemporary Black Americans, heroic aspirations can be achieved.

Personal identity and national character are major themes in both works. Odysseus' confrontation with the Cyclops, in which at first he shrewdly calls himself 'No Man' but later, as he escapes, proudly reveals his identity, is an example of the way in which the former theme is developed in Homer's epic. As Odysseus triumphs in adventure after adventure he expresses his identity as the man who is never at a loss. The hero of Invisible Man, however, must find an identity. The identity theme is announced in an epigraph from Eliot's Family Reunion:

I tell you, it is not me you are looking at,
Not me you are grinning at, not me your confidential looks
Incriminate, but that other person, if person,
You thought I was: let your necrophily
Feed upon that carcase.²

The invisible man is never named, and he has no meaningful identity until, illuminated by hundreds of light bulbs, he realizes that he is an invisible man. Like other epics, The Odyssey portrays a hero who embodies the identity of a nation. Ellison's hero, too, is representative of his people, Black Americans. In fact, the invisible man lives through the stages of Black American history: exploitation of the crudest kind by Whites, a Booker T.

Washington brand of personal advancement, attempts at integration, militancy and life underground. His ontology quite accurately recapitulates his race's phyllogeny.

Besides these major themes, the two works are similar in many details. In fact, the episodes in Invisible Man seem to be patterned on the ones in The Odyssey. The first similar episodes are the battle royal scene, which follows the prologue in Invisible Man, and the Trojan War in The Odyssey. Both occur before the main action begins, and both to a large extent determine the fate of the hero. The war creates Odysseus' problem, to return home safely with his men, and gives him a powerful enemy, Poseidon. In the battle royal scene Ellison develops the conventional idea that sex and aggression are often mixed with bigotry. More important, however, in it Ellison introduces the novel's Poseidon figure, the White. In this scene the young invisible man is at the mercy of the Whites, just as he always will be, though he does not always realize it. Their influence on him is often subtler than Poseidon's influence on Odysseus, sometimes even benign, but in the end the Whites, unlike Poseidon, triumph.

After the battle the Whites send the invisible man to Bledsoe's college, just as Poseidon sends Odysseus to Calypso's island. Both places at first seem idyllic. For a while Odysseus is charmed by his hostess and willing to delay his trip home. Likewise, the invisible man at first believes that the college will make him a success, so he accepts its values and imitates its president. But then the sinister aspect of these people becomes evident. Odysseus wants to leave but Calypso resists; the invisible man wants to stay but Bledsoe expels him. Odysseus manages to escape and Calypso proves not to be very evil after all. After he leaves, the invisible man does not hate the truly sinister Bledsoe, but his attitude changes when he discovers that the letters Bledsoe gave him are not recommendations but instructions to Whites to refuse him help. Odysseus confidently sets sail to
express his identity, but the invisible man's value system, and with it his identity, are smashed in the chaos at the Golden Day, because he sees that some members of the professions he aspires to are insane. When the id, represented by the inmates, erupts in this scene, overwhelming the super-ego--in the person of Supercargo--the narrator's weak personality falls apart, too, and he is forced to build an identity.

The invisible man next meets the liberal Whites to whom Bledsoe has ostensibly recommended him. They do not seem hostile; Emerson even seems totally obliging. At this point in the narratives the adventures in Invisible Man begin to occur in an order unlike the order of their analogues in The Odyssey, because the final destination of the two heroes is very different: the invisible man ends up in a place like one from which Odysseus escapes, an underworld. The analogue in The Odyssey of the White liberals is the lotus-eaters. Both groups are soporific, lulling the heroes into believing that nothing is wrong, nothing needs to be done. Emerson in Ellison's novel, like his famous namesake, exudes optimism. The departures from these settings by the two heroes are typical of them and therefore significantly different from each other. Odysseus escapes by an act of will, proving again that he is never at a loss. The invisible man is thrust out by the liberals, showing that he is nearly always at a loss.

The invisible man's next experience, at the paint factory, is like Odysseus' experience on the Island of the Winds. In both episodes a helpful man gives the hero a valuable gift and instructions about how to use it, but the instructions are disobeyed, causing disaster and angering the donor. Aeolis gives a bag of winds to Odysseus, telling him not to open it. However, Odysseus' man let out the winds, so their ship is blown back to Aeolis' island. Because the invisible man has no allies--which is one of his main problems--he is solely responsible for an error. Soon after he begins work he is given instructions by Kimbro and Brockway. Because he does not follow the instructions--first about mixing the paint, then about tending the gauges on the boilers--he angers his supervisors. Odysseus loses only his helping winds, but the invisible man is injured in an explosion, nearly lobotomized and thrown back into the streets.

He is aided by Mary, the Nausicaa of the novel. She is not a young, alluring maiden, but she gives him a place to stay and listens to him. Although he is slow to realize it, she is the only true friend he has. Similarly, Nausicaa and her father are the only true friends, besides his somewhat bumbling crew, that Odysseus has until he returns to Ithaca. They provide him with a comfortable place to stay and they listen to his story. Odysseus leaves his hosts for an even more hospitable family, his own. The invisible man for once leaves voluntarily, but chooses his next destination unwisely.

The invisible man comes upon a crowd watching a family being evicted, uses the rhetorical skills he had demonstrated in the battle royal scene and is discovered by the Communist Party. When he joins the Party his immediate superior is Jack, whose analogue is Polyphemus, the Cyclops. Both Polyphemus and Jack treat the hero well at first. Odysseus and his men feast on the Cyclops' dairy products, and the Party pays the invisible man and takes care of him. But then the Cyclops returns and captures Odysseus and his men, and the invisible man becomes a victim of the seemingly inevitable factionalism of the Left. In both episodes the identity theme is developed. The Party gives the invisible man both a name, which is not revealed, and, while he is a successful speaker for them, the most meaningful identity he has had. But later they take away this identity, showing that he is merely their pawn. Odysseus not only uses a false identity to fool his adversary and then boastfully asserts his real identity, but he also defeats his enemy in combat by gouging out his eye. Jack also loses his eye, but it merely falls out. It was false all the time, like him. The invisible man is not victorious but helpless, and he is told: "You must accept discipline. Either you accept decisions or you get out...."

I stared into his face, feeling a sense of outrage.... I looked from his face to the glass, thinking, he's disempowered himself just in order to confound me.... And the others had known it all along (pp. 409-410).

The Communist Party episode, the longest in Invisible Man, has a second analogue. Another political force in
Harlem, Ras the Exhorter, and the Party's chief theoretician, Hambro, are reminiscent of Scylla and Charybdis. The invisible man, like Odysseus, must steer a course between two enemies. Ras is physically aggressive, especially late in the book when he becomes Ras the Destroyer, so he is like the monster Scylla that tries to catch passers-by. Hambro is the exponent of rigid political dogma and thus like the rock Charybdis. The choice between Ras and Hambro is a choice between action and contemplation, practice and theory; later, between violence and organizing. Unlike Odysseus, the invisible man can find no middle way between these pairs, so he chooses Hambro and the Party, which later rejects him.

More importantly, Hambro and Ras differ on racial issues. Hambro thinks that race is insignificant, that one's real allegiance should be to the proletariat and its agent, the Party. Ras, a Black nationalist, teaches that race is all-important, and he derides the invisible man for turning away from his Black brothers. There is a middle course between these two attitudes toward race, and the invisible man slowly, painfully, finds it, and thereby creates an identity for himself. He learns that he must begin building an identity by acknowledging his Blackness but that he must be more than Black, more than a stereotype. He realizes, in a vision he has while smoking a reefer and listening to music in his underground hole, that he must be an individual:

"In the beginning . . ."
"At the very start," they cried.
"... there was blackness"

"Black will git you . . ."
"Yes it will . . ."
"... an' black won't . . ." (p. 12).

This paradoxical combination of individual identity and racial unity is more clearly expressed in the epilogue: "Our fate is to become one, and yet many" (p. 499). Gradually he learns to accept Black culture--like the Blues and Black history--and thus become one with his brothers, but also to become an individual, one of the "many." This successful navigation between two extremes is one of the invisible man's few genuine achievements.

He has to deal with female enemies also. The White woman who lures him to her apartment is a Siren (p. 354ff.). His encounter with her is in some ways the opposite of the analogous episode in The Odyssey. Unlike the Sirens, she does not offer knowledge as part of her temptation, but, in order to attract him to her apartment, she pretends to want knowledge from him. Also, his voice, not hers, is alluring. She asks him, "No one has told you, Brother, that at times you have tom-toms beating in your voice?" (p. 357). These two episodes end in opposite ways. Odysseus resists the Sirens by telling his men to tie him to the mast, but the invisible man succumbs. Although he escapes when her husband returns, he realizes that he has been used by another man's hedonistic wife.

Later he is victimized to a greater extent by another woman, Sybil. Her name is ironic, for she is not a prophetess, but a Circe. Her prototype in The Odyssey literally turns Odysseus' men into swine, and Sybil figuratively does the same thing to the invisible man. She is a married woman, like the previous temptress, but much more vulgar, pathetic and desperate, and he absorbs some of these qualities. The depths to which they sink are revealed in this passage:

I was annoyed enough to slap her . . .
Then she said, "Come on, Come on!"
and I said, "Sure, sure," looking around wildly and starting to pour the drink
upon her I stopped, my emotions locked,
as I saw her lipstick lying on the table
and grabbed it, saying, "Yes, yes," as I
bent to write furiously across her belly
in drunken inspiration:

Sybil, you were raped
by
Santa Claus
surprise.

(p. 452)

Probably the strangest character in Invisible Man is Rinehart, the man of many identities, or to use the invisible man's pun on his name, of many minds. He is a lover; when the invisible man puts on sun glasses, a woman asks him, "'Rinehart, baby, is that you?"' (p. 417). He is also a hipster. Mistaken again for him, the invisible man is addressed by two hipsters:

"'Rinehart, poppa, tell you what you put-
ting down"' (p. 418). He is also called a "confidencing sonofabitch" (p. 422) and "Rinehart the numbers man!" (p. 424). The
invisible man even sees a handbill, from which he gets the notion of being invisible, that reads:

Behold the Invisible
Thy will be done O Lord!
I See all, Know all, Tell all, Cure all.
You shall see the unknown wonders.
Rev. B. P. Rinehart
Spiritual Technologist

Above all, Rinehart is a cynic. The invisible man once rebukes Hambro by saying, "that's Rinehartism--cynicism" (p. 436). Finally, he is a Proteus who continually changes his form. Odysseus knew how to improvise and trick, but the doctrine of invisibility is a revelation to Ellison's hero.

The riot in Harlem, the adventure that the invisible man has before his final destination, is similar to the adventure Odysseus has before the interlude on Calypso's island. The invisible man is endangered when he joins Dupre and his fellow looters, who burn and steal, especially taking food: "cases of beer, cheese, chains of linked sausage, watermelons, sacks of sugar, hams, cornmeal" (p. 480). This mob is reminiscent of Odysseus' crew when they steal and eat the oxen of the sun.

Helios, the sun god, complains to Zeus, who sends a tempest to drive Odysseus' ship to Calypso's island. Similarly, while fleeing the riot the invisible man tumbles down a man-hole, from where he tells his story.

To determine the meaning of this man-hole it is necessary to consider the cause of the riot: the death of the invisible man's friend Todd Clifton. This impressive Black leader is rejected by the Party and is reduced to perpetrating fraud in order to live. He sells dolls that seem to move by their own power, but actually are manipulated by strings. Because he has no peddler's license, he flees from a policeman, who kills him. This murder causes a riot, because the invisible man organizes a huge funeral to focus the anger in Harlem. The only innocent victim in The Odyssey is Elpenor, who dies from a fall off a roof on Circe's island, and he is Todd's analogue.

Immediately after Elpenor's death, Odysseus visits the Underworld and sees him. Similarly, Todd Clifton's death causes the riot, which in turn causes the invisible man to fall into an underworld, the man-hole. The differences between Odysseus' and the invisible man's visits are great. The former learns the way home and other information from omniscient Tiresias and sees famous dead people like Achilles. But there is no prophet to instruct the invisible man; he has to provide his own illumination, artificially, with light bulbs. The biggest difference between the two episodes is that Odysseus rises from the Underworld and returns home, but the man-hole is the final step for the invisible man. Although he has plans to leave, when the book ends he is alone in the depths.

The last difference between the two heroes is the most important. Half of The Odyssey takes place after Odysseus' return to Ithaca, his homeland, when a kind nurse, a doughty swineherd, a loyal son and a faithful wife wait for him. Helped by his son and the swineherd, he defeats the suitors, and The Odyssey ends happily. But the invisible man has no allies or family, no happiness and, above all, no real home.

Thus, each of the invisible man's adventures is like one of Odysseus'--until its outcome. Odysseus always wins; the invisible man, although he learns in the process, always loses. Odysseus begins with a personal identity and membership in a group. Even though he occasionally wants to divorce himself from his fellow Blacks, the invisible man seeks his own and his group's identity. Invisible Man ends with a suggestion that invisibility is suitable not only for Blacks but also for all modern men: "who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?" (p. 503). If he does speak for all of us, White and Black, Ellison has illuminated more than the plight of Black Americans. His hesitant claim may be true; he may have described the perils and invisibility of contemporary man. If so, he has written an epic worthy of comparison with The Odyssey.

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1 The only reference to the two works together is undeveloped and appears in Time: "Black and Blue," 59:15 (April 14, 1952), 112.

2 I will use the Signet edition of Invisible Man and place page references in parentheses.