CHAPTER - III
ORALITY AND TEXTUALITY: FOLK ELEMENTS IN
INVISIBLE MAN

The predominant theme in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* is the quest for cultural identity. The protagonist seeks identity not as an individual, but as a Black man in a white society. The invisible man searches for self-definition in terms of his lived life and values gained from the unique Black-American experience. His quest lies in the conviction that the Black experience is unique, that is part of the community’s struggle: "Who knows but that on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?" Cultural identity becomes indistinguishable from the human condition.

One way that Ellison bridges the gap between the uniqueness and the universality of Black experience is by using Black folklore. *Invisible Man* is filled with folk elements: tales, trinkets, toasts, songs, sermons, jazz, jives and jokes. In his essays and interviews, Ellison has repeatedly singled out Black folklore as the source of genuine Black self-definition:

In the folklore we tell what Negro experience really is. We back away from the chaos of experience and from ourselves and we depict the humour as well as the horror of our living. We project Negro life in a metaphysical perspective and we have seen it with a complexity of vision that seldom gets into our writing.

Negro folklore, evolving within a larger cultural domain is regarded something as a Blackman’s own core hence more than the literal. It announces the Negro's willingness to trust his own experience, his own
sensibilities in defining reality, instead of allowing his masters to define these crucial matters for him. At the same time, however, Ellison insists that “On its profoundest level American experience is of a whole”, as it is implied throughout Shadow and Act, that behind “John Henry is Hercules, behind specific folk expression is, “the long tradition of story telling ... of myth”. So when Ellison uses Black folklore in his fiction, he consciously integrates it with the myths of the larger American and Western cultures.

Ellison then goes on to identify the problem by saying:

For example, there is the old saying amongst Negroes: if you’re black, stay back; if you’re brown, stick around; if you’re white, you’re right. And there is the joke Negroes tell on themselves about their being so black they can’t be seen in the dark. In my book this sort of thing was merged with the meanings which blackness and light have long had in Western mythology: evil and goodness, ignorance and knowledge, and so on. In my novel the narrator’s development is one through blackness to light; that is, from ignorance to enlightenment: invisibility....

It took me a long time to learn how to adapt such examples of myth into my work — also ritual. The use of ritual is equally a vital part of creative process. I learned a few things from Eliot, Joyce and Hemmingway, but not how to adopt them.

The saying, “if you’re black, stay back” is not myth, but folk wisdom. Ritual is not completely independent of myth, it is the form through which myth is often expressed. What Ellison attempted to do, in order to adapt Black folk expression in literature was to turn it into ritual and put
it at the service of a myth larger than itself. Folklorists, myth theorists and literary critics differ widely on the definition of myth and its relationship to the rest of folklore. Those who believe that a myth involves divine characters and folktales human, that myths take place in prehistoric and folktales in historic time, or that myths are believed by teller and audience and folktales told as fiction, are acknowledging not necessarily a sharp distinction between two levels of folk belief— one concrete, temporal and specific to the folk group, the other abstract, eternal and universal. "Eternal" and "Universal" are here relative terms. They refer to times and worlds larger than those of the immediate social context, however, the largeness of the world is unimportant. In Ellison's novel such "myths" refer to the abstract level of "folk-expression".

The specific implications of the difference between a social and a mythic view of the folk experience can be illustrated by considering Ellison's discussion of the Battle Royal scene in Invisible Man:

Take the "Battle Royal" passage in my novel, where the boys are blindfolded and forced to fight one another for the amusement of the white observers. This is a vital part of behaviour pattern in the South which both Negroes and Whites thoughtlessly accepted. It is a ritual in preservation of caste lines, a keeping of taboo to appease the gods and ward off bad luck. It is also the initiation rituals to which the greenhorns are subjected. This passage which states what Negroes will see I did not have to invent; the patterns were already there in society, so that all I have to do was present them in a broader context and meaning. In any society there are many rituals of situation which, for the most part, go unquestioned. They can be simple, elaborate, but they are the connective tissue between the work of art and the audience.
The Battle Royal is rooted in the slave experience. It goes back to the many versioned folktale "The Fight", in which the old Master and his neighbour pit their two strongest slaves against each other and stake their plantations on the outcome. It has been used by Wright in *Black Boy* (1945), Faulkner in *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) and Killens in *Young Blood* ( ) in dramatizing social relations between blacks and whites. It encapsulates the physical, economic, psychological and sexual exploitation of slavery, while dramatizing the slaves’ comprehension of it. Identifying the rituals of a slave society for example: “keeping of taboo [is] to appease the gods” and an “initiation ritual which all green horns are subjected”, Ellison turns them into an essentially religious ritual. By emphasizing the symbolic rights, Ellison transforms social experience into a mythic one. The social and the mythic interpretations of a situational ritual might coexist peacefully if such a situation is not a function of so abnormal a condition as slavery.

The ritual also symbolizes the relation of an individual to his own community, of an oppressed people to those who oppress. Because the social ritual and the mythic ritual reflect different levels of relationship between people and power without having compatible meanings. To equate the Battle Royal as an appeasement ritual for the gods is to assume that the relationship between blacks and whites, in its dramatized mode is divinely sanctioned and eternal. Although that relationship has always seemed permanent, Black folklore is based on the premise that it is not. In his theoretical analysis, Ellison places *Invisible Man* in a context that distorts its meaning and makes it a series of initiations that
finally demonstrates not the politics of slavery, but the chaos of the universe. In his fiction, in general, he fits-in Black-American folk expression to the forms of American and Western myth. To do so, he must ignore, minimize, distort, or deny the peculiarities of the Black folk expression and its authentic meaning. The peculiarities of the Black folklore reflects the peculiar institutions from where they evolve and transcend them. Thus the end of the identity quest in Ellison’s fiction becomes the beginning.

As has already been stated, through the early part of the 20th century, Afro-American ideology renewed optimism, sought to find a place in the complex ideas of the American Dream. The Afro-American therefore has to believe in the American Dream or destroy much that is of value to him. The optimism can be seen as embracing the after-beat of rhythms picked up from those established by the abolitionists in slave narratives. Today the rhythms of the American Dream runs in a parallel pattern with a more serious questioning of the Dream itself. Benjamin Mays' *Born to Rebel* (1971) recounts the encounter with nothingness during Mays' youth, but finds ground for optimism in the fruits of public service. On the other hand, Richard Wright's *Black Boy* (1945) an autobiographical work questioned the very notion of the dream itself. Although the autobiography's ending leaves ground for hope in the promised land of the North, the work torn apart the cultural fabric of the slaves by interrogating its various claims to authenticity as it comes round to the brink of nothingness:
After I have outlived the shocks of childhood, after the habit of reflection had been born in me, I used to mulled over the strange absence of real kindness in Negroes, how unstable was our tenderness, how lacking in genuine passion we were, how void of great hope, how timid our joy, how bare our traditions, how hollow our memories, how lacking we were in those intangible sentiments that bind man to man, and how shallow was even our despair. After I had learned other ways of life I used upon the unconscious irony of those who felt that Negroes led so passionate an existence! I saw that what had been taken for our emotional strength was our negative confusions, our flights, our fears, our frenzy under pressure. 

Wright was offended by the fact that a Black folk tradition was oriented toward mere survival, base submission, and escapism. As he further stated in “Blueprint for Negro Writing” (New Challenge, Fall, 1937), he wished to mould the tradition into a martial stance. With the help of Marxism, he also wished to create the values by which the race was to live or die, but should not withdraw from decisive action and obscuring “clarity of vision”. He decried that “a cowardly sentimentality which had deterred Negro writers from launching crusades against the evils which Negro ignorance and stupidity have spanwed.”

Thus from his autobiography and from several works of fiction, there emerges a hero as Black rebel-outsider, embattled, particularly after Uncle Tom’s Children ( ), both with the pretensions of the American Dream and his own folk tradition.

Ralph Ellison’s response to Wright’s portrait of Black life has been mixed. In his essay, “Richard Wright’s Blues” in Shadow and Act (1964), he seems to partly accept and partly reject Wright’s perspective. Among
other things, he notes that the personal warmth of black communal life, following Wright’s illustrations, “is accompanied by an equally personal coldness, kindliness by cruelty, regard by malice,” that the opposite qualities are quickly set off “against the member who gestures toward individuality,” and that “The member who breaks away is apt to be more impressed by its negative than by its positive character.” Wright was rejecting not only the white south but the south within himself. “As a rebel, he formulated that rejection negatively, because it was the negative face of the Negro community upon which he looked most often as a child.” Embattled, himself with Irving Howe in his latter essay “The World and the Jug”, in Shadow and Act (1964), Ellison rejected the same quotation as having its source in Wright’s attempt to see the forms of Negro humanity through the lens of Marxism and in Wright’s paraphrase of Henry James: “catalogue of those items of high civilization which were absent from American life during Hawthorne’s day, and which seemed so necessary in order for the novelist to function.” However, it must be said that Wright’s intense rendering of negative images of Black life in such works as Black Boy (1945), Native Son (1940), Lawd Today (1963), and The Long Dream (1958) without precluding James and Marxism, would seem to require that we accept his negative remarks as an article of faith and belief. Ellison’s earlier remarks, taking into consideration the stance of the rebel, and Wright’s own aspiration to launch crusades against ignorance and stupidity, seem to come closer to accounting for the degree of negativity in Wright’s position.
The folk influence in *Invisible Man* defines not an action but an attitude of ironic withdrawal from the white world, an attitude represented metaphorically by the lives of all those characters—Bledsoe, Trueblood, Brockway and Rhinehart—who deal with it successfully and traditionally by the protagonist's withdrawal into his half-lighted cellar. All the characters who function well in the white world inhabit some sort of wider world through Bledsoe's calculated humility; Trueblood's subconscious; Rhinehart's organized disguises; Brockway's mixing up Liberty Paints, they all accepted the chaos that is apparent. "You have looked upon ... madness and are not destroyed?" Mr. Norton asks Trueblood. "No such, I feels all right".11 "This here's the uproar department and I'm in charge"12, boasts Lucius Brockway. Rhinehart cannot simply live with chaos; as Rhine the fighter, Rhine the gambler, Rhine the briber, Rhine the lover, and Rhine the Reverend. He "is" chaos: "could he be all of the?" ... Could he himself be rind and hert? .... It was true as I was true... The world in which we lived was without boundaries. A vast seething, hot world of fluidity, and Rhine the rascal was at home. Perhaps only Rhine the rascal was at home in it. It was unbelievable, but perhaps only the truth was always a lie".13 Having this insight, the protagonist realizes that he "no longer has to run for or from the Jacks and the Emersons and the Bledsoes and Nortons, but only from their confusions, impatience, and refusal to recognize the beautiful absurdity of their American identity and mine".14 He goes underground following the model of these folk characters, having the wisdom of his folk advisers, he acts out the lesson that folk allusions have helped him to understand.
This ironic withdrawal is presented as negation of the white world and its absurdity. The protagonist is relieved from the "illness of affirmation, of saying 'yes' against the nay-saying of my stomach, not to mention my brain". The characters he is imitating and accepting their advice are all from the conventional point of view, a bit diabolical, the crazy grandfather, the insane vet, the neurotic young Emerson all are a bit mad. It is against this perceived negation that Ellison sets the contrived reinterpretation of the grandfather's advice: "could he have meant—hell, he must have meant that we were to affirm the principle on which the country was built and not the men ...." Reflecting on the grandfather's advice he makes a dramatic statement: "perhaps that's my greatest social crime, I've overstayed my hibernation, since there's a possibility that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play".

But withdrawal into a hole is not negation. To say that the world is absurd, that the only reality is in the mind, is a way of saying that the world and the falsehoods that make it absurd are unimportant. And that is, if not affirmation, at least acquiescence. The goal in Invisible Man is to know, not to change knowledge is presented as the equivalent of change. But knowledge does not necessarily produce change. The affirmation of Invisible Man is neither the survival technique nor the political weapon that are used by the characters, for the negation behind it all is in the mind. The ultimate effect of Invisible Man's reinterpretation of the Black folk image is not to elevate such characters as Lucius Brockway, the cellar rebel, to the status of Dr. Bledsoe or Mr. Norton but to reduce the archetypal Black folk hero to that of Brockway.
Thus the result of the protagonist’s identity quest is not an attempt at self-definition, but reaffirmation of the identity provided by the White culture.

There are two folk characters in the novel who have the potential for a positive representation of the Black folk perspective: Mary Rambo and Brother Tarp. Both are explicitly characterized as anchors against chaos. The protagonist thinks of Mary as “a force, a stable familiar force like something out of my past which kept me from whirling off into some unknown which I dared not face”.\(^1\)\(^8\) He regards Brother Tarp’s gift of the sawed-open chain link as a “paternal gesture which at once joined him with his ancestors, marked a high point of his present, and promised a concreteness to his nebulous and chaotic future”.\(^1\)\(^9\) Both offer the protagonist advice in direct opposition to the counsel of underground: “It’s you young folk what’s going to make the changes”, Mary says, “y’all’s the ones. You got to lead and you got to fight and move us all on up a little higher. And I tell you something else, it’s the ones from the south that’s got to do it, them what knows the fire and ain’t forgot how it burns. Up here too many forgets”.\(^2\)\(^0\) Brother Tarp echoes Mary with the gift of the leg-chain link:

Even when times were best for me I remembered. Because I didn’t want to forget those nineteen years. I just kind of held on to this as a keepsake and a reminder.... I’d like to pass it on to you, son .... Funny thing to give somebody, but I think it’s got a heap of signifying wrapped up in it and it might help you remember what we’re really fighting against. I don’t think of it in terms of but two words, yes and no; but it signifies a heap more .... \(^2\)\(^1\)
This passage bears upon the activist perspective and the stabilizing effect of Mary and Tarp on slavery, the South, the past – the Black folk experience. The anchor against chaos that each provides is a clear perception of the source of the chaos, not as general absurdity, but as the specific legacy of slavery, something to be confronted in the world, not just in the mind. But the perspective of Mary and Brother Tarp is not the perspective of the novel. Ellison does not follow the implications of their articulations. Their advice is never confirmed, never refuted and never even dramatized. Though they are introduced as admirable and illuminating characters, they are soon dropped and forgotten. Mary Rambo is further developed in an unused chapter entitled “out of the Hospital and under the Bar”, but even if it were included, she would still have no sustained effect on the novel. The final perspective remains that of the grandfather who has said “no” so secretly that even his family is shocked to hear him call himself a traitor.

“The literature of the slave” is an ironic phrase, at the very least, and is an oxymoron at its most literal level of meaning. “Literature”, as Samuel Johnson used the term, denoted an “acquaintance with ‘letters’ or books”, according to The Oxford English Dictionary. It also connotes “polite or humane learning” and “literary culture”. While it is self-evident that the ex-slave who managed, as Frederick Douglass puts it, to “steal” some learning from his or her master and the master’s texts, was bent upon demonstrating to a sceptical public an acquaintance with letters or books. We cannot honestly conclude that slave literature was meant to exemplify either polite or humane learning or the presence of literary
culture. Indeed it is accurate to argue that the literature of the slave consisted of texts collectively railed against the arbitrary and inhumane learning which white masters foisted upon them to reinforce a perverse fiction to the "natural" order of things. The "slave" by definition, possessed at most, a liminal status within the human community. To read and to write was to transgress this nebulous realm of liminality. The slave's texts, then, could not be taken as specimens of black "literary culture". Rather the texts of the slave could only be read as testimony of defilement. The slave's representation of the master's attempt to transform a human being into a "commodity", and his verbal witness of the possession of "humanity" were shared in common with Europeans. The slave wrote not primarily to demonstrate humane letters, but to demonstrate his or her own membership in the human community.

This intentions cannot be disregarded as a force extraneous to the production of a text. We recall, in this context, Ralph Ellison's apt expression what we call "tradition", is "a sharing of that 'concord of sensibilities' which the group expresses."²² Black writers to a remarkable extend have created texts that express the broad "concord of sensibilities" shared by persons of African descent in the Western hemisphere. Assertions that the slave narratives begin the Afro-American literary tradition are repeated so often that they have acquired the force of self-evident truth. Charles Davis makes the argument up front in titling one of his important essays: "The Slave Narrative: First Major Art Form in an Emerging Black Tradition."²³ James Olney echoes Davis, only more strongly, in stating, "the undeniable fact is that the Afro-American
The narratives focus on two crucial aspects that not only make slavery intelligible, but the "black experience" as well. The slave narrative also moves in two directions: the 'here and now' and the 'there and then'. It is the narrative actions in the 'here and now' that interest us. In an attempt to define a major stand of development in a black tradition, one has to take into account the theme of a journey like that of the invisible man. The black narrative has an ambiguous relationship to American institutions, manifesting an erosion of faith in the American Dream which earlier had provided grounds for optimism. The emerging self, equipped with imagination, resourcefulness, and a sense of the tenuousness of childhood innocence, attempts to foster itself by crediting the adult world with its own estimate of its god-like status while managing to retreat into the autonomy of the childhood world in the face of conflicts. Given the black adult's compulsion to compromise with prevailing institutions, while developing limited codes through which nobility, strength and beauty can be registered, a child's requirement of love, security and consistency are barely anchored on adult support and prevailing chaos. The black adults in the absence of other institutional support depend on the religious and blues traditions.

Ellison’s ability to redefine, rather than simply include, Black folklore in his fiction is regarded as his special contribution to the literary
interpretation of both folklore and Black culture. A few commentators have criticized Black folklore for its dependence on Western mythology. Larry Neal, who singles Ellison out for his broad and profound understanding of Afro-American culture, considers the fact that Ellison overlays his knowledge of Black culture with concepts that exists outside of it. George E. Kent regards Ellison's use of the folk and cultural tradition in *Invisible Man* with a "certain unease", inspired by the elaborate system of interconnection with western symbols and mythology. These comments treat the elements of blackness and Western tradition in Ellison's fiction as separable. But Ellison's adaptation of Black folklore produces an alloy rather than separate metals. The process of ritualization itself changes the meaning of the folklore.

Although rituals do undergo change, they do so much more than other aspects of life. While fixity remains the principle of ritual as a form, people used it to deal with "those sectors of experience which do not seem amenable to rational control."\textsuperscript{26} or as Ellison himself put it, "People rationalize what they shun or are incapable of dealing with; these superstitions and their rationalizations become ritual as they govern behaviour. The rituals become social forms and it is one of the functions of the artist to recognize them and raise them to the level of art."\textsuperscript{27} Thus ritual by its very nature formalizes the relationship of individuals to an order they do not understand and think they cannot change. By formalizing, it is perpetuated and celebrated. As a form, ritual tends to affirm the powerlessness of human beings and the permanence of a fixed order.
Adoption of ritual in literature explains the implications of the ‘form’ to the conflict between characters and the social, natural, or metaphysical forces controlling their lives. It diminishes the role and responsibility of individuals in shaping their own world, personifies impersonal forces and dehumanizes social institutions, homogenizing human experience by emphasizing continuity rather than development. It reduces any particular human action to an insignificant gesture among many in the long run. Ultimately, it reduces the significance of the very conflict it expresses by setting it in the context of innumerable others, past and future, by foreordaining the outcome, and approving the outcome as a contribution to maintaining the order.

Ritualization of Black folklore applies to the specific social conflict between Black people and the institution of slavery. It implies that this conflict is part of a general, eternal and inescapable conflict between human beings and their limitations. It transforms the social conflict at the heart of the folk expression into the metaphysical conflict of framing the myth, thus denying the social conflict any importance of its own. But the relationship between an oppressed people and an oppressive society is social, it is the result of human action and can be changed by human agency. To imply otherwise in Ellison’s own words is to rationalize.

Rationalization is in fact just what Ellison’s ritualization of Black folklore accomplishes. It implicitly justifies the relationship between Black people and American society by effectively denying it. The folk advisers in *Invisible Man* offer the protagonist a way of looking at society
that allows him to live with it as it is. They teach him to consider
invisibility as a personal asset, rather than a social liability and to
embrace chaos as the natural order. However, invisibility in the novel is a
social liability that represents chaos in racism. In this Yes means No only
in the mind of the speaker. In Invisible Man, Ellison offers folk
expression as a definition of blackness, then uses folk characters and
allusions to deny the social reality that has created the folk identity.

Thus the tradition of black experience achieved by Ellison’s
ritualization of Black folklore ultimately becomes white. The implication
is not only white for its own sake but for the “larger” context of white
American culture into which rituals integrate the folklore. Because the
very idea of a change in the mind set, can change social reality. The
support and the interests of white society implicitly are real and that deny
any privilege to the Black. Ellison’s adoption of Black folklore, however
involuntarily, exchanges the self-definition of the folk for the definition
of the masters.

The protagonist of Invisible Man moves through various levels of
society, and in each one undergoes an experience representative of the
illusion of the Black people and the machinery by which those illusions
are produced. The destination of his journey from the South to the North,
from illusion to reality, is understanding, the clarifying of the confusions.
At the point that he achieves clarification he throws up the false identities
and assumes his own reality as an invisible man. His reality does not rise
out of what people – black or white -- say he is or would have him to be,
but from his own sensibilities and his link with his own people.
REFERENCES:

6. Ibid.
13. Ibid., p. 376.
15. Ibid., pp. 432-33.
16. Ibid., p. 433.
17. Ibid., p. 439.
18. Ibid., p. 196.
19. Ibid., p. 294.
20. Ibid., p. 194.

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