

NEW SKIN: ELLISON, JUNG, AND THE UNCONSCIOUS

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"In the electric age we wear all mankind as our skin."¹

Marshall McLuhan contends that the electric media, television in particular, have given Americans the means of instant, total awareness both of themselves, especially of their unconscious or subliminal states, and of others, who may differ in skin color or points of view but with whom total social involvement is now not only desirable, but absolutely necessary in the ontological sense of the word.² However, though television may have made us more conscious of our unconscious and more aware of the dynamic relationship between other individuals' well-being and our own, the mutual feeding and forming and mutilating of one another's psyches is a process as old as mankind itself and one which had been recognized long before McLuhan's observations. C. G. Jung provides an illustration:

Every Roman was surrounded by slaves. The slave and his psychology flooded ancient Italy, and every Roman became inwardly, and of course unwittingly, a slave. Because living constantly in the atmosphere of slaves, he became infected through the unconscious with their psychology. No one can shield himself from such an influence.³

It is this profound psychological truth--that man's innermost center of being, his collective unconscious, is nourished or debilitated by everything any individual does with or for or to another individual--that Ralph Ellison grasps both philosophically and artistically and makes the dynamic core of his powerful *Invisible Man*. In his essay on Stephen Crane, Ellison says that "the deeper insights were available to him (as they are to each of us) through a ruthless plunging into the dark depths of his own

¹Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: Signet, 1964), p. 56.

²*Ibid.*

³C. G. Jung, *Contributions to Analytical Psychology* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1928), p. 173.

heart and mind."⁴ Ellison himself is the example, par excellence, of an artist whose intense plumbing of his own psyche yields "the deeper insights," and he brings them to fruition through the medium of print, but in a work that is certainly as electrifying an influence both on the world of literature and on the world of social dynamics as any electric medium could be.

Ellison says in "The World and the Jug" that "true novels, even when most pessimistic and bitter, arise out of an impulse to celebrate human life and therefore are ritualistic and ceremonial at their core."⁵ The almost mesmerizing effect that *Invisible Man* has on the emotions of its readers is surely, in large part, due to its being a ritualistic celebration of all human life as well as the realistic, and sometimes surrealistic, search for identity of one black individual.

The hero, or perhaps anti-hero, is an individual with a history (which becomes the novel) and ultimately a personality uniquely his own. He has his own dreams, which vary from time to time, but which are essentially to be useful and successful and recognized as a human being in a world dominated by whites; he makes his own mistakes, essentially the same mistake over and over again--allowing others to dictate what he should believe and do; he suffers his own private agonies as his illusions are torn from him and as he discards one after another of the apparent alternatives for achieving his dreams; and he finally makes his own terms with life and the rest of mankind: "The final act of *Invisible Man* is not that of a concealment in darkness . . . but that of a voice issuing its little wisdom out of the substance of its own inwardness--after having undergone a transformation from ranter to writer."⁶ Ellison asserts that "Action is the thing. We are what we do and do not do."⁷ His central character is what he is by reason of his own individual acts and negligences. "It is what the hero refuses to do in each section which leads to further action. He must assert and achieve his own humanity."⁸

Yet this character has no name and, in the beginning, no visible features or substance. Thus, he is Everyman. When as a boy he enters the smoke filled arena and is forced to fight other

⁴Ralph Ellison, "Stephen Crane and American Fiction," *Shadow and Act* (New York: Signet, 1953), p. 79.

⁵Ellison, "The World and the Jug," *Shadow and Act*, p. 121.

⁶Ellison, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," *Shadow and Act*, p. 71.

⁷Ellison, "The Art of Fiction: An Interview," *Shadow and Act*, p. 180.

⁸*Ibid.*

black boys for the entertainment of the white men, there is more going on than just a particularly cruel incident in the life of one boy, more even than "a ritual in preservation of caste lines, a keeping of taboo to appease the gods and ward off bad luck."⁹ On its deepest level, this is an initiation rite in which all artists, indeed all mankind, must participate. Akin to the mythical beings whose time in the underworld is essential to the seasons of growth in the upper world, the hero of *Invisible Man* "must go down into the pit and face the mystery in order to be reborn,"¹⁰ and he must do this not once, but many times.

After the hero is expelled from his Edenlike college, he is once more an outsider, as are all Negroes, as are all artists, as are all men, until he can achieve a new identity. What follows is

. . . a series of initiations in which the hero passes through several stages and groups of identification. The changes of identity are accompanied by somewhat formal rituals resembling the primitives' [that is, primal or archetypal] rites of passage . . . [which] are essentially symbolic representations of birth, purification and regeneration in nature.¹¹

As nature is cyclical, the hero's progress toward identity and reality is cyclical. The "nigger" is kept "running," but not in a straight line.

At the paint factory, the hero again descends into the basement pit, is tried by fire, and experiences a weird sort of rebirth in a womblike box, from which he has to be freed by the cutting of an umbilical cord. His birth, however, like all birth, is accompanied by pangs of pain and loss of security. Later the Brotherhood gives him a new name and a new job, but again the security is short-lived. Even as the hero is initiated into his role by giving a speech in another pitlike arena, where darkness seems to surround him because of the glare in his eyes, he becomes again unsure of who he is. But he is reassured of his role by the Brotherhood once more, and a period of relative certainty follows until an anonymous note sets him running again. So it goes, periods of security and insecurity cycling back upon each other, more initiations occurring, until finally the hero ends up in the underworld of a coal cellar where, in a dream sequence, he is initiated into the world of reality by being stripped of all illusions and of the physical representations of his manhood, but not

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 175.

¹⁰Ellin Horowitz, "The Rebirth of the Artist," in Joseph F. Trimmer, ed., *A Casebook on Ralph Ellison's "Invisible Man"* (New York: Crowell, 1972), p. 239.

¹¹*Ibid.*, pp. 239-40.

of his humanhood. It is here, in fact, that the hero finds his identity as a human being.

The reader responds to the hero's various initiatory episodes not as an observer but as a participant, totally caught up in emotion. This thorough sense of identification with the hero Ellison effects by his skillful use of archetypal images and themes: sight-blindness; visibility-invisibility; darkness-light; whiteness-blackness; birth-death; father-God figures; the Oedipal myth; color, castration, flight, and season symbols.¹² Ellison uses such symbols consciously, knowing that it is basic to the fiction writer's confrontation with the world to plunge back into the "shadow of the past where time hovers ghostlike" and to convert "experience into symbolic action."¹³ Jung has explained that archetypes are the "formulated resultants of countless typical experiences of our ancestors . . . the psychic residua of numberless experiences of the same type."¹⁴ Thus, an artist who uses archetypes entrances the reader, for he speaks in a voice more powerful than his own; "he raises the idea he is trying to express above the occasional and the transitory into the sphere of the ever-existing. He transmutes personal destiny into the destiny of mankind. . . . That is the secret of effective art."¹⁵ Jung's words sound as if they were written with Ellison specifically in mind, for Ellison effects artistically exactly what he is enunciating philosophically: a fusion of self and other, a merging of individual and all humanity.

Ellin Horowitz, in a perceptive discussion of Ellison's imagery, interprets the hero's briefcase as his unconscious, in which are stored up things he cannot get rid of so that it becomes "a record of his being."¹⁶ Though Horowitz does not mention it,

¹²The archetypal nature of the symbols Ellison uses was brought home to me in a very personal way. Our five-year-old, Chad, excitedly insisted upon telling me a dream he had had: The scene was his kindergarten classroom, but the floor was made of dirt. It was "dark" and Chad could not "see," but he could hear his classmates around him. He was in the center of the "pit," he said, using this word I had never heard him use before. He had to count to eight in Spanish (his "trial," I suppose). When he had done that successfully, he heard his friend Jason call him, and they laughed and ran together around the room, which had become "light." I would interpret this as an initiation into society, writ small.

¹³Ellison, "Introduction," *Shadow and Act*, p. xvi.

¹⁴Jung, *Contributions to Analytical Psychology*, p. 246.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 248.

¹⁶Horowitz, *A Casebook*, p. 241.

this interpretation explains beautifully the hero's strange remark to his pursuers after he has fallen down through the open manhole: "I've had you in my briefcase all the time and you didn't know me then and can't see me now."¹⁷ The hero means more than that he has had therein the false identities given him by various white men. He means that in each individual's unconscious are carried the acts and feelings of all other individuals. When any individual is tortured, emasculated, and shorn of illusion, all suffer, including the torturers, for their acts return to them as effects. Moreover, because of the inextricable flow of the unconscious of one individual from and into what Jung calls the "collective unconscious," each individual derives his identity, as well as his well-being, from that of all other individuals. It is this inescapable interdependence that is Ellison's central theme.

The final initiatory rite underground, the perfectly conceived nightmare scene, brings home to the hero and to the reader the shattering realization of all men's ontological oneness and complicity in the fate of mankind. The hero, in an exhausted state and an altered state of consciousness, dreams of castration and sees his bloody blobs spilling out his seed. He says to the assemblage, "there hang not only my generations wasting upon the water . . . but your sun . . . and your moon . . . your world . . . and that drip-drop upon the water you hear is all the history you've made, all you're going to make. Now laugh you scientists" (p. 493). Having plunged outside of scientific history, outside of dialectical materialism, into the chaos, darkness, and myth that he had so feared, the hero has been put in touch with his own unconscious and the collective unconscious of the race, not of blacks or of whites, but of the race of mankind. And once this happens, the hero realizes that all men are brothers in a way so basic that no amount of denial, either by word or act or lack of act, can negate the fact. In retrospect, it becomes clear that, in the earlier initiations, it is not only the black hero who is tried and found wanting or who suffers the consequences of the action or lack of action. From the white town bigwigs at the battle-royal to black Bledsoe (bled-so) to white Norton (northern) to black Lucius (Lucifer) Brockway to Mother Mary to Brother Jack --all of them are "running too, running all over themselves" (p. 497); all are inextricably involved in the initiation rituals; all suffer in their own ways because of the burden of guilt which is stored up in each one's individual unconscious and in the collective unconscious of the human race.

It is significant that the hero refers to Jack, Emerson, Bledsoe, Norton, Ras, the school superintendent, and others who had run him and then emasculated him as "scientists." The drip-drop of his blood and semen into the waters of life, the hero says, is these scientists' only contribution to history. What

¹⁷Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Signet, 1947), p. 490. Hereafter, pages will be cited in the text.

Ellison means is illuminated, though predated, by a passage from Jung:

History, as an effective reality, is not contained in thick books, but lives in our very blood. . . . In the end it resolves itself to nothing less than this: is one willing to be unhistorical and, therefore, to make history, or not? No one makes history who does not dare to risk everything for it, even his own skin. For he carries through the experiment, which is his own life, to the bitter end; and in so doing he interprets his life, not as a continuation but as a beginning. Continuation is a business already provided for in the animal, but to initiate is the prerogative of man; the one thing of which he can boast that transcends the animal.¹⁸

Jack, the dialectical materialist, and the other pragmatists and realists gathered there would deny Jung's concept of history and the hero's new grasp of reality as unscientific and not empirically demonstrable. Indeed, they do dismiss the hero's profound insights by calling him a "mystic idealist" (p. 493).

Whether or not Ellison had ever read Jung's passage, its point is so precisely Ellison's point that he could well have written *Invisible Man* as an amplification of Jung's assertions. In the "Prologue," Ellison's narrator tells the reader to "beware of those who speak of the spiral of history; they are preparing a boomerang" (p. 10), and he speaks of a yokel who won a boxing match, who "knocked science . . . cold" (p. 11) by refusing to go along with his opponent's sense of time. These are insights that the hero grasped during the nightmare scene. Though the hero's potentiality to affect history through the continuation of his personal line has been destroyed, he has stepped outside of conventional time and can see that this bitter end is really a beginning, that he still has the capacity to affect and to effect history through joint effort with those who have castrated him and who will, in turn, be castrated by the boomerang of history if something is not done to prevent it. The hero's final words in the dream sequence are these: "No, no, *we* [emphasis added] must stop him [the mechanical man of the future, which is now]!" (p. 494).

Following the dream sequence, in the "Epilogue," the narrator asserts that the black and white strands of American life are inextricably interwoven:

Our fate is to become one yet many--This is not prophecy, but description. Thus one of the greatest jokes in the world is the spectacle of the whites busy escaping blackness and becoming blacker every day, and

¹⁸Jung, *Contributions to Analytical Psychology*, pp. 184-85.

the blacks striving toward whiteness, becoming quite dull and gray. (p. 499)

But there is more going on than the general homogenization of attributes. There is that psychological determination of one another through the unconscious that Jung illustrates with his description of the slave infection of the master. "I'm your destiny, I made you," says the hero to Mr. Norton, which makes Norton think the hero is mad (p. 500). But the invisible man has learned that he is "linked to all the others in the . . . semi-visible world," which means not only that there is a political unity of interest among the "mere pawns in the futile game of 'making history'" (p. 497), but, more fundamentally, that each human's "individuation," to use a Jungian term, flows from and into the continuous stream of the collective unconscious and thereby derives its being and its meaning. So even though the history of mankind lives in the hero's blood, in his racial memory, in his unconscious, he has, as Jung says, to risk everything to make history. What he has to risk, according to Ellison, is his own humanity.

The hero's invisibility is not only a matter of being unseen by others, says Ellison, it is also a result of the hero's refusal "to run the risk of his humanity, which involves guilt."¹⁹ There is guilt because of the complicity of all men in each other's lives and in the history that is yet to be made. It is to be hoped that the guilt lays the foundation for responsible action. "Humanity is won by continuing to play in the face of certain defeat" (p. 499), says the narrator, sounding much like Camus.

The hero does not know whether accepting the lesson clubbed into him by reality has placed him in the rear or the avant-garde, but he leaves that to history, to Jack and his ilk, the scientific historians, to figure out while he studies the lesson of his own life (p. 495). This is as it should be, for the hero is both outside and inside history; while having a very personal history, he is, paradoxically, ahistorical. His blood and his unconscious predate historical time, yet carry the history of the race. And, absurd though it may be, he must bear his share of responsibility for the blood and the unconscious of every individual now and in the future. Running the risk of one's humanity means, finally, to accept consciously and act upon what has been true subconsciously all along. One cannot achieve a state of equilibrium until his conscious and unconscious are brought into harmony. One cannot find his individual identity until he feels his collective identity. Surely this is that area of which the hero speaks "in which a man's feelings are more rational than his mind" (p. 496).

Ellison has said that the artist seeks transcendence over personal guilt through socialization of his guilt in a work of art

¹⁹Ellison, "The Art of Fiction," p. 180.

in the form of ritual.²⁰ Having recognized that there seethes a chaos below the surface of apparently rational human relationships, that people rationalize what they shun or are incapable of dealing with, that these rationalizations become ritual as they govern behavior, and that the rituals become social forms, it becomes the function of the artist to recognize them and raise them to the level of art and thus transcend them, for his own good and the good of all humanity.²¹ Not only artists, but all men, need expiation for their sins to their fellowmen, sins which weigh on their unconscious and damage their well-being, whether they consciously recognize it or not. By participating vicariously in the rituals of the work of art, by allowing the archetypal symbols that the artist uses to penetrate both conscious and unconscious, men experience an emotional catharsis that enables them to *feel* their humanity more fully.

Ellison's *Invisible Man* provides one of the best examples of all time of a work of art's causing people to feel their own humanity. Ellison's agonizingly personal search of his own psyche is socialized and made so richly meaningful to readers that they, we, become much more than readers. We feel, we participate in, the invisible man's experiences and insights. Why we are touched so deeply, so electrically, Jung's insights help us to understand. What Freud once said to the Viennese author and playwright, Albert Schnitzler, whom he is said to have regarded as his alter ego, might well have been said by Jung to Ellison: "I have gotten the impression that through intuition--actually in consequence of careful introspection--you know all that I have discovered in tedious work on other men."²²

In the "Prologue," the narrator says, "the end is in the beginning" (p. 9), which at the time seems to be an Aristotelian structural concept. It turns out to be a Jungian philosophical concept as well: By becoming unhistorical and thus making history, by carrying through the experiment, his life, by risking his very skin, the hero is not only initiated but initiates. He makes a beginning. Thus, he transcends the animal and becomes truly human. Ellison's narrator says, in the final pages, that he "must shake off the old skin and come up for breath," even though he recognizes that the breath he takes may be either of spring or death. Actually, which it is does not matter, for "there is a death in the smell of spring" regardless (p. 503). That the end is in the beginning is a fact of life, absurd maybe, but a fact, nevertheless. Moreover, the narrator's last words, "Who knows but

²⁰Ellison, "Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity," *Shadow and Act*, p. 55.

²¹Ellison, "The Art of Fiction," p. 175.

²²WIPB TV "Program Guide," March, 1975, in a discussion of a *Masterpiece Theatre* series.

that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?" (p. 503), make clear that the old skin he is sloughing off is being replaced by the skin of all mankind. What better end and beginning than this?
