RALPH ELLISON'S MODERN VERSION OF BRER BEAR AND BRER RABBIT IN INVISIBLE MAN

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Mr. Ellison's Invisible Man is an intelligent, young Negro attuned to what he considers the clarion philosophy of the white world--"keep this nigger boy running." At first we find him like a bear, by his own admission, hibernating, unknown to anyone in a Harlem tenement basement. There he reflects upon his past experience, which soon, like Dante's travail to the blinding light of knowledge, is to be recounted. We can meanwhile understand symbolically one of his preoccupations. Around him in this dark basement he has rigged electric fixtures. He has tapped a power line and currently is stealing the electricity that illuminates his hibernation. On the ceiling and walls there are now 1369 lighted bulbs. Such enlightenment metaphorically sets the tone of the book. It is from one frame of reference a psychological study, impressionistically told.

So begins the story. In the South, once, a Negro boy was awarded by the whites a scholarship to a Negro state college. He was to learn the tradition of Booker T. Washington--practical service to the Negro community, humble dignity (at least in public), intellectualized acceptance of white authority. And naively on that foundation he frames his goals, and affixes in the rafters the hopeful branch of religion. Dilligently and in innocence he learns to conform. As a reward, in his third year, he is chosen to chauffeur a visiting white trustee of the college.

The day is a disaster. Taking a back road he allows the delicately sensitive trustee to see the Negro in all his squalor. Following a conversation with a farmer who is known to have committed incest, the trustee faints and is carried to the only available haven, a saloon and brothel just then at the height of its weekly business with the Negro ambulatory Vets of a mental institution. Within the day our hero is dismissed from the college of conformity, on the morrow traveling North to the expectation of greater freedom.

In short order, thus upon the verge of manhood, other disillusionments follow. The letters of recommendation which he carries from the college president prove treacherous. In the North he is economically expolited. Because of his skill as a public speaker he is enlisted by the Communists and later duped. In the shadow of each rebuff he distinguishes his grandfather's enigmatic smile and hears his words: "overcome 'em with yesses." Accordingly, the race of his experience in the South and North exhausts his

consciousness of self. He finds that in running he is nowhere. Like a continually endangered Odysseus under the polyphemal white eye of society he is Noman. The whites are blind to him, he is invisible to himself, having failed in a succession of roles. While in itself this is a kind of knowledge by suffering, it is more than he can bear. His self-imposed basement exile is therefore an escape from responsibility, if also from the inequity of a hostile world. The winter of his discontent, he knows, must come to its hibernative end, and he must chance the new spring, yet for the time--and for the empahsis of the novel--his past disillusioning experience must be narrated.

Because the mode of that narration is impressionistic, Ellison takes the opportunity to convey the largest part of the novel's meaning via a quite imaginative, often bizarre range of imagery. In that way the logic of image associations sets out the basis of thematic implication. This may come as a new idea to the historian and litterateur alike, especially because the social and political significance of Mr. Ellison's book seems conclusively to derive from its open drama, colorful vignettes, and frank appraisals. Yet it may not be amiss to demonstrate that there is a good deal more social and political commentary being effected in the work via a highly planned if somewhat covert structure.

This means several things. Such a demonstration is necessarily involved with its own tools, the logic of interpolation as well as the more generally understood judgement of interpretation. Further, the story is not always told literally, but rather is rendered by symbols and images that have something like a life of their own. At an extreme (the Invisible Man's experience while in shock), the literal result takes the form of an impenetrable impressionistic morass, and the reader must agree to witness rather than to understand in the traditional sense. Other times a logical association can be drawn from similar instances: at the beginning of the novel the Invisible Man comes to a southern "smoker" where he will enter the prizefight ring, and while there he sees a nude dancer who has an American flag tattooed on her belly: at the end of the book he is described as a "black bruiser" who is "on the ropes" and "punch drunk" and he scrawls another distortion of another American message across the belly of another nude: "Sybil, you were raped/ by/ Santa Claus/ Surprise." Such devices as these form the texture (albeit an ironic one) of the American meanings which the hero experiences, and which no less importantly the reader is invited to experience with him.

As we do so we may trace the Invisible Man as a Christ-like figure, sacrificed and sacrificing. Many of the symbols by which he is described are distinctly Christian symbols, many of his actions are analogues of Biblical events. Or, psychologically considered, he is the dramatic vortex of Negro neuroticism: so extensive is the imagery here that we must read and interpret with the aid of an unabridged Freud. Historically and politically, too, he is beset by a cavalcade of American symbols and images which are

in the wrong places, a sometimes subtle, sometimes raucous debunking of the names and institutions which Americans are supposed to hold so dear: the American flag upon her belly undulates to the shimmy of a nude, the identity of Jefferson is an illusion in the mind of a shellshocked veteran, the Statue of Liberty is obscured in fog while liberty is the name appellate to a corporate enterprise, Emerson is a businessman, the Fourth of July is Jack the Communist's birthday as well as the occasion of a race riot.

Based fairly closely upon the folklore motif of Brer Rabbit and Brer Bear, the line of imagery discussed in this paper is as ironic as such other patterns of meaning, and perhaps even more so because of its Negro origin. Like the novel's fifty or perhaps seventy five other motifs, it is not especially extensive, nor does it so closely effect an analogy that it admits of no other meaning for its individual parts. Quite the opposite. The bear and the rabbit are sometimes psychologically one in the same, as in Jack the Rabbit, Jack the Bear. But it would seem that the rabbit can be Peter as well. Or he is called Buckeye, which describes Jack the Communist later on. Or he is about to be peppered with BUCKshot. Or there is a pun on bear, so that the hero can not bear his existence. There is, in short, a rich language play which intertwines this motif with many others, which, perhaps too gratuitously on occasion, identifies rabbit with Brer Rabbit, which makes literary explication not the easiest of pursuits. Yet, for all that, the point of Ellison's use of this motif seems plain enough. Though they are sometimes friendly enough, less than kin and more than herbiverous quadrupeds, rabbit and bear are naturally irreconcilable. More, we know from Uncle Remus that soon they will match wits.

This makes for a good metaphor in which to cast the Invisible Man, since, interestingly enough, for Ellison, wit is not the same as intelligence. His protagonist is not a victor. Early in his education the Invisible Man discovers that. While he is chauffeuring Mr. Norton, the trustee of the college, they approach Jim Trueblood's backroad shack. The Invisible Man mentions that Trueblood has had relations with his own daughter. Norton demands that the car be stopped. He runs over to Trueblood, accosts him, wants his story. While the amazed and morally upright Invisible Man looks on, Trueblood complies in full detail. Ellison already has described him "as one who told the old stories with a sense of humor and a magic that made them come alive." And again, as one "who made high plaintively animal sounds." Now this story: sleeping three abed because of the extreme cold, his wife, daughter and himself, as if in a dream well beyond his control, just naturally, incest occurred. The story is a colloquial poetic. Before the act Trueblood has been nothing, but now he freely admits: "But what I don't understand is how I done the worst thing a man can do in his own family and 'stead of things gittin bad, they got better. The nigguhs up at the school don't like me, but the white folks treats me fine."

This irony is the key to Ellison's entire treatment of Brer Rabbit and Brer Bear's relationship. Here the issue is moral. Trueblood, in the middle

of the night which he describes "Black as the middle of a bucket of tar," has given his daughter a baby. For this he is rewarded. Norton gives him a hundred-dollar bill. "You bastard," says the Invisible Man under his breath, "You no-good bastard! You get a hundred-dollar bill!" Playing the bear, the Invisible Man is fooled, of course; thrown out of school in a hurry. In vain he objects to the college president: "But I was only driving him, sir. I only stopped there after he ordered me to...." "Ordered you?" retorts the president, "He ordered you. Dammit, white folk are always giving orders, it's a habit with them. Why didn't you make an excuse? Couldn't you say they had sickness--smallpox--or picked another cabin? Why that Trueblood shack? My God, boy! You're black and living in the South--did you forget how to lie?"

This is the form of the anecdote. Brer Bear is outwitted by Brer Rabbit in a first encounter. So the Invisible Man travels to the North. There on the streets of New York City he meets the second rabbit man, in this instance named Peter. Of course, exactly considered, Peter rabbit is not the same as Brer Rabbit, yet he belongs to the same tradition. He knows how to escape the McGregors of the world. Here in Harlem he looks like a clown in baggy pants, wheeling a cart full of unused blue-prints. Says Peter, "Man, this Harlem ain't nothing but a bear's den." The Invisible Man then completes the bridge of logic to the original analogy: "I tried to think of some saying about bears to reply, but remembered only Jack the Rabbit, Jack the Bear." Peter needs no social reenforcement, however. He proffers his key to success: "All it takes to get along in this here man's town is a little shit, grit, and mother-wit. And man, I was bawn with all three." So the friendly side of the rabbit's personality, advising the Invisible Man what to expect from the city, the North, the white world. But it is no use, for the bear must always be tricked--and soon he is.

He has heard of a job at Liberty Paints and hurried to apply. The scene depicts a patriotic devotion to the free enterprise system: flags flutter from the building tops. A screaming eagle is the company's trade mark. Liberty Paints covers America with what is advertised as the whitest white possible, a defective shipment just then being sent out for a Washington national monument. The bear is sent down, down, down, to help the irascible Negro, Lucius Brockway.

"Three levels underground I pushed upon a heavy metal door marked 'Danger' and descended into a noisy, dimly lit room. There was something familiar about the fumes that filled the air and I had just thought pine, when a high-pitched Negro voice rang out above the machine sounds." In an image which we may recall, the first rabbit, Trueblood, has already dreamed of such machinery. And his black as tar description is taken up now by the Invisible Man's thought of pine, and by Ellison's pun "high-pitched." So the hero encounters Lucius, the next Brer Rabbit, who is described as small, wiry, with cottony white hair, who defends himself by biting, and whose coveralls covered by goo bring the image of the Tar Baby to the Invisible Man's mind.

Against Lucius's grit and mother-wit there is barely any defense. It turns out that Lucius alone has the secret of America's whitest white paint. He and no one else knows the location of every pipe, switch, cable and wire in the basement heart of the plant. Only he knows how to keep the paint from bleeding (whereas Trueblood does actually bleed for his moral smear), only he how to mix the base. He has helped Sparland, the big boss, word the slogan "If it's Optic White, It's the Right White." And he knows his worth: "caint a single doggone drop of paint move out of the factory lessen it comes through Lucius Brockway's hands." So in the matter of economics as before with morals, Brer Bear can not win. As Lucius's assistant he tends the steam valves, and when they pass the danger mark, burst, Brockway scrambles for the door and escapes while the Invisible Man attempts to shut them off and is caught in the steam. Again we may remind ourselves that the concepts of machinery and scalding have been united in Trueblood the rabbit's dream. Brer Bear can not win no matter how hard he tries.

In this case, moreover, his efforts are naive, short of the hypocrisy which alone means survival for the natively talented Negro. While he struggles for consciousness and self in the company hospital, that fact of Negro existence is brought out. A card is placed before him: "What is your name?" Under the bludgeoning of experience he has lost his identity, "I realized that I no longer knew my own name. I shut my eyes and shook my head with sorrow." The fantasy of his impression continues. Other cards are submitted, finally the question: "Boy, who was Brer Rabbit?" Soon after he is released in a daze, finds his way to Harlem and collapses on the sidewalk.

Here Ellison has been portraying the New Negro intellectual. What has this Invisible Man learned?--that in the South, in the course of enlightenment he is pitted against his fellow Negro, farmer and college president alike; that Negro inured to the quasi-slavery practiced by the white. And in the North little better: survival in a slum, a bear in a bear den. Yet defeat is a realization, and a realization is a victory of perspective. In short, he is no simple Brer Bear. It is Ellison's intention to have him learn what the young intellectuals must learn--that as long as narrow self interest motivates him he can have no peace. His must be the realm of the universal. That becomes the next phase, not with a rush of empathy, but as before, through trial, through defeat, through knowledge of self.

One day, when he has recovered from his ordeal in the paint factory, he comes upon the Harlem eviction of an aged Negro couple. Their meagre possessions on the sidewalk, the wife attempts to return into their apartment to pray. When the marshals in charge refuse permission the crowd riots. Suddenly in the melee the Invisible Man hears himself yelling, "Black men! Brothers! Black Brothers!" His further role as Brer Bear has begun. Under the aegis of his colloquial elloquence the crowd returns the furniture to the apartment. Then, in another moment, the police have arrived and he searches for a way of escape. A white girl standing in the doorway accosts him,

"Brother, that was quite a speech you made," directs him to the roof. He hurries across to another building, down the stairs, into the street a block away, across to a far corner. But as he waits for the light to change there comes the quiet, penetrating voice beside his ear, "That was a masterful bit of persuasion, brother." The biggest, most persistent rabbit of all has just tracked him, Brer Jack the Communist, alias Buckeye the one-eyed international hopper. Brer Bear is wanted for the organization. Will he listen over coffee?

Says the Invisible Man, "I watched him going across the floor with a bouncy rolling step." Again: "His movements were those of a lively small animal." And Jack's pitch is short: "Perhaps you would be interested in working for us. We need a good speaker for this district. Someone who can articulate the grievances of the people. They exist, and when the cry of protest is sounded, there are those who will hear it and act." Communism is the answer to his needs, for as many reasons as it is advertised to have. It offers him a cause, social equality and a job. It fulfils what must seem the generic destiny of a Brer.

What informs the Communist policy is the scientific attitude, however, not the man but the mass. To this positivistic philosophy the Invisible Man must immediately be trained, for in the course of change to the new brotherhood, he is told by Hambro the Communist philosophe, certain sentimental ideas will have to be sacrificed. The very idea of race, that core and defense of Negro unity, must be sublimated. Nor is there place in the Brotherhood's teaching for emotion, for psalm singing, yam-eating, Tuskeegee zeal. All is to be logical: the answers to the woman question, the rational youth groups, the organization of labor, even the public rallies. At least this is the theory, and if like Liberty Paints it is myopic and actually tinged with grey, if the women take him to bed to answer their political questions, if the youth are too easily frantic, if the public is still strong for the gospel and labor distrusts the Negro as scab; if these realities, the Invisible Man's idealism draws him into the bear trap, Brother Jack his foil.

His is a persuasive skill. Soon he is known, liked, trusted, powerful, confident that the Brotherhood is leading the Negro aright. Now he is willing to fight Ras the Exhorter, leader of the Negro-only movement. But as quickly, the trap springs: the internationally directed Brotherhood changes its Harlem policy. Indefinitely, there will be an interdiction of its plan to better the Negro's social condition. Unless the Invisible Man is willing to sacrifice the trust, the hopes of his fellow Negro, he must renounce identity once more.

In a scene which proves the Brotherhood's shortsightedness--Brer Jack, it turns out, actually has but one eye--there comes the break. But now, unallied, the Invisible Man must reckon with Ras the Destroyer, who in a Fourth of July flash electrifies Harlem as the nationalist leader of a super race riot. This is no time for intellectualism, nor this the place. Pursued,

to survive, our hero has no choice but to hide in an underground cavern. There we find him when the novel begins: "Call me Jack-the-Bear, for I am in a state of hibernation." That is the pattern, from rural copse to cosmopolitan forest.

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