patterns of movement in ellison's *invisible man*

robert j. butler

> All I wanted was to go somewheres, all I wanted was a change, I warn't particular.
>
> —Huck Finn

> When a woman gets the blues she runs to her room and cries;
> When a man gets the blues he takes a train and rides.
>
> —traditional blues song

One of the central and most distinctive values in American culture is a desire for pure motion, movement either for its own sake or as a means of freeing oneself from a prior mode of existence. A relatively new and chronically rootless society, America has always placed an unusually high premium on mobility rather than security and stability. It is not surprising, therefore, that American literature is densely populated with heroes and heroines who try "to find in motion what was lost in space"[1]—restless people in quest of settings which are fluid enough to accommodate their passion for a radical independence and completely open possibilities. As Henry Nash Smith and others have cogently argued, Cooper's West, Melville's ocean, Twain's river and Whitman's open road are the mythic places Americans yearn for. John Steinbeck observed in his own travels at the end of his career that the quintessential American impulse is a reflexive wish simply to keep moving:

> I saw in their eyes something I was to see over and over again in every part of the nation—a burning desire to go, to move, to get under way, anyplace, away from any Here. They spoke quietly of how they wanted to go somewhere, to move about, free and unanchored, *not toward something but away from*

0026-3079/80/1300-0005$01.50/0

something. I saw this look and heard this yearning everywhere in every state I visited. Nearly every American hungers to move.[2] (Italics added)

Constance Rourke in *American Humor* similarly speaks of "that perpetual travel which often seemed the single enduring feature of the country."[3] Indeed, one might validly distinguish American literature from that of other Western countries in terms of this quest for pure motion. Whereas, for example, movement in the classic English novel is usually directed toward a definite place, a coherent set of tested values and a secure niche in a stable society, movement in the representative American novel is nearly always spatially undirected, an open-ended process of becoming. Tom Jones, Joseph Andrews, Oliver Twist and even Robinson Crusoe see their journeys as a necessary evil, a way of working out their identities in a place-oriented world, but Jack Kerouac longs simply to be *on* the road itself, knowing full well that his destination will probably be a disappointment. Like Walt Whitman, he tramps a "perpetual journey."[4] Odysseus moves consciously and instinctively forward toward a wife and a spot in a hierarchical society but Rip Van Winkle ambles off to the woods so that he can avoid both. Don Quixote leaves his kingdom and Dulcinea always to return but Huck Finn lights out to the territories and never looks back. Candide's journey comes to an end in a specific place which will give him community, sustenance and identity but Thoreau leaves his "garden" after a mere two years because he has other lives to live. Conceiving of life as a fluid motion, he wants to avoid any "particular route" or "beaten track."[5] At the end of *Heart of Darkness,* Marlowe will settle for the illusion of civilization and will tell the lies necessary to maintain it, but Natty Bumppo holds steadfastly to the integrity he feels is threatened by society and moves toward an ever-expanding wilderness. Like Faulkner's Lena Grove and Dos Passos's Jimmy Herf, he has much more confidence in movement than placement.

Afro-American writers, whose cultural history consists in no small way of large-scaled movements (the journey from Africa, the escape from slavery, the Great Migration, etc.) have also made extensive use of this picaresque mode. Richard Wright's heroes pass through an assortment of places which never satisfy them but they attach their deepest longings to open-ended movement. Biggest Thomas' highest aspirations are crystallized when he admires a flying plane. The central characters of "Big Boy Leaves Home" and "Almos' A Man" hope to solve their problems by leaving town and heading vaguely North. James Baldwin's protagonists yearn for "another country" which can not be found on any maps but is instead a condition of moral and spiritual wholeness which they never find. Stacy Mims, the central figure of Eldridge Cleaver's "The Flashlight," believes that "life was motion."[6] His moment of awakening prompts him to leave the famil-

iar world he grew up in and to pursue a larger life which he can only dimly imagine.

One of the few studies concerned with this important subject, Sam Bluefarb's *The Escape Motif in American Literature,* contrasts the traditional escape hero with his modern counterpart. Arguing that the theme of escape portrayed in a representative nineteenth century novel is basically optimistic because the hero has a particular place to go, he claims that the contemporary American writer has lost his belief in movement because there are no longer any spots to light out for.[7] This view, however, does not square with the substantial body of post-World War II American fiction which often depicts the American hero in motion which is both joyous and meaningful. Although the West has long since been officially closed and we find ourselves confined to labyrinthine cities and restricting middle class life styles, some of our best writers continue to give impressive evidence of the persistent mobility of American life. Ken Kesey's Bromden, Bernard Malamud's Levin, Saul Bellow's Augie March and Joseph Heller's Yossarian can still activate a meaningful version of the American dream by travelling on a Whitmanian open road. And if, spatially, they reach its end (few do, however), the territories *inside* their heads offer indefinite possibilities for further development. Vonnegut's Billy Pilgrim, even though he has reached a dead end in the outward world, can still travel to the Montana of his imagination. This faith in inward motion provides *Slaughterhouse Five* with a surprising buoyancy, a diminished but very real affirmation similar to those values endorsed by our classic writers.

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man,* which feeds hungrily from both specifically Black and generally American literary traditions, is an excellent example of how this picaresque mode continues to flourish in our post-World War II literature. For it is in many ways a novel which defines basic American values in terms of the possibilities and limitations of motion. Its nameless hero is a wanderer who often identifies certain kinds of physical movement with moral and spiritual renewal. Like Ishmael and a number of other traditional American protagonists, he never gives us the details which would help us to *place* him—a given name, a family past, or the exact spot where he was born and raised.[8] The college he goes to is likewise nameless and without a precise location. Furthermore, he does not tell us at the end of the novel exactly where he will go after he surfaces from his underground abode. His life, which is not tied down to any specific places or even an exact time, is notable for its constant change, movement, and freedom from rigidly fixed points of reference.

It is revealing too that he leaves for New York after being expelled from college without carefully looking back at his past life. He never seriously considers returning home nor does he initially tell his parents

where he is going. The letter he eventually writes does not reveal the truth of his situation and his occasional bouts of homesickness always pass quickly.

His entry into the city, therefore, recalls Franklin's arrival in Philadelphia, Carrie Meeber's first vision of Chicago, and James Weldon Johnson's initial impressions of New York. Wide-eyed with prospects of future happiness, he quickly forgets any anxieties about being cut off from a stabilizing past or a familiar place. He dreams "with eyes blankly staring upon the landscape"[9] as the bus approaches Manhattan. Once in Harlem, he is intoxicated by the novelty, movement and pace of its life. The city as an actual place dissolves as his lively imagination transforms it into a world of fluid reality, endless opportunity:

> For me this was not a city of realities but of dreams; perhaps because I had always thought of my life as being confined to the South. And now as I struggled through the lines 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)

Late in the novel, he marvels about the Northern city as a place where "You could actually make yourself anew" (377). Although he is sometimes disillusioned by many aspects of city life, he never loses this Dreiserian vision of the city as a dynamic process, a magical release from a confining mode of existence and the creation of marvelous new opportunities. With all its hectic movement and breath-taking openness, it is the complete antithesis of his stagnant life in the South.[10] He never seriously disputes Peter Wheatstraw's claim that although Harlem "ain't nothing but a bear's den . . . it's the best place in the world for you and me" (133). Such a protean world is an extension of his fluid self, a personality which delights in novelty and constant metamorphoses.

While the central character's journey may be seen as a search for "home," the word is seldom used—as it is in *The Odyssey*—to denote a specific place, a stabilizing past, or a group of blood relatives. It is certainly not a geographical location where he can settle down, get married, raise a family, and become part of a stable community. "Home" is most often used by Ellison as the kind of mythic symbol used in the spirituals, representing freedom, Black awareness, and peace.[11] Thus, when the narrator describes his underground refuge as a "home" (5), he sees it more as a process than an actual place—a liberating state of mind nourishing the kind of complex awareness needed to solve the riddle of his Afro-American identity. This requires him to inhabit a cultural world which is fascinatingly double, insisting that he do full justice to the demands of both his ethnic past and his broadly American desires for a new life. This is precisely what he means when he

claims in his first Brotherhood speech: "After a long and desperate and uncommonly blind journey I have come home . . . Home!" (262). He feels his political involvements here will not only give him an exciting new identity but will also help him to redress the wrongs inflicted on his people throughout American history.

Similarly, the lives of many other characters may be seen as kinds of indefinite motion. Bledsoe is identified by his rags-to-riches "rise" (90) in American society. What he values most is moving to the top rather than enjoying what is there when he arrives:

> "I don't even insist that it was worth it, but now I'm here and I mean to stay—after you win the game, you take the prize and you keep it, protect it; there's nothing else to do." He shrugged. "A man gets old winning his place, son." (111)

What is poignant about Bledsoe's apparently successful circumstances is that the Darwinian process which vaults him to the top of the heap does not really provide him with things of intrinsic value. Although he does not fully realize it, he is controlled by the rapid motions of his experiences and he is surely mistaken when he brags: "This is a power set-up, son, and I'm at the controls" (110).

Homer Barbee's conception of the Founder's life, likewise, stresses its incredible mobility, its nature as an indeterminate epic journey. Born into slavery, he soon masters "the black art of escape" (94) and, like Moses, leads his people out of the wilderness. Appropriately, he dies on a fast-moving train:

> In the car up ahead, in the Pullman assigned him by the very president of the line, the Leader lay tossing. He had been struck with a sudden and mysterious sickness. And I knew in spite of the anguish within me that the sun goeth down, for the heavens themselves conveyed that knowledge. The rush of the train, the clicking of wheels upon the steel. I remember how I looked out of the frosted pane and saw the great moving North Star and lost it, as though the sky had shut its eye. The train was curving the mountain, the engine loping like a great black hound, parallel with the last careening cars, panting forth its pale white vapor as it hurled us even higher. And shortly the sky was black, without a moon . . . . (98-99)

The Founder's death, like his life, is revealed through powerful and rapid upward movement. To Barbee, this motion is perpetual, for even though the Founder's death is signified by the mysterious disappearance of the moon, it is clear that the sun will always rise, bringing on a more glorious day. Indeed, through the growth of the college, "the great seed" (102) which will survive him, the Founder's dream of advancement will endure. In effect, therefore, Barbee claims that such a life epitomizes two great myths of motion—the Biblical image of Moses leading his people across the Red Sea and the American be-

lief in endless progress. Both crystallize the post-Civil War yearnings of Black people to escape the bonds of slavery and to enter fully into the mainstream of American life.

The lives of other important characters are also perceived as various types of movement. Rinehart's protean self is revealed in his apparent ability to move through an enormous variety of roles and places. And Norton's hopeless confusion about his own life is aptly portrayed on the novel's final pages when he is described as wandering the New York subways searching for the "Centre Street" (436) which will always elude him. Tod Clifton's despair is dramatized by his decision "to fall out of history" (328) by leaving the Brotherhood and assuming the stereotyped role of street huckster. Peter Wheatstraw, the charming drifter whom the narrator meets in his first week in Harlem, portrays his happy-go-lucky life as movement he directs himself, apart from the "plans" which others try to impose on him.

Moreover, the novel almost always associates lack of mobility with radically diminished opportunities and sometimes death. The Southern Black college which promises possibility but delivers frustration, is best revealed by the river which slowly passes through it: "sluggish and covered with algae more yellow than green in its stagnant stillness" (28). As the hero is engaged in one of his final talks with Bledsoe, who is intent on trapping him, he feels "I could barely move . . . my legs were rubbery" (111). He experiences the same threat of paralysis while in the iron lung at the factory hospital and while delivering carefully controlled speeches for the Brotherhood. On one occasion, the spotlight which illuminates the stage on which he is speaking is imagined as "a seamless cage of stainless steel" (258). Later, while engaging in depressing sexual games with Emma, he thinks, "If I were really free . . . I'd get the Hell out of here" (312). In each of these experiences where the hero's mobility is drastically reduced the result is the same. His fluid identity is threatened by the static ideas with which other people want to control him.

Ellison's narrator ultimately conceives of his life as carefully mediating between two extremes: stasis and purposeless movement. He is often threatened by two kinds of stasis, the above-described paralysis and mindless circularity, outward motion which really goes nowhere. Purposeless movements also take two forms, a random drifting and greatly accelerated activity which eventually goes out of control. Although he sees life as constant flux, the hero finally realizes that his experiences must have a loose but humanly satisfying design controlled by a flexible purpose and a tentative direction. While it is important to note that the hero's journey is not circumscribed by a particular place or a fixed meaning, it nevertheless is purposeful. An ongoing process of self discovery, it finally leads to a fuller awareness of the complexities of his protean identity.

Whenever the narrator loses control of his movements, he usually

faces disastrous consequences. For example, he makes one of his major mistakes while aimlessly driving with Norton through the countryside. Taking the old man much too literally when he claims he would like to go "anywhere" (30), the hero drives off the highway, for no apparent reason, down the dirt road leading to Jim Trueblood's house and the Golden Day. His random movements gradually accelerate, resulting in a whole series of bewildering and painful episodes which culminate in his being sent on a fool's errand to New York by Bledsoe. This absurd task does not end until he gains conscious control over his life while underground.

The battle royal confronts the narrator with all of these negative forms of motion and becomes, therefore, a central epiphany of what he should not do with his life. The scene itself is a grisly spectacle of chaotic movement, "complete anarchy" (19). Although the initial preparations might indicate a highly structured ritual, the actual results are a pandemonium of noise, terror, and hysterical motion—the boys blindly punching each other, the stripper trying to escape the "mad" (17) chase of the men who attempt to rape her, and people wildly scrambling after phoney money. All this is acted out in a room which is a surreal "swirl of lights, smoke, sweating bodies" (19). Caught in this whirling nightmare, the hero realizes: "Blindfolded, I could no longer control my motions. I had no dignity" (18).

The final events of the battle royal, however, present the narrator with an equally inhuman alternative, paralysis. For the speech he delivers is a statement about staying in his "place," a world drained of opportunities for real development. Paraphrasing Booker T. Washington's Atlanta Exposition Address, he says:

> To those of my race who depend upon bettering their condition in a foreign land, or who underestimate the importance of cultivating friendly relations with the Southern white man, who is his next door neighbor, I would say: "Cast down your buckets where you are." (24)

This argument for not moving out of the South, of course, is richly satisfying to his white audience because it guarantees them a cheap labor supply which has no clear ideas of genuine advancement.

Assured that the invisible man will "lead his people in the proper paths" (25), ending in a cultural dead end, they reward him with a briefcase and a scholarship to a Negro college. Both impel him on a false quest which is pointed toward his destruction. For the road to the college, as we soon find out, leads to the madhouse, a world which alternates between moral paralysis and occasional moments of insane physical movement at the Golden Day. The briefcase, likewise, fills the hero with delusions of being "successful" in the white world and, as the vet later tells him, this also leads to madness.

Ellison artfully establishes the battle royal as a central episode

which gets repeated in many different forms throughout the novel. Most of the hero's outward adventures, therefore, are a deadly circle of repetition which force him to re-live the humiliations of this event in his late adolescence. The dream he has immediately afterwards is a clear prefiguration of this. In it, his grandfather opens the briefcase and finds a seemingly endless number of envelopes contained within each other, representing the "years" (26) of the hero's life. And they all express the same depressing message: "Keep this Nigger-Boy running" (26). Although it will take the narrator a long time to realize this, the life which white society has planned for him consists of a wild goose chase ending in exhaustion and stasis.

His activities at the Golden Day are clearly another version of what has happened in the battle royal. In both scenes, he is a passive victim of an incoherent, violent, and quick-moving world which leaves him dazed and confused. Likewise, the fiasco at Liberty Paints depicts the eruption of a seemingly rational world into confused motion and incoherent violence which he can neither understand nor control. The scenes in the factory hospital which follow immediately induce the same kind of paralysis he experienced while giving his graduation address. And this speech, controlled by white people who manipulate him for their own self-interest, is a preview of most of the speeches he will give for the Brotherhood. Jack, who is intent on making him "the new Booker T. Washington" (233), monitors his talks as carefully as did the Southern whites. Finally, the Harlem Riot at the end of the novel brings his actions full circle, enacting on a large scale the absurdities of his home town. Here too, the central character is reduced to the status of a passive victim observing a scene of mad violence, raucous noise, and wild motion.[12]

Most of the novel's major scenes utilize important images of circularity to further underscore the futility of the movements which they dramatize. The stripper from the battle royal dances in "graceful circles" (17) and Homer Barbee paces in a semi-circle as he delivers his oration about the Founder. Both people are parts of rituals which they do not fully understand and blindly repeat for the sake of their audiences. As the hero drives Norton down the road to Trueblood's house, he observes birds circling overhead. He also sees "pigeons circling" (217) immediately before he runs into Jack during the eviction episode and he notices exactly the same image right before Clifton is killed. In all three cases, the circling of the birds is a foreshadowing of similar disasters—experiences which get out of hand because the hero fails to understand their nature. They prepare us for the nightmare at the end of the novel where he imagines himself being castrated by the various people who have run his life. Here too, a circular image is used to suggest the hero's helplessness—a butterfly is described as circling "three times around . . . [his] blood-red parts" (430).

The circle is also used often to suggest the invisible man's inner

confusion. As he smarts from Kimbro's criticisms at the Liberty Paint factory, his emotions are described as "whirling" (155). Similarly, in his final showdown with Jack he feels his own head is "whirling as though I were riding a supersonic merry-go-round" (357). The final result of his liaison with Sybil is to cut him loose from any center of gravity and to put his head "awhirl" (401). The terror and confusion inspired by the Harlem Riot is clearly depicted by the hero stumbling "in circles" (424) as he searches for Mary Rambo's apartment. (These scenes are technically unified by the dizzying motion of the narration itself. Each episode is basically surreal and nervously paced, often giving the impression of having been filmed by a movie cameraman who rapidly pans his scenes and blurs his focus to give an artful effect of psychological disorientation.)

These sequences, therefore, define the hero's life prior to his movement underground as an iron circle of necessity which can be broken only if he becomes sufficiently aware of his situation. Although he shows some limited awareness of this by the novel's mid-point, such knowledge is easily dissolved by the fast pace of events. For example, as he enters the Chythonian with Jack, he twice thinks "I had been through it all before" (228), but this vague perception does not add up to anything useful. While delivering his first Brotherhood speech, he also "felt the hard, mechanical isolation of the hospital machine" (258), but he fails to realize that the insane doctors at the hospital and Jack are virtually the same people. Ironically, he sees his Brotherhood experiences as a liberating "new life" radically separated from his past:

> This was a new phase, I realized, a new beginning, and I would have to take that part of myself that looked on with remote eyes and keep it always at the distance of the campus, the hospital machine, the battle royal—all now far behind. . . . For if I were successful tonight, I'd be on the road to something big. (253-54)

Lulled by the illusion that the battle royal and related experiences are "far behind" him, he has little understanding that "the road to something big" is the same worn path which the Southern whites have put him on as a reward for his graduation address.

Critics have often expressed dissatisfaction with the ending of *Invisible Man* because they can discover no real basis for the affirmations which they feel the author intends. Irving Howe, for example, finds the hero's final discussion of his possibilities to be unconvincing since he does not specify their exact nature.[13] Likewise, Marcus Klein views the narrator's optimism in the Epilogue to be "desperate, empty, unreasonable and programmatic"[14] since his journey is a depressing circle which has trapped him. Edward Margolies, in the same way,

feels that the hero's affirmations at the end of the novel are ineffective because "there is no evidence in the text to fortify his beliefs."[15]

Other critics, therefore, have felt free to interpret the book in completely pessimistic terms. Floyd Horowitz argues that the narrator's movements finally lead him "nowhere" and that "his self-imposed basement exile is therefore an escape from responsibility."[16] Roger Rosenblatt has recently described the narrator's travels as a complete *reductio ad absurdum:*

> As a romance, nothing is at the end of the quest; as a bildungsroman, nothing is the product of the education; as a tour de force, nothing is the vehicle. The hero progresses from South to North to nothing; from capitalism to communism to nihilism. He makes a long and arduous journey which ends in a basement. . . .[17]

It is my purpose here to demonstrate that these views of the book are inadequate because they fail to account for either the author's intentions, the novel he wrote, or the traditions he operated in. For the hero's journey, examined in these contexts, *does* have a positive meaning. The fact that the invisible man can not finally tell us precisely where he will go does not imply that his journey is over and drained of meaning. Rather, it links him to many other American heroes who are careful not to tie themselves down to specific journeys for fear that they will constrict their own possibilities. The fact that Huck Finn heads vaguely for the "Territory ahead" does not undercut the positive meaning of his journey but adds to it. Similarly, the indefinite placement of Whitman's hero at the end of "Song of Myself" underlines the marvelous openness and fluidity of his experiences. The indeterminateness at the close of Langston Hughes' *The Big Sea* suggests its author's faith in his abilities to transcend the tight strictures of a racist society and to pursue the myriad possibilities of his own life. In the same way, the spatially undirected nature of the hero's movements at the end of *Invisible Man* suggests that he has more than one life to lead. We must, therefore, take very seriously his claim that he will soon end his hibernation, shaking off "the old skin" (438) and become a new man.

His movement underground, far from being a cop-out ending in moral paralysis, is actually a temporary exile, what Frost has called "a strategic retreat,"[18] which will allow him to gain the kind of awareness which is a precondition to meaningful action. This is the sort of perspective which Leslie Fiedler has claimed is essential to the American experience because it has created a uniquely American consciousness:

> Fleeing exclusion in the Old World, the immigrant discovers his loneliness in the New World; fleeing the communal loneliness of the seaboard settlements, he discovers the ultimate isolation of the frontier. It is the dream of exile as freedom

> which has made America but it is also the experience of exile as terror which has forged the self-consciousness of Americans.[19]

Since his own withdrawal from outer reality results in precisely this mixture of existential freedom and terror, the hero can develop the "complex double vision"[20] which Ellison has claimed is necessary for both survival and success in American life. Thus, the narrator's insistence in the Epilogue that he is still able "to condemn and affirm, say no and say yes" (437) is much more than empty raving, "buggy jiving" (439).

Indeed, his flight underground provides him with a world which has real similarity to the frontier in which classic American heroes have moved. Ellison, who has taken great pains to define his own social background as Western rather than Southern, consciously exploits the imagery of the West in defining his narrator's underground as an escape valve that still works. Just as in *Shadow and Act* he identifies his boyhood home as the "border"[21] state of Oklahoma, he places the invisible man in a "border area" (5) between Harlem and the larger white world. He also takes pleasure in having some of the Harlem rioters characterize Ras as a demented cowboy: "Ride 'em cowboy. Give 'em hell and bananas" (425). Then too, the hero's sense of his underground as "space, unbroken and impenetrable" (428) would suggest a clear parallel with the indefinite land areas classically associated with the West. Such a "dimensionless" (429) world gives him the psychological room he needs to imagine himself in fresh new ways. Although his coal cellar, like the West, was "shut off and forgotten during the nineteenth century" (5), his imagination can reopen it and make it live as a traditional symbol of American opportunity.

Such a world, therefore, is a weird modern equivalent of what Frederick Jackson Turner classically defined as "the meeting point between savagery and civilization."[22] Poised between the barbarous outer world of Ras the Destroyer and the richly cultivated life of his own mind, the hero can devise a mode of consciousness and action which will intelligently mediate between these extremes. He may, therefore, move productively inward to the self and outward to the social world. For his existence under the streets of New York is not the "underground" (347) in which Tod Clifton is buried, a condition of final stasis. Nor is it the bizarre "underground" (157) which traps Lucius Brockway in his illusions. Rather, it is an awakening process which endows him with vision (light) and power (electricity). As such, it ultimately enables him to move back into the external world with renewed confidence and ability. He is not "blind' 'sa mole in a hole" (397) like Sybil's husband but a person in the process of undergoing the kind of metamorphosis which standard American heroes have experienced in the West, on the open road, or at sea. For once removed from the madly paced, disintegrating world of external events, he is

able to understand that the chronic failure of his past consists of "trying to go in every way but my own" (433). This kind of self-reliance is the first step in charting his own way in the world.

What this way will be is never made exactly clear, nor could it be. For Ellison's central character sees his future in quintessentially American terms, as a succession of open possibilities rather than a rigid sequence of events. Finally grasping the vet's claim that "the world is possibility if you'll only discover it" (120), he perceives his underground as an American process of renewal:

> Yes but what *is* the next phase? How often I have tried to find it! Over and over again I've gone up to seek it out. For, like almost everyone else in this country, I started out with my share of optimism. I believed in hard work and progress and action, but now after first being "for" society and then "against" it, I assign myself no rank or any limit, and such an attitude is very much against the trend of the times. *But my world has become one of infinite possibilities.* What a phrase—but still it's a good phrase and a good view of life, and a man shouldn't accept any other; that much I've learned underground. Until some gang succeeds in putting the world in a strait jacket, its definition is possibility. Step outside the narrow borders of what men call reality and you step into chaos—ask Rinehart, he's a master of it—or *imagination.* That too I've learned in the cellar, and not by deadening my sense of perception; *I'm invisible, not blind.* (435, italics added)

What is important here is that there will be a "next phase" and the hero has been above ground many times to seek it out. Invisible but not blind, he understands that life in America may indeed be an endless series of next phases, indefinite possibilities for development. But this need not plunge him into Rinehart's world of "chaos," a morally purposeless world which he has tried and rejected. There is an alternative to this, the liberating world of the imagination which can dissolve "the narrow borders of what men call reality" while creating a flexible kind of order to control the fluid reality which emerges. By expanding his perceptions rather than deadening them and by following the example of Louis Armstrong and other creators whom he admires, he may literally become an artist. For as Ellison has made clear in his editorial writings, art is a basic way of controlling experience: "Life is as the sea, art is a ship in which man conquers life's crushing formlessness."[23] This is precisely the function of the blues which Peter Wheatstraw sings and the spirituals sung at Tod Clifton's funeral—to transfigure the pain of life's chaos by giving it shape. Clearly, this is also the function of the novel which the narrator gives us, to make sense of an apparently absurd world by submitting it to the discipline of art.

Or the hero may certainly choose other roles in the outside world—

he could, for example, discover that there are political commitments more meaningful than those offered by either Ras or Jack. (The novel ends, after all, on the verge of the Civil Rights Movement which would drastically change the lives of American Blacks.) Thus shaping his own life as the artist discovers the elusive organic form of his materials, he may break the dead circle of his past and move in positive new directions. Although he is surely correct when he finally tells Norton "Take any train; they all lead to the Golden Day" (437), he is no longer riding on the iron rails of other people's expectations. Instead, he has come to the Whitmanian realization that he may create his own road and travel on it in any number of directions.

Marjorie Pryse is therefore misleading when she claims that "The myth of the North is gone; Brother Tarp's physical flight to freedom is no longer an option for Invisible Man."[24] Not only does Ellison's protagonist give this important Afro-American myth new vitality by internalizing it, he also has faith that movement in the physical world is still a liberating prospect once one has achieved the supple consciousness to flexibly direct that movement. He promises to return to the fast-paced life of surface events, stressing that "Without the possibility of action, all knowledge comes to 'file and forget' and I can neither file nor forget" (437). Since his underground makes possible both inward and outward movements, it frees him from the trauma of the battle royal. Consciously assimilating his past rather than crudely rejecting it or sentimentally idealizing it, he may move in new directions:

> And now I realized that I couldn't return to Mary's or to any part of my old life. I could approach it only from the outside, and I had been as invisible to Mary as I had been to the Brotherhood. No, I couldn't return to Mary's, or to the campus, or to the Brotherhood, or home. I could only move ahead or stay here, underground. (431)

Approaching his life in this way "from the outside,"[25] he can gain a mature perspective on it, using it as a way of illuminating his present and future experiences. He can thus avoid the brute circularity and randomness of his past movements. But he is clearly opposed to the idea of staying underground too long. The freedom he seeks is more than "simply the freedom not to run" (434).

While rushing around for the Brotherhood, the narrator complains of his running a footrace "against" (287) himself. But late in the novel, as he speeds toward the Harlem riot which will disabuse him of many illusions about his identity, he imagines his experiences as a running "within" (403) himself. This crucial change is central to the novel because the hero's quest for identity can assume a fruitful direction only if he stops opposing his essential self with the various roles others have given him. Running against himself, he goes nowhere, but run-

ning *to* himself he may discover the way which leads "home," his identity as a Black American. Although by the conclusion of the novel this important movement has just really begun and the hero is a long way from any definite end point, this is no cause for the despair which Rosenblatt and others have spoken of. Realizing that life is a dynamic process rather than a fixed journey, the hero's movements provide him with the mobility and loose direction which he needs. It finally places him in harmony with what his author has described as "the magical fluidity"[26] of American life.

Put another way, the novel finally transfigures the symbol of the circle, investing it with dramatically new positive meanings. Although most of the hero's life is portrayed as a deterministic circle whose circumference traps him and whose center evades him, he is ultimately able to see his life as a series of circles which radiate indefinitely outward from a coherent center. Unlike Norton, who will never get to Centre Street because he will always be trapped by the abstract designs which rigidly direct his life, Ellison's narrator does manage to find the core of his experiences and to work outward from there. Whereas Norton is attempting to get to the locus of city government in New York, thus tapping its "power," Ellison's hero is moving toward personal centers of strength, rejecting the public masks he has worn throughout the novel. In entering the underground, he goes *into* a circle after lifting the manhole, a "circle of holes in steel" (428). This solid and rigid circular object dotted with a number of small circles is clearly a symbol of the life which he has led up to this point. By *lifting* it, he creates important new directions for himself, a centripetal journey to the self which will eventually enable him to move productively outward to the larger social world. Looking at the iron manhole and paying special attention to the various holes cut into it, he has a sudden revelation: "This is the way it's always been, only now I know it" (428). This realization that his life has been a series of repetitions embedded in the hard, tough substance of other people's plans for him is a major step toward freedom. Significantly, this epiphany is soon followed by the ritual burnings of the past identities contained in the briefcase he was awarded on the night of the battle royal. Having destroyed the betrayals implicit in his high school diploma, Clifton's doll, Jack's letter, and the Brotherhood's identity card, he concludes: "You've run enough, you're through with them at last" (429). The fool's errand initiated by the battle royal has come to an end.

Now that his underground life has generated a true consciousness, he is able to reject his earlier view of reality as mechanical sequence, linear progression. This is the meaning of his statement in the Prologue that the world moves in the manner of a boomerang instead of an arrow. But this is not a solipsistic process which will trap the hero. The mind moving in these circles transforms experience by saturating it with consciousness. This in turn provides novel forms of thought and

action. The circle of one's life, therefore, constantly grows larger, enlarging one's field of possibility. Ellison, who was named after Emerson and who has on several occasions confessed to a feeling of kinship with him,[27] finally imagines his hero's life as the sort of liberating symbol which Emerson spoke of:

> The life of man is a self-evolving circle, which, from a ring imperceptibly small, rushes on all sides outward to new and larger circles, and that without end. The extent to which this generation of circles, wheel without wheel, will go, depends upon the force of truth of the individual soul.[28]

This, of course, is a classic American vision of motion as endless possibility. Emerson, who argued that "the eye is the first circle," insisted that man may either be trapped or freed according to the power of his perception: "There are no fixtures to men if we appeal to consciousness."[29] In the same way, Ellison demonstrates in *Invisible Man* that his protagonist may inhabit such a dynamic world of unlimited becoming if he is able to *see* himself, his roots, and his environment in their essential terms. His claim that "the end was in the beginning" (431), therefore, is not a cry of despair. Instead, it is proof that he has discovered the primal stuff of the self and is now ready to embark on the open-ended journey which is such an essential feature of the American picaresque tradition.

Canisius College

notes

1. Tennessee Williams, *The Glass Menagerie* (New York, 1945), 115.
2. John Steinbeck, *Travels with Charley* (New York, 1961), 10.
3. Constance Rourke, *American Humor* (Garden City, New York, 1931), 96.
4. Sculley Bradley and Harold Blodgett, ed., *Leaves of Grass* (New York, 1973), 83.
5. Sherman Paul, ed., *Walden* (Boston, 1960), 220.
6. James Pickering, ed., *The City in American Literature* (New York, 1977), 269.

Susan Blake's "Ritual and Ritualization: Black Folklore in the Works of Ralph Ellison," (*PMLA*, 94 [January 1979], 121-37) argues that Ellison's own Blackness is alloyed with his American identity. For example, she points out that his use of Black folklore is consistent with American folklore in general. I would argue that the same is true of his use of the journey motif. His hero's odyssey is deeply rooted in American and Black literary traditions. These traditions, although at odds with each other in many different ways, are essentially in agreement as they imagine movement.

7. Sam Bluefarb, *The Escape Motif in the American Novel, Mark Twain to Richard Wright* (Columbus, Ohio, 1972), 6.

Wright Morris, although he admits that escape fiction is still being seriously written by American writers, claims that this genre amounts to little more than adolescent pipe dreams now that the frontier is gone. His sharpest criticism of modern American literature is that it feeds too much on the past dreams of the frontier and not enough on current realities. *The Territory Ahead* (New York, 1963), 9-17.

8. We are told at the end of the battle royal that the town where the episode takes place is called "Greenwood." But this may not be a place the hero has lived for very long. Then too, the name Ellison gives the town certainly does not pin it down to any definite location. Many states in the Deep South have a Greenwood.

9. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York, 1952), 121. All subsequent references to the text are to this edition. Page numbers appear in parentheses after the quote.

10. In this way, Ellison's city is remarkably like the New York which Jean Paul Sartre describes in his essay, "New York, the Colonial City." Unlike the urban centers in Europe which are securely anchored in time and space, New York is indeed "a city in motion"

(Literary and Philosophical Essays [New York, 1955], 120), a fascinating but bewildering process which offers people greatly expanded opportunities while stripping away their past identities. Although Sartre is in many ways attracted to such a place, he concludes that it is "the world's harshest city." (p. 123).

Dreiser, James, Sandburg, Dos Passos, and many other American writers who have treated the American city share this perception of it as an open-ended, fast-moving process. Ellison, like them, is sometimes ambivalent about this, excited about the opportunities created by the process but also fearful of its radical instability. Ellison's fears, however, are never strong enough to make him prefer a pastoral world to this urban setting.

11. The word reverberates throughout the book as an important motif. He describes his underground hide-out as a "home" and after the Liberty Paint episode detonates his Southern identity he says: "I longed for home" (197). The spiritual "Many Thousands Gone" played at Clifton's funeral implies that death has brought him "home" to a final rest. Although the word is sometimes used by Ellison in a literal sense, it is more frequently used metaphorically as the kind of "home" across the River Jordan which the spirituals celebrate.

Blues music, which has frequently been cited as a well-spring of Ellison's vision, envisions motion in a similarly vague but liberating way. The blues singer is often relieved to be on the road but is fully aware that the actual town up ahead will confront him with at least as many problems as the place he has just left. He has little hope in being placed in a stable world but sees movement itself as a symbol of temporary freedom and peace.

Going "home," therefore, is the hero's development of a consciousness which is both American and Black, a painfully complex but rich identity which is consistent with his personal ideals and cultural past. In another sense, the hero's journey "home" is a microcosm of Afro-American history. His personal movements often parallel the phases of Black life in America. For example, his expulsion from college is similar to Blacks leaving slavery after the Civil War—in each case, the outward bonds of servitude are dissolved but real freedom is denied. The narrator's movement North, likewise, is analogous to the Great Migration. Both are quests for independence and freedom.

12. Although he makes no mention of how motion is portrayed in these scenes, Jonathan Baumbach sees a number of parallels between the battle royal, the Harlem riot, the hero's expulsion from college, the interview with Emerson, and the Liberty Paint episode. He finally complains of "the curiously static quality of the novel," *(The Landscape of Nightmare* [New York, 1970], 85) pointing out that the book's major episodes all boil down to the same meaning. Marcus Klein expresses a similar dissatisfaction, arguing that all the major episodes are excessive repetitions of the battle royal. He finds that the novel's "great fault" is that "it doesn't finally go anywhere." *(After Alienation* [Cleveland, 1965], 109).

Although I greatly admire both studies, I find it difficult to agree with this criticism. The book's anti-realistic style allows for this kind of exaggeration. Then too, there is a great deal of fascinating surface variety in these scenes, even though they are used to develop the same theme. Like an intricate symphonic or jazz composition, the novel's main structural principle consists of cleverly developing a rich set of variations around a complex central theme.

13. Irving Howe, "Black Boys and Native Sons," included in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Invisible Man* edited by John M. Reilley (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1970), 102.

14. *After Alienation*, 109.

15. Edward Margolies, *Native Sons: A Critical Study of Twentieth-Century Negro American Authors* (Philadelphia, 1968), 148.

16. Floyd Horowitz, "Ralph Ellison's Modern Invisible Man," *Midcontinent American Studies Journal*, IV (1963), 221.

17. Roger Rosenblatt, *Black Fiction* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1974), 185. Ellison's editorial comments on *Invisible Man*, however, are completely at odds with this sort of pessimistic interpretation. For example, he points out: "In my novel the narrator's development is one through blackness to light; that is, from ignorance to enlightenment: invisibility. He leaves 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 again when he leaves his underground cave for the open." *(Shadow and Act* [New York, 1966], 174.)

Rosenblatt (and others) have lost many of the novel's more subtle meanings by interpreting its journey in terms which are much too literal and linear. The hero's odyssey does not end in an abandoned basement but moves instead into the rich complexities of his mind and spirit. In other words, the book, to use its hero's language, moves more like a boomerang than an arrow. The plot is not simply a linear movement in space; rather, it is a journey which constantly returns to the self. The more the hero's outward activities bring him back to his own inwardness, the richer and more positive his experiences become.

18. Edward Latham, ed., *The Poetry of Robert Frost* (New York, 1964), 282.

19. Leslie Fiedler, *Waiting for the End* (New York, 1964), 83-84.

20. Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, 137.

21. *Shadow and Act*, 25-26. Here he describes his life in Oklahoma as noticeably freer than it could have been in the South in those times. He describes it as a place having no tradition of slavery, and being a "border" state, it was a good place for Ellison to assimilate the

values often associated with frontier life—independence, mobility and "a boy's dream of possibility."

22. George Rogers Taylor, *The Turner Thesis Concerning the Role of the Frontier in American History* (Lexington, Massachusetts, 1972), 4.

The underground also suggests parallels with themes and myths arising from the particular circumstances of Blacks in America. Its darkness is an obvious reference to Blackness and the jazz and blues which the hero contemplates spring from Afro-American folk art. His dream dramatizes his African and slave pasts.

As a symbol, therefore, the underground beautifully expresses the hero's final awareness that he is *both* Black and American, the product of two mainly complementary traditions.

23. *Shadow and Act*, 94.

24. Marjorie Pryse, "Ralph Ellison's Heroic Fugitive," *American Literature*, 46 (1973), 13.

25. The hero's journey at this point can be seen as a complex struggle with time and ethnicity. He is searching for harmony not only between his past, present, and future but also between the sometimes opposing demands of his identity as a Black person and an American. Earlier in the novel he was simply contemptuous of his personal and ethnic past and tried to run away from them. But, gradually, he realizes that his cultural roots are a tremendous source of strength, beauty, and value. Mary, who represents a large part of his racial background, literally saves him after he passes out on the streets. But he is very careful not to identify *wholly* with her or the world she embodies for fear of being limited by them. He remains ambivalent toward her until the very end and it is important to realize that, when given the choice of returning to her "home" or going underground, he chooses the latter. His "home," although inclusive of his racial past, is not circumscribed by it. While not rejecting Mary, he does not romanticize her either. He wants an identity which is rooted in a Black past but which is also shaped by the indefinite future which most American heroes are drawn to.

26. *Shadow and Act*, 113.

27. Robert Bone's "Ralph Ellison and the Uses of the Imagination" has an excellent discussion of the author's debt to the American transcendentalists, especially Emerson. (The essay is included in *Anger and Beyond*, ed. Herbert Hill [New York, 1966], 86-112.) Ellison himself has frequently commented upon his admiration for nineteenth century American masterpieces and his desire to restore their positive vision to contemporary literature. In "Hidden Name and Complex Fate" he even ponders the significance of his being named after Emerson. Sensing as a young man the "distant world of possibility" suggested by the name, he concludes that it had something to do with his choice of professions and his view of life. (*Shadow and Act*, 155.)

28. Stephen Whicher, [ed.], *Selections from Ralph Waldo Ellison* (Boston, 1960), 169.

29. Whicher, 169, 170.