

**down from slavery**

**invisible man's  
descent into the city  
and the discovery of self**

robert butler

“Not only could you travel upward toward success,  
but you could travel downward as well.”

*Invisible Man*

Gabriel Morton and Lucia White observed in their seminal 1962 study *The Intellectual Versus the City* that “For a variety of reasons our most celebrated thinkers have expressed different degrees of ambivalence and animosity toward the city.” Citing an “anti-urban roar” in “our national literary pantheon,” containing writers such as Jefferson, Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, Poe and Henry Adams, they claimed that there is nothing in our national literature like “the Greek attachment to *polis* or the French writer’s affection for Paris.” Their examination of the writers who have constituted “the core of our intellectual history” led them to conclude that it “would be extremely difficult to cull from their writings a large anthology of poetry or social philosophy in celebration of American urban life.”<sup>1</sup>

However, a dramatic reversal of this anti-urban bias in American literature may be found in Afro-American writing, a literary tradition which has frequently been critical of the values expressed in mainstream American literature. While

one of the central drives in our classic literature has been a nearly reflexive desire to move away from the complexity and supposed corruption of cities toward idealized non-urban settings such as Cooper's West, Thoreau's woods, Whitman's open road and Twain's river, nearly the opposite has been true in Afro-American letters. To be sure, several classic black texts such as Washington's *Up From Slavery*, and Dunbar's *Lyrics from Lowly Life*, express a deep suspicion of urban experience and strongly advise blacks to remain in the rural South. And in recent years a number of impressive novels written by black women, most notably Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Paula Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*, are centered in an essentially pastoral outlook. But in the main, Afro-American literature from its beginnings to the present has been persistently urban in vision. The *Narrative of Frederick Douglass*, for example, portrays the rural South as a plantation culture intent on exploiting and then destroying black people, and envisions the city as a place of deliverance. Entering New York harbor after escaping slavery, Douglass felt like one who had escaped from a den of hungry lions" and later feels himself at "the starting point of a new existence"<sup>2</sup> when he moves to New Bedford. In the same way, *Incidents of a Slave Girl* concludes with Linda Brent achieving freedom and selfhood in a number of cities after escaping a life of slavery on a Southern plantation. Emerging from the "black pit"<sup>3</sup> of her past life, she discovers a new life in Philadelphia, New York and Boston. W. E. B. DuBois, who was born in a small village in Western Massachusetts, likewise found greatly expanded possibilities for development in cities such as Boston and Atlanta. James Weldon Johnson, visiting New York for the first time in 1899, enthusiastically embraced the modern American city as a place of renewal:

The glimpse of life I caught during our last two or three weeks in New York . . . showed me a new world, an alluring world, a tempting world of greatly lessened restraints, a world of fascinating perils; but above all, a world of tremendous artistic potentialities.<sup>4</sup>

Langston Hughes would later help to fulfill these artistic potentialities in his celebrations of Harlem, a city which fired his imagination and became the center of his life and art. His first view of New York in 1925 is remarkably similar to Johnson's earlier evocation of that city: "There is no thrill in all the world like entering, for the first time, New York Harbor. . . . New York is truly the dream city—city of towers near God, city of hopes and visions."<sup>5</sup> Richard Wright's vision of Chicago is split between wonder and terror but the city is always preferable to the rural alternatives in Mississippi which Wright so categorically rejected. A "fabulous . . . indescribable city," Chicago was both a brutally naturalistic environment which could crush Bigger Thomas and also a world of "high idealism"<sup>6</sup> which could help to liberate the narrator of *Black Boy* and *American Hunger*. Never romanticized, it nonetheless provided Wright with a compelling symbol of American identity, the larger world for which he hungered. And when Wright despaired of achieving a human identity in America, he renewed his search for selfhood in Paris.

Most important black literature which has emerged since the Depression has also been largely urban in character. While never hesitant to criticize the negative aspects of the American city, it has usually resisted the temptation of romantically positing an alternative to urban reality in an idealized pastoral setting. Moreover, this large and significant body of literature contains some surprising celebrations of city life. James Baldwin's best fiction is rooted in New York, a place of extraordinary beauty as well as pain. Claude Brown's *Manchild in the Promised Land*, which set out to tell the story of "the first urban generation of Negroes," is careful to point out that urban blacks are "better off" than their counterparts in the rural South because the city, for all its corruption and violence, has the vitality and educational possibilities necessary for the "better life" which Brown himself achieved. Amiri Baraka's 1981 essay "Black Literature and the Afro-American Nation: The Urban Voice" argues that, from the Harlem Renaissance onward, black literature has been "urban shaped," producing a uniquely "black urban consciousness." While careful not to idealize the condition of blacks in American urban centers, he predicts that the setting for black liberation will be the cities, because black consciousness there has reached a point where it can undertake advanced levels of revolutionary activity: "But if the cities represent higher levels of perception and sophistication for us in America, they must be the focal point of yet more advanced levels of struggle."<sup>8</sup> And Toni Morrison, although stressing that the American city in general has often induced a sense of "alienation" in many black writers, nevertheless adds that modern black literature is suffused with an "affection" for "the village within" the city, black neighborhoods which are repositories for life-sustaining "community values."<sup>9</sup> Gwendolyn Brooks' poetry often celebrates this sense of cultural unity within the black neighborhoods of South Chicago. A "village" of black life can be found even in Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*. Despite the urban horrors which that book so painfully details, some hope is affirmed at the end of the novel by the emergence of community spirit symbolized by the tearing down of ghetto walls and the preparations for a block party.

One way to explain this surprisingly positive image of the city in Afro-American literature is to examine the historical experience of blacks in America. From the very outset, blacks were denied imaginative access to a pre-urban homeland in Africa because the institution of slavery did everything possible to stamp out the memory of that homeland. And the actual experience of slaves in America did not permit them the luxury of romantically imagining the non-urban settings which are so mythically prominent in the fictions of Cooper, Melville and Twain. As Huckleberry Finn and Jim sadly discover, the territories ahead could be truly liberating only for whites. In the era following the literal ending of slavery, new strategies for enslavement were devised in the South where codes of segregation and the practice of sharecropping were to make it impossible for blacks to establish a positive image of rural life which could serve as a counterbalance to the pull of the cities. The black writer, therefore, has usually found it inappropriate to envision idealized non-urban space as a relief from the pressures of urban living. For these reasons, the city has been an important symbol in black literature and that literature has been remarkable

for the variety of ways it has made powerful and unique affirmations about urban life in America.

I

Ellison's *Invisible Man* is a vivid example of this pro-urban drive in Afro-American literature because it reduces to absurdity the hero's experiences in the rural South and extends to him the possibility of a kind of redemption in the Northern city. The small town in which the hero grows up, ironically given the pastoral name of "Greenwood,"<sup>10</sup> is revealed in the Battle Royal episode as a place intent on blinding him with illusions about American life and trapping him in the debilitating roles of a segregated society. The college he attends appears to be a kind of "Eden" but is in fact a "flower studded wasteland" (29). The hero's experiences in both of these apparently bucolic settings arouse his hopes of finding a place for himself in the American dream but actually reduce him to the level of a robot controlled by people who use him for their own purposes.

His movement to New York City, however, suggests a way out of these traps. After he has been "expelled" (91) from his false Eden and "cast into the darkness" (105), he moves North to a larger and potentially more liberating world. As Ellison himself has observed of his hero in *Shadow and Act*, "He leaves the South and goes North; this, as you will notice in reading Negro folktales, is always the road to freedom—the movement upward. You have the same thing when he leaves his underground cave for the open."<sup>11</sup> This is the Dreiserian "city of dreams," a "world of possibility" (122) which the hero beholds in wonder as he steps off a Greyhound bus and contemplates Harlem for the very first time. As he observes late in the novel, New York is for him a fluid, open world with "all boundaries down," a new space where "you could actually make yourself anew" (377).

What the hero must discover, however, is that the city which he beholds in such wonder is not a simple world containing one meaning but is in fact a tangle of painful contradictions. Like himself and American reality in general, the city is complexly double. He eventually discovers his own duality when he realizes that "there were two of me" (281), a public self enslaved by society's expectation that he climb the ladder of outward "success" and a private self which is deformed by this "black rite of Horatio Alger" (87). In the same way, he comes to see New York as two mutually opposed cities: First, the city classically portrayed in Horatio Alger novels, an urban world enticing him with external rewards such as money, power and status, and second, an existential city which offers an enriched consciousness leading to freedom and genuine self-hood.<sup>12</sup>

His movements in these cities take two very different forms. The Algerian city invites him to move "upward" in American life toward various forms of outward success. But as the Battle Royal and his early experiences in New York clearly indicate, this upward movement exacts a terrible price, for it forces him to move away from the self toward various false roles eroding his identity. His movements in the existential city, however, are consistently *downward*, moving away from outward success and toward a greater degree of personal

freedom, independence and self awareness. Rushing toward the center of Harlem late in the novel, he describes this movement as a race to the self: "I ran through the night, ran within myself" (403).

But for much of the novel he is engaged in a fruitless "footrace against" (287) himself as he moves blindly through an Algerian city mapped out by others intent on using him. He is sent to New York by Bledsoe ostensibly to redeem himself after the fiasco at the Golden Day. His letters of recommendation to various important people in the city apparently will put him in touch with the "sponsors" who in the Alger myth always open the doors of success for the hardworking young boy desirous of "rising" in life.<sup>13</sup> The hero temporarily takes up residence in Men's House, a place which has traditionally housed black men who have left the South to pursue the American Dream in the North. But when he finds out from Emerson's son that his letters will not lead him to sponsors interested in helping him to "rise" in life, but, on the contrary, will put him on a wild-goose chase toward a "horizon" which "recedes ever brightly and distantly from the hopeful traveler" (145), he rejects everything which Men's House stands for and resolves to make his own way in the city.

Ironically, however, he uses another recommendation, the one provided by Emerson's son, and this brings him to Liberty Paint, which is described as a "small city" (149). What he encounters there is another version of the Alger myth which now promises upward mobility by becoming part of a complex industrial society. Here again, the city seems to offer freedom from a restrictive Southern past but in fact provides him with another version of that past. Working for Kimbro, whom his fellow workers characterize as a "slave driver" (151) and whom he sees as "a Northern redneck, a Yankee cracker" (152), he becomes part of an urban plantation which reduces him to the level of a share-cropper at best and a slave at worst. The hero is exactly right when he thinks that "there were unseen lines which ran from North to South" (128). Attaining one's freedom is not a simple matter of physically moving to a Northern city because the urban North has been contaminated by the same racism and brutality which characterizes the pastoral regions of the deep South.

Even in his acts of conscious rebellion against the Alger myth the hero ironically repeats the experience of slavery in the Northern city. Signing up with the Brotherhood because it promises him "the highest possible rewards" (268) and a liberating role to play, he ultimately discovers that he is trapped in the same way that he was trapped in the Battle Royal. Here again he is carefully monitored by whites who want to make him "the new Booker T. Washington" (231), a person who will channel black political energy into forms which are acceptable to whites. And just as his involvements in the Battle Royal result in self destructive violence for himself and others, his involvement in the Brotherhood culminates in the Harlem Riot which the Brotherhood engineers, a mad explosion which the hero ultimately describes as "not suicide but murder" (417). Put another way, his Brotherhood experiences lead him to yet another dead-end, confinement in a Dantean "city of the dead" (324), a Hell brought on by his own blindness and desires for power and status.

What he needs to enter the existential city of possibility is the kind of consciousness necessary to correctly *read* his urban experiences so that he can

map his own way through the city and thus discover the city as a reflector and liberator of the self. In the Vet's words, he has "to learn to look beneath the surface" (118). This ultimately brings him literally into an existential underworld which frees him by completely inverting the values of the Horatio Alger myth, sending him *down* to the liberating regions of the self instead of up towards the material goals which have in fact enslaved him all his life.

Getting to the urban underworld, however, is no easy process, because he has always been trained to see success in Algerian terms as upward movement and freedom, or in Booker T. Washington's terms as rising from a condition of servitude. He begins the process of liberation leading to the "underground" of the self by spontaneously wandering through the hidden parts of the city, slowly becoming more aware of it as an emblem of the hidden parts of himself. Penetrating a city which he informally maps for himself, he gradually discovers the hidden recesses of his own nature.

This process begins shortly after the Hospital sequence where he takes the subway to Harlem and then passes out on the streets. Stunned by the explosions at Liberty Paint and the electro-shock therapy at the Hospital, the hero is freed from the Algerian "plan" for success imposed on him at the Battle Royal and reinforced in all subsequent episodes. Significantly, he moves to Harlem, which is a kind of underground, a "city within a city" (122). His free movements in Harlem repeatedly result in increased self awareness as he discovers the falsity of an American Dream which promises freedom for all but creates an immense ghetto depriving enormous masses of their political, social and economic rights. Developing the habit, while living with Mary Rambo, of reading books from the library during the day and "wander[ing] the streets until late at night" (197), the hero begins the slow process of reading the city and the self. Deciphering the codes contained in books and the urban landscape, he finally begins to interpret the secrets that have been deeply buried within himself for most of his life.

The first example of this occurs approximately half way through the novel when, hurrying through the streets one day, he comes upon a vendor selling yams. This key episode endows him with "an intense feeling of freedom" (201) because it awakens in him a renewed respect for his folk traditions and their ability to "nourish" him more than the Alger myth, which has him rejecting soul food for a standard breakfast of toast, juice and coffee. This scene contrasts sharply with an earlier episode on the city streets when the hero meets the man calling himself Peter Wheatstraw. Whereas in the earlier episode, the hero was not able—and probably unwilling—to decipher the folk codes which are such a key part of his identity, here he understands what the street vendor is talking about and identifies strongly with the rich ethnic past which the sweet yams evoke. While the earlier street scene with Wheatstraw resulted in the hero rejecting his racial traditions, thinking "they're a hell of a people" (135), this scene in Harlem culminates in his thinking with pride "What a group of people we were" (200).

Shortly after this he moves into "a side street" (202) where his perceptions are developed further as he witnesses an old black couple being evicted from their apartment. The vaguely-felt nostalgia induced by eating the yams becomes a much more disturbing feeling of anger and betrayal when he sees all of the

couple's possessions thrown out on the street, reduced to what he will later describe as "junk whirled eighty-seven years in a cyclone" (211). Again, the urban scene speaks to him in a vital way:

I turned aside and looked at the clutter of household objects which the two men continued to pile on the walk. And as the crowd pushed me I looked down to see looking out of an oval frame a portrait of the old couple when young, seeing the sad, stiff dignity of the faces there; feeling strange memories awakening that began an echoing in my head like that of a hysterical voice stuttering in a dark street (205).

Here the outer cityscape becomes a compelling metaphor of the hero's self, which is tied to a cultural and racial past for which he finally takes responsibility. As he observes the dispossession of the old couple, he realizes that he too has been dispossessed of the same American Dream promised to them. The outward street thus becomes the "dark street" of his mind, filled with a critically important new sign of selfhood, the "hysterical voice" so long repressed since the Battle Royal but which now cries out for full articulation.

Throughout the remainder of the novel the hero continues to move into the self as he freely explores the existential city. He thus slowly becomes aware of the wisdom of Wheatstraw's statement that Harlem may be a "bear's den" but "it's the best place for you and me" (123). Wandering the streets after he has witnessed Clifton's death, he thinks "It was as though in this short block I was forced to walk past everyone I had ever known" (335). More importantly, he becomes increasingly sensitive to two voices which he had previously been trained to ignore—the voice of the city and the voice arising from the deepest levels of his consciousness. From his very first moments in Harlem he had been aware that these two voices are somehow related:

I had always thought of my life as being confined in the South. And now as I struggled through the lives of people a new world of possibility suggested itself to me faintly, like a small voice that was barely audible in the roar of city sounds. I moved wide-eyed, trying to take the bombardment of impressions (122).

Just as the roar of the city awakens his sensations so that he sees and hears in an intensified way, it also releases in him a "small voice" of possibility which was muffled in the Battle Royal episode and completely silenced in his interview with Bledsoe. The vital roar of the city, so unlike the deadly silence of the campus, begins a true process of education for the hero because it draws from him the existential "voice" which is at the core of his self.

As the novel progresses, the hero's small voice amplifies as his consciousness of the city becomes more comprehensive and enriched. After delivering a Brotherhood speech, he thinks "I threw my voice hard down against the traffic sounds" (278). While speaking at Clifton's funeral he imagines the crowd

looking at "the pattern of my voice on the air" (343). By the end of the novel, he has developed a voice which is as richly complex and sophisticated as the city itself. Moreover, he has switched from an oral to a written voice, moving from the status of orator to novelist. This is a crucial change for it makes him less dependent upon the needs of his immediate audience and better able to sound his own depths. The role of writer also grants his voice a greater degree of permanency and universality, enabling him to reach the "lower frequencies" (439) which speak to all people.

Invisible Man, therefore, stops modeling himself on Norton, Bledsoe, the Founder and others who deceived him with the Horatio Alger myth, and he ultimately sees himself as a latter day Frederick Douglass, the man who liberated himself by moving from the rural South to the urban North and who transformed himself by becoming the master of his own voice. For he comes to regard Douglass as the man who "talked his way from slavery" (285) and created his own name, thus signifying the fact that he was a truly self-made man, one who became humanly successful, not by accumulating wealth and status but by fully actualizing the self. In this way he rejects a superficial Algerian plan for success and celebrates a more essential American dream, an existential version of Emersonian self-reliance.

## II

In her recent study of the American heroine, Blanche Gelfant argues that the city often becomes for women characters a modern equivalent of the West because it offers them the sort of free space necessary for achieving a "new life":

In a city throbbing with dreams and desires, the heroine learns to identify her own needs, and living among strangers she has the privacy to cultivate personal desires usually condemned by family and friends as "selfishness" . . . . Enjoying physical and social space in the city, the heroine moves about freely and experiences movement as freedom. For her, the territory ahead—the essence of freedom in male myths of the West—lies around the corner, a few streets away, in another neighborhood where nobody knows her and where she alone will say who she is.<sup>14</sup>

Something very similar happens in *Invisible Man*. Rejecting pastoral settings such as the small town and the bucolic campus, the hero moves to the city where he is at first befuddled by the urban environment and is then controlled by others who possess greater awareness of how that environment functions. But he gradually experiences the city as a liberating frontier, a fresh version of the West offering the external and psychological space necessary for a new life characterized by radical forms of self-awareness, freedom and independence. The American frontier, which was described by Frederick Jackson Turner as "the meeting point between savagery and civilization,"<sup>15</sup> is reborn again in Ellison's



underground, a "border area" which mediates between "the jungle of Harlem" (5) and the decadent Manhattan of Emerson's Calamus Club and Jack's intricate political games. Although his underground, like the West, has been "shut off and forgotten during the nineteenth century" (5), he can reopen it through a prodigious act of will and imagination. A vital source of power and light, it converts him from an impotent robot into a fully conscious being able to direct his life in his own way. Ellison's positively imagined underground, therefore, is a revealing contrast to the ironic underworlds portrayed in Wright's "The Man Who Lived Underground" and Baraka's *Dutchman*. Whereas Wright's and Baraka's psychologically underdeveloped protagonists are murdered in tomb-like settings beneath the streets because they lack the experience and mental acuity to take full advantage of urban possibilities, Ellison's sophisticated, intellectually keen hero envisions his ingenious subterranean "home" (5) as a place of "hibernation" (11) providing him with the kind of new life which traditional American heroes have found in the West. Although a racist society forces him underground to kill him, he can, unlike Wright's Fred Daniels and Baraka's Clay, use his own inward resources to transform a cold, dead place into a warm, life-giving space.

Paradoxically, the underground is for Ellison an urban equivalent of what the frontier was for Thoreau, a brilliant metaphor of the limitless possibilities of the self. Just as Thoreau exhorted his readers to become "the Lewis and Clark . . . of your own streams and oceans; explore your own higher latitudes,"<sup>16</sup> Ellison artfully interiorizes the Western myth by suggesting that selfhood may be attained by descending into our lower latitudes, the underground of the self which is "space, unbroken" (428), a "dimensionless room" (429) reflective of the self's "infinite possibilities" (435). Converting the territories ahead into the territories *inside* his head, Ellison's hero becomes a true citizen of his own "city . . . of dreams" (122).

He is careful to remind us, however, that this does not result in a neurotic escape, a puerile evasion of either his racial roots or his social responsibilities. As the Prologue makes clear, his descent into self is made possible only by encountering the full complexity of his racial past which contains both the pain of slavery and the transcendence afforded by black artists such as Louis Armstrong who have made "poetry" (6) out of their racial experience, thus converting a condition of oppression into "a beam of lyrical sound" (6). Moreover, his descent into the innermost reaches of the self paradoxically empowers him finally to return to the above-ground city where he is determined to play out a "socially responsible role" (439). He lays great stress in the Epilogue on the fact that "the old fascination with playing a role returns and I'm drawn upward again" (437). Several important new roles do indeed await him in the above ground world; for example, he does in fact become a writer who reveals the truth about his society, and he could become involved in political activity very different from that prescribed by either Jack or Ras. Now that he has effectively studied "the lesson of [his] own life" (432) he could also become, like his grandfather, a teacher in the broadest sense of the word. These roles are liberating because they enrich the self while allowing the hero to connect himself to a larger social world in the city. In this way, each of these new roles is quite

different from the old roles which nearly turned him into a robot because they arise from his own enriched, deepened, consciousness rather than the "plans" other people have devised for him. He therefore tells us that his "hibernation" (433) in the underground is nearly over and that he goes above ground every night to seek out "the next phase" (435) of his life.

Although he is not yet able (or willing) to define precisely the exact nature of the roles he will play for fear of being limited by them, the two anecdotes he relates about his above ground experiences offer ample proof that he is not "jiving" (439) when he speaks of acting effectively in the city. Both of these stories, the fight which he describes in the Prologue and the conversation with Norton which he dramatizes in the Epilogue, establish the hero as fundamentally different from the victimized country bumpkin he was in his pre-underground days. Whereas he formerly lacked the consciousness necessary to direct his life and was therefore easily manipulated by others, he is now in full control of himself and his social environment.

Aware in the Prologue that his white attacker is a pathetic victim of a racist world which blinds his eyes and blunts his heart, Invisible Man can transform violence into awareness, laughing with "sincere compassion" (4) at a man who was mugged by an invisible man. He thus saves himself from the self-defeating violence which has threatened him in nearly every major episode in the novel, from the Battle Royal to the Harlem Riot. He also extends the same kind of richly human "mixed feelings" (436) toward Norton when he sees him pathetically lost on the subway and asking for directions to Centre Street, the locus of political power and government in New York City. Whereas he had earlier made Norton an Algerian sponsor and begged him for direction in life, he now gives subtly ironic directions to Norton who is too hurried and self-deluded to become aware of their meaning: "Take any train; they all go to the Golden D" (437). No longer riding on the hard rails of other people's expectations which lead to madness, the hero can reject the Algerian city which still dominates Norton's life. Abandoning Norton's city of delusions once and for all, invisible man returns temporarily to his urban underground, laughing all the way at Norton's absurdity. He thus becomes more fully aware that his own life has ultimately found a truer "center"—the urbane consciousness which will allow him to transcend existentially the "fate" imagined for him by the Nortons of the world.

Canisius College

## notes

1. Gabriel Morton and Lucia White, *The Intellectual Versus the City: From Thomas Jefferson to Frank Lloyd Wright* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1962), 1, 2, 3.
2. Houston Baker, ed., *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (New York, 1982), 143, 150.
3. Henry Louis Gates Jr., ed., *The Classic Slave Narratives* (New York, 1987), 505. It is important to understand, however, that neither Frederick Douglass nor Linda Brent portrays a naively idealized view of the Northern city. Both were acutely aware that the Fugitive Slave Law made it very easy for them to be removed from the city and returned to slavery in the rural South. Both also were quick to discover that the Northern city was not free of racism—Douglass was denied a job as caulker in the shipyards of New Bedford because he

was black and Linda Brent was subjected to the indignities of Jim Crow laws in Boston, Philadelphia and New York. Nevertheless, Douglass and Brent certainly prefer the Northern city to the rural South, a place both writers describe as a kind of Hell. For all its limitations, the Northern city provided them with greatly expanded possibilities for human development which they eagerly responded to and capitalized on.

4. James Weldon Johnson, *Along This Way* (New York, 1933), 152.

5. Quoted in Arnold Rampersad's *The Life of Langston Hughes, Volume I: 1902-1941, I Too Sing America* (New York, 1986), 50.

6. Richard Wright, "How Bigger Was Born," included as the Introduction to the Harper and Row edition of *Native Son* (New York, 1940), xxvi. Michel Fabre in *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright* (New York, 1973) points out that Chicago, for all the difficulties it created for Wright, still gave him a radically new life which freed his spirit. Characterizing Wright's Chicago as "still the teeming, ever-expanding city that Carl Sandburg had immortalized," he claims that Chicago gave Wright crucially important opportunities not possible in his prior life.

7. Claude Brown, *Manchild in the Promised Land* (New York, 1965), vii-viii. In his one trip away from New York when he visits relatives in the rural South, Brown is bored with and alienated by country living. He returns to New York with great relief: "Down South was sure a crazy place and it was good to be going back to New York."

8. Michael C. Jaye and Ann Chalmers Watt, eds., *Literature and the Urban Experience: Essays on the City and Literature* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1981), 150, 148, 158.

9. Jaye and Watt, 37, 38.

10. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York, 1952), 87. All subsequent references to the text are to this Modern Library edition. Page numbers appear in parentheses after the quotations.

11. Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York, 1966), 174.

12. In his recent book *Going to the Territory* (New York, 1986) Ellison has elaborated in some detail on the crucial impact which New York City had on his own personal development. Coming to New York in the summer of 1936 to earn enough money to complete his senior year at Tuskegee Institute, he soon became aware of the "cultural possibilities" and "social freedom" which the city offered him. Like the hero of the novel, he eventually came to see the city in existential terms as a "rite of initiation" for which he had to be his "own guide and instructor."

New York becomes for him a "journey without a map" leading to self discovery and self creation. Now freed from the "claustrophobic provincialism" of the South which inhibited his growth by imposing narrow roles on him, he begins existentially to develop "a second self" through a process of "masking" which he defines as "playing upon possibility, a strategy through which the individual projects a self-elected identity and make[s] of himself a work of art." Like the hero of the novel, he sees the city as a liberating new space which allows him to define himself in existential, protean terms.

13. Most Alger novels espouse a clearly defined formula for success, providing a "paradigm" which books like Washington's *Up from Slavery* use for serious purposes, but *Invisible Man* inverts for ironic effects. Alger's *Ragged Dick* (New York, 1962), for example, centers on the hero's "plan" to achieve "a new life" by working hard and then impressing wealthy men who will provide a place for the hero in middle class life. Sponsors such as Mr. Greyson and Mr. Rockwell complete the hero's identity by providing him with a new name (Richard Hunter, Esq.), a steady job, and the prospects of a continued "rise" in American life. Ellison's invisible man earnestly pursues his formula for success for most of the novel but abandons it because he realizes that such "success" will destroy his identity by turning him into a robot. He therefore separates from sponsors such as Norton, Bledsoe and Jack, simultaneously rejecting the material rewards they have promised him. He also stubbornly refuses the names which others have imposed upon him, preferring to have no name. Namelessness represents the fluid, indeterminate identity he achieves by existentially descending into the self.

14. Blanche Gelfant, *Women Writing in America* (Hanover, New Hampshire, 1984), 219.

15. George Rogers Taylor, *The Turner Thesis Concerning the Role of the Frontier in American History* (Lexington, Massachusetts, 1972), 4. In his own biographical observations Ellison stresses the importance of the frontier in the development of his own American consciousness. In *Shadow and Act* he describes his Oklahoma at that time as a "border" state having no tradition of chattel slavery. Thus it put him in contact with the liberating values of the frontier life— independence, freedom, and a "boy's dream of possibility." In *Going to the Territory* he once again stresses the positive aspects of the Oklahoma he grew up in as "a territory of hope," and "a relatively unformed frontier state." Furthermore, he describes New York City as a new kind of psychic frontier which he explores by assuming the "American role of pioneer." Emphasizing the fact that he came to New York because he wanted "room to discover who I was," he makes the city a modern equivalent of the West because it opens up the psychological "space" necessary for self-discovery and development.

16. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and On the Duty of Civil Disobedience* (New York, 1948), 268.