introduction

Reading Forward to *Invisible Man*

The Promethean instinct
will reappear in Negro life.
—Ralph Ellison,
unpublished correspondence,
Negro Quarterly, c. 1942

With its unsympathetic treatment of the left, caricature of black nationalism, embrace of existential ambivalence, and closing assertion of vital center patriotism—characteristics that contributed to its winning the National Book Award—Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) bears many traces of its early cold war origins. Although most critics and teachers, acting on Ellison's frequent warnings that *Invisible Man* is neither political allegory nor autobiography, have viewed the novel as only loosely aligned with twentieth-century historical and political movements, they have for the most part accepted the premise that the invisible man's negative experiences with the Brotherhood faithfully replicate typical features of U.S. Communism. Even critics otherwise opposed to doctrines of literary reflection routinely assume that Ellison got it right about the left. Especially when read in conjunction with other cold war–era African American texts—novels like Chester Himes's *Lonely Crusade* (1947), autobiographies like Richard Wright's *Black Boy (American Hunger)* (1993), and political histories like Harold Cruse's *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual: A Historical Analysis of the Failure of Black Leadership* (1967)—Ellison's novel has functioned over the years as Exhibit A for the case that Communism is antithetical to the interests of Americans in general and African Americans in particular. Widely taught in both high schools and colleges, adjudged one of the most important novels of the twentieth century, and situated at the hub of a veritable critical industry in the twenty-first, *Invisible Man* is routinely read through critical and historical lenses that the novel itself played no small role in creating. I aim to befog those lenses

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by demonstrating that Ellison's masterwork emerged only after a protracted, and torturous, wrestling down of his former political radicalism.[1]

Ellison's publishers did their best, when *Invisible Man* first appeared, to efface traces of the author's earlier connections with radical publications and organizations. The dust-jacket biography of the Random House edition featured Ellison's early studies in music and sculpture; his work experience in a factory, for a psychologist, and as a freelance photographer; his service in the merchant marine during the Second World War; and his lectures on American literature at New York University and Bennington College. Nothing was said, however, of the approximately three dozen pieces of left-wing fiction and reportage he had produced before 1946. In a *New York Times* profile published in 1952, the columnist Harvey Breit made no mention of Ellison's publications in *New Challenge*, *New Masses*, *Direction*, *Tomorrow*, *Negro Quarterly*, *Negro Story*, *Common Ground*, or other left or left-affiliated organs, listing only a small handful of appearances in safer venues like *American Writing* and *Cross-Section*. The biographical sketch accompanying the *Saturday Review*'s greeting of *Invisible Man* effaced Richard Wright from Ellison's background, claiming—in a trend that Ellison would encourage over the years—T. S. Eliot as the dominant influence on the young novelist. The flurry of second-round reviews accompanying Ellison's reception of the National Book Award compounded the portrait of the artist as political innocent. The handful of angry and dismissive reviews of *Invisible Man* appearing in leftist publications, revealing the bile of not just antagonists but former associates, was buried in the historical cellar of the early cold war.[2]

In the years following the publication of *Invisible Man* Ellison customarily disparaged the left but remained evasive regarding the novel's relationship to his own political history. In an interchange with Irving Howe about Negro writers and politics in 1963 he remarked that it was "awful" that Wright had "found the facile answers of Marxism before he learned to use literature as a means for discovering the forms of American Negro humanity." In the preface to *Shadow and Act* Ellison claimed that he had himself "soon rejected . . . Marxist political theory." He had been, he claimed in 1971, a "true outsider" of the left. In his introduction to the thirtieth-anniversary reissue of the novel he acknowledged his youthful participation in the Scottsboro and Angelo Herndon defenses, support for the Loyalists during the Spanish Civil War, and protests against discriminatory hiring along 125th Street, but implied that he had been situated at the periphery rather than the core of these left-led mass activities. Writing to the Wright biographer Michel Fabre in 1982, Ellison claimed that his political outlook had always been "a product

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of [his] own grappling" and had "emphasized the Negroes' rather than the workers' point of view. . . . There was no way for me to accept the Communist notion that workers and Negroes were unite[d] without a large dose of salts."[3]

On rare occasions Ellison implied a somewhat fuller past involvement in left politics. In a 1965 interview he admitted to having "gone through the political madness that marked the intellectual experience of the thirties" and articulated a critique of the Communist Party (CP) that corresponds quite closely with the depiction of Brotherhood perfidy in *Invisible Man*:

> If I were to write an account of the swings and twitches of the U.S. Communist line during the thirties and forties, it would be a very revealing account, but I wouldn't attempt to do this in terms of fiction. It would have to be done in terms of political science, reportage. You would have to look up their positions, chart their moves, look at the directives handed down by the Communist International—whatever the overall body was called. And you would be in a muck and a mire of dead and futile activity—much of which had little to do with their ultimate goals or with American reality. They fostered the myth that communism was twentieth-century Americanism, but to be a twentieth-century American meant, in their thinking, that you had to be more Russian than American and less Negro than either. That's how they lost the Negroes. The communists recognized no plurality of interests and were really responding to the necessities of Soviet foreign policy, and when the war came, Negroes got caught and were made expedient in the shifting of policy.

Ellison's claim not to know the precise name of the Communist International implies only a vague acquaintance with leftist centers of power, while his demurral—"I wouldn't attempt to do this in fiction"—signals that *Invisible Man* is not to be read as a historically grounded account of the Communist myth- and policymaking he pejoratively describes. Yet his assertion that all the same he could write a "very revealing account" of the "swings and twitches of the U.S. Communist line during the thirties and forties" suggests that he had hardly been an outsider to the left. Ellison purports to have studied leftist politics from a safe distance, close enough to have felt the heat but not so close as to have been burned.[4]

While Ellison was welcomed with open arms by the mainstream white literary establishment, for more than two decades he and his novel were viewed with considerable skepticism in the black literary world, where he was frequently scorned for his depoliticized existentialism, Eurocentric notion of

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universality, and elitist detachment from the struggle in the streets. Even though a number of Ellison's African American critics were familiar with his earlier association with the left, however, they tended to omit this information from their polemics. Before Ellison's death in 1994 critical commentary on *Invisible Man* across the spectrum was almost completely silent about his former political radicalism, even though his early writings had been in the public domain and his correspondence with Wright—documenting both men's intimate and complex relationship with the Communist Party—had long been available to researchers at Yale University's Beinecke Library.[5]

Since 1994 it has been more difficult to accept at face value Ellison's claim to marginality in his former relation to the left. The publication in 1996 of *Flying Home and Other Stories*, which included a number of short stories unpublished in Ellison's lifetime, revealed him to have been a committed (and skilled) writer of proletarian fiction in his apprentice years. In 1999 there appeared in *The New Republic* some tantalizing excerpts from letters written in 1937 by Ellison to his mother in which the young man declared his fervent hope that Soviet-style socialism would be instituted in the United States. Lawrence Jackson's *Ralph Ellison: The Emergence of Genius* (2002), which ends with the publication of *Invisible Man*, thoroughly documents the young Ellison's several years of intense involvement with left-wing politics and political organization. Arnold Rampersad, in his definitive *Ralph Ellison: A Biography* (2007), demonstrates that Ellison was a figure of considerable significance in leftist literary circles before he repudiated his radical connections and, after the publication of *Invisible Man*, joined the Congress for Cultural Freedom and became a solid member of the cold war–era New York literary establishment.[6]

The record of Ellison's early leftism as a writer remains largely incomplete, however, because the vast archive of his unpublished short stories, novel outlines, journalism, and drafts and notes to *Invisible Man* to this point remains unexamined, both as a body of material of interest in its own right and as the vital back story to the novel. As a result most critical commentary on Ellison's oeuvre, with a few notable exceptions, remains premised on the same old narrative. To the extent that it matters at all, the story goes, Ellison's leftist commitment was an early one, reflecting the idealistic enthusiasm of youth, the urgency of the Depression and wartime years, and the appeal of the Communist-led cultural movement before it revealed its political and artistic limitations (or, in harsher assessments, its Stalinist essence). *Invisible Man* is read as testimony to Ellison's maturation; the novel's repudia-

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tion of leftist authoritarianism and scientism and its embrace of democratic pluralism and epistemological ambivalence exhibit not just its protagonist's development from ranter to writer, but the increasing sophistication of the text's creator as well. Even as revisionary accounts of the cold war era have reconfigured, at least to a degree, the history of U.S. Communism in relation to antiracist and workers' movements, literary critics continue to read *Invisible Man* backward from the standpoint of an abidingly anticommunist discourse that is all the more difficult to track for its having invisibly entered the groundwater of U.S. cultural history. That this discourse is invoked in otherwise incompatible approaches to the novel—ranging from performative readings of its deconstructive indeterminacy to foundationalist readings of its celebratory democratic individualism—tells a good deal about the ideologies shaping the political unconscious of much contemporary criticism and theory.[7]

To no small degree Ellison assisted his critics' proclivity to read the novel from the perspective of cold war ideology by developing in his own post–*Invisible Man* oeuvre a lexicon for analyzing not only American culture and society at large but also, and perhaps especially, his own novel. The availability of this body of "god-terms" (Kenneth Burke's designation of analytical categories possessing unquestionable authority) has enabled, indeed pressured, critics to examine the novel from the vantage point that the author fully codified only after its publication. Starting with his acceptance speech at the National Book Award ceremony in 1953, Ellison proposed that the "experimental form" of his novel, departing from the "final and unrelieved despair" of "narrow naturalism," reflected the "rich diversity and . . . almost magical fluidity . . . [of] America." Following in the tradition of nineteenth-century forebears who had been "willing to confront the broad complexities of American life" and to view "the Negro . . . [as] the gauge of the human condition as it waxed and waned in our democracy," *Invisible Man* sought to "[confront] the inequalities and brutalities of our society forthrightly," while still "thrusting forth its images of hope, human fraternity, and individual self-realization." The task of the American novelist, Ellison concluded, was to grapple, as had Odysseus, with the shape-changing god Proteus, who "stands for both America and the inheritance of illusion through which all men must fight to achieve reality." Only by extracting the "truth" from the "mad, vari-implicated chaos" of American life, asserted the exuberant Ellison, can the writer complete his odyssey toward "that condition of being at home in the world, which is called love, and which we term democ-

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racy." Melding artistic experimentalism with political pluralism, Ellison situated his novel as an exemplary modernist extension of the grand tradition of American letters.[8]

Ellison subsequently expanded on a number of key terms in his National Book Award speech and added others. "Complexity," his favorite term, would come to signify the binary opposite of reductionism, whether leftism in politics, naturalism in writing, or sociology in the study of human beings. Implying a root connection between epistemology and politics, "fluidity" would describe not only the imperviousness of reality to logical categorization but also the fundamental classlessness of American society. "Chaos" would denote the existential void threatening to engulf those courageous enough to explore complexity and fluidity. "Democracy" would designate the "rock" of "sacred principles," the "articles of faith" binding the nation and enabling the writer to steer clear of the abyss of chaos. "Diversity" would signify both the premise and the achievement of American democracy, "frequently burdensome and always a source of conflict, but in it . . . our fate and our hope." "Discipline" would point to both African American stoicism in the face of slavery and Jim Crow and, along with "technique," the careful craft required of the writer confronting the "mysterious possibilities generated by our unity within diversity and our freedom within unfreedom." "Ritual," with its cognates "sacrifice" and "scapegoat," would allude to the means by which societies achieve consensus. "Underground," often coupled with "consciousness, subconsciousness and conscience," would designate the peculiar status of the Negro as both the repressed other of the national psyche and the means to national redemption. Often cited in conjunction with the epilogue of *Invisible Man*, where early variants of several of these words and phrases direct the narrator's backward glance over his life, this handy tool kit of "god-terms" has routinely been deployed by critics parsing the novel. Despite the stated commitment to pluralism informing the lexicon, it has often functioned in a highly "discipline-ary" manner, enforcing multiple rules and restrictions on readers' engagement with Ellison's oeuvre, especially the novel.[9]

I depart from the circular practice of reading *Invisible Man* through the palimpsest supplied by Ellison's writings after 1952 and, more generally, by the cold war narrative that abidingly shapes most discussion of American writers—especially African American writers—and the left. Drawing upon an examination of the multiple drafts, outlines, and notes for the novel, as well as Ellison's early journalism and fiction, I read forward to *Invisible Man*. I view that novel not as a well-wrought urn awaiting exegesis through the

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critical categories that presumably guided Ellison's shaping hand, but as a conflicted and contradictory text bearing multiple traces of his struggle to repress and then abolish the ghost of his leftist consciousness and conscience. Ellison might retrospectively describe the composition of *Invisible Man* as a struggle with Proteus, the shape-changing god of the sea who challenges Odysseus as he seeks to find his way home. But before Proteus Ellison's favored mythological figure was the rebellious titan Prometheus, designated the "patron saint of the proletariat" in the discourse of the Popular Frontist cultural left, who stole fire from the Olympian gods to enable humanity to conquer nature on its own. Ellison's early writings, both published and unpublished, testify not just to his radical political beliefs, in particular his attraction to the figure of the African American Communist as Promethean hero, but also to his reliance on Marxist categories of historical and political analysis. In the published novel the invisible man refers to history as a boomerang (or, alternatively, a gambler) and warns off his readers from those who claim that history is a spiral. But Ellison's early writings view freedom as the recognition of necessity, ask continually "What is to be done?," and endorse the dialectical view of history illustrated by Engels's famous spiral analogy. In abandoning Marxism Ellison abandoned both a passion and a paradigm.

I treat *Invisible Man* from the standpoint of the many decisions that went into its making rather than as the product that resulted from those decisions, seemingly inevitable once enclosed between covers. The novel's narrator asserts that "the end is in the beginning," and the text's apparently seamless symbolic patterning suggests that the major rhetorical strategies deployed in *Invisible Man* were from the outset neatly ordered in the novelist's mind. The homologous character structures of the text's antagonists—showing Jim Crow racists, Uncle Tom apologists, Wall Street capitalists, blood-thinking black nationalists, and authoritarian Communists all enacting the governing ritual of the battle royal—were largely imposed a posteriori. Indeed Ellison contemplated organizing his novel around clustered symbols and character systems possessing substantially different ideological inflections than those informing the text. Moreover the movement from *purpose* through *passion* to *perception*—the Burkean patterning that famously underlies the invisible man's blundering toward insight, within individual episodes as well as in the arc of the narrative as a whole—was by no means mapped out in advance. The political revelations that constituted *perception* would undergo particular reformulation. The familiar ending of *Invisible Man* was in fact nowhere in view when, in July 1945, Ellison sat in the doorway

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of a barn in Waitsfield, Vermont, and penned the words, "I am an invisible man." During the next seven years of writing, rewriting, and re-rewriting Ellison expunged multiple characters and incidents conveying a radical, even in places pro-Communist politics.

This process of anticommunist-ization entailed far more, however, than canceling, supplementing, and reconfiguring the portraits of characters associated with the Brotherhood. While retaining the atmosphere of the Great Depression, Ellison effaced from the published text all references to international and domestic fascism, left-led union organizing, and, above all, the Second World War, gradually replacing these with materials that would depoliticize the novel's historical context and facilitate its critique of the left. Even though he had distanced himself from Communist organizations and publications by mid-1943, and by mid-1945 was expressing vehemently anti-Communist views, it would take Ellison several years to relinquish the analytical categories through which he had previously understood the world and to substitute new ones in their place. Although he would write to his friend Albert Murray that his main problem in finishing the novel was a formal one—handling "transitions"—his multiple rewritings of the novel testify above all to his struggle to tame his radical materials and bring them into alignment with a far more conservative worldview. Prometheus was not to be easily wrestled down.[10]

The paradigm shift taking place within Ellison's text was accompanied, at once enabled and driven, by the paradigm shift taking place in the novel's audience: both the implied and the historical readers to whom, and above all *for* whom, the invisible man offers to speak on the lower frequencies in the novel's ringing finale. When Ellison began work on his novel in 1945, sympathy with leftist causes was fairly widespread. Joseph Stalin had been *Time* magazine's Man of the Year twice during the war, and memories of the Grand Alliance remained strong even after Winston Churchill proclaimed the lowering of the Iron Curtain. Postwar rebellions against colonial regimes all around the globe indicated that the antifascist war had generated irreversible changes; a "better world" for many of the world's inhabitants of color was in the making. Throughout the United States a massive wave of postwar strikes, deferred by the wartime no-strike pledge, strengthened the hand of organized labor. In New York City, where Ellison would write almost all of *Invisible Man*, Harlem's Communist councilman Benjamin J. Davis Jr. was reelected in 1945 with the second largest percentage of votes in the city's history. In 1946 the city saw its largest May Day march ever, and the wartime antiracist agitation for jobs and justice turned into a vigorous postwar

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movement for civil rights. As late as April 1949 some twenty-eight hundred prominent artists and intellectuals, including a delegation from the USSR, participated in the Cultural and Scientific Conference for World Peace at the Waldorf-Astoria, suggesting the continuing vitality of the left-led cultural front. In the postwar years many potential and actual readers of novels, radicalized during the 1930s and 1940s, were not readily inclined to exclude leftists from the rubric of universal humanity; they could not be interpellated, that is, hailed and recognized, as anti-Communist, much less anticommunist.[11]

By 1952, however, there had come into being a substantial anticommunist readership, one able and willing to take part in cold war fictional rites of consensus. Not only had the U.S. government witch hunt of leftists entailed a massive campaign of repression and intimidation, including the assault on Paul Robeson and other antiracists at a peaceful picnic at Peekskill, New York; the handcuffing and arrest of the eighty-three-year-old W. E. B. Du Bois as an "unregistered foreign agent"; the deportation of the National Maritime Union leader Ferdinand Smith; and the expulsion of Ben Davis from New York's City Council (and his eventual imprisonment under the Smith Act). The peacetime trial and conviction of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg for alleged wartime treason reminded the population at large of the need for continuing vigilance against the enemy within, usefully coded as Jewish and Communist. Ex-Communist memoirs such as Louis Budenz's *Men without Faces: The Communist Conspiracy in the U.S.A.* (1950) and the recantations gathered in Richard Crossman's *The God That Failed* (1950) testified to the psychic self-betrayal entailed by commitment to red organizations. Arthur Schlesinger Jr.'s *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* (1949) and Eric Hoffer's *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements* (1951) represented Communists as dogmatists fearful of doubt and ambiguity; the thesis that Communists shared these features with their fascist counterparts was argued by Hannah Arendt in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). *Red Channels*, with its signature icon of a red-gloved hand brandishing a microphone, warned Americans of the omnipresence of Russian spy faces and voices in the mass media; the movie *I Was a Communist for the FBI*, nominated for an Oscar as best feature-length documentary in 1951, displayed the inhumanity of reds, even as husbands and lovers, and urged viewers to hand over the subversives in their midst.[12]

That this barrage of propaganda was directed as much toward its working-class listeners and viewers as toward its targeted victims went largely unnoticed. Even as thousands of reds, disproportionately immigrants and

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workers of color, lost their jobs and in some cases their lives in the postwar attack on the CIO unions, social scientists were proclaiming the class struggle a chimera. As David Riesman asserted, "[The] distribution of power in America [is] . . . amorphous . . . situational and mercurial. . . . Ruling-class theories, applied to contemporary America, seem to be spectral survivals of [an] earlier time." As the long boom got under way the new rites of consensus required the expulsion of those members of the tribe still embracing such spectral survivals and identifying with their dispossessed counterparts around the globe. The universalism experienced by the cultural audience emerging in the early years of the cold war was largely premised upon the scapegoating of Communists, now recognized, through the logic of guilt by association, as foreign agents invading the body politic. Just as Ben Davis would no longer stand for the people of Harlem, leftist characters in fiction would no longer stand for shared human values. *Invisible Man* both emerged from and contributed to this discursive ejection of reds from the circle of humanity.[13]

John Callahan, the executor of the Ellison literary estate, compiler of *Juneteenth*, and editor of various editions of Ellison's works, has written, "Before going through [Ellison's] papers, I would never have guessed that they would provide enough clues for someone to write a biography tracking the making of *Invisible Man*." *Wrestling with the Left* is—at least aspires to be—that biography. As a biography of a text it draws primarily on other texts, many of them unpublished; while Ellison's experiences supply a necessary context, my principal focus here is not on the life but on the oeuvre: the early journalism, literary criticism, short stories, and especially the drafts and notes of *Invisible Man*. The present-participle formulation of each of the chapter titles emphasizes process: Ellison is viewed in a continuing present as he grapples with his developing project, rather than from a retrospective standpoint from which the end of his odyssey is always already known.[14]

Part I comprises three chapters focusing on Ellison's pre–*Invisible Man* writings. Chapter 1, "Forming a Politics," examines journalistic and nonfictional texts, published and unpublished, including work that Ellison produced for the Federal Writers Project, articles and reviews published in the *New Masses* and other journals of the left, writings composed at his desk at *Negro Quarterly*, fragments and meditations from his notebooks, and correspondence with a range of friends, most notably Richard Wright. In these documents Ellison addressed such matters as capitalism and socialism; fas-

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cism and antifascism; Negro nationalism, American nationalism, and proletarian internationalism; Negro migration; democracy; the meaning of victory in the Second World War; and, directly or indirectly, the Communist Party. As he worked out his views he initially attached distinct meanings to various concepts, including "discipline," "fluidity," and "sacrifice," that would later receive very different inflection as "god-terms." Ellison for several years adhered to Party positions on "the Negro question," the nature of fascism, the relationship of democracy to socialism, and the changing character of the war between 1939–41 and 1941–45. During the war, however, he became increasingly critical, in some respects from the left, of the Party's subordination of antiracist and working-class demands to the need for national unity; by mid-1945 he was expressing disgust with the Party for its wartime opportunism. All the same, as late as 1948, when he was halfway through the writing of *Invisible Man*, Ellison asserted the necessity to reject red-baiting and continued to adhere to key aspects of Marxism; it would take him some time to assume the mantle of a cold warrior. Throughout this chapter I situate Ellison's relationship with the left, in both its conjunctive and its conflicted phases, within a critical analysis of the contradictions informing the theory and practice of the CP-led movement between the late 1930s and the beginnings of the cold war.

Chapter 2, "Developing an Aesthetic," focuses on the theory of representation that guided Ellison's maturing ideas about what literature could and should be and do. Starting with his first book review in 1938, the young Ellison, a rigorous Marxist strongly influenced by the example of Wright as both critic and creative writer, initially evaluated literature primarily in terms of the adequacy of its realism and the partisanship of its politics. Increasingly interested in the role of universals in effecting literary communication but seeking heroes embodying class consciousness, he explored Negro American folklore, especially broad figures like the mythic worker-hero John Henry, in relation to transcultural archetypes of the Promethean hero found in the comparative folklore of Stanley Edgar Hyman and in the myth and ritual doctrines of the Cambridge School of Classical Anthropology. Preoccupied, like other radicals of his time, with the phenomenon of fascism, both Hitlerism and its Jim Crow variant, Ellison explored the connections between Marx and Freud; aware that language and ideology were inextricably intertwined, he examined the rhetorical theory of the leftist cultural critic Kenneth Burke, who posited that "equations," "associational clusters," and other devices function to impose ideologically saturated systems of assumptions upon the readers of texts. While Ellison's engagement with myth,

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folklore, psychology, and Burkean symbolic action are generally viewed as manifestations of a retreat from politics and history, embrace of formalism, and absorption of African American experience into Eurocentric mythology, this interest was originally fostered in contexts supplied by the *New Masses* and the League of American Writers. Here, in his words, "myth, ritual, and revolution were slammed around" and Negro folklore was viewed as the expression of an oppositional, at times revolutionary political consciousness. The hegemony of New Criticism, involving formalist close reading without attention to historical and ideological context, and of myth-and-symbol archetypalism, entailing the assimilation of literary works to transhistorical psychological and aesthetic universals, was yet to come.[15]

In chapter 3, "Writing from the Left," I examine Ellison's substantial body of early fiction, much of it unpublished to this day. The same movement from proletarian realism to a more experimental method that is perceptible in his analytical writings is visible in his short stories as well. A good deal of this material is unabashedly revolutionary, featuring class struggle north and south, linking class exploitation with racial oppression, and invoking the international movement against fascism as surrounding ethical context. Partial drafts of stories with African American Communist protagonists show Ellison assessing reds very differently than he does in the published text of *Invisible Man*. The chapter ends with a glance at several character sketches and plot outlines for novels that relate suggestively to that novel. These early fictional works reveal that a number of symbolic motifs and dramatic structures prominent in *Invisible Man*—the figure of the sacrificial scapegoat, patterns of initiation and rebirth, the movement through *agon* to *peripeteia*—guided Ellison's imagination in his Marxist days. He did not need to abandon the left in order to explore the relevance of Greek tragedy and comparative anthropology to the experiences of African American workers and radicals. Indeed the figure of Prometheus was his preferred embodiment of revolutionary energies linking radicals of the present with the red line of history.

Part II reads forward through the drafts and plot outlines of *Invisible Man*. Featured in the scrutiny of these materials are fully dramatized episodes and chapters that went through several drafts but were dropped from the final version; narrative segments that were retained but revised, often substantially, in the published text; and notes and jottings sketching out possible plot developments that Ellison never fleshed out in narration or dialogue. Taken together these scattered unpublished materials indicate the very different novel that Ellison might have written, indeed started to write.

In chapters 4 and 5 I examine the portions of the novel treating the pro-

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tagonist's pre-Brotherhood days. Chapter 4, "Living Jim Crow," introduces Ellison's early outlines for the entire novel and focuses on the section of the novel set in the South. Featured here is Ellison's original inclusion of materials relating to lynch violence and sharecropper union organizing, which significantly reconfigure the portrayal of the college, the Norton-Trueblood encounter, and the maddened vets in the Golden Day. Featuring issues relating to class struggle and political economy, the early drafts of the southern section also emphasize motifs relating to ritual and myth; Eliot's hanged man, in fact, makes a startling appearance in the figure of a lynched sharecropper. Notable too in these draft versions of the novel's opening chapters is a considerably more daring treatment of sex and sexuality, including homosexuality as a reaction to Jim Crow, than appears in the published text. Ellison's drawing more fully upon Marx did not preclude, indeed if anything encouraged, a more intense engagement with Freud.

In chapter 5, "Becoming Proletarian," I examine Ellison's changing representation of the invisible man's migrant odyssey from neofeudalism to modernity. Emphasized here are various episodes, omitted from the novel, that expand upon the protagonist's experiences as a worker; his invisibility in no small part derives from his absorption into the market for abstract labor in the industrial North. Also at work in the draft chapters delineating his migrant experiences is a pronounced antipatriotic trope that would be significantly etiolated, although not entirely expunged, in the final draft. Of greatest interest is the early text's portrayal of the class-conscious inhabitants of Mary Rambo's Harlem boardinghouse, in particular the figure of LeRoy, a young organic intellectual and maritime union activist, recently murdered at sea, who has left behind a journal full of radical meditations. He is the source of the phrases "more human" and "dedicated and set aside" whose provenance the invisible man ponders in the published text. Figuring as the novel's embodiment of the proletarian hanged god, a politicized avatar of the cross-cultural mythic hero-king described by the Cambridge School, LeRoy, "the king," functions as both benchmark and double in relation to the invisible man. He also supplies Ellison with a voice with which to express, if obliquely, certain aspects of the left critique of Communist theory and practice that he had developed during the wartime years; LeRoy's elimination from the novel signals Ellison's final suppression of his own abiding Marxist affinities. Relegated to the cellar of the published text, sending out signals that can be heard only by readers familiar with the early drafts, LeRoy is the invisible man within *Invisible Man*.

The next two chapters treat the sections of *Invisible Man* depicting the pro-

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tagonist's relationship with the Brotherhood. In chapter 6, "Finding Brotherhood," I chart Ellison's changing representation of his protagonist's experiences with the multiracial organized left. The description of his halcyon days as a political organizer, which receives highly compressed treatment in the novel, originally encompassed several dramatized episodes and chapters displaying the Brotherhood's Depression-era popularity in Harlem. While the novel restricts its portrayal of Harlem's residents to folkish characters who appear impervious to the historical forces shaping their world, earlier drafts depict a range of class-conscious Harlemites capable of historical agency. Moreover by depicting some individual Brotherhood members sympathetically—Hambro, humble and wise, is a former concentration camp inmate; the invisible man enters into a love affair with a young white woman named Louise—these excised episodes dramatically recast the text's representation of the left, which in the published novel focuses on the cartoonish characters of Jack, Tobitt, and Wrestrum. The original episodes are of sufficient number and impact to reshape the novel's overall tripartite arc. "Purpose" having consisted in the college and early New York chapters, the text's "passion" section comprises both the LeRoy material and the extended Brotherhood narrative; "perception," the protagonist's eventual discovery of Brotherhood perfidy, is substantially delayed. Ellison's drafts and notes for this section indicate that he considered complicating the text's unifying trope of vision and blindness by adding the metaphor of Marxism as magnifying lens, a symbolism that obviously had to be expunged from the final draft.

Chapter 7, "Recognizing Necessity," investigates Ellison's revisions of the portion of the novel depicting the period of crisis and betrayal, personal and public, which culminates in the Harlem riot. Displaying Ellison's gradual demonization of the Brotherhood—at first there is no Tod Clifton manipulating Sambo dolls; Brother Jack neither loses his eye nor writes the note warning the invisible man to stay in his place; Ras is identified with a black fascist notorious in wartime Harlem—these chapter drafts show Ellison deploying a dense patterning of antagonists, rituals, and symbols in a formal equivalent to the anticommunist doctrine of guilt by association. Of particular importance here is the published text's elimination of all references to fascism and the Second World War. This move enables Ellison to accuse the Brotherhood of treachery without considering the difficult political choices that faced leftists, himself included, during the wartime years. Through this obliteration of context the narrative's initially class-conscious representation of the historical situation facing Harlem's workers and radicals devolves into an epistemologically grounded critique of Marxist scientism.

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In chapter 8, “Beginning and Ending,” I map and analyze the process by which Ellison reconfigured the arc of his narrative as a boomerang, enabling the invisible man to declare that “the end is in the beginning.” I pay particular attention to the further occlusion of elements in the prologue that would have brought in the war. In the epilogue LeRoy’s journal is pillaged for conclusions quite different from those the radical mariner would have reached; the invisible man’s trickster grandfather is invoked as a key source of his newfound faith in American democracy. The invisible man’s final positioning of himself as “speaking for you” is premised upon an exclusion of “Brother Jack and the boys,” whose attempt at castrating the American eagle has placed them beyond the ethical pale: universalism is premised on anticommunism.

A few points on methodology. Since my focus here is primarily on Ellison’s process of revision, especially of *Invisible Man*, the devil will be in the details. Readers are free to take up this book wherever they wish, but they are strongly urged to peruse it from beginning to end. The benefits of reading forward from Ellison’s earliest works to the published text of *Invisible Man* are cumulative and cannot be readily encapsulated in nuggets of information or insight. I do not, however, devote equal time to all features of *Invisible Man*; since I am concerned primarily with Ellison’s creative process, portions that were not extensively rewritten receive less attention. The purpose here is not a new reading of *Invisible Man* (or of any other work by Ellison), although I hope my findings will challenge existing readings premised upon uninterrogated assumptions about Ellison’s political outlook. This study’s relevance to the large body of commentary on Ellison’s oeuvre is thus relegated to footnotes; disputes over interpretation do not occupy the main text.

More crucially some comments are in order regarding the way I approach the question that has probably by this point arisen for the reader: Why? Why? has two components. The first is, Why did Ellison relinquish his former leftist commitments and become a fixture in the cold war literary establishment? Was it inevitable that he would become an anticommunist, or were choices involved? If so, what were these, and at what level of determination did they operate? The second is, Why bother to write such a long book about the making of *Invisible Man*? What is at stake in this project?

Regarding Why? number one. While much of this study will be devoted to untangling the webs of specific positions and values that constituted Ellison’s consciousness at specific moments, the question warrants a method-

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ological response since it directs attention to the model of causality upon which this biography of *Invisible Man* is premised. In Ellison's life, as in all lives, the forces producing change and development occurred on multiple levels, all interpenetrating at any given moment. On the individual level, signifying the site where Ellison was uniquely inserted into the matrix of historical forces shaping his time and place, his two biographers have both ably described the features of an immensely talented man at once hemmed in by the constraints of American racism and beset by various personal demons. Jackson emphasizes the anger and insecurity resulting from the early death of his father and the ensuing poverty of his family that drove the young Ellison to seek temporary fulfillment in leftist politics and, by the time he undertook *Invisible Man*, to explore greener pastures. Rampersad, elaborating on this depiction of the early pressures on Ellison, stresses his development of a self-protective emotional shell which, coupled with a streak of ruthlessness, enabled him, when the occasion arose, readily to replace his proletarian aesthetic with mythic archetypes, his challenge to capitalism with an affirmation of American nationalism. Rampersad's compelling delineation of Ellison's deepening isolation behind increasingly elitist and conservative barriers, as well as his defensiveness about not publishing a second novel, is steeped in irony and pathos; for all its distance from its subject the biography is profoundly moving. While *Ralph Ellison: The Emergence of Genius* and *Ralph Ellison: A Biography* delineate with scholarly precision Ellison's participation in leftist cultural circles over a few years, both biographies depict a man who was ambitious to transcend the limitations of his early life at practically any cost. The Ellison who takes shape in both portraits was never passionate in his attraction to the literary left; that he would relinquish his radicalism well before the arrival of McCarthyism—both biographers date his detachment from the left to 1943—comes as no great surprise.

Despite their acute portrayal of Ellison's psychology and scrupulous narration of his activities, both biographies considerably narrow the domain of causality in Ellison's life by insufficiently appreciating the impact of the radical movement, both cultural and more broadly political, to which he was drawn as a young man in the late 1930s and which continued to influence his feeling and thinking for several years after he had presumably cut his ties with the left. This truncation of causality is traceable in part to the fact that neither Jackson nor Rampersad examines Ellison's unpublished early fiction and novel outlines or more than cursorily the drafts of *Invisible Man*, an omission that is understandable since the life alone is sufficiently complicated to divert attention from these hard-to-access materials.[16] Yet it is these unpub-

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lished texts which contain the clearest evidence that Ellison not only took his Marxism seriously but also continued to think like a Marxist well past 1943. These texts supply the basis for hypothesizing that, despite Ellison's severing of his connections with leftist magazines after 1943 and his stated antipathy toward CP members and CP policies from 1945 onward, the programmatic anticommunism shaping the published text of *Invisible Man* took definitive form only in the late 1940s, and not before.

Neither Jackson nor Rampersad, moreover, has much regard for the project of the Depression-era and wartime cultural left; this low estimate necessarily colors their representations of Ellison's connection with literary radicalism. Jackson characterizes the Communist-led literary movement in such consistently derogatory terms, and freely attributes to his biographical subject such consistently hostile reactions to his leftist associates after the bloom was presumably off the revolutionary rose, that Ellison's decision to distance himself from his early radicalism emerges as a well-advised (if also opportunist) course of action. Even though Jackson peruses LeRoy's journal, perceives its leftism, and recognizes that Ellison eliminated it from *Invisible Man* only late in the day, his insistence upon Ellison's negativism toward the Communist movement from 1940 onward makes it hard for the reader to understand why such politically defiant, indeed deviant materials would have been allowed to remain in the manuscript for so long. Rampersad simply views Ellison's relinquishment of his Communist aesthetic as a precondition to his emergence as a writer of genius. While hardly admiring of Ellison's ability to cut himself off from people who no longer served his interests, Rampersad evidently views Ellison's abandonment of his leftist affiliations as just one among his many self-advancing acts, and perhaps, when all is said and done, the wisest. For both Jackson and Rampersad, then, character, formed in the crucible of early familial dynamics amid the overarching constraints of Jim Crow, is, in a sense, fate.[17]

To return to the matter of levels of causality. This study is premised upon a different view of Ellison's insertion within the Communist movement, that is, of causality operating at the level of the larger historical matrix. Careful scrutiny of Ellison's published early journalism and fiction, unpublished proletarian fiction and novel outlines, and above all the drafts and notes for *Invisible Man* reveals a man who took his left politics, as a source of both radical joy and existential doubt, very seriously indeed. I argue that the contradictions within Ellison, as both a man and a writer, cannot be understood apart from the contradictions informing his historical moment, which means, given his particular convictions, the contradictions informing the American

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left between the late 1930s and late 1940s. There is, in other words, no inside of Ellison that can be sealed off from the outside of that history. To answer the question Why? in relation to *Invisible Man* it is necessary to steer away from using the terms in which Communist movements routinely are at once described and dismissed—"dogmatic," "rigid," "Stalinist," or whatever—not only because such labels falsify, but also because, in their reductiveness, they answer the question of causality before it is asked: given the nature of leftists and leftist movements certain results are purportedly inevitable.

I try instead to re-create the vantage point from which Ellison engaged with his moment. I originally considering titling this study *Wrestling with Prometheus*, not only to indicate the proletarian origin of Ellison's fascination with classical mythology but also to suggest the titanic dimension of his grappling with the political and historical forces that shaped both his environment and his own sense of what it means to be a human being. While this literary reference proved too arcane for the title of a book aspiring to wide readership, I have retained the term *wrestling* in my title to indicate the centrality of struggle—with a "left" both internal and external—in Ellison's compositional process. My account of the novel's preparation, conception, and composition will be closely interwoven with, rather than placed at a distance from, the history of the CP-led left. I view the choices that Ellison made as an individual in his capacities as both man and artist in the context of various strategic options taken by the left movement with which he identified for a significant period of time. To propose that this movement made choices, both monumental and misguided, may sound odd to some readers, particularly those predisposed to associate Marxism with mechanistic determinism, the relentless "storm" of "necessity" in which, as Brother Jack famously says in *Invisible Man*, "individuals . . . don't count" (291). To be sure, what is meant by "choice" in this study as regards both Ellison and the larger Communist movement is not based on a notion of autonomous selfhood or free will. All the actors involved in this narrative were making their decisions in situations that were, to say the least—Marx's famous opening of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* comes to mind—not of their choosing. But to *read forward*, through both a historical movement and a life, is to view both as products of a series of roads taken and not taken. It is, in a sense, far more deterministic to view the fate of the Depression-era and wartime American left as molded by certain invariable features of the character of Communism or, for that matter to view the fate of Ellison himself as set in advance by a character molded in the crucible of his youth. This study seeks to construct the history of Ellison's text, American Communism, and *Invisible Man*'s re-

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lationship with American Communism in as fully dialectical a manner as possible.[18]

In future chapters I outline and discuss in greater detail the three strategic decisions by the CP-led left that bear particular relevance to the genesis and production of *Invisible Man*; I briefly summarize those decisions here so that the roads taken and not taken by Ellison can at least be glimpsed in their larger historical context. The first is the decision of the American Communist movement in 1928 to address what was called "the Negro question" by adopting the so-called Black Belt thesis, which held that African Americans in the rural South constituted a "nation within a nation," positioned to compensate for the "lag" produced by the neofeudalism of Jim Crow by fighting for self-determination and completing the "unfinished tasks" of the bourgeois democratic revolution. At the same time, African American migrants to urban areas were seen to constitute part of the multiracial proletariat, positioned to join with the rest of the working class to build a union- and community-based movement that would become powerful enough to overthrow capitalist rule and set up a society run by and for the masses of the dispossessed. This dual thrust, while moving the Communist movement ahead from its previous near-exclusive focus on class over racial oppression, generated a new set of potential problems. What was to be the relationship between national and class consciousness? Were African Americans a vanguard force that, by virtue of their sharper awareness of capitalist exploitation, could lead the revolutionary movement for a Soviet America? Or were they instead the "carriers of the widest democracy," a "people" whose struggle for democratic rights constituted them as a metonymy of fulfilled nationalist promise? Ellison's attempts to work out the relationship between the proletarian and the national features of Negro experience in his early journalism and fiction cannot be understood apart from the left's often contradictory analysis of this issue.[19]

The second important strategic option of the Depression-era left that would dramatically shape the course of subsequent events was the endorsement by the Seventh World Congress of the Third International of the view that fascism entailed not the brutal class rule of capitalism in crisis, but the domination of society by an especially reactionary sector of finance capital. The strategic implications of this analysis, which resulted in the Popular Front against Fascism, were far-reaching. While the possibility for building a broad-based movement was, from the standpoint of the left, greatly increased, so too was the risk of class collaboration. Were various sectors of the capitalist class, and the state apparatus itself, now allies of the masses of the

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dispossessed? Was democracy now coterminous with a populist-inflected patriotism? Could Communism, without irony, be described as "twentieth-century Americanism"? From the late 1930s to the mid-1940s Ellison found himself both embracing and querying Popular Frontist Americanism. And while his eventual codification of American patriotism would have precious little in common with Popular Front ideology, it is an irony worth contemplating that Ellison would turn against the left much of the political artillery that he had acquired during his youthful days in its ranks.

The third strategic decision of the Communist movement that shaped its fortunes, and not just in the eyes of Ralph Ellison, was its call for wartime unity in the antifascist "people's war" after the Nazi invasion of the USSR. Workers were enjoined to forgo strikes in order to keep war production at full throttle; African Americans were urged to join the segregated armed forces and channel demands for equality into fights to eliminate the poll tax and end discrimination in wartime industries. The CP went so far as to dissolve itself into the Communist Political Association (CPA) for nearly a year toward the end of the war, on the grounds that revolution was no longer on the agenda. Ellison's disappointment, indeed distress at these developments was palpable. By the time the CP reversed direction in the wake of the war he had jumped ship and would never get back on board. The fact that he would subsequently lambaste the left from the right should not obscure the fact that it was initially the left's failure to stay the course to the left that helped shift him to the right. Choices made all along the way, by both Communism the movement and Ellison the individual, resulted in the outlook encoded in *Invisible Man*.

Given, however, the canonical status of Ellison's novel—which endows the text's portraiture of politics and history with the stamp of academic approval, indeed the aura of holy writ—it bears noting that there was no inevitability to Ellison's migration to the right after the war. Just as it had not been foreordained that he would for a time embrace communism as the antidote to alienation and inequality, neither was it foreordained that he would become a cold warrior; various choices remained available. In the aftermath of the war, even as it suffered from internal demoralization and came under increasing repression, the CP continued its campaigns against police brutality, segregated housing, employment discrimination, and resurgent southern violence. As Washington sent its temporizing ambassadors, formal and informal, to what would soon be called the Third World, Paul Robeson sacrificed a celebrated career to become a full-time civil rights activist and advocate for colonial independence. W. E. B. Du Bois, rethink-

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ing his decades-long skepticism toward Communism, chose in this difficult period to move to the left, for which he was rewarded in 1948 by expulsion from the NAACP, which he had helped to found some four decades before, and by indictment in 1951 for being something close to a spy; he would decide to join the Communist Party in the decidedly unfashionable year of 1961.[20]

While it might be argued that writers were compelled to abandon their radicalism as the cold war heated up—and Ellison's Random House editors did indeed suggest revisions to *Invisible Man* that helped to strip away its residual connections with revolutionary politics—not all writers and artists followed the same course as Ellison, nor did they heed the advice of mainstream publishers. With the hearings of writers and artists by the House Un-American Activities Committee in full view and the jailing of the Hollywood Ten soon to come, Langston Hughes publicly condemned the Smith Act trials. Opting to go down a road very different from that traveled by Ellison, a number of African American writers and artists—including Louise Meriwether, Frank Marshall Davis, John Oliver Killens, Lorraine Hansberry, Lloyd Brown, Alice Childress, and the cartoonist Ollie Harrington—aligned themselves with the left, furthering its causes and publishing in its organs. A much larger number of Communists and fellow travelers, of all racial and ethnic backgrounds, quietly relinquished their former affiliations but refused to join the red-baiting chorus. Although much of the critical commentary on *Invisible Man* celebrates the narrator's closing rejection of Brotherhood scientism and affirmation of democratic individualism as manifestations of his hard-won wisdom, other historical actors had very different notions of what constituted hard-won wisdom in the world of 1952. Ellison did not have to take the road more traveled by, which became even more worn by his passing there.[21]

This reference to Ellison's critical fortunes raises the second Why? posed earlier, namely, Why write this book? Particularly for teachers of English, this question may comprise several interrelated queries. Why trace the genesis of Ellison's masterwork in such painstaking detail, when what matters is the final product, with its careful aesthetic patterning and well-honed irony? Why load so much analysis of history and politics, especially the politics of Communism and anticommunism, onto what is, after all, an investigation into a literary text? Doesn't this practice simply reduce literature to nonliterature, removing its ability to invest reality with what Ellison himself called "the bright magic of a fairy tale"?

One answer to this cluster of questions is that, when read as the product of the multiple rewritings that display Ellison's deliberate refashioning

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of multiple characters, events, and tropes, *Invisible Man* demonstrates that anticommunism is not in some way inherent in historical actuality, but is instead a discourse, selectively shaped and articulated in conjunction with and opposition to alternative discourses. The relationship between ideology and reference in mimesis, in other words, is brought to the fore: to study Ellison's novel as a literary arti-fact, that is, an artfully made product, requires defamiliarizing its relation to the reality it purports to represent. While this observation is often made in relation to fictional representation, it is especially relevant in the case of a novel that has played no small role in bringing into being the familiar portrait of Communism that its drafts help to deconstruct. This study thus asks teachers of literature to rethink what they are doing when they teach *Invisible Man* as an instance of the modernist well-wrought urn. To interpret the novel's patterning on its own terms, and not to query what is being equated with what and why, is to reproduce uncritically the ideological premises undergirding that patterning. An awareness that the symbolistic roundedness of Ellison's novel is the formal correlative of a politics of guilt by association makes it far more difficult simply to teach *Invisible Man* as a novel. It is necessary to confront the embeddedness of the political in the aesthetic.[22]

Another answer to the query Why write this book? calls for confronting the relationship of *Invisible Man* to the realm of historical possibility—past, present, and future. The examination of Ellison's many cuts and substitutions from early versions of *Invisible Man* conveys the cost of anticommunism, that is, what is sacrificed when a leftist vision is expunged. For just as the ultimate target of the McCarthy-era witch hunts was, arguably, not so much Communists themselves as the millions who might heed their message, what is lost from *Invisible Man* through Ellison's revisions is a full and rich sense of the potential for conscious and radical historical engagement on the part of Harlem's working class. Ellison wrote in 1944 that American literature had lacked "images of black and white fraternity" since the time of Mark Twain; in 1952 the invisible man asks whether politics might ever be "an expression of love" (452). But the published text conveys precious little of either fraternity or love. In the drafts, by contrast, where Ellison was motivated by residual memories of the revolutionary movement, he portrayed a range of characters, central and marginal, black and white, who embody the possibility for multiracial proletarian solidarity and interpersonal love in the struggle to bring a "better world" into being. The novel's anticommunism consists in far more than its creation of cartoonish stereotypes of commissars and bootlickers. By eliminating the novel's class-conscious

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characters and substituting for them folkish migrants whose consciousness is confined to vernacular culture, Ellison not only deprived Harlem's working class of historical agency. He also withheld from the novel's readers—past, present, and future—those images of fraternity and activism so badly needed to help them confront the crying issues of their times. While many teachers of literature are not accustomed to discussing capitalism, Communism, and anticommunism, they are generally comfortable with categories of literary analysis stemming from a valuation of humanism. This study intends to demonstrate that, because of the political standpoint from which its published version is composed, *Invisible Man* is a far less humane and antiracist novel than it might otherwise have been.[23]

The final answer to Why write this book? relates to literary history, in particular the history of African American literature. It is perhaps one of the best-kept secrets of American literary history that substantial numbers of black writers have had a significant relationship with the left. Through its prominent place in the canon of both African American literature and American literature generally, Ellison's novel has played no small role in defining the political and aesthetic criteria for what constitutes greatness in a work of literature, as well as what counts as the significant trends in African American literature between the Second World War and the present. Seen in the context of its own turbulent coming-into-being, *Invisible Man* will invite reconsideration of the many radical black writers who to this day remain the scapegoats of cold war rites of consensus. To readjust the lenses through which one can peer back at this past may aid the imagining of future possibilities for transforming the historical landscape, literary and otherwise.

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