Rhetorical Strategy in Ralph Ellison's "Invisible Man"

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“He who is educated to Angst is educated to possibility”

The above inscription from Søren Kierkegaard is not frivolously appended, for throughout Ralph Ellison’s serio-comic *Invisible Man* the narrator not only exploits the Dane’s dictum—“the world is possibility,” and “somewhere between Rinehart and invisibility there were great potentialities” (Ellison 154, 499)—, but also explores the permutations of identity and the unsteady steps to selfhood. “All sickness,” argues the “I” of the “Prologue,” “is not unto death, neither is invisibility” (14). These ritualistic discoveries are nowhere better evinced than in the very self-conscious and retrospective protagonist’s rhetorical strategies employed throughout his story.

The Invisible Man is the consummate spokesman to illustrate the uses to which rhetorical voice, polemic, and dialect are put, since he himself from adolescence has staked his reputation on oratory—to exhort and cajole, to dig his “buggy jiving,” to sculpt the parameters of all language that is and is not him. As the action progresses, other contiguous voices help shape, deepen, and chart the course of his emerging personality. By the “Epilogue,” he becomes something more than a vengeful “disembodied voice” hibernating in a hole. His book becomes an intimate, probing, and extended *apologia pro vita sua*.

Ellison’s rhetorical architectonic has been largely ignored by those who dismiss the novel as “talky” and “tedious” (Baumback 85), as discursive (Klein 109), as offering “No social message, no system of beliefs, no intellectual conclusions . . . other than [the narrator’s] own consolation in telling it” (Margolies 132). Only the “black and blues” leitmotif has been convincingly addressed (O’Meally 78-104). Quite clearly, a revaluation of the fabulist’s tactics is in order. In his polemical “Rejoinder” to Irving Howe, Ellison qualifies the “rhetorical strategy” of his initial argument in “The World and the Jug” by declaring that “to the extent that I am a writer . . . the American language, including the Negro idiom, is all that I have” (Shadow 126). And later, toward the close of the same essay, love of language and the act of writing become the nexus for his assessment of Hemingway’s, and not Richard Wright’s, genius (141).

That same controlled cultivation of first-person and pluralistic voices
imbues *Invisible Man* with much of its vitality. It is no wonder then that the I’s odyssey is conspicuously colored by a baroque admixture of language—sentimental, stridently discordant, technocratic, parodic, and reflective—as well as by discernible borrowings from Faulkner and Hemingway. The shifts in voice suggest and parallel more fundamental changes in attitude, values, and ideals of the naif from Greenwood, U.S.A., who ultimately realizes that Bledsoe’s references are worthless, that no business opportunity awaits a black man, even one who repudiates “colored people’s time,” body odor, and soul food, that the self-serving scientific realism of the Brotherhood promotes only dialectical tautologies and chaos, not the aspirations of Harlem, and that the inherently racist Gestalt of Liberty Paints’ surgeons serves to transform him into a “walking zombie,” a “black amorphous thing,” and not an individual. Much as Joyce translates Dedalus’s experiential growth from child to maker through progressively orchestrated gradations of sophisticated language, so too does Ellison map the misadventures of his anti-hero, until he finds his own slightly sardonic, breezy, blues-saturated, and meditative tongue.

From the outset, the Invisible Man is pulled in several different directions at once. The language of actual and proto-Northern powerbrokers (Norton, Bledsoe, the surgeons, the Brotherhood, Ras) is mitigated by the limp and occasionally allusive metaphorical speech of nostalgia and the Academy (Norton, Trueblood, Barbee, Emerson fils, the I-as-greenhorn), while the displaced idiom of transplanted Southerners (Rambo, Wheatstraw, the yam man, Tarp) contrasts sharply with the counterculture hip of zootsuiters, deadbeats, and rascals. In rejecting the austerity of naturalistic fiction, Ellison instead opts for “the rich babble of idiomatic expression . . . a language full of imagery and gesture and rhetorical canniness . . . ” (Bone 198). The radical greening of the Invisible Man’s language and political and social perceptions is provocatively foreshadowed by the “nutty” vet en route to St. Elizabeth’s Hospital: “I can see you after you’ve lived in Harlem for three month. Your speech will change . . . ” (150).

Before that overt warning, the Invisible Man exists in a world of fantasy, fear, and false pride. At the Southern businessmen’s smoker *cum* Battle Royal, the ambitious youth is more concerned with the “dignity of his [valedictory] speech” than with his muscular adversary, Tatlock: “Should I try to win against the voice out there. Would not this go against my speech, and was not this a moment for humility . . . ?” (25). Expediency demands that he accede to the way of the world: he throws the fight, tempers his “social equality” speech, and, armed with a “gleaming calfskin brief case,” begins his archetypal pilgrimage from darkness to light, unmindful of the encomium imparted to him in a dream by his crusty grandfather—“Keep This Nigger-Boy Running” (33).

Within the “quiet greenness” of the rural, segregated college where the scholar “possessed the only identity [he] had ever known,” he yokes his dreams to the school and—ever deferential and politic—only
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halfheartedly rebels when he is dismissed, sensing an opportunity to capitalize even on failure. Writing from hindsight and with Mrs. Ramsay’s “fifty pairs of eyes,” the narrator broadly parodies his own youthful exuberance, naiveté, and the idyllically sequestered landscape with lush, languid, almost Faulknerian tropes. The vine-covered buildings “lined with hedges and wild roses that dazzled the eye,” thick honeysuckle and wisteria, fluttering mockingbirds, timorous and untested lovers, coeds in colorful summery dresses promenading on the grassy lawn coalesce in a series of corny apostrophes:

Oh, long green stretch of campus, Oh quiet songs at dusk,  
Oh moon that kissed the steeple and flooded the perfumed nights, Oh, bugle that called in the morning, Oh, drum that marched us militarily at noon—what was real, what solid, what more than a pleasant, time-killing dream? (36)

The same serene wistfulness characterizes the urbane doublespeak of Mr. Norton for his daughter, Homer Barbee for the Founder, Trueblood’s dreamy tale of incest, and Mr. Emerson’s son’s apparently recondite allusions to Huck Finn. The Bostonian speaks “like someone in a book” about his dead child, “a being more rare, more beautiful, purer, more perfect and more delicate than the wildest dream of a poet,” and, of course, one “too pure for life” (42, 43). His reminiscence is deflated by the shell-shocked vets at the Golden Day (“He’s only a man. Remember that” [85]) and by the playful remonstrance of a happy hooker (“Be happy, white-folks” [91]). Trueblood’s enigmatic account of incest is seasoned with dark humor (“You know, we gettin’ to be a better-lookin’ race of people . . . ” [54]) which belies its traumatic impact. Barbee’s lugubrious, blind, biblical oration both confuses and impresses the captive student who “could not understand the words . . . only the mood, sorrowful, vague, ethereal,” throbbing “with nostalgia, regret and repentance” (115). The paean to the fallen Founder’s vision, ambition, and this-worldly accomplishments approximates the boy’s own vague yearnings.

Constrained by his homosexuality, by his analyst, and by his own pitiful ineffectuality, cynicism, and lack of identity, the troubled young Emerson punctuates his rhapsodic and unctuous prose with social gaffes by trying to impress a minority member (“Some of the finest people I know are Neg—” [186]) and speculates about what truly lies behind the “pasteboard masks” of life: “Aren’t you curious what lies behind the face of things?”, “Who has any identity any more, anyway?”, and “do you believe it possible for us, the two of us, to throw off the mask of custom and manners that insulates[s] man from man, and converse in naked honesty and frankness?” (185, 184, 182-83). His cryptic, and hence unreal, Ahabian interrogation proves unacceptable to the upwardly-mobile, pragmatic lad. Only the memory of “the low harsh gutturals” of a forgotten Baptist preacher’s voice, “now stripped of its imagery,” and the patently personal and crude posturings of a
martinet-like college president impress the youth determined, as he was in adolescence, to “play one group against the other” (23).

Bledsoe and the Vet are twin tutors who precipitate the language of authority, power, and freedom in the forms of reprimands and sage counsel. The latter acknowledges the youth’s invisibility and offers precepts about life: “Play the game, but don’t believe in it. . . . Learn how it operates, learn how you operate . . . ” (151-52). Bledsoe epitomizes and perverts its operations about the “way things are [in the South] and the way they’re supposed to be.” “I didn’t make it,” he whines, echoing Jake Barnes’s preamble to life, “and I know that I can’t change it. But I’ve made my place in it and I’ll have every Negro in the country hanging on tree limbs by morning if it means staying where I am” (141). Bledsoe has learned to “get power and [to] stay in the dark and use it . . . .” (142). That is why he and his kind are always “at the controls,” and why the student seeks to matriculate the following year in order to “be indisputably the leading campus figure.” The work-ethic rhetoric, deceit, conniving, and cronyism—aligned with the tortured vision of a debased romantic ideal (“I identified myself with the rich man [Norton] reminiscing . . . ” [39])—provide the Invisible Man with the impetus to succeed at all costs.

Another pivotal turning point in his career involves his relocation to Harlem which, in turn, necessitates an equally expedient readjustment of Southern manners, values, and dialect. On the hot, gritty, and angry sidewalks he is abruptly introduced to the wailing West Indian harangue of Ras the Exhorter. Ras speaks “bahd English” because it “ain’t [his] mama tongue,” and the incipient spokesman for the Harlem district is plainly disturbed by the “crude, insane eloquence of his plea” for black separatism. These incantatory sounds of frustrated, discontented urban blacks compel the I to affect a new idiom and a new demeanor: “I’d learn the platform tricks of the leading speakers. And I would make the best of my contacts. When I met the big men to whom my letters were addressed I would put on my best manner. I would speak softly, in my most polished tones, smile agreeably and be most polite . . . .” (155). Later, the youth decides to be

charming. Like Ronald Coleman. What a voice! Of course you couldn’t speak that way in the South, the white folks wouldn’t like it, and the Negroes would say that you were “putting on.” But here in the North I would slough off my southern ways of speech. Indeed, I would have one way of speaking in the North and another in the South. (161)

“I had to be careful though,” he concedes, “not to speak too much like a northern Negro; they [southern blacks] wouldn’t like that” (175).

The Harlem experience also exposes the Invisible Man to other less flatulent and less militant voices than those of reactionary romantics and myopic, would-be revolutionaries. The entire middle section, in fact, conjures up diverse elements of black folk culture and ushers in the
vocabulary of the streets. Several voices, in particular, depict the organized innocence of the never-to-be-forgotten past, the language of uprooted Southern blacks who emigrated north in search of better prospects. Though daunted and faced with inevitably bleak futures, they maintain through humor and common sense a keen appreciation for life’s possibilities. They are the survivors whose “humanity is won by continuing to play in the face of certain defeat” (Invisible Man 564).

A collector of junk and blueprints, Peter Wheatstraw indoctrinates the I to “street-smarts”: “All it takes to get along in this here man’s town,” he chides, “is a little shit, grit, and mother-wit. And man, I was bawn with all three. In fact, I’m a seventh son of a seventh son bawn- with a caul over botheyes and raised on black cat bones high john the conqueror and greasy greens— . . .” (172-73). The ironically perverse fact that the Invisible Man later sabotages Monopolated Light & Power by wiring up his “warm hole” with 1369 lights secured from a “junk man . . . a man of vision, [who] has supplied [him] with wire and sockets” illustrates how well the modern-day “tinker-thinker” has adapted to the illogic of city living. Similarly, the yam man, who dispenses traditional Southern fare, forces the I to face the fact of not being “ashamed of what you liked.” The once embarrassed boy who had earlier declined a huge chops-and-grits breakfast as “an act of discipline” so exults in his “intense feeling of freedom” of eating in public that he impishly ridicules an imaginary Bledsoe as “relishing hog bowels” and chitterlings: “The captions over his picture: Prominent Educator Reverts To Field-Niggerism!” (259); “I can see,” notes the street-vendor as the boy butters a second hot potato, “you’re one of those old-fashioned yam-eaters.”

“They’re my birthmark. . . . I yam what I am.” (260)

Even Mary Rambo—“a stable, familiar face like something out of [his] past”—shelters, consoles, and educates the narrator in her own homely way. The sterotypical mammy may mother him, talk of programmed responsibility and of being “a credit to the race,” but more than this, Mary trusts and believes in the slick surrogate son recently discharged from Liberty Paints. At her boardinghouse, his “obsession with . . . identity . . . return[s] with a vengeance” and a “new, painful, contradictory voice” erupts, which prods him to make speeches (253). Mary’s patient wisdom and unabashed love enable her to transcend urban corruption; it is this lesson that she imparts to him: “Don’t let this Harlem git you. I’m in New York but New York ain’t in me, understand what I mean” (249). The regenerate man learns to “Keep a steel helmet handy” when plans boomerang.

Brother Tarp, the fourth innocent, presents a special case. A nineteen-year refugee from a Southern chaingang, Tarp never looks back, never becomes bitter. Inured to vicissitude, this gentle, loyal, and maimed Party worker who “really learned how to wait” solemnly bestows his legshackle on his confident superior, who immediately discerns the
difference between this crude and shameful link to his and his ancestors’ blood heritage, which bears the marks of “haste and violence,” and Bledsoe’s shiny, manufactured replica which serves as a paperweight. The keepsake floods the youth with a “whole series of memories” which, however much he tries to dispel, becomes the basis for his late reclamation of self. In keeping with their surnames, which underscore an umbilical tie to the natural world, the slangy, idiomatic, densely experiential patois of the four tutors complements their narrative and educational roles. Their mute voice of “dispossession,” instinct, and survival are the matrix of the I’s own dialogue. From them, the Invisible Man learns to become “more human,” acknowledges that individuals do count.

The Invisible Man’s physical and psychical transformations originate amid the “vast whiteness” of the company hospital (“I was in the grip of some alien personality lodged deep within me” [243]), continue into his Brotherhood activities (“I was becoming someone else” [327]), and culminate in his recognition of at least two distinctly differentiated selves—the uncalculating or natural one that “had spoken [of dispossession] in a very old-fashioned way” and the “new public self that spoke for the Brotherhood . . . [that] was becoming so much more important than the other that I seemed to run a fast race against myself” (344, 371).

Both selves are accompanied by a corresponding change in his and his associates’ language. The clinically bigoted banter of the “enlightened” surgeons (“Get hot, boy!” [232]) is reinforced by the arrested development of the petty bourgeois comrades at the Chthonian—“But don’t you think he should be a little blacker?” inquires Emma of Jack, and, “How about a spiritual, Brother?” asks another (295, 304). Both voices are at odds with Ras’s purple prose and Tod Clifton’s “obscene spiel.” Thus, the Invisible Man’s docility and abundant humanity make him at once the preeminent spokesman to articulate the grievances of the Harlem poor in particular and socio-political reform in general; so too is he envisioned as a “backward reactionary” by Wrestrum and Tobit who demand that the “spiral of history” be disseminated in a language free from rhetorical embellishment, emotion, and tradition. In order to advance among Party regulars who “seemed to say just what they felt and meant in hard, clear terms,” the Invisible Man conditions himself to retain their argot: “That too, I’d have to learn”(309). This “new phase” is measured by his ability—uptown and downtown— to rigorously promote the Party line “with . . . just the proper mixture of arrogance and down-to-earth humility to satisfy all” (409). Success, he soon discovers, is “in your voice, after all. In your voice . . . .” (411). To reject the Brotherhood would constitute a rejection of the only identity, aside from school, he has known, and so leave him “nowhere.”

It is not until Tod disappears, plunges outside of history, and is gunned down, however, that the Invisible Man’s metanoia is fully realized. This long recognition scene—which finds its analogue in The
Sun Also Rises—becomes the thematic, rhetorical, and spiritual center of the book. The narrator is not only made aware of his “deep sleep,” but delivers an impassioned threnody to the slain youth who, according to Ras, might well have been an African prince. Instead, Tod becomes a victim of Jack’s and Ras’s panaceas for perfection and a martyr for independence and rebellion. His spiel repudiates Jack’s “unknown tongue” and Ras’s ravings. Despite the Invisible Man’s outrage at seeing himself mimicked by the two-faced Sambo dolls and by what he construes to be Tod’s “betrayal,” his funereal depiction of the killing presages his own descents into the darkened subway and into the manhole.

Many of the formal stylistic techniques Jake Barnes employs to ennoble and humanize Vicente Girones, who is fatally mauled during the San Fermin encierro, are expanded upon by Ellison’s narrator: namely, a dispassionate, reportorial style that conveys a heightened emotion without tricks; a solemn, dirge-like tone throughout; an overloading of run-on sentences connected mainly by “and” to approximate the uninterrupted flow of time and experience; and a heavy reliance on nouns which suggest “things” in the phenomenal world. Like the spiritually defunct Barnes who is upset by his compatriots’ bad behavior and indifference to the aficionado’s goring and eventual death (“Was there?” Bill Gorton politely asks [The Sun 204]), the despondent Invisible Man is likewise appalled by the Brotherhood’s collective lack of concern for Tod and for their questioning of his own motives at the funeral rally. Ultimately, each capitalizes on the deaths further on: Jake in a fluid, obituary-like account which places the peon at one with nature and the Invisible Man in his Morris Park tribute, which liberates him from the bondage of the Brotherhood. For Barnes, Girones’ death signifies that the “fiesta was finished,” the “fiesta was over.” For the Invisible Man, the fact that “Tod Clifton’s Tod” motivates him to destroy Brotherhood operations by falsifying membership enrollment records.

His final meeting with Tod dissolves into a “slow-motion movie.” Amid the turbulent street crowd, he overhears the once “precise” inflections of the Brother, but the radical sing-song of the dolls, a reflection of Tod’s disenchantment with and disengagement from the Brotherhood, which sacrificed Harlem to more expedient national concerns. When the cop appears, the narrator’s “sound track [stops] dead,” and we bear silent witness with him to a pantomime of violence that mocks the bluster of the dolls:

They [Clifton and the cop] were coming my way, passing a newsstand, and I saw the rails in the asphalt and a fire plug at the curb and the flying birds, and thought, You’ll have to follow and pay his fine . . . just as the cop pushed him, jolting him forward and Clifton trying to keep the box from swinging against his leg and saying something over his shoulder and going forward as one of the pigeons swung
down into the street and up again . . . and I could see the cop push Clifton again . . . his arm shooting out stiffly, sending him in a head-snapping forward stumble until he caught himself . . . the two moving in a kind of march that I'd seen many times, but never with anyone like Clifton. (425)

Three successive run-on sentences beginning with “And”—a connector liberally sprinkled throughout the passage—follow until Tod crumples before the disbelieving and inert Invisible Man, who then abruptly shifts to clipped, declarative sentences: “I couldn’t move. The sun seemed to scream an inch above my head. Someone shouted. A few men were starting into the street” (426). The flat, detached, almost monotonous report accentuates his horror and helplessness. Watching “without emotion,” the narrator includes the minutiae of the incident:

Everything seemed slowed down. A pool formed slowly on the walk. My eyes blurred. I raised my head. The cop looked at me curiously. Above in the park I could hear the furious flapping of wings; on my neck, the pressure of eyes. I turned. A round-headed, applecheeked boy with thickly freckled nose and Slavic eyes leaned over the fence of the park above, and now as he saw me turn, he shrilled something to someone behind him, his face lighting up with ecstasy. (427)

Similarly, in Hemingway’s novel, the experienced correspondent meticulously documents the madcap running of the bulls and, as the crowd swells, he is slammed against a fence, and so is physically removed from the proceedings. He omits nothing, however, not the same two cops clubbing another drunken pseudo-matador and then dragging him away, and inevitably not the “one [bull that] shot ahead, caught a man in the running crowd in the back and lifted him up in the air. Both the man’s arms were by his sides, his head went back as the horn went in, and the bull lifted him and then dropped him” (The Sun 196). The celebration of a peasant’s life lived “all the way up” is couched in the form of a terse, but evocative, news dispatch:

Later in the day we learned that the man who was killed was named Vicente Girones, and came from near Tafalla. The next day in the paper we read that he was twenty-eight years old, and had a farm, a wife, and two children. He had continued to come to the fiesta each year after he was married. The next day his wife came in from Tafalla to be with the body, and the day after there was a service in the chapel of San Fermin, and the coffin was carried to the railway station by members of the dancing and drinking society of Tafalla. The drums marched ahead, and there was music on the fifes, and behind the men who carried the coffin
walked the wife and two children. . . . Behind them marched all the members of the dancing and drinking societies of Pamplona, Estella, Tafalla, and Sanguesa who could stay over for the funeral. The coffin was loaded into the baggage-car of the train, and the widow and the two children rode, sitting, all three together, in an open third-class railway carriage. The train started with a jerk, and then ran smoothly, going down grade around the edge of the plateau and out into the fields of grain that blew in the wind on the plain on the way to Tafalla. (198)

The Invisible Man's edifying discourse on the short, bitter life of Brother Tod Clifton duplicates Jake's organic fusion of form and content and, in turn, becomes another sacrament of execution. It reaffirms the dead man's humanity by demythologizing—not-deifying—his person, by making ordinary occurrences in his life appear extraordinary:

His name was Clifton and they shot him down. His name was Clifton and he was tall and some folks thought him handsome. . . . His name was Clifton. . . . He thought about things and he felt deeply. I wouldn't call him noble because what's such a word to do with one of us? His name was Clifton, Tod Clifton, and, like any man, he was born of woman to live awhile and fall and die. . . . His name was Clifton and for a while he lived among us and aroused a few hopes in the young manhood of man. . . .

(444)

The artfully repetitive paean continues in the same understated way:

Here are the facts. He was standing and he fell. . . . He fell in a heap like any man and his blood spilled out like any blood. . . . That's all. They spilled his blood and he bled. They cut him down and he died; the blood flowed on the walk in a pool, gleamed a while, and, after a while, became dull then dusty, then dried. That's the story and that's how it ended. (445)

The orator makes no overt attempt to politicize the people in the best neutered patois of the Party, but, like Barnes, speaks as it "truly was": "It wasn't the way I wanted it to go, it wasn't political" (446). One palpable effect of the Man's testament is that he no longer perceives a crowd, "but the set faces of individual men and women" (448). It is for them—the dispossessed—that he decides to subvert the Brotherhood's authority by becoming privy to high-echelon secrets. Although he fails in this endeavor, his mission is sustained and revitalized throughout the hot August night's rioting by distinctly
separate, but equal, Harlem voices.

The aroused collective voice of Harlem coincides with the Invisible Man’s acceptance of his past and present lives. In the subway, he really listens for the first time to the callow teenaged hipsters who “speak a jived-up transitional language full of country glamour” which places them “outside the groove of history” (430, 433). When he dons their uniform—dark glasses and a fedora—and forsakes the Brotherhood’s disciplined regime, a cacophony of strangely familiar and intimate voices address his Rinehartesque persona, “someone else,” and not him, in street lingo. “Rinehart, baby,” croons a hooker, “is that you?” (472). “Rinehart, poppa, Tell us what you putting down,” call out some hepcats (473). Their kindred spirits, the zootsuiters, salute him with, “Hey now, daddio” (474), and winos inquire, “How’s your hammer hanging” (479). Even Barrelhouse is duped and defers to him as “Poppa-stopper”; Brother Maceo derides him as a “confidencing sonofabitch” (475, 477).

Like Hesse’s Harry Haller in the Versailles Hall of Mirrors, who ultimately discerns a multiplicity of selves within him, the Invisible Man recognizes the pimp’s, the pusher’s, the lover’s, the bagman’s, the “spiritual technologist’s” many contradictory roles as a continuum where you meet “your old selves coming and going and perhaps all at the same time” (499). And within the boundaries of Rinehartism, he accepts the possibility of and responsibility for freedom. Even Brother Hambro’s cynical legalese cannot diminish the “new sense of self” he feels when he confronts Ras face-to-face in a primeval struggle. Appropriately enough, the spear that he hurls back at the Exhorter penetrates and locks his jaws, sealing forever the house of speech. As though “roused from sleep,” the metamorphosed, short, dark hero, possessed “with only a certain eloquence,” understands, as did Tod, that it is “better to live out one’s own absurdity than to die for that of others, whether for Ras’s or Jack’s” (547).

Once inside the manhole, divested of his illusions and the contents of his briefcase, the Invisible Man accelerates his own plunge outside of history and his return to psychic health. “I was whole,” he proclaims in his first underground residence (558). That epiphany prompts the coming-to-be of his book, the irrevocable fact that “The end was in the beginning,” and the cultivation of a more sanguine voice to complement his new-found sense of direction. Like Nick Carraway, whose development as a reliable first-person narrator and, more importantly, as a caring man is sustained by his commitment to a childhood precept—“Reserving judgements is a matter of infinite hope” (Gatsby 2), the Invisible Man’s two-fold maturation is gauged by his increasing faith in the “infinite possibilities” the future offers (563). For both, the writing process becomes a therapy and a travail, the only certain act of accountability for a self in turmoil. It is no wonder then that the “Epilogue” concentrates very self-consciously on the writing process and invention as they contribute to his spiritual growth.

As an artist, the Invisible Man no longer needs to abuse the world
for its indifference or to try to account for its furious irrationality. He
must patiently endure its convulsions and accede to its eternal twilight.
In ordering his past life, he reorders and renews his present and future
lives. His architectonic is the near perfect structure he imposes on a
lawless universe. He can, like Jake Barnes, still find the world a good
place if he pays the right price. His book, like Barnes's, is a compulsive
effort to get it right, to get it all down, and that represents a threat
to his present stasis. In acknowledging that “half of it [sickness] lay
within me,” he submits to the impenetrable forces of the universe and
makes himself vulnerable to love. As such, he continues in a long line
of American fictional “isolatoes” born of Bildungsromane who learn
through the via negativa that to lose, to acquiesce, is to risk the very
ground of one’s being. Freedom for him no longer connotes something
Sartrean, something “dreadful,” but rather presumes an absurd license
to surface, to perform responsible action, to test so as to ensure one’s
visibility: “it was,” as he says, “the recognition of possibility.” That
is why he torments himself—as does Dostoevsky’s “madman”—“to put
it all down. Because in spite of myself,” he concludes, “I’ve learned
some things. . . . The very act of trying to put it all down has
confused me and negated some of the anger and some of the
bitterness. . . . In order to get some of it down I have to love” (566).

As with his philosophic assessment of the American acculturation
process—“Our fate is to become one, and yet many” (564)—the Invisible
Man is a product of all the individuated, eclectic voices with whom
he has come in contact, and yet his own voice remains intensely private
and discernible. The reader—the “you” to whom his confession of
failure and fear is addressed—comprises his ostensible audience, but
it also turns inward, a self-directed cri de coeur about one’s need for
light and air, about unmitigated hatred and violence, about playing
against stacked odds, about the politics of hope, not despair, about
listening on the “lower frequencies” to one’s interior callings, about
the uncertainties of an uncharted future, about clarity, about waiting.
As Freud admonished, “‘One must learn to bear some portion of
uncertainty’” (Sachs 147). As Dupre and Scofield demonstrated by
gutting their Harlem tenement, he must evolve a plan,
“organized . . . and carried . . . through alone” (536). And as
saints and ascetics have practiced, he must—if his eyes are opened and
not merely “looking through”—exercise patience, the waiting, waking
virtue. These eloquent acts truly comprise the Invisible Man’s (and
Ellison’s) sullen language and selfless love, the art of understanding,
the covert tactics of the tongue.

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