

## Finding Brotherhood

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A few of us stepped forth and  
accepted within the confines of  
our personalities the death of  
our old folk lives, an acceptance  
of a death that enabled us to  
cross class and racial lines, a  
death that made us free.

—Richard Wright, *Twelve Million  
Black Voices*

To act scientifically in regards  
to such a situation would be  
to take action to *prevent it before  
it happened* . . . to swerve the  
developing forces away from the  
destructive event and transform  
it into [a] socially useful one.

—Ralph Ellison, advice of Hambro  
in the “Brotherhood” episode of  
*Invisible Man*

In the published text of *Invisible Man* the protagonist’s encounter with the Brotherhood is shadowed from the start by the reader’s apprehension that something sinister is in the works: the “governing ritual” of the battle royal is about to be repeated, if in a new and different register. Brother Jack hires the protagonist not for his intelligence and initiative but for his voice; the young man’s oratorical abilities are being turned against him once again. The protagonist is supplied with his new name on another one of those ominous slips of paper; when another message arrives, cautioning him to go slow in a white man’s world, the handwriting is, as it were, on the wall. As ignorant armies of punch-throwing black men clash by night in the streets of Harlem, and as the invisible man finds himself blinded by bright lights in the boxing arena while Brotherhood officials look on, we know that sacrificial rituals are once again—in indeed still—in process. In short, much of our cognition in

this section of the novel is based in re-cognition. The text's careful rhetorical patterning enables us to view new characters and situations as supplements to familiar clusters and equations; repeated tropes, character types, and incidents channel, in fact govern, our response to the invisible man's entry into political life.

Our ease in making connections among parallel and analogous symbols and incidents is reinforced by our knowledge, or what we believe to be our knowledge, of history. We are aware, even if the invisible man is not, that he has landed in a nest of Communists. LeRoy may not have limned for us the "authoritarianism of the left," but we know a red when we see and hear one. We wink and nod when Ellison identifies his leftists as the "Brotherhood," just as we previously winked and nodded at his dissociation of the Founder from Booker T. Washington and of the campus (even with its signature statue) from Tuskegee. It does not matter that in postpublication commentaries Ellison continually denied that the Brotherhood is the CP. Like the reviewers who greeted *Invisible Man* back in 1952, virtually all of whom made this association, we discern the historical identity of the radicals the invisible man encounters in Depression-era Harlem. We know that they protest evictions and profess themselves friends of the Negro people, but also that their motives are tainted and their friendship false. When red-headed Brother Jack follows the invisible man over the rooftops and offers him a job, this is, we acknowledge, typically opportunistic and cynical Communist behavior. Rhetoric is compounded by reference, re-cognition via textual patterning with re-cognition via invocation of a fund of common knowledge. If we identify with the cold war-era reader who is assumed and greeted in the 1952 novel, textual rites of consensus are operating with a vengeance.<sup>1</sup>

In this chapter I examine the process by which Ellison creates an apparently seamless homology between the northern urban left and the series of antagonists the invisible man has encountered, starting with the town fathers at the battle royal. As we may anticipate, given the harshness of his criticisms of the Communists in his correspondence in 1945, Ellison from the outset intended to subject his protagonist's experiences with the Brotherhood to critical scrutiny. In one early outline the protagonist, after learning that he has been "given the run-around" by the trustees, returns to the South, either Atlanta or Birmingham, where, in a partial parallel with Angelo Herndon, he

steps in front of [a] mixed relief parade and is exclaimed a Hero by [a] left-wing group.

He is arrested, charged with treason, thrown in jail. After his release he returns north and becomes [a] political figure; a “leader” who discovers soon that he leads no one, but is in reality a figure-head.

In a draft of his letter to his publisher, Peggy Hitchcock, in 1946, Ellison remarks that his novel’s “political allegory” will entail describing “a man of good will who attempts to function idealistically in a political organization which cannot afford the luxury of idealism.” Although “allegedly democratic,” he continues, the organization “observ[es] the ritual of jimcrow custom,” thereby “mak[ing] for situations of such absurdity that they [be]come the antithesis of anything progressive.” The hero loses his position of leadership in the organization “at the point when he truly begins to understand something about himself and the world.” Ellison added, “This, I’m afraid[,] is as far as I have conceived the structure, for the end, the climax, evades me.”<sup>2</sup>

While consistently stressing the ironic disparity between the Brotherhood’s theory and its practice, Ellison’s notes and outlines indicate his original intent to spread the blame for the invisible man’s never attaining the standing of a genuine leader. When he is “picked up by the radicals” who find him “useful because he is young, handsome, [and] can speak[,] it does not occur to them,” notes Ellison, “that he is an opportunist, disorganized and unreliable.” “The democracy which he discovers in his political milieu is not that of its written program, but of its human exponents”; nonetheless he “fall[s] into the uncle tom pattern again, . . . creat[ing] ambivalence in order to feel comfortable.” Expanding on this contradiction in “Working Notes,” Ellison writes that the invisible man, upon learning that “he is a leader in name but not in fact, gives in to his passive drives . . . fail[ing] to see that he is dealing with well-meaning but blundering human beings, most of whom have misunderstood him because of the unconscious assumption that they knew what was best.” Accordingly he “phones his office several times a day to ask for himself . . . finding reassurance in hearing the girl use his title.” When he becomes romantically involved with Louise, a white Brotherhood member, he “cannot accept himself nor believe that anyone like Louise could find him attractive,” a psychological complex that Ellison refers to in his notes and letters to Hyman as the novel’s “Othello theme.” As in the early drafts of Ellison’s reviews of *Black Boy* and *An American Dilemma*, as well as in “The Initiation” and other proletarian short stories, both African American and white Communists are shown to be toting considerable baggage as they journey toward a better world.<sup>3</sup>

Besides depicting the invisible man and his comrades as beset by com-

parable contradictions, the outlines and drafts of the novel's New York section contain a number of episodes—eliminated from the published text—that substantially remold the portrayal of the Brotherhood's relationship with Harlem's migrant population. At least half of the section of the novel that Ellison variously titled "Perception," "Book III," and "Political Life"—itself occupying the second half of the 1952 text—originally contained quite a sympathetic depiction of leftist political organizing among urban African Americans. Accompanying this added material is a reconfiguration of certain key tropes. As we shall see, the positive characterization of Louise ruptures the text's portrayal of white Brotherhood members as racists and of white women as tools of power-hungry white men. The novel's symbolism of blindness and invisibility is complicated by a cluster of images that associate Marxism with a lens affording special insight into reality. Injecting greater complexity, to use Ellison's favorite evaluative term, into the published text's more reductive treatment of the left, these omitted episodes and readjusted tropes afford insight into the reasons why the novel's climax may have continued to "evade" Ellison. For some time he was apparently unable, or unwilling, to skewer the left: LeRoy's inability, or unwillingness, to illustrate concretely the "authoritarianism of the left" may have affected his creator as well.<sup>4</sup>

#### "What is to be done?": Yam Man and Eviction

In the text of *Invisible Man* from 1952, the working-class character of Harlem's migrants is emphasized on the day the invisible man encounters the Brotherhood. In his Men's House days the protagonist had breakfasted on toast and orange juice; now, with the blasting of his bourgeois expectations, he is prepared to acknowledge his abiding love of southern foods and buys two hot buttered yams from a street peddler. His declaration of identity—"They're my birthmark . . . I yam what I am" (266)—has been widely hailed as signaling his willingness to return to his roots. This gesture not only prepares him, and us, for his upcoming defense of the Provos, the elderly evicted couple, but also indicates his growing oneness with the migrant folk from whose vernacular traditions he has to this point separated himself. For many critics his punning consumption of the yams also portends an opposition between the signifying fluidity of folk or migrant speech and the rigidity of the Brotherhood's scientific discourse. A good deal of political and cultural resonance has been detected in those yams.<sup>5</sup>

While the invisible man's delight in the steaming yams signals his yearning for home in all versions of the text, Ellison at first framed the yam seller's situation in more starkly economic terms. In answer to the invisible man's inquiry about the source of the yams, the man tells him, "Before I came North I used to raise em. Had me a forty acre farm. . . . Then I got into some trouble and had to leave. So I came up here and went to work in a factory. Then I was out of work and hit upon this idea." He says, "With all the home boys round these parts [business] aint so bad. Don't look like I'll ever get away from yams though." Although he received part of the promise of Reconstruction (forty acres) the yam seller's inability to abide by the ethics of Jim Crow—"I got into some trouble"—has driven him northward to join the industrial proletariat. The Depression, however, has interrupted that trajectory: selling yams is not a folkish vocation but his way of surviving in the informal economy on the fringes of crisis-beset capitalism. In the 1952 text a close-to-the-soil character linked with other migrants—Peter Wheatstraw, Mary Rambo—who exude folkish authenticity, the yam man earlier figures as a laid-off proletarian. As Paul notes in Ellison's early fictional sketch of the radical organizer hero, having forty acres is no solution to the problem of systemic racism, which requires a more fundamental challenge to class rule.<sup>6</sup>

In the 1952 text the invisible man's decision to speak out at the eviction is spontaneous; in fact in his ignorance he has to be informed of what an eviction is. In earlier treatments of the young man's period of urban wandering Ellison stresses his needy narcissism. "The only thing left was the desire to make speeches," recalls the narrator. "In spite of Bledsoe, Norton and the others I felt myself to be a leader and a speaker of some eloquence." Having discussed the Harlem housing crisis at Mary's, and having himself come across many an eviction protest since his arrival in New York, he wonders, "Where had all the soap-box speakers gone, now that winter had come? Did they go south with the birds or keep silent until the spring? What if they made their same angry speeches down south, and had been doing so for years without my knowledge? Or did they now make their proclamations in well-heated meeting rooms, now that no one lingered on the windy corners?" When he speaks at the eviction protest, Ellison jotted, the invisible man's words are "mainly a projection of his own anger and bitterness. . . . He speaks out of lostness and vanity."<sup>7</sup>

The eviction episode itself underwent little revision; in all the drafts Ellison's portrayal of the Brotherhood-led multiracial solidarity dramatizes the

testimony of the composite “we” in Wright’s *Twelve Million Black Voices*: “[We] black folks smashed the marshals’ locks, picked up the paltry sticks of furniture, and replaced evicted families” with the support of “white workers” who “differed from those we had known on the plantations; they were not ‘po’ white trash.” Ellison initially stressed the immediacy of the southern memories evoked in the invisible man by the Provos’ plight. The young man’s sharp visual image of his mother, “*hanging wash on a cold windy day, so cold that the warm clothes froze even before the vapor thinned . . . her hands white and raw in the shirt-swirling wind*” (273), is followed by a memory of his father, whose “last years” were nothing but “straw whirling away in the wind.” When the young man sees the Provos’ possessions “as behind a veil *that threatened to lift, stirred by the cold wind in the street*” (273), windblown images of both parents thus press upon his consciousness. We are reminded that the invisible man has not just generalized roots in the South but family members still trapped by Jim Crow.<sup>8</sup>

This “veil” is more than the veil of private memory; as the narrator relates, “The new voice in my head was about to attack the Founder.” He soon finds himself speaking mockingly of the “great leader whose wise action was reported in the newspaper the other day” (275). The historical referent of this “wise leader” is almost surely Tuskegee’s President R. R. Moton, whose action in surrendering the wounded Sharecroppers Union organizer Clifford James to the Macon County sheriff closely resembles the invisible man’s ironic praise of the “leader [who] . . . when that fugitive escaped from the mob and ran to his school for protection . . . was strong enough to do the legal thing, the law-abiding thing” (276). When the invisible man asks the angry Harlem crowd, “What is to be done?” his echo of Lenin invokes the revolutionary phrase that was a favorite of Ellison’s in his *New Masses* and *Negro Quarterly* days. The veil that “threaten[s] to lift” in the published text is not just the veil of a generalized Du Boisian double consciousness, but the veil covering the invisible man’s painful personal remembrances, as well as the veil ambiguously positioned by Washington on the Tuskegee campus statue. The South is very much alive in the North; not just the scattered memorabilia of the Provos, but also the recent collusion of Washington’s legacy with the suppression of sharecropper organizing, probe and poke at the historical consciousness of the invisible man from behind his memory’s windblown veil.<sup>9</sup>

Although Ellison never worked this material about penetrating behind the veil into a dramatized narrative, his jottings reveal that doing so would have repositioned the text in history, moving it forward by several years. In

one variant the scene included “old folks, soldier, white aggressor, mother father sister brother”; in another variant, “black woman, a sweetheart, a mother, possible a grandmother, ‘big mamma,’ stressing emotional elements of Harlem riot. White man, Negro mother, Negro soldier . . . Perhaps old man could have been or there could be a disabled son present.” These notes indicate that Ellison considered situating the Provos’ eviction not during the early years of the Depression, as is implied by the historical references to Clifford James and R. R. Moton, but during the wave of wartime evictions about which Ellison had written in 1942 in his *New Masses* profile of Mrs. Jackson, “The Way It Is.” The presence of the soldier in particular would have pointed to the tensions over segregation in the armed forces that contributed to the Harlem uprising in 1943; the references to the “white aggressor” and the “black woman” suggest a more specific connection with the catalyst of the riot, namely, an encounter in which a black soldier was shot by a white policeman after interceding in an altercation between the policeman and an African American woman. Ellison was clearly pondering whether—and if so, how—to relate the war abroad to the war at home.<sup>10</sup>

### “History has passed them by”:

#### Encountering the Brotherhood

According to all of Ellison’s notes, outlines, and drafts, the eviction episode is what brings the invisible man directly into contact with the Brotherhood. But Ellison considered various possibilities for how this might happen. Instead of escaping over the rooftops, the protagonist might “[find] a gun, [be] arrested, held in jail”; it would be this display of militancy—and not his speech-making ability—that results in his being “picked up by group.” Ellison supplied an additional impetus for his hero’s pursuit of a connection with the Brotherhood. In the published text he briefly encounters a young white woman in the Provos’ emptied apartment. Congratulating him on the effectiveness of his speech, she advises him to escape over the rooftops but is never glimpsed again. In early drafts, however, the invisible man thinks:

She was very pretty and I felt my throat tighten with swift fear and shame as I realized that I was alone with her. *If the police caught me here it would be really bad for me, ran through my mind. But isn’t she pretty! What is she doing up here / Who’s she with, why would he bring her up there and get mixed up in something like this? She’s not afraid and I’m trembling. But look at that face! And that tone of voice. It’s like we’ve known one another a long time. . . . It’s just*

like I've heard, here they don't know to be afraid. Just like I heard. These northern ones are crazy.

The prophecy of the vet is on the verge of being fulfilled.<sup>11</sup>

In all the dramatized versions of the text Brother Jack is described as a politician, bent upon recruiting the young man for his rhetorical skills. Resenting the invisible man's racial identification with the Provos—evidenced in his assertion that “We were burned in the same oven”—Jack states, “You were watching a death, . . . meta-phor-ically speaking. . . . History has passed them by. . . . They're like dead limbs that must be pruned away so that the tree may bear young fruit or the storms of history will blow them down anyway. Better that the storm should hit them.” In the published text, Jack's assessment that the Provos are “living, but dead[,] dead-in-living . . . a unity of opposites” displays an objectifying scientism in which “individuals . . . don't count” (290–92). But in the context supplied by the invisible man's dream at Men's House—in which he imagines that his parents would be utterly lost in the city, and even his grandfather would prove unable to shed his superstitions—Jack's analysis of the Provos' preindividuality is shown to be largely accurate, even if his conclusion that they “don't count” reveals his robotic rationalism. The invisible man's very recent memory of his father's “last years” as “straw whirling away in the wind,” moreover, draws upon the same imagistic matrix as Jack's description of the “storms of history”; Ellison's elisions detach Jack's statement from a trope that might otherwise give it greater credibility.

Even as Ellison reconfigures the context framing Jack's view of historical necessity, however, he gestures toward its continuing relevance. For through Jack, who claims to have been reading “a detective story or something” titled *A Death on the City Pavements*, Ellison teasingly alludes to the section treating northern migration in Wright's *Twelve Million Black Voices* bearing that designation. Wright writes, “A few of us stepped forth and accepted within the confines of our personalities the death of our old folk lives, an acceptance of a death that enabled us to cross class and racial lines, a death that made us free.” Ellison, we will recall, admired *Twelve Million Black Voices* more than any other work by Wright; by making him confront the “trauma of passing from the country to the city of destruction [that] brought no anesthesia of unconsciousness but left our nerves peeled and quivering,” he wrote to Wright in 1941, the text made him a “better Marxist.” Like the “scientific politician,” Ellison learned from reading Wright's text, the writer must “manipulate . . . weigh and balance [and] test [reality] . . . in order to control it.” The analysis

offered by the “scientific politician” in the 1952 text further echoes Ellison’s own assertion in his essay “Harlem Is Nowhere” (1948) that Harlem is both “the scene of the folk-Negro’s death agony . . . and the setting of his transcendence. Here it is possible for talented youths to leap through the development of decades in a brief twenty years, while beside them white-haired adults crawl in the feudal darkness of their childhood.” Read in the context supplied by these texts, Jack’s commentary on the Provos’ place (or lack of place) in history sounds a good deal like something Ellison himself thought and wrote; the only difference is that in Jack’s voice the invocation of science and dialectics comes across as an inhumane proclamation of necessity rather than a rational grasp of the process, at once painful and redolent of possibility, whereby the old gives birth to the new.<sup>12</sup>

Noting the rhetorical pattern that makes teaching *Invisible Man* an English professor’s dream, Pancho Savery has observed of the eviction episode, “By this point of the novel, if not earlier, students are usually having fun. They easily recognize the various manipulations of the Brotherhood and can connect them to those of the men at the battle royal and to Bledsoe, Brockway, Kimbro, Emerson, and Norton. This part of *Invisible Man* can be taught very quickly.” For Savery and many other critics, the process of interpretation goes on automatic pilot once the text moves into the Brotherhood section. Had *Invisible Man* retained the episodes and characters that Ellison left on the cutting floor, the process of recognition and connection would have been fraught with difficulty, requiring slowing down rather than speeding up.<sup>13</sup>

### “Struck down by History”: Last Rites

In several drafts of *Invisible Man* the motif of death on the city pavements undergoes further elaboration when, soon after parting with Jack, the invisible man comes across an old white man who has just been hit by a truck and lies dying on the sidewalk. The young man thinks, “Everyone was being dispossessed. . . . Pruned away, as the man in the cafeteria had said. ‘Struck down by History.’ . . . *Elderly abstract white man struck down by History at the wheel of two ton truck.*” The truck driver, a white man whose jacket sports “a row of green and black union buttons,” calls the invisible man “Mac” and asks him to pretend to be a priest and perform the last rites. First refusing, the protagonist gives in: “I had grown so used to fantasy, had become so fragmented that with the dead language on my tongue I fell into the priest’s role with a certain ease.” He substitutes a deck of playing cards for a Bible and

dredges up all the Italian and mangled Latin he can remember, from “Allegretto . . . Moderato . . . Legato con fuoco” to “Allia Gallia est . . . divisia enter tertia partem” to “Ultima Thule in Excelsis, E Pluribus Unum, mater, mater, Maria.” A fragment of Proverbs comes to him “out of the past: . . . ‘Man’s despair is God’s opportunity.’”<sup>14</sup>

As he leaves the dead man, the protagonist finds himself imitating the stride of a man he had known as a child:

A tall, fastidious Jew (even taller and more fastidious than Uncle Charles) for whom I’d worked as an adolescent. He was a man who walked with a stately stride, a very kind man, and more aristocratic than all the aristocratic Southerners in the town put together. . . . I had admired him because when the others called him Christ Killer I knew that they hated him and to me he was a figure who seemed more like Christ than they and yet free of Christ because he was a Jew. . . . By identifying myself with him I had found one way of defying the others.

Frightened by both the people who assumed he was a priest and his own readiness in assuming the role, he wonders:

What had happened to people that they couldn’t see me. Didn’t they know that I was nothing like the figure they assumed? First the eviction and now this. One group as confused as the other! Had I become invisible? And then a truly terrifying thought: Perhaps I was everything, anything or nothing, depending upon who was looking upon me at the moment! Hadn’t I acted the role of priest as quickly as I had played—what was the term?—a rabble-rouser?<sup>15</sup>

As in the draft version of the hospital scene, the invisible man’s political-cum-mythic unconscious is hard at work. The conquest-celebrating words of Julius Caesar, who was previously associated with General Pershing, here coexist not only with directions in Italian for musical performance but also with “E Pluribus Unum,” the Founding Fathers’ proclamation of unity in diversity. “Ultima Thule in excelsis” couples the mysterious geographical limits of the known world with divine sanction to explore them. The sudden memory of the “aristocratic” Jew shows the protagonist coupling anti-Semitism with anti-Negro racism, an association that would have been heightened had Ellison retained the wartime context of the eviction protest, and that would have added a grim historical footnote for readers in 1952 to the invisible man’s claim to have been “burned in the same oven” as the Provos. His identification with the Jew, whom he considers “more like

Christ” than his persecutors, reinforces his emerging sense of himself as a “dedicated and set aside” subject-object of sacrifice; his call upon “mother Mary” is at once a cry for Mary Rambo and a call upon the mother of the dying god. Mid-twentieth-century readers might have caught Ellison’s further allusion to the popular Harlem evangelist Father Divine, for the biblical phrase “Man’s despair is God’s opportunity” closely approximates the title of this cult figure’s famous sermon in 1947 about the moral blessings of poverty. Through the invisible man’s cobbled-together string of biblical and Latinate words and phrases, Ellison suggestively associates Christianity with empire, anti-Semitism, Negro invisibility, and the sacrifice of the dying god. The ideological critique he had embedded in such early naturalistic works of fiction as “A Party Down at the Square” is still being voiced, albeit in a heavily allusive high-modernist idiom.<sup>16</sup>

Ellison’s notes indicate that he considered situating the priest scene at many different points in the text, from the invisible man’s early days at Men’s House to his time at Mary’s to his full involvement in Brotherhood activity. Ellison’s eventual decision to locate the episode right after the eviction reveals the text’s hardening emphasis on the politician’s opportunism:

If [the] priest scene comes after he [is] approached by politician, it will be given an added irony; i.e., he has really lost integrity and will play any role. . . . “Man’s despair is God’s opportunity,” comes into his mind, ironically, while he is giving last rites to old man (who reminds him of Old Man Norton in the Golden Day). Ironically, for in his own despair he goes to see [the] politician, thus it is [the] politician’s opportunity.

Despite Ellison’s evident attachment to the priest scene—it appears in multiple plot outlines—he eventually left it out. Perhaps he felt that the episode’s modernist allusiveness, like that associated with Cleo/Delphenia or various elements in the hospital dream sequence, was overly dense. In the search for “universals,” it was one thing to invoke John Henry; it was quite another to appeal to more obscure Western cultural and intellectual traditions familiar only to elite audiences. Perhaps he was influenced by the Knopf editor Harry Ford’s comment that the episode should be “sacrifice[d] . . . in the interest of the forward movement of the narrative. Loss of identity and personal confusion of the narrator seems strongly established without it.” While *Invisible Man* suffers no irremediable damage—indeed the text probably benefits—from Ellison’s decision to excise the priest episode, the comment quoted above reveals the deliberateness with which he approached the task of structuring his text. He was well aware that,

immediately following the protagonist's encounter with Jack, the priest episode would resonate with an ironic political implication it would lack in other settings. Ellison was a highly conscious practitioner of symbolic action.<sup>17</sup>

**“All Americans joining hands against their oppressors  
and dispossessors”:** The Brotherhood Parade

Ellison's decision to excise another episode that would have followed the eviction scene is considerably more crucial. The invisible man is shown encountering a multiracial march of protestors streaming down Lenox Avenue toward Mount Morris Park; the successful eviction protest is inspiring mass activity. Curious, but also wondering whether “that nameless girl, with a warm voice, a pleasant face,” is somewhere in the parade, he follows:

There were hundreds of them, marching six or eight abreast in a kind of wild discipline beneath a blaze of phosphorescent flares. . . . I now saw the whites, not old and at the head, as they would have been at the campus, but young, of all ages and mixed indiscriminately throughout the procession. . . . At the head of the procession a group of men stood on the bed of a truck, surveying the gathering crowd. “They must be the leaders,” I thought. . . .

Their chanted words were now becoming distinct:  
*“No more dispossession of the dispossessed!”*

Noting that the men in the truck are a mix of black and white, with one looking “like an Indian or a Chinese,” he sees a sign bearing the image of a locomotive and the words, “The History Train is Moving, Get on Board, Harlem, Get on Board,” as well as other placards proclaiming, “YOU HAVE A DATE WITH DEMOCRACY” and “A RENDEZVOUS WITH HISTORY!”<sup>18</sup>

Although some onlookers disparage the whites in the march as “just some *more* white folks making some more fools out of some *more* Negroes,” a group of boys do a riff on the marchers' slogans in the parade's wake:

*I dispossessed your mama 'bout half past nine,  
 She said, “Come back, daddy, any ole time.”  
 I dispossessed your sister at a quarter to two,  
 Said, “If you stay 'til six, daddy, you will do.”  
 I dispossessed your grandma at a quarter to one,  
 She said, “Daddy, daddy, daddy, thy will be done.”*

Jesus Christ, I thought, looking at the strutting, nose thumbing boys. I haven't heard anything like that since I left home. They were playing the *dozens* in the same rhythm as the chant.<sup>19</sup>

The invisible man is not deterred by a woman in a hot dog stall who urges him instead to join Father Divine; he would then be "possessed by father, . . . and there ain't no room for worldly dispossession." The march and subsequent rally at Mount Morris Park have him enthralled, and he recalls, "Something which I could not define took hold of me. Perhaps this is something like what I had made them feel today." Hearing the crowd sing "one of our songs . . . but with a different set of words," he at first feels "somewhat indignant," as if "tricked into singing something as new which [he] had known all along." Watching the group on the speakers' platform, consisting of "twenty men . . . one white woman and one black woman," he sees Brother Jack, looking down "as though he saw each member of the crowd separately and in infinite detail." A bushy-bearded white man addresses the crowd

in economic terms, . . . painting a picture of bad conditions which extended not only over the North but over the entire world. He described scenes of eviction and dispossession and men laid off from jobs, and the work of unions and the activities of strike-breakers and the attempts to set white workers against black workers. "There is only one America," he said. "And it's not a white America nor a black America, it's the America of equality, where everyone should be guaranteed the right to live in peace and prosperity, an America to be won by all Americans joining hands against their oppressors and dispossessors."

When the crowd sings "John Brown's Body," the invisible man remembers that his grandfather "had often sung [the song] in a quavering voice when by himself." After the national anthem is sung, he ascends the wind-blown speakers' platform; the man who greets him is at first "cold-eyed" but warmly calls him "Brother Key" when he recognizes the young man as the speaker at the eviction. "If you want me, I'd like to work with you," the protagonist offers. "All you have to do is speak, brother," he is told. "You just keep the door unlocked and we'll do the rest."<sup>20</sup>

The man's cold eyes recall the stare of the party leader in "The Initiation"; his statement that the invisible man needs only to speak signals troubles to come. Nonetheless white members of the Brotherhood are shown here not as aliens mysteriously popping up at Harlem evictions, but as activists at ease marching down Lenox Avenue alongside their black comrades. The

Brotherhood's slogan about dispossession is not foreign to Harlem ears, but assimilable to the verbal play of the dozens. The Brotherhood's call for "an America to be won by all Americans joining hands against their oppressors and dispossessors" carries nonironic force; Ellison would later scoff at Communist claims to embody "twentieth-century Americanism," but the white-bearded speaker, who appears both persuasive and sincere, utters words similar to those Ellison himself had penned during the late 1930s and early 1940s. Most important is the fact that the invisible man joins up with the Brotherhood not several weeks later, because he is broke, but immediately, because he is attracted by what he has seen and heard. Despite its faint hints at the "authoritarianism of the left," the parade episode contains a highly sympathetic representation of the Popular Front-era CP. Had it been retained in the published text it might have recalled for some of the novel's first readers not only the vigorous left-led Depression-era activism but also the recent Harlem nighttime vigils of thousands in support of Willie McGee and the Martinsville Seven, cold war-era victims of racist attack. The passage had to be expunged.<sup>21</sup>

**"We're not interested in his looks but in his ability":**

Induction into the Brotherhood

In the 1952 text the invisible man is inducted into the Brotherhood at the Chthonian several weeks after the eviction episode; in the drafts this scene occurs on the same evening as the eviction, parade, and rally. LeRoy is on the protagonist's mind, for the cubist paintings on the walls of the wealthy fellow traveler's apartment remind him of the portrait now on Mary's wall. The other guests are approachable. One, who, the young man thinks, may be passing over the color line, is a "pleasant man with dreamy gray eyes"; perhaps he offsets the "cold-eyed" man at the rally. The "plain" woman who asks about "the state of women's rights" (311) in the 1952 text is earlier described as a "feminist fighter" who inquires into the "conditions of domestic workers." It seems unnecessary to stipulate that she is not attractive.<sup>22</sup>

In the 1952 text Jack's designation of the invisible man as "the new Booker T. Washington" (305) indicates that the smoker scene is about to be replayed; the invisible man, we anticipate, will again imitate Washington's "Atlanta Compromise" address of 1895, albeit in an altered idiom, to please those with power. But Jack's proposition that this new Booker T. Washington will "work for the poor" is initially accompanied by the explicit statement, "The old Washington worked for the rich. You will be . . . even greater than

he. Because you today will speak not just for one race, but for all the dispossessed. . . . You shall be one of a collectivity of heroes of the people!" Jack's choice of Washington is anomalous; not Washington but Douglass, as Ellison well knew, was the African American at the center of the left's pantheon of historical heroes. While Jack's opportunism is blatant, it is evident that what he admires in Washington is his capacity to lead, not his politics. His admission that Washington "worked for the rich" recalls Ellison's own earlier estimate that Washington, as a tool of the "counter-revolution" in the post-Reconstruction South, had "betrayed not only the Negro but also the working class and the northern farmers as well." At least no punches are being pulled.<sup>23</sup>

Jack is evidently obsessed with a view of History that is both apocalyptic and mechanical: a "supreme world crisis" must be faced, and only the Brotherhood can offer the necessary "scientific explanation" (307). This statement is supplemented in a draft, however, by his observation that in times of crisis "the people . . . [demand] the resurrection of the dead," and that "the dead will answer":

Thus the question is whether we who represent the living, we who are the consciences of the people are to stand by and allow the dead to come forth with their old false answers, the answers made invalid by historical developments or whether we shall teach the dead the new answers, the new truth, so that they can give the people the new truth in their old names? We say no! For if we fail to win the ears of the dead, the enemies of the people will take advantage, they will write the speeches of the dead.

Although Jack arrogantly considers himself to be in possession of "the new truth," he evinces a certain degree of epistemological sophistication. He sees that history is both past events and the way they are narrated; the class struggle is fought out in the streets and in the realm of discourse. In the battle of representation, figures from the past, especially the past of a nation, are always being reconfigured for present uses: hence his placing alongside Booker T. Washington such figures as Jefferson, Jackson, Pulaski, Garibaldi, Sun Yat-sen, Danny O'Connell, and Abraham Lincoln (307). Typical of the Popular Front-era CP's advocacy of popular nationalism, Jack's statement is not one with which Ellison, as he revised his manuscript, would likely have quarreled; perhaps it needed to be struck from his increasingly negative portrayal of Jack precisely because he agreed with it.<sup>24</sup>

Jack's interchange with Emma further indicates Ellison's initial intention to invest the Brotherhood leader with greater credibility. In the original typescript, when Emma expresses her wish that the young man were "a little

blacker,” Jack angrily responds, “Don’t be a damn fool. . . . We’re not interested in his looks but in his ability.” The word “ability” is crossed out, and “voice” is penciled in. In the first version Jack apparently has made a positive estimate of the young man’s potential that is not restricted to his verbal facility. Emma’s comment raises serious doubts about the Brotherhood’s integrity; the invisible man catches its imperialist overtones and thinks, taking a stiff drink, “What was I, a man or a natural resource?” (303). What Emma says moreover is not Ellison’s own invention: in 1944 it was reported in the right-wing *New York World-Telegram* that the light-skinned Angelo Herndon had heard the CP leader Anna Damon utter words to this effect when, several years before, he had been greeted by a CP-led delegation in New York’s Pennsylvania Station after being freed from prison. If Damon had in fact made the statement about Herndon’s complexion, Ellison would probably have heard the story from Herndon himself during their time as coeditors of *Negro Quarterly*. Apparently, however, this offensive comment, even if authentic, did not turn Herndon away from the CP; in *Let Me Live* his claim to have been “dazzled” by the multiracial display of the “brotherhood of man” referred to his experiences on the very day he arrived in New York. It was only when Arthur Schlesinger, drawing upon the *World-Telegram* reportage, featured Damon’s comment in a *Life* magazine article about the CP in 1946 and subsequently in his *The Vital Center* in 1949, that Damon’s remark assumed synecdochic status as a register of the racial outlook presumably widespread among white Communists. Ellison’s original intention to feature Jack’s valuation of the invisible man’s ability rather than his looks (or for that matter his voice) would have suggested, at the very least, that, within Brotherhood circles, there was a range of racial attitudes, some more emancipated than others. This was an estimate that Ellison himself had in fact aired in the draft of “Richard Wright’s Blues,” where he stated that although some white Communists, acting out of guilt, “idealize” their Negro comrades, thereby producing a “double standard,” there are “fortunately . . . some Negroes and whites who, by recognizing the causes [of the double standard], escape this dead-end.”<sup>25</sup>

It could be argued that Ellison’s substitution of “voice” for “ability” in the published text is not all that significant; Jack is, after all, characterized as a politician and shown to be manipulative from the outset. But characterization is dialectical and situational; depending on where a writer places emphasis at a given moment, either negative or positive qualities can predominate. In the context supplied by the 1952 version of the library scene, where it is patent that Jack intends the invisible man to function as a ven-

triloquist's dummy, the Brotherhood leader's subsequent condemnation of the short drunken white man who asks the protagonist to sing spirituals constitutes further evidence not of Jack's antiracism, but of his inhumanity. Although the drunk's statement that invisible man, *qua* Negro, must be naturally musical recalls Emma's whispered comment about his complexion, the new recruit is shown reacting to the two assertions quite differently. Emma's racism places her beyond the pale, while the drunk's invites the compassionate thought, "Shouldn't the short man have the right to make a mistake without his motives being considered consciously or unconsciously malicious?" (314). Presumably the drunk is an object of sympathy because he has also been the object of Jack's attack. By this logic, however, Jack is both damned if he does react and damned if he does not. Had he, or some other Brotherhood representative, not intervened, the drunk's stereotypical remark would have gone uncontested; yet Jack's shouting at the drunk leads the invisible man to conclude that the Brotherhood's programmatic condemnation of white chauvinism is a sign of an unforgiving rigidity, not of an authentic dedication to equality.<sup>26</sup>

This scene contains one other small revision with large ramifications. When Jack hands the invisible man his new Brotherhood name, it is at first "typed on a slip of paper"; "typed" is crossed out and "written" is penciled in. In the 1952 text, the protagonist's crowning realization of Jack's betrayal will occur when, having fled underground during the riot, he matches the handwriting on the warning note he received as Harlem organizer with the handwriting on the slip containing his Brotherhood name: it is a moment of consummate re-cognition, the falling into place of the final piece in the jigsaw puzzle of treachery. In Ellison's original conception of his plot, however, there was evidently no plan that *perception* would hinge on this visual clue, for there is no direct evidence that Jack is the supplier of the new name. Indeed while it is evident that the invisible man has not chosen his own party name, for readers familiar with leftist organizing this assignment of an alternate political identity would not necessarily set off alarm bells; in order to evade surveillance it was routine for Communists to assume different names, and often to play no role in choosing them. Indeed in one of Ellison's favorite novels, Malraux's *Days of Wrath*, the Communist protagonist Kassner is saved from execution by an imprisoned comrade who self-sacrificially assumes Kassner's name; falsifying and exchanging names can save lives. As Ellison later remarked about his rhetorical strategy as a practitioner of symbolic action, "Place[d] in the right context, and at the optimum state of an action, [a detail] vibrates and becomes symbolically eloquent."

It is the inclusion of the name-bearing paper within the associational cluster of Bellerophonic letters, rather than the paper's possession of intrinsic significance as a marker of red perfidy, that invests it with "symboli[c] eloquence."<sup>27</sup>

### "Oh you fair warrior": The Othello Theme

In the earliest versions of the Chthonian chapter there appears to have been no induction in the library, no toast to History. Instead the invisible man has already joined the Brotherhood after the torchlight parade; at the party he is absorbed by his reencounter with the pale young blonde woman he met at the eviction earlier that day. Her name is Louise; he flirts with abandon. She is idealistic; speaking of "the movement" she says, "It's our only hope! And our people are the best people in the country. Really selfless and devoted and truly democratic. You're sure to like it." The narrator recalls, "'Yes, I'm sure,' I said, looking boldly into her eyes, 'Because you're a part of it, I'm sure I will.'" As he looks at her "gently throbbing and upward sweeping throat," he is infatuated:

And I knew at that moment that it was not her color, but the voice and if there was anything in the organization to which I could give myself completely, it was she. If I could work with her, be always near her, then I could have all that the Trustees had promised and failed to give, and more. And if she was not the meaning of the struggle for the others, for me she would be the supremest prize of all. "O you fair warrior," my mind raced on, "You dear, sweet, lovely thing, for you I'd rock the nation with a word. You'll be my Liberty and Democracy, Hope and Truth and Beauty, the justification for manhood, the motive for courage and cunning; for you I'll make myself into this new name they've given me and I'll believe that Brother Jack and the others mean what they say about creating a world in which even men like me can be free."

Well tutored by Woodridge, the invisible man replays in his mind Othello's greeting to Desdemona: "O my fair warrior." He remembers the vet's laughter but thinks, "So I would *play* the fool, and if it was that my being black made me desire the white meat of the chicken, then I'd accept my desire along with the chitterlings and sweet potato pie."<sup>28</sup>

The Othello theme is extended as the invisible man and Louise converse. She speaks of her wealthy father, a variant on Shakespeare's Brabantio, and declares that her political participation is "a means of balancing up some

of the harm he does.” Her white handkerchief recalls for the young man a story about an aunt of his, a laundress who, offended by her employer’s demand to know the secret of her spotless washing, claimed that she added coal oil; when her employer tested the technique (one apparently less efficacious than the admixture of black to white at Liberty Paints) and chastised the laundress, the black woman beat the white woman “to a fair thee well.” Nothing daunted by the challenge implicit in the story—will she identify with the rebellious black laundress or the overbearing white employer?—Louise responds, “We must act in order to do something about the hateful things.” Louise is no mere liberal or fellow traveler, the invisible man learns; according to Jack, “[She] works closely with the strategy committee and many of our directives will come to you through her.” When the protagonist and Louise leave the party together, she, driving a Lincoln convertible purchased by her father, drops him off at the subway; a man asks whether he is “the one they used to call Petey Wheatstraw back down in Dallas” and congratulates him on having snared a “little pink-toe.” Nodding off on the train, the invisible man dreams briefly of Tatlock, as well as of signs reading “No niggers or dogs allowed” and “QUIT DISPOSSESSING THE DISPOSSESSED.” His mind is spinning; he has met up with his own version of Mary Dalton, red rather than pink.<sup>29</sup>

Back in LeRoy’s former room the protagonist ruminates on his day:

I’d have to learn that “scientific” language to speak to the people; and I’d have to find words to make her understand how I felt about her. All this time I’d wasted fooling around waiting for the trustees to recognize me! But I’d make up the lost time, now that I knew better; and it was good that I’d been given a new name, I’d be able to lash out at them and they wouldn’t know who I was, or from where I’d come.

His motives are, to say the least, mixed. He is driven by the desire for revenge; while he claims that her color is not what draws him, it is evident that his attraction to Louise the woman cannot be separated from his estimation of Louise as the “prize,” the “white meat of the chicken.” Besides setting up an implied comparison between the invisible man and Paul Robeson—whose Broadway performance as Shakespeare’s Moor of Venice had met with great popular acclaim, but whom Ellison was to view over the years with a combination of awe, contempt, and not a little envy—the *Othello* allusions position him as one who will, we fear, love not wisely but too well. But if the protagonist in some sense is *Othello*, then Louise is *Desdemona*, a figure beyond irony who embodies genuine innocence. Where the figure of

a white woman used as bait to draw in black recruits was a familiar trope in such anti-CP texts as J. Saunders Redding's *On Being Negro in America* (1951) and Chester Himes's *Lonely Crusade* (1947), Ellison's Louise would appear to be cut from a different political cloth.<sup>30</sup>

"Working Notes" indicates that Ellison initially assigned to Louise an important role in *Invisible Man*. A "young woman of great charm," Louise "is the one person in the [Brotherhood] whom [the invisible man] can believe accepts him as a human being. He regards her as a symbol of democracy, of freedom and fertility." As we shall see, her figure would continue to appear in various sketches and outlines for subsequent plot developments. Aside from the description of their encounter at the Chthonian, however, the only other sustained passage focused on Louise is a long Joycean ramble, apparently part of the invisible man's meditation the night they have met, in which he free-associates from the white woman featured in beer advertisements to Miss Anne to Primus Provo to Macon County to the blue eagle rock to John Brown to being higher than a Georgia pine, with many other connections in between. Ellison wrote to Hyman in the fall of 1949, "[I have decided] to leave out the 'Othello' theme, which I'm now convinced would complicate thing[s] too much. I'll just save it for the next novel."<sup>31</sup>

In deleting Louise, Ellison no doubt simplified his task. But he also effaced from the text a female character who, linked with Mary Rambo, expands the locus of rebirth beyond the purely male domain; just as Mary serves as surrogate mother to LeRoy, Louise serves as erotic partner and spiritual companion for the invisible man as he strives to meet the demands of his double. She also supplies a compelling instance of at least one Brotherhood member for whom the invisible man is not invisible; that she functions as a symbol of democracy to him, as LeRoy did to Treadwell, alerts us to her vital role in the novel's political theme. Above all she is a white woman who breaks the mold of objectification and stereotype supplied by the other appearances of white women in the novel: the naked dancer and, later, Sybil and the woman in the red robe. To the extent that she is confined to stereotype, this occurs primarily in and through the tortured consciousness of the invisible man.

Commentators on the Chthonian chapter of *Invisible Man* have frequently noted the reference to Greek mythology in the name Ellison chose for his protagonist's site of initiation: because the term refers to the underworld presided over by Hades, it has been taken to suggest the hellish nature of the Brotherhood's domain. The fact that the invisible man later encounters Sybil (Sibyl) at Emma's apartment in the Chthonian underscores the mythologi-

cal allusion and further connects the narrative with Eliot's *The Waste Land*, where the poet hero descends into the half-classical, half-Christian inferno of the modern "unreal city." If we bear in mind Ellison's interest in the Cambridge School, however, the Chthonian takes on less demonic connotations. According to Jane Harrison, the chthonic deities were pre-Olympian figures, daimons associated with the earth rather than authoritarian gods associated with the heavens, who embodied the direct relationship between humanity and nature in preclass societies. The figure of Dionysus distilled this relationship; his yearly initiation at the time of spring planting, entailing sacrifice by dismemberment, signaled the process by which deities are made, and then used up, in order to meet communal human needs. Harrison points out, moreover, that the "civilization of the worshippers, quite other than patriarchal," was reflected in the relative positions of male and female deities. In the underworld, from which new life emerges every spring, Harrison writes, "two goddesses reign supreme: Demeter and Kore, the Mother and the Maid; Hades . . . never disputes their sway."<sup>32</sup>

The all-male lineup of Brotherhood leaders in the library indicates that patriarchy rules supreme; Emma is barely even Hera to Jack's Zeus, serving as at most his secretary and mistress. But Louise's prominent role in the earliest versions of the Chthonian episode suggests her connection with the chthonian deities, especially with Kore (more commonly known as Persephone), whose emergence from the underworld every spring accompanies the renewal of life and the promise of agricultural bounty, especially corn. Louise's "fall of light hair" reinforces her resemblance to Kore/Persephone of the corn-silk hair and links her with Mary Rambo, a Demeter/Themis/Gaia figure, in a symbolic daughter-mother relation. Their nurturing relationships with the doubled figures of LeRoy and the invisible man testify to the central role of women, as both mothers and lovers, in the birth, growth, death, and rebirth of male heroes. It is perhaps no accident that the invisible man thinks of LeRoy's picture when he sees Emma's cubist paintings; his secret sharer, the proletarian hanged god, is witnessing the invisible man's initiation in this new variant of Men's House. Ellison's interest in the matriarchal configuration of the chthonian deities may motivate the otherwise anomalous comment that, in an early version of the library scene, is assigned to one of the Brotherhood leaders: he declares not "We believe in brotherhood," but "We believe in motherhood." The site of initiation into the band of false fathers in the published text, the Chthonian figures as the site of a more ambiguous entry into the tribe in the novel's early drafts. It is where the invisible man meets a white goddess whose mythical whiteness is asso-

ciated not with castration and control—as are, in their different ways, both the dancer of the battle royal and Sybil—but with rituals stemming from the collective needs of a nonhierarchical social order.<sup>33</sup>

**“Tell us what we need to know”:**

Meeting Brother Hambro

The invisible man’s fondness for his fellow roomers makes him regret “having to leave this old house with its close, intimate community, even though it was often too close for me.” Regarding Cleo, he thinks, “God knows I don’t owe *her* anything. . . . Except . . . that which a man owes any woman, every woman, if he thinks he does and she thinks he does, which I don’t, which she would, but I won’t. . . . And yet I’ll be leaving something unfinished with her.” He dreams that he is on stilts and that, taking him for LeRoy, she calls him down. Leaving Mary’s the next morning, he carries not only the iron-cast Sambo bank but also LeRoy’s journal. “Where else could you get a job beating your gums?” he ponders, banishing his doubts. “You’re—what’s the phrase—dedicated and set aside, for whatever and you’d better hurry and learn for what. Brother Jack’s made a date for you with history.” He leaves behind his old hat, “its green felt . . . sunfaded and dust coated though [he] had worn it only a year”: “Now it hung shapeless and brown, like a leaf struck by the winter’s snow. I would buy a new one for my new name.” An avatar of the year-daimon, he has been reborn and is entering a cycle of activity where the words “dedicated and set aside” will rearticulate his role as scapegoat—whether as fall guy or dying god remains to be seen.<sup>34</sup>

Ellison considered inserting at this point a short comic scene in which the invisible man attempts to change the hundred-dollar bill given to him by Brother Jack. Some midtown jewelers attempt to swindle him, but he is wise to their game. The episode plays off the battle royal scene—this time he can tell fake money from real—but adds little to the novel beyond making the obvious point that he is now in the big money and has become somewhat cagier. In the published text the invisible man immediately enters the tutelage of Brother Hambro, a “tall, friendly man, a lawyer and the Brotherhood’s chief theoretician” (357). The older man does not appear in a dramatized scene, however, until he coldly explains the necessity for sacrificing Harlem. By contrast, Hambro’s precursor is named Stein; the “third joint of his right index finger” is “permanently crooked”; he bears “three blue stars tattooed on the back of his left hand.” This “almost Lincolnesque” teacher stresses the unity of theory and practice, noting that “action without theory [is] a

riot; theory without action, that's kibitzing." The invisible man finds himself "working harder than [he] ever had at college," during the day "reading and discussing theory" and in the evenings "attending rallies and meetings in the various districts." Stein/Hambro urges his student, "Listen to the people talk, get their grievances, their protests." He acknowledges, "[The Brotherhood has] tried on several occasions to move the people to action and each time we've failed . . . [because we had the] wrong approach—not to the historical forces, but to your people."<sup>35</sup>

Stein/Hambro's explanation is worth quoting at length:

A people may exist during a historical period and still not be of that period, just as the Plains Indians are still with us but not a part of the present day historical movements. To be part of a historical period a people must be organized and able to make themselves felt as a force. To do this a group must find its voice. . . . It must be able to effectively accept or reject the basic issues of its time, and thus it must learn to act.

In answer to the invisible man's query, "But don't we act?" Stein/Hambro replies,

Yes, but not historically. . . . I refer to *decisive* action. Perhaps it would be more correct to say that your people *react* rather than act—insofar as they express themselves after events which profoundly effect their destiny have occurred. *After* a lynching or a riot they protest, and sometimes quite vigorously. But to act scientifically in regards to such a situation would be to take action to *prevent it before it happened*. At the first hint they would arm themselves or take whatever action that would be effective—asking for police protection, where that is possible—although we know it seldom is; calling upon friendly white people—whatever is necessary to swerve the developing forces away from the destructive event and transform it into [a] socially useful one.

Noting that the group behavior of the Negro people "has nothing to do with race"—the "labor unions were like that until recently"—Stein/Hambro concludes with a warning and a plea:

We don't know too much about your people. We thought we did but we don't, even though some of us still think we do. What we have is a theory. It's a good theory, but it's up to you to put it into action. So instead of trying to tell you how or what to do I'll tell you to work it out your own way. Only don't say that I told you, because some of our brothers wouldn't

understand. . . . And one final thing, Brother: don't tell us what we want to hear, tell us what we need to know.<sup>36</sup>

Ellison's decision to exclude this conversation from the 1952 text substantially alters the invisible man's introduction to the left. Where Brother Jack seems to have all the answers and simply wants the invisible man to rubber-stamp his conclusions, here the principal Brotherhood theorist evinces a good deal of humility, stressing the need for theory to be informed by practice. His analysis of the requirement that African Americans "make themselves felt as a force" recalls a principal concern of Ellison's *Negro Quarterly* editorials. Stein/Hambro's assertion that the purpose of such historical engagement is to act proactively in order to "prevent [a lynching or riot] from happening" contrasts dramatically with the 1952 text's portrayal of radicals wishing to profit from racial violence. Stein/Hambro advocates that Negroes "act historically" so that they may make their own "destiny" rather than have it made for them; he turns Norton's formulation on its head. As a sympathetic mentor Stein/Hambro resists incorporation into the cluster of false fathers who reenact the battle royal's governing ritual. Like Trader Stein in *Lord Jim*, Stein/Hambro is instructing the young man how to survive in the "destructive element" into which he is being initiated, indeed how to transform the "destructive event" into its opposite.

But Stein/Hambro is not just a wise mentor. Notably he is most likely Jewish, as his name suggests, and he bears on his hand what appears to be a concentration camp tattoo as well as evidence of torture. Stein is aligned with other references to Jews and anti-Semitism—the "tall, fastidious Jew" of the protagonist's childhood, the protagonist's claim to have been "burned in the same oven" as the Provos—that suggest parallels between the "Nazi persecution of Jews" and "the persecution of Negroes in the United States" that Ellison had examined in one of his first pieces of political journalism. In the 1952 version of *Invisible Man* Hambro's largely unsympathetic characterization suggests an ironic inflection to his name; his claim to being a brother to the sons of Ham is specious, indeed hammy. If we recall his earlier incarnation as the largely sympathetic Stein, however, Hambro's name suggests the kinship between the sons of Ham (who was after all a son of Noah and brother to Shem, biblical ancestor of all Semitic peoples) and modern Jews, as well as the speciousness of the racist discourse proclaiming their difference. Ellison's original portrayal of Stein/Hambro thus suggests his continuity with such positively rendered left-wing Jewish characters as Wright's Boris Max in *Native Son* and Himes's Abe Rosenberg in *Lonely Crusade*. Com-

pounding the omission of references to Spain and Munich, the conversion of Stein into Hambro removes *Invisible Man* from the international context of fascism and war, the “supreme world crisis” to which Brother Jack referred.

**“The great groping of the blind for sight”:**

The Arena Speech

With the elimination of the antieviction parade, the arena rally is the novel’s only dramatized representation of the appeal of the Popular Front-era CP to New York’s working class. The invisible man is mesmerized by the heady atmosphere in the hall: the singing of “John Brown’s Body,” the enthusiasm of the “uncommon people” determined to be “dispossessed” no more. Yet the protagonist is both caged and blinded in the circle of artificial light; his recalling that “years ago” a famous boxer was “beaten blind in a crooked fight . . . right here in this arena” implies—for the reader, if not the Candide-like hero—that the novel’s governing ritual is about to be replayed. Over several drafts Ellison converted an uplifting experience into one tinged with threat. At first Brother Jack contributes to the oratory, “speaking in terms of economic[s], history, international trends[,] . . . of the necessity facing the people, of what they must do.” For the young man on the stage Jack “seemed to roll the world into a circle of meaning, then took a segment of the circle and pulled it until it was like a pointer that [led] to each individual in the arena.” This conjunction of individual and collective identities gives the invisible man “the sense of being intimately connected with events and people abroad.”

I no longer lived upon a fragment, but in a total world, the revolution of which, with its surge of events, through the correct and combined action of others, I could help control. For the first time I seemed to have a hand in my own destiny. Old Norton had spoken of me as *his* destiny, now Brother Jack was giving me a sense that I was my own—no, that we, here in the arena were *our* destiny. We had only to combine and act. . . . I listened completely absorbed, my respect for him growing.<sup>37</sup>

Although Jack’s speech does not stir the audience emotionally—“No shouts of ‘Amen’ interrupted him, nor spontaneous singing”—the invisible man initially thinks, “He’s giving them too much to absorb at once . . . the analysis is too profound.” Ellison revised this passage to read, “I listened carefully to his analysis. He went into minute detail, speaking coldly in terms of economics.” Finally, however, Ellison removed Jack’s entire speech, along

with the protagonist's reaction to its content, and portrayed the Brotherhood leader as a "father listening to the performance of his children," penciling in "bemused" before "father," "adoring" before "children." He added the concluding words, "'Listen to them,' Brother Jack said. 'Just waiting to be told what to do.'" The Brotherhood's Marxism has been transformed from a means of grasping totality to an instrument of totalitarian control.<sup>38</sup>

Ellison initially placed considerably more emphasis on the rally's display of class-based multiracial unity. "Lord, Our God, we are assembled here tonight with the lines thrown down," intones the preacher who opens the rally. "I mean the color lines, Lord. Tonight, Lord, there will be no color line for we know that in your sight no colors exist. We are assembled, Lord, in the spirit of brotherhood." Sounding much like the invocation uttered by the preacher-turned-Workers Alliance organizer that Ellison recorded in "No Discrimination," the opening prayer shows the Popular Frontist appeal of the "spirit of brotherhood." As soon as he enters the arena, the invisible man sees "row after row of faces, black and white." ("Black and white" was crossed out of a subsequent draft.) In the published text, the theme of class-based solidarity can be inferred from his parable of the two one-eyed men who stop "walking down opposite sides of the street" and combine their vision to fight back against the "smooth, oily scoundrel running down the middle of the street . . . [who] claims he needs the space—he calls it his *freedom*" (344). But the phrase "black and white" explicitly describes the audience only once in the published text, when, near the end of his speech, the protagonist tells his listeners that he feels "your black and white eyes upon me" (345). Expanding the speech in the drafts, Ellison contemplated that, as he stands in the spotlight, the invisible man might conjure up a "picture of [a] flood with people of both races fighting the force of nature, lined up with spades repairing a broken levee." The invisible man would link this image from a transformed South with his own remembered picture of "Negroes and whites with flares winding up . . . Mount Morris Park . . . in the cold."<sup>39</sup>

These utopian visual images of black and white, dark and light, Ellison jotted, would be accompanied by literary images of "black and white fraternity," recalling "Huck and Jim," the "Negroes in *Moby Dick*," and Faulkner's "kids in *Intruder in the Dust*." The speech would also draw upon the invisible man's memories of his "grandfather's friendship for his young master; how they hunted, played, fought and ate and were punished together; and how later the grownups intervened and destroyed their friendship, destroyed their innocence and dropped the curtain of hate between them." The young orator places this somewhat idealized account of antebellum trans-

racial friendship in historical context: “For some seventy-nine years, I said, black and white fraternity has been an unlawful thing.” That the movement exemplified at the arena rally is to complete the unfinished tasks of the Civil War, and make real the fictional utopia imagined by Ellison’s cherished “ancestors,” is clear.<sup>40</sup>

In the published text the invisible man’s leaning forward and confessing that he feels “more human” is prompted by an eruption of his subconscious, a feeling of being “naked” in the bright lights (345). In an earlier version he confronts the electricity of the situation in terms that explicitly recall the battle royal:

I had to seize the ends of the broken power line and allow it to flow through myself—otherwise failure and profound embarrassment. And even as I felt the words returning I sensed that I was about to say something that shouldn’t have been revealed. I leaned forward, straining to see through [the] barrier of light, feeling the hot swift terror that comes when technique fails, when the machine collapses and you see the blood shoot from your exposed flesh. It was one of those moments when, with the [mechanism] thrown out of gear there is left nothing to fill the gap but the tender naked self.

Declaring, “Our common dream [has become] . . . a fighting reality,” he concludes, “You’ve given me back my anger and the old human vision. I’ve been reborn. I’ve been reborn in you and you in me and we witness an American miracle. I feel the great deep ache of the land for fraternity, the great groping of the blind for sight.”<sup>41</sup>

In the 1952 text the protagonist is wholly unprepared for the arena speech, which he delivers the day after his induction at the Chthonian; although he has glanced at some Brotherhood pamphlets, he knows nothing about left politics. Yet he undergoes severe chastisement all the same; evidently his lapse into the vernacular has pushed the sectarian buttons of several Brotherhood leaders. In earlier drafts, by contrast, he has studied with Stein/Hambro for four months and has sat silently on rally platforms analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of other Brotherhood speakers. When he speaks in the arena it is not a sink-or-swim situation, nor is there a postmortem. “The others were waiting in the dressing room,” recalls the narrator, “and as we got into the car and started away I could hear the audience still cheering behind us.” In a subsequent version containing the post-rally meeting, Brother Jack offers a mild criticism: “You did well. . . . But you must study our literature because you must never fail to get over our ideological mes-

sage.” The other leaders are “more enthusiastic.” The “brother with the pipe” drops his initial criticism, the “short bald man” affirms Jack’s overall positive assessment, and “the others made sounds of agreement.” Although in these early versions of the episode the Brotherhood leaders would presumably have firmer grounds for criticizing the “unscientific” nature of the invisible man’s speech—he has, after all, been studying both theory and practice for several months—they are relatively positive; perhaps they actually appreciate his ability rather than just his voice.<sup>42</sup>

Later that evening the invisible man reflects upon the reaction of the audience: “I had spoken for them and they had recognized my words. I belong to them. . . . Perhaps this was what was meant by being ‘dedicated and set aside.’” Wondering, “What had I meant by saying that I had become ‘more human?’,” he dismisses the possibility that he had picked up the phrase from another rally speaker, his grandfather, or Woodridge. Racking his brain, he decides, “It was a mystery once more, as at the eviction I had uttered words that had possessed me” (353–54). While the source of the phrase “dedicated and set aside” is equally a mystery to the reader of the 1952 text, a reader acquainted with the drafts recognizes their provenance in Treadwell’s description of LeRoy. The phrase “more human” comes from LeRoy himself, as he meditates in his journal about the need for “a way of life more universal, more human and more free than any to be found in the world today.” To be “more human” involves laying claim to a kind of freedom very different from that enjoyed by the capitalist whose freedom consists in keeping the workers visually impaired by racism and confined to different sides of the street.<sup>43</sup>

Still mulling the uncanny way in which LeRoy’s words have worked their way into the back of his mind, the invisible man reads further in the journal and comes across the entry in which LeRoy imagines being able to reach fifteen million listeners. The protagonist ruminates:

If I could get only a million to listen to me I could get something done. What if one could get the 15 million to listen, he could help get something done. What if I could become known to each and every one of them, could become a meaningful name in their mouths? That was something worth working for, and a way to make the world spin faster. If I could reach each of these and bring them into the movement.

Next to the text describing the invisible man thinking, “Ally the one tenth of the population with those conditioned to brotherhood and there’d be no worry about race,” Ellison scribbled in the margin, “Dies Irae.”<sup>44</sup>

It is noteworthy that LeRoy's conceit about radio broadcasting, the trope that famously ends the novel, occurs in the aftermath of the arena rally. The protagonist dreams of reaching an audience of millions—of “raising hell with radios!,” as Langston Hughes exclaims in “Good Morning, Revolution!”—on the day when he feels he has “become ‘more human’” and, as a Brotherhood representative, “spoken for” his audience of “uncommon people.” Ellison's jotting “Dies Irae” next to the invisible man's vision of a Brotherhood-led movement of millions alludes to the antifascist theme effaced from the published text. For the Latin phrase “Dies Irae,” in religious discourse associated with the Day of Judgment, translates as “day [or days] of wrath,” the English title of Malraux's novel (translated in 1936) about German antifascists. While this historical reference point, coupled with the Popular Frontist theme of dispossession, would seem to locate the arena rally in the 1930s, as in the early sketches of the eviction scene Ellison blends the Depression and war-time years. For the invisible man's statement that for seventy-nine years “black and white fraternity has been an unlawful thing”—most likely a reference to the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863—situates his speech in 1942, in which case the “supreme world crisis” that laps at the novel's edge is not the rise of fascism in the 1930s but the antifascist war of the early 1940s, with all the complications posed to the left by the Nazi invasion of the USSR. The invisible man's desire to reach fifteen million listeners by radio is thus a more ambitious version of Ellison's and Herndon's project in *Negro Quarterly* of persuading African Americans that they have “their own stake in the fight against fascism.”<sup>45</sup>

In the published version of *Invisible Man* the arena rally figures as an ambiguous event; heady and exciting, it is shadowed by memories of the battle royal. In his subsequent meditation the protagonist catches at straws of memory, unable to recall where he came up with the phrase “more human” or to fathom how or by whom he has been “dedicated and set aside.” His excitement at being accepted and celebrated is offset by the cold reception of his speech by several Brotherhood leaders who promise to figure as future competitors and antagonists. His success is fraught with anxiety.

In the drafts, by contrast, the invisible man accepts the role proposed to him by Treadwell and acknowledges his oneness with LeRoy. He recognizes the danger of electrocution but volunteers to be the conduit of electricity connecting the platform with the rest of the arena; where at the battle royal his conduction of electricity was a means of surviving a ritual directed against him as a “pseudoscientific” scapegoat, here it is dialectically transformed into a strategy for purposively aligning the individual with the col-

lective. The electricity generated at the power plant operated by black hands need not be utilized only for purposes of exploiting labor or, as in the hospital episode, assuring ideological domination; it can be turned against its owners and supply light for those who dwell in darkness. On the day of the invisible man's emergence into the spotlight as a Brotherhood organizer, LeRoy has been reborn in him. The repressed alter ego that had burst out with the words "social equality" at the smoker, led him down the road to Trueblood's shack, tormented him during his days of "lostness," and prompted him to "attack the Founder" at the eviction, has emerged from the depths of his political unconscious. Through LeRoy's analysis of the sources of black leadership, the invisible man grasps the connections among fighting "dispossession," becoming "more human," and being "dedicated and set aside." The ominous similarities between the arena rally and the battle royal indicate that the novel's "governing ritual" may well still prevail. But irony and destiny contest with hope and possibility; the "great groping of the blind for sight," coupled explicitly with the "deep ache for the land of fraternity," is not an individual but a mass historical need, one for which the Brotherhood is shown to possess a solution of considerable appeal. Not all boxers end up blinded; the invisible man is willing to fight for sight. He is not, at least at this moment, the scapegoat as victim, but the scapegoat as sacrificial hero, consciously willing to subject himself to modern forces of production if these can provide the energy for movement toward a better world.

### **"I could make them forget black and white":**

#### Organizing for the Brotherhood

Ellison considered various possibilities for the invisible man's activities as a Brotherhood organizer. There might be a "mass meeting at Columbus Circle where he discovers American political violence. Goons come to break up meeting, he fights . . . [is] arrested under old law against masking in public because he appears on platform wearing dark glasses. Case fought to supreme court. Won." This victory would be followed by a "campaign to have Negroes hired as bus drivers, other city jobs." Or, "badly beaten at a demonstration, [he] lies between life and death. Survives a hero." Or again, feeling the need to redeem himself after his "failure to use scientific language," he might engage in some "heroic action[,] one in which he performs self sacrifice[,] . . . refus[ing] to give information under torture." He "might return South for a time; he might go to prison to make it possible for more important leader to continue his work." In one way or another, Ellison decided, the

plot “demands a dramatic, climactic action,” one enabling the invisible man to “act heroically” and at the same time “suspect that he is invisible exactly at the moment of his triumph.”<sup>46</sup>

That the invisible man’s “days of certainty” will end in doubt and then disaster is forecast in the published text at the end of chapter 17, where the retrospective narrator recalls that “for one lone stretch of time” he lived in a magical haze, subjecting himself unquestioningly to a regimen of “pattern and discipline” (380–82). The phase of “purpose” within the arc of “Political Life” has been established quickly; almost immediately problems arise, and the “passion” begins. The first dramatized passage depicting the protagonist’s Brotherhood work, his and Tod Clifton’s encounter with Ras the Exhorter, ends with Clifton’s foreboding comment about the need to “plunge outside of history” (377). The note warning the invisible man that “this is a *white man’s world*” then appears on his desk (383), and, as Douglass gazes down from his portrait on the wall of the Harlem office, the long journey toward disillusionment begins. The reader, positioned alongside the ironic narrator in his basement, remains ahead of the naïve protagonist all along, wondering when he will wake up and smell the coffee.

The drafts of *Invisible Man* indicate that Ellison initially planned a fuller description of the “purpose” guiding his protagonist’s work as a Brotherhood organizer. Not only does he organize the People’s Hot Foot Squad, a “drill team of six-footers . . . striking up sparks with their hob-nailed boots” (379); in the narrator’s retrospective summary of the “days of certainty,” the activity surrounding the stepped-up campaign against evictions is elaborated:

It was nothing for our group to pull five thousand men and women into the streets on short notice; or to lead them to mass with groups from other sections for a ringing march straight down Broadway or Fifth, or even Park, to City Hall. We must have worn an inch or two off the surface of the streets. Just give me the hungry and dispossessed and I could make them forget black and white and rush a squad of police, or throw an iron picket line around City Hall or the Mayor’s Mansion.

The Brotherhood’s activities are shown to produce positive results. After one demonstration of ten thousand “there was a lessening of police brutality, and an ordinance passed against evictions. And most of all more relief was provided.” The invisible man manifests heroism in battle—“I continued speaking. Bricks could fly, hostile cops could shatter heads and I’d hold my ground”—and evidently takes seriously his assignment to place his finger on Harlem’s pulse:

I began to be quite popular with the membership. Especially with that of Harlem. They were my secret. For it was by talking with them, standing in their bars, visiting [their] homes, listening to their problems, discussing their likes and dislikes that I was able to make fruitful suggestions to the top committees when policy was being made. Besides I reacted to events much as they did themselves. Thus whenever we launched a slogan it was forged so as to express their hopes as well as those of other groups and their support for most issues was won.

Ignoring, however, the most important part of Stein/Hambro's advice—that he should tell the truth—the invisible man acts manipulatively in relation to these “top committees”: “I learned to talk only after I had listened to them and when I talked I knew what they wanted and what they wanted to hear; thus in the big committee meetings of the leadership I knew what to say and to get our demands fitted into the general program. Oh I loved the role I played—or thought I played, and I played the role I loved.” Even more than in the published text, the invisible man of the drafts is a contradictory figure, in part opportunistically playing a role and in part committed to making the role a reality.<sup>47</sup>

The ironic perspective of the narrator in the 1952 novel guides the reader's attention toward both the illusion-filled protagonist and the menacing circles in which he moves. Ellison's sentence-level additions and substitutions reveal, however, that the retrospective narrator had to undergo considerable refashioning in order to perform this rhetorical function. In a passage describing the narrator's recollection of Brotherhood members from “the other sections,” Ellison made the following changes:

They were like no other people I had ever known. I liked their ability to organize[,] their selfless acceptance of human equality, and their willingness to get their heads beaten to bring it a fraction of a step closer. They were [*substituted: seemed*] willing to go all the way. Even their wages [*substituted: a great part of their wages*] went into the movement. And most of all I liked [*added: what I thought was*] their willingness to call things by their true names. Oh, I was truly carried away. For a while I was putting most of my salary back into the work [*substituted: Money was not so necessary when we found so much in our group*].

The narrator's observations of selfless behavior, originally presented as objective statements of fact, are altered to stress their subjectivity; he now sees the reality behind appearance. Eventually, however, Ellison omitted the

entire passage. Even in its qualified form this description of Communist selflessness supplied perhaps too compelling a rationale for the invisible man's decision to accept his new identity and role. Instead the reader is left with the distinct impression that the Brotherhood has money to throw around; the invisible man's astronomically high salary of sixty dollars per week suggests that he is being bribed by a corruption widespread in the organization.<sup>48</sup>

Even the invisible man's assuming a new name upon joining the Brotherhood takes on a different valence in the novel's earlier drafts. As he watches the "watery play of light" on the portrait of Douglass, he thinks:

How magical it was that [Douglass] had talked his way from slavery to a government ministry, and so swiftly. Perhaps, I thought, something of the kind is happening to me. Douglass came north to escape and find work in the shipyards; a big fellow in a sailor's suit who, like me, had taken another name. What had his true name been? Whatever it was, it was as Douglass that he became himself, defined himself. And not as a boatwright, as he'd expected, but as an orator. Perhaps the sense of magic lay in the unexpected transformations. "You start Saul, and end up Paul," my grandfather had often said. (381)

This passage in the 1952 text exhibits the seductiveness of the notion that one can assume an identity, even so heroic an identity as that of Frederick Douglass, when it is supplied by others; the invisible man is repeating his old errors and riding for a fall. In an earlier version, however, between the phrases "is happening to me" and "Douglass came north" are injected the words, "Only I knew more about how things were done than Douglass knew. I was no 19th century idealist, as LeRoy had written of Douglass, and in the Brotherhood we were dedicated to the fight for our beliefs. . . . Yes, there was magic about it."<sup>49</sup>

With the addition of these words, the ensuing reference to Douglass as "a big fellow in a sailor suit" not only recalls that in the previous century Douglass escaped from slavery with the help of abolitionist sailors but also connects him with the twentieth-century radical mariner who reflects upon the limitations of oratory in the absence of action and ponders how best to carry forward the combined legacy of Douglass and Brown. That Douglass had changed his name several times in the course of his escape—and allowed Nathan Johnson, his abolitionist host in New Bedford, to select the name "Douglass" for his final incarnation—further validates name changing as a feature of initiation into a new social role. The evident approval of

Douglass's transformation by the invisible man's grandfather, whose favorite song was "John Brown's Body," further valorizes the practice of changing identities in altering historical circumstances. The allusion to St. Paul (formerly Saul), whose words about rebirth, sight, and totality resonated in the protagonist's mind during the hospital scene, suggests that he is entering a phase when "that which is in part shall be done away"; he will stop "see[ing] as through a glass, darkly," and will encounter the world "face to face."<sup>50</sup>

At least so he hopes. Even in the drafts the invisible man's feeling that his transformation is "magical" bodes ill; in the published text he is closing his eyes to signs of trouble that are all too clear to the reader. To view his sense of transfiguration in an entirely ironic light, however, is something that even the retrospective narrator of the 1952 text cannot fully manage to do. Chapter 17 ends with the protagonist's confident statement, "Life was all pattern and discipline; and the beauty of discipline is when it works. And it was working very well." In an earlier draft Ellison penciled in the words, "If only it could have stopped right there." This observation lacks the ironic intonation of the narrator's other retrospective assessments of the "days of certainty." One wonders whether his creator at one point shared this regret, and with difficulty expunged it from the final draft.<sup>51</sup>

### "A lens is forming out of our scars and bruises":

#### The Magazine Interview

Struggling to truncate "purpose" and get into "passion" as he revised the novel's political section, Ellison omitted several episodes dramatizing the Brotherhood's activism in Harlem. Occurring in the period following the invisible man's reception of the poisoned pen letter warning him, "This is a *white man's world*" (383), these passages elaborate upon the young man's goals and achievements as an organizer. His interview with the magazine reporter—which, summarized rather than dramatized in the 1952 text, leads Wrestrum to accuse his rival of being a "dictator" and an "opportunist" (401)—is initially rendered as a conversation with Miss Laurel, an attractive young woman from *Brown Success* magazine. Asked where he was born, he jokes, "The Arena . . . right on the platform with the spotlight on me"; pressed, he states, "On one of those little Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina." Remarking on the "traces of African culture to be found there," she proposes, "Maybe you're the descendant of an African king." He replies that he was an orphan, raised by "an old woman called Aunt Mary" and taught to read by "some of the boys at the shine parlor." Denying that he ever "studied

under Dr. Bledsoe”—the reporter seems to have gotten wind of his past—he asserts, “Well, for a time I went to sea. . . . I was an ordinary seaman.”<sup>52</sup>

He then lays out the philosophy of the Brotherhood:

Freedom is not only the consciousness of necessity, Miss Laurel. It is also the recognition of possibility. First must come the recognition of the possibility of freedom. . . . Without the recognition of *possibility* freedom might lie close at hand unrecognized. A new ideal of freedom must at first be abstract, an idea; but with possibility it is different. Possibility must always be concrete, a technique, a body of concepts, a vision and since these can’t exist within the pure air, possibility means people, organized people. . . .

Growth is implicit in man, for he is born not in sin, but in discontent. He wants to move toward the light from the darkness. . . . Just let the mind get a peep at the possibility of freedom and it emerges cautiously from its world of darkness and looks around for a lens through which it can focus its sight. That lens is possibility. Sometime the lens lies right at hand and we fail to see it, or else we’re too timid.

His metaphors become wilder. “They say pearls come from grains of sand falling into the shell and irritating the delicate flesh of the oyster. Maybe that’s the way with consciousness. Your mind has to be bruised until it develops the pearl the eye is capable of seeing, accepting the vision that will melt the iron, crack the iron rock of reality.” The Negro people, he tells Miss Laurel, “have given birth to the pearl, and a lens is forming out of our scars and bruises, and soon we’ll all see that Brotherhood is the vision that will transform the world.” The scene ends with his failed attempt to secure a dinner date; Miss Laurel, it turns out, is married.<sup>53</sup>

The magazine interview features the invisible man’s giddy egotism: he pontificates, flirts, throws his weight around. But the interview reveals the extent to which he has accepted his doubling with LeRoy. He thinks, “My background came over with that vague, unreal twist that LeRoy’s had, and in fact, it read more like LeRoy’s real life than my own except for some things which I had said about brotherhood and consciousness.” In concocting for himself a history of being raised by a woman named Mary and then going to sea, he obviously has on his mind not just LeRoy but also LeRoy’s books about the hero; the invisible man’s fictional pedigree is straight out of Raglan and Rank. His claim to have come from the Sea Islands, with their strong folkloric ties to Africa, signals his identification with a cosmopolitan blackness (one that the older Ellison would insistently disavow). His assertion

that he learned to read and write at a shoe shine parlor recalls Douglass's narrative of how he acquired literacy. His comments on freedom, necessity, and possibility are an amalgam of LeRoy, the vet, Marx, and Engels, as well as Ellison's own writings for the *New Masses* and *Negro Quarterly*.<sup>54</sup>

Of special interest is the invisible man's somewhat convoluted metaphor about the pearl and the lens, which contains a Marxist reformulation of LeRoy's analysis of the basis for African Americans' role in creating a "better world." LeRoy had written that it is the Negro's experience with "brutalization," the extraction of bullion from blood, that yields particular insight into the current social order, as well as the need for a "more human" mode of existence. In an analogy drawn from the dialectics of nature, the invisible man here describes the emergence of the pearl out of the irritation produced by a grain of sand; the pearl beyond price is the negation of negation. In the same way, he proposes, the lens of class consciousness can be fashioned from the "scars and bruises" of Negro life. This metaphor suggestively recalls Ellison's *Daily Worker* recommendation in 1942 that both history and literature be viewed through "the clarifying lens of the Marxist ideology," which itself recalled Wright's description in "How Bigger Was Born" of how it felt when he envisioned Bigger Thomas's life from the standpoint of class consciousness: "[It was] as though I had put on a pair of spectacles whose power was that of an x-ray enabling me to see deeper into the lives of men."<sup>55</sup>

While the young man's enthusiasm is somewhat manic, it is difficult to view with irony his epistemological-cum-political formulation; it sounds too much like what Ellison used to proclaim. We are reminded of Ellison's statement to Burke that he felt compelled to approach the "universal" through the "racial grain of sand"; that grain of sand is no discrete or inert entity, but an agent capable of producing revolutionary insight. Perhaps Ellison's own political unconscious is at work as he narrates the invisible man's speech on behalf of LeRoy.

**"We decided we was goin to join":**

Hattie and Julius Franklin

The Brotherhood's poster campaign, which features the multiracial "Rainbow of America's Future," plays a minor role in the 1952 novel. Disappearing as soon as they are put up, the posters are the locus of mystery until it is discovered that, as Brother Tarp says, Harlemites are "taking them rainbow pictures and tacking 'em to their walls 'long with 'God Bless Our Home'

and the Lord's Prayer" (386). The episode serves mainly to fuel Wrestrum's envy and hostility. Originally, however, the posters' disappearance generates suspense—the Brotherhood fears sabotage, even FBI interference—until the invisible man, engaged in door-to-door canvassing, spots one of the posters in the apartment of a couple named Hattie and Julius Franklin. Hattie, who reminds him of Mary Rambo, recognizes him as “that speaking brother”; he is, she says, familiar to “everybody who knows how much good the brotherhood is been doing.” Complaining about Negro relief investigators “spying on their own folks,” as well as about white store clerks who call her “Honey,” Hattie prods her six-foot-four husband into confessing that he took the poster. She declares, “At least four of my friends got them on their walls. Hester Cook and Lizzie Sanders even had theirs framed.” She and her husband are not members of the Brotherhood, Hattie states, “But we believe in it and we supports everything youall do. I guess we never got around to joining.”<sup>56</sup>

The poster campaign, by virtue of its immense popularity, generates controversy in the mainstream press. While one newspaper attacks the Brotherhood as “subversive,” another attempts to co-opt the issue. Professing distrust of the “motives [and] questionable methods [of] . . . this increasingly conspicuous group,” the second paper asks, “Is this not a glimpse, garish though it may be, of our great and fecund American dream?” Dismissing the Brotherhood as “latecomers,” the editorial concludes, “We say let our slogan be, the American Dream achieved in the good American way!” The narrator recalls, “It gave us quite a laugh, we had them fighting among themselves and the fact that the placards were my project worked very well for me.” While the episode further illustrates Jack's opportunism and vanity—in one version he takes credit for the poster campaign once he learns of its success—the “Rainbow” poster's popularity also displays Popular Front propaganda at its most effective, as well as the genuine appeal for Harlemites of the left's multiracial approach to the fight against racism.<sup>57</sup>

The Franklins do not make just a cameo appearance. When the invisible man returns to Harlem after his assignment downtown, he finds them active in the Brotherhood's “Don't Buy Where You Can't Work” campaign, which is demanding jobs for Negro workers in Harlem stores. Hattie remarks that it was because of this activism that “we decided we was goin to join.” When during the riot the invisible man is attacked by Ras, Julius is shown defending him physically from Ras's “private strongarm squad.” Ellison's exclusion of the Franklins from *Invisible Man* effaces concrete and dramatized evidence

of the Brotherhood's success in reaching Harlem's working class. Hattie's resemblance to Mary is telling, for it expands the text's typifying range. While Mary largely remains, at least in the published text, a preindividual migrant, insisting that New York has not penetrated to her core, Hattie develops into a class-conscious activist. Julius, with his marked resemblance to the mythic John Henry, presents a black man in overalls other than Lucius Brockway. The image of this quintessential proletarian physically defending a fellow Communist from a band of Garveyites would have to be expunged from the 1952 text; when one of his editors suggested that the Franklins be eliminated from the manuscript, Ellison agreed.<sup>58</sup>

**“We building the movement together”:**

The Fired Tenement

Hattie and Julius Franklin were not to be the only supporters of the left among Harlem's working class. In another episode eliminated from the 1952 text the Brotherhood calls upon the city government to “provide more housing for the people” and pressures landlords to clean up their tenements; the focus of the campaign is a huge slum apartment building called the Jungle. Ellison notes that the building is “full of rats, vermine [*sic*]. Prostitution. Storefront church. Plagued by numbers runners, wineheads, . . . and politicians. . . . People too brutalized to fight against it.” Hoping to supply Harlem with what one organizer calls “a living demonstration to others that [the Brotherhood is] for the man lowest down,” the tenement campaign will guarantee that they “will always have allies, and will always be in touch with reality.” The tenement episode could have been based upon any number of CP organizing efforts in Harlem between the time Ellison arrived in 1936 until he left for the merchant marine in 1943.<sup>59</sup>

Thinking that he has seen Louise enter the building, the invisible man loses sight of her but overhears two tenants talking:

“Look here man,” I heard, “You know these here fays don’t act like ofays, they act like people!”

“What kinda people?”

And I bent closer, excited, as he said,

“Real people. The other night a couple of em invited me to go home with em, and I started not to go; then I changed my mind. I said to myself, If they can ask me, then least I can do is go.”

Responding to his friend's skepticism, the first speaker continues:

“Now the last thing in the world I wanted out of the Brotherhood was to go sitting up in some white man’s house. All I wanted was the sons-a-bitches whas poor as me to take off some of that pressure sos I could get myself something. Cause I always figures I could get mine if they left me alone. But this is something much bigger than I thought. I’m in it for good now. They invite me to they house, I invite them to mine; they serve me sauerkraut and winnies, I serve em red rice and beans, and we building the movement together.”

The inhabitants of the Jungle enact the hospitality extended toward class-conscious whites that the composite *we* of Wright’s *Twelve Million Black Voices* recognizes as key to the migrants’ emergence into modernity: “We invited them into our homes and broke our scanty bread with them, and this was our supreme gesture of trust.”<sup>60</sup>

Ellison imagined different outcomes to the episode, all involving fire. In one draft, when the fire breaks out the invisible man helps people escape and becomes “a hero by default.” In what appear to be later versions, Brotherhood organizers “see [the] fire and allow it to burn. Then . . . it must be decided whether they do so through callousness or out of their belief that large numbers will benefit from its destruction.” In a variant of this debate, “one group thought of burning building [but] are stopped by danger to people, tenants’ possible loss of life.” Ellison eventually decided that the fire would be deliberately set by members of the Brotherhood: “Fire grows out of conflict between two factions: out of color situation; out of efforts of some members of faction to create incident that will bring Harlemites to pitch of indignation.” The invisible man’s heroic saving of lives would be manipulated: “They must *use* him just as they use the event of the fire. . . . They burn houses and risk lives of tenants in order to do good. He saves lives at risk of his own. . . . He reveals the essential anti-humanity of their humanism.” An episode originally intended to demonstrate the Brotherhood’s sincere concern over poverty is transmuted into proof of its perfidy.<sup>61</sup>

### “The bear that was a man”: Brotherhood and Sacrifice

At some point during the composition of *Invisible Man* Ellison abandoned a fragmentary, and more than slightly bizarre, episode that was variously titled “Barbecue,” “The Bear That Was a Man,” and “Bear in Window.” To be located after the invisible man has gone downtown and then returned to Harlem, the unevenly sketched chapter shows him learning from Brother

Tarp that Harlemites are tiring of the new Harlem leaders' abstract verbiage and hungering for the kinds of parades and actions previously organized by the protagonist. The invisible man hatches a plan for a huge Brotherhood-sponsored barbecue, to be held in the park under the George Washington Bridge, to which all of Harlem will be invited; the chief attraction will be a barbecued bear. When the bear arrives from Alaska "in a box like a coffin," it is discovered that the bear is frozen and has already been skinned. The "naked" bear is placed in the refrigerated display window of a restaurant, with a sign reading, "YOU HAVE A DATE WITH JACK THE BROTHERHOOD BARBECUE BEAR—FREE." People in the crowd remark that the bear resembles a man; the invisible man assures them, "That's Jack the Bear standing there." The text breaks off after an old woman peers through her spectacles and proclaims, "He might not be a *bearman* . . . but he sure is a *man* bear." The actual cooking and consumption of the bear are not portrayed, although in another sketch of the problems facing the invisible man on his return to Harlem Ellison jotted, "Barbecue makes people sick."<sup>62</sup>

It is not clear how this strange episode was supposed to align with other elements in Ellison's contradictory patterning of the Brotherhood's relationship with Harlem, let alone with the many references to the folkloric Jack-the-Bear scattered throughout the text. On the one hand, the eerie resemblance of the bear to a man, compounded by its having been skinned and readied for public cooking and consumption, suggests a human sacrifice, even a lynching; we recall Ellison's chilling comparison of a lynched man with a barbecued hog in "A Party Down at the Square." That this ritual would be carried out in the name of the Brotherhood is indicated by the jotted words beneath the title "The Bear That Was a Man": "The Brotherhood has invited you to eat one of your own. That's what it wants you to do." This grim association of the Brotherhood with murder, even cannibalism, anticipates the invisible man's closing nightmare of castration by the lynch mob led by Brother Jack. That both events take place in the shadow of the bridge named after the first of the Founding Fathers suggests the Brotherhood's betrayal of the democratic legacy. Especially when read backward from the standpoint of Ellison's anticommunist American nationalism post-1952, the "Bear in Window" episode can be taken to indicate that, from the outset, he intended to condemn the Brotherhood as "lynchers of my people," as he had railed in the letter from September 1945 to Hyman accusing the Communists of having "done something far worse to the ideas of socialism than the Nazi did to the Jews."<sup>63</sup>

On the other hand, the bear's ritual association with death and rebirth—as the Cambridge School theorist Rhys Carpenter put it, “Death in the midst of life, and some hope of life even after the crushing calamity of death”—makes it difficult to read the “*man bear*” as simply a victimized scapegoat. Ellison indicated various alternative possibilities when he wrote, “What if in story of the barbecued bear he is treated as Manna? This requires context of some kind—political? It is, after all, a context, an agon. Bear a sacrifice? What if bear actually is a—man? What consequences other than the legal?” One possibility is that sometimes a bear, even if it looks like a man, may be just a bear. Ellison's notation that a context which is political is required implies another possibility: that he came up with the bear-sacrifice theme when thinking in another context, perhaps biblical, as is intimated by the reference to manna, the divinely supplied food that sustained the Israelites during their flight from Egypt. But insofar as Negro folklore analogized African Americans under slavery with Israelites under Pharaoh's rule—and CP-inflected updatings analogized slaves with present-day workers and Pharaoh with capital—the notion that the barbecued bear would supply necessary nourishment on the journey to a better world dramatically reconfigures the episode's political context, transforming it from an allegory of lynching into one of emancipation. The interpretive possibilities are dizzying.<sup>64</sup>

LeRoy may help here in synthesizing what are otherwise two utterly incompatible readings. For the radical mariner was totemically consumed as “Tom the turkey” by those who had dedicated him and set him aside. The notion that the Brotherhood would invite Harlemites to “eat one of [their] own” might signify not the murder and cannibalism of a victimized scapegoat but the sacrifice of an honored god. As symbolic action the barbecue would thus embody not a lynching but a counterlynching: the ritual consumption of the cooked and dismembered bear would, like the symbolic ingestion of the sacrificed king, serve to affirm and strengthen the community's communalism and communion. From this standpoint the protagonist's plan to locate the barbecue in the shadow of the George Washington Bridge reveals the representational contradictions accompanying Popular Front nationalism, but not necessarily in an ironizing way. Does the archetypal Founding Father look down kindly on this bonding ritual of his people? Or does he aim to keep in the shadow of his iron might the descendants of his slaves? “Bear in Window,” while a source of comic relief, contains a host of ambiguities barely resolvable even in the context of the richer and more complex treatment of myth, ritual, and politics shaping the novel's early

drafts. One thing is clear: once LeRoy was killed off there remained no means by which the “Bear in Window” material could be effectively related to the rest of the novel. It was fated to join the many other narrative elements, realistic and allegorical alike, that would be excised by Ellison’s editorial knife.

Ellison’s decision to omit many Harlem-based episodes—the parade, the magazine interview, the poster campaign, the encounter with the Franklins, the tenement organizing, the bear barbecue—has an impact on *Invisible Man* that is both quantitative and qualitative. In the 1952 text, with the exception of Brother Tarp, the only migrants encountered by the invisible man before the riot—Mary without her roomers, Peter Wheatstraw without his discarded flag, the yam man without his factory worker history—are folk figures who seem largely out of touch with the proletarianizing forces of modernity. Along with the youths playing the dozens with Brotherhood slogans in the antieviction parade, however, the Franklins, the inhabitants of Mary’s apartment, and the unnamed dwellers of the Jungle leave a concrete visual and aural impression of the relevance of the Brotherhood’s theory and practice to many of Harlem’s inhabitants. It was one thing for the narrator to summarize in ironic retrospect his memories of the “days of certainty” preceding his downfall. It was quite another thing—as Ellison, a careful reader of Henry James’s prefaces, well knew—to dramatize and flesh out the Brotherhood’s interactions with Harlemites who assume a reality of their own.

Ellison’s omission of these working-class episodes and characterizations is compounded by the conversion of Stein into Hambro, the increasingly robotic characterization of Jack, the elimination of Louise, and the excision of LeRoy as the protagonist’s abiding secret sharer—revisionary acts that profoundly transform the text’s carriers of a leftist political vision. On another rhetorical level (more subtle and subliminal, but for that reason far harder to detect), Ellison’s cancellation of the reference to Marxism as a clarifying lens removes from the novel’s guiding trope of blindness and vision the dialectical possibility that vision can be magnified and focused by science. His comparable reworking of the motif of electric power in the arena rally episode negates the possibility that industrial technology can function as a means of both individual development and collective working-class resistance. In his revisions of the first half of the Brotherhood section, the way is being prepared for the lowering of the political boom in the second half.

Up to this point, however, Ellison’s shuttling back and forth between the mid-1930s and the early 1940s has not posed any significant problems to his

“political allegory.” The Brotherhood activities he has featured are fairly typical of the Popular Front left. As long as “purpose” and “passion” dominate the invisible man’s motivations, the larger historical forces shaping his radical activism—the Depression and the war—can remain largely unspecified. When he is moved into the phase of “perception,” however, history comes to the fore; occlusion becomes repression. Let us keep in mind which gods rule the seas as we move into the gathering storm.