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THE EMERGENCE OF THE TRICKSTER FIGURE IN RALPH ELLISON'S *INVISIBLE MAN*

In his novel, Ralph Ellison traces the painful initiation story of his protagonist called invisible man. Unlike the traditional Bildungsroman plot, however, at the end of the story, the protagonist does not rise hero-like and gain the recognition and admiration of the community. Quite to the contrary: instead of going up the social ladder, he literally goes underground in a forgotten basement, which he rigs with hundreds of incandescent light-bulbs. This puzzling attitude is the effect of the insight Invisible man gains during his epic journey from the American South to the Harlem ghetto of New York. In a society structured to favor the whites and obstruct the colored people, the protagonist's black skin works repeatedly against him until he takes advantage of his weakness in the true spirit of the quintessential African-American folklore trickster figure.

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Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* is considered to be one of the quintessential African-American novels. It is an initiation novel following the self-determination epic journey of the unnamed protagonist from unconditional adherence to external identity narratives to disillusionment and finally to the emergence of self-awareness and the rejection of all pre-fabricated identity discourses. The process of gaining self-reliance is accompanied by a second transformation: the protagonist sheds his morally rigid ethical outlook on life and adopts the trappings of the 'trickster figure'. In African-American folklore the trickster figure is usually a weak animal or person, but nevertheless capable of outsmarting much stronger opponents. In other words, using one's intelligence, the trickster figure manages to compensate for his apparent disadvantages in terms of physical strength.

At the beginning of the novel, the protagonist recounts the then confusing admonition of his grandfather upon his deathbed, who tells him to adopt a basically trickster-figure attitude to the white people. At the time, the protagonist is baffled and shocked at this rebellious advice. Gradually, as Invisible man undergoes a series of disappointments and betrayals, he comes to see the wisdom of his grandfather's

words in his dealings not only with whites, but altogether as an identity formation. The figure of Rhinehart, who adopts a multitude of identities, becomes the catalyst of the protagonist's transformation and adoption of the trickster sensibility and identity since it is the only viable mechanism for a black man to overcome the institutionalized racism of white society.

The process of the protagonist's transformation from a gullible young man who takes at face value identity narratives to a self-reliant disillusioned trickster figure is a lengthy one and understanding that process requires a definition of the trickster figure. The trickster appears in many folklore traditions, including in the Bulgarian one personified by Hitar Petar. In African-American context, trickster figures empower the enslaved Africans by the dramatization of a conflict situation where the weaker protagonist, an animal or a person, manages to outsmart a physically stronger adversary. Since the slaves were historically the weakest class in American society, they identified with the weaker, but smarter trickster figure, who by means of wits manages to triumph against the odds and vicariously bring victory to the downtrodden people as well. According to Harris:

...tricksters succeed by outsmarting or outthinking their opponents. In executing their actions, they give no thought to right or wrong; indeed, they are amoral. Mostly, they are pictured in contest or quest situations, and they must use their wits to get out of trouble or bring about a particular result. Though trickster tales in African American culture are frequently a source of humor, they also contain serious commentary on the inequities of existence in a country where the promises of democracy were denied to a large portion of the citizenry, a pattern that becomes even clearer in the literary adaptations of trickster figures. As black people who were enslaved gained literacy and began to write about their experiences, they incorporated figures from oral tradition into their written creations. In fact, some scholars have argued that the African American oral tradition is the basis for all written literary production by African Americans. (Harris)

As evidenced from the above quote, the trickster figure acquires ubiquitous symbolic significance throughout all African-American writing. The protagonist of *Invisible Man*, though, is ignorant of the importance of that mode of perception of the world at the beginning of his journey. His first encounter with the trickster ethics is shocking and incomprehensible. Upon his deathbed, his grandfather gives the protagonist's father advice which sounds like the manifesto of a subversive political organization. It runs counter to the meek persona his grandfather cultivated throughout his life. Regarding the white people, he urges he admonishes:

Son, after I'm gone I want you to keep up the good fight. I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open. (Ellison 1995:16)

At this point his grandfather's words fall on deaf ears, because the protagonist has fully subscribed to the socially accepted view that black people should know their place and resign to the lower social status assigned to them by the whites. Waging war on that norm is far from the sensibility of the protagonist. As the title of the novel suggests, his invisibility derives not only from the inability of the white people to recognize his existence but also suggests his keeping a low profile, that is, adopting an accommodating attitude towards the whites rather than waging war on them.

Fully believing in the gospel of humility, the protagonist embarks on a journey of self-discovery, which in literary terms can be described as an initiation story. His first lesson is in humility and is learned during the *battle royal* upon his graduation where he and several more young black men are humiliated by the white patrons of the school. This episode is striking not only with the arrogance of the white patrons of the school towards the African-American graduating young men, but also with the uncritical and self-abasing attitude of acceptance the protagonist. The most poignant part of the episode is when following the fight with other black boys, dazed while blood is filling his mouth during his speech in front the white patrons of the school, he mispronounces social *responsibility* as social *equality*:

The laughter hung smoke like in the sudden stillness. I opened my eyes puzzled. Sounds of displeasure filled the room. They shouted hostile phrases at me. But I did not understand. A small dry mustached man in the front blared out, "Say that slowly, son!"

"Social responsibility, sir," said.

"You weren't being smart, were you boy?" he said, not unkindly.

No sir...I was swallowing blood".

Well, you had better speak more slowly so we can understand. We mean to do right by you, but you've got to know your place at all times." (Ellison 1995: 31)

His second lesson is after the fiasco with Mr. Norton. The protagonist fails in taking the white man on a tour of the black community and ends up introducing him to the seamy underside of the supposedly progressive community that the black college's head Dr. Bledsoe wants to impress the white patron with. Following that disaster, Dr. Bledsoe informs Invisible man that he has failed the cause of the black people and that he no longer can study at the college. The young man's inability to comprehend where he erred in respect to Norton and the black people's cause compels Dr. Bledsoe to give him a lecture, which in its essence is an articulation of the trickster ethics. When the protagonist, believing that he is being wronged, threatens to expose the injustice committed by Dr. Bledsoe, the head of the college gives him a short lecture on what his true place is:

„Tell anyone you like," he said. „I don't care. I wouldn't raise my little finger to stop you. Because I don't owe anyone a thing, son. Who, Negroes? Negroes don't control this school or much of anything else -- haven't you learned even that? No, sir, they don't control this school, nor white folk either. True they support it, but I control it. I's big and black and I say ,Yes, suh' as loudly as any burr-head when it's

convenient, but I'm still the king down here. I don't care how much it appears otherwise. Power doesn't have to show off. Power is confident, self-assuring, self-starting and self-stopping, self-warming and self-justifying. When you have it, you know it.

Let the Negroes snicker and the crackers laugh! Those are the facts, son. The only ones I even pretend to please are big white folk, and even those I control more than they control me. This is a power set-up, son, and I'm at the controls. You think about that. When you buck against me, you're bucking against power, rich white folk's power, the nation's power -- which means government power!"

He paused to let it sink in and I waited, feeling a numb, violent outrage. „And I'll tell you something your sociology teachers are afraid to tell you," he said. „If there weren't men like me running schools like this, there'd be no South. Nor North, either. No, and there'd be no country -- not as it is today. You think about that, son.“ He laughed. „With all your speechmaking and studying I thought you understood something. But you . . . All right, go ahead. See Norton. You'll find that he wants you disciplined; he might not know it, but he does. Because he knows that I know what is best for his interests. You're a black educated fool, son. These white folk have newspapers, magazines, radios, spokesmen to get their ideas across. If they want to tell the world a lie, they can tell it so well that it becomes the truth; and if I tell them that you're lying, they'll tell the world even if you prove you're telling the truth. Because it's the kind of lie they want to hear . . .“

I heard the high thin laugh again. „You're nobody, son. You don't exist -- can't you see that? The white folk tell everybody what to think -- except men like me. I tell them; that's my life, telling white folk how to think about the things I know about. Shocks you, doesn't it? Well, that's the way it is. It's a nasty deal and I don't always like it myself. But you listen to me: I didn't make it, and I know that I can't change it. But I've made my place in it and I'll have every Negro in the country hanging on tree limbs by morning if it means staying where I am.“ (Ellison 1995: 143)

Dr. Bledsoe is the consummate trickster figure. He is aware of the power structure underlying the relation of African-Americans to the dominant white culture and he has learned that the only way for a black person to rise in this power set-up is by manipulating the white folks while letting them think they are in charge. Bledsoe is a brilliant trickster-artist. Seeing the protagonist's naiveté, he gives him a frank and straightforward lecture on how American society functions. This is the second time the young man encounters the trickster ethics. Yet, despite its details being spelled-out for him, he once again fails to understand its inherent wisdom. He is shocked at Bledsoe's unapologetic aggression even towards his own race. Bledsoe knows that in order for a black man to prosper in a white man's world, he has to acknowledge what Hansen calls "the dominance of White culture from slave times on through the present (Hansen 1979: 42)". Bledsoe has done exactly that and seemingly bows down to the established order; yet, in his doings with the white people he re-enacts the trickster figure aesthetics by manipulating skilfully the dominant cultural narrative. This is the kind of wisdom that eludes the young man, yet.

In spite of the lecture, the protagonist continues his journey with the firm conviction that identity formation is a project he can master if only he perseveres.

He is hired by a political organization operating in Harlem, New York as a speaker. Following a number of incidents, the protagonist realizes that his idealistic motives for joining the organization are at odds with its political goals. Once again, he is cast in the role of the gullible fool used to further the ulterior motives of someone else. It is important to point out that The Brotherhood is run by white people, who predictably designate for him a role and identity that come into conflict with his true self. He finds himself in a situation similar to the one Hansen describes when he claims that the black people's "social and psychological existence has been largely defined by the dominant culture's values and attitudes towards Blacks (Hansen 1979: 42)". Once again, he is invisible as a human being to others, since they see him only as a tool to further their needs:

For all they were concerned, we were so many names scribbled on fake ballots, to be used at their convenience and when not needed to be filed away. It was a joke, an absurd joke. And now I looked around a corner of my mind and saw Jack and Norton and Emerson merge into one single white figure. They were very much the same, each attempting to force his picture of reality upon me and neither giving a hoot in hell for how things looked to me. I was simply a material, a natural resource to be used. I had switched from the arrogant absurdity of Norton and Emerson to that of Jack and the Brotherhood, and it all came out the same -- except I now recognized my invisibility (Ellison 1995: 508).

Following his disillusionment with the Brotherhood and his quest for identity formation, the protagonist experiences another jolt to his code of moral conduct. He is consistently being mistaken for a certain Rhinehart; moreover, Rhinehart apparently has many personal identities: he is a reverend, a pimp, a street-wise crook etc. The possibilities opening up to the protagonist, after he is mistaken for Rhinehart, are staggering. He realizes that Rhinehart is morally fluid and hence, adaptable character, in stark contrast to his own moral rigidity. Rhinehart's flexibility ensures him prosperity by removing the self-imposed limitations that afflict Invisible man. Rhinehart is yet another trickster figure manipulating and triumphing over others and inspires invisible man to finally adopt the same ethics. Even the name Rhinehart is symbolic of moral fluidity, he is both *rind* and *heart*, form and content, inside and out, defying any categorization and labelling, defying constraints and, respectively, attaining ultimate freedom:

So I'd accept it, I'd explore it, rine and heart. I'd plunge into it with both feet and they'd gag. Oh, but wouldn't they gag. I didn't know what my grandfather had meant, but I was ready to test his advice. I'd overcome them with yeses, undermine them with grins, I'd agree them to death and destruction. Yes, and I'd let them swallow me until they vomited or burst wide open. Let them gag on what they refused to see. Let them choke on it.

That was one risk they hadn't calculated. That was a risk they had never dreamt of in their philosophy. Nor did they know that they could discipline themselves to destruction, that saying „yes“ could destroy them. Oh, I'd yes them, but wouldn't I yes them! I'd yes them till they puked and rolled in it. All they wanted of

me was one belch of affirmation and I'd bellow it out loud. Yes! Yes! YES! That was all anyone wanted of us, that we should be heard and not seen, and then heard only in one big optimistic chorus of yassuh, yassuh, yassuh! All right, I'd yea, yea and oui, oui and si, si and see, see them too; and I'd walk around in their guts with hobnailed boots. Even those super-big shots whom I'd never seen at committee meetings. They wanted a machine? Very well, I'd become a supersensitive confirmer of their misconceptions, and just to hold their confidence I'd try to be right part of the time. Oh, I'd serve them well and I'd make invisibility felt if not seen, and they'd learn that it could be as polluting as a decaying body, or a piece of bad meat in a stew. And if I got hurt? Very well again. Besides, didn't they believe in sacrifice? They were the subtle thinkers -- would this be treachery? Did the word apply to an invisible man? Could they recognize choice in that which wasn't seen . . . ?

The more I thought of it the more I fell into a kind of morbid fascination with the possibility. Why hadn't I discovered it sooner? How different my life might have been! How terribly different! Why hadn't I seen the possibilities? If a sharecropper could attend college by working during the summers as a waiter and factory hand or as a musician and then graduate to become a doctor, why couldn't all those things be done at one and the same time? And wasn't that old slave a scientist -- or at least called one, recognized as one -- even when he stood with hat in hand, bowing and scraping in senile and obscene servility? My God, what possibilities existed! And that spiral business, that progress goo! Who knew all the secrets; hadn't I changed my name and never been challenged even once? And that lie that success was a rising upward. What a crummy lie they kept us dominated by. Not only could you travel upward toward success but you could travel downward as well; up and down, in retreat as well as in advance, crabways and crossways and around in a circle, meeting your old selves coming and going and perhaps all at the same time. How could I have missed it for so long? Hadn't I grown up around gambler-politicians, bootlegger-judges and sheriffs who were burglars; yes, and Klansmen who were preachers and members of humanitarian societies? Hell, and hadn't Bledsoe tried to tell me what it was all about? I felt more dead than alive (Ellison 1995: 508).

Finally, the protagonist has realized that the world is just a stage for the play of trickery. He cannot win as long as he plays by the rules of moral rigidity. The odds are against him and adopting the trickster ethics does not ensure that he automatically will become the winner, but at least he will no longer be the fool who is always taken advantage of. At the end of the story, structurally situated at the beginning of the novel, Invisible man is deep underground in a basement long forgotten by everyone else and illuminated by thousands of light bulbs. This surreal setting can be interpreted in a number of ways.

First, it is a subversive act in the line of the trickster ethics, especially with the explicit statement that he has deliberately wired the least energy efficient type of light bulb with the express purpose of siphoning off as much electricity as possible. It is a symbolic act of revenge against a system which has repeatedly mocked and frustrated his efforts for social equality and dignity. Though he cannot defeat the

system by stealing electricity from the electric company, the protagonist engages in trickery because he has relinquished moral conventions about wrong and right, and switched to a more protean and fluid mode of being, in compliance with the amorality of the trickster figures, as outlined by Harris:

In executing their actions, they give no thought to right or wrong; indeed, they are amoral. Mostly, they are pictured in contest or conquest situations, and they must use their wits to get out of trouble or bring about a particular result. For example, in one African American folktale, Brer Rabbit, the quintessential trickster figure in African American folklore, succeeds in getting Brer Fox to rescue him from a well by asserting that the moon reflected in the water at the bottom of the well is really a block of cheese. Brer Fox jumps in the other water bucket, descends into the well, and in the process, enables Brer Rabbit to rise to freedom. (Harris)

The second line of interpretation is ironic. The protagonist admits it, and yet his very invisibility, which he by now sees both as an affliction and a possibility, necessitates that he is surrounded by light in order to assure himself that he exists and has form. This need arises from his perception of his invisibility as a burden he resented throughout his life. The paradox is that the possibility aspect of his invisibility relies on taking on various identities and shapes. In other words, he is no longer dependant for his self-identification on his old form, and respectively on light to confirm that form. At the end of the novel, Invisible man no longer resists his historically-determined identity of invisibility. Instead, he basks in his newly-acquired self-acceptance and the infinite array of opportunities it opens up in front of him. He is no longer to be defined and excluded by white society. In the true spirit of the trickster figure, he is going to take advantage of his very weakness and dive with his new fluidity into the imperfect society of the white man. He is still invisible, but he shifts his perspective on it, seeing it in positive light, not as a burden:

Perhaps you'll think it strange that an invisible man should need light, desire light, love light. But maybe it is exactly because I am invisible. Light confirms my reality, gives birth to my form. A beautiful girl once told me of a recurring nightmare in which she lay in the center of a large dark room and felt her face expand until it filled the whole room, becoming a formless mass while her eyes ran in bilious jelly up the chimney. And so it is with me. Without light I am not only invisible, but formless as well; and to be unaware of one's form is to live a death. I myself, after existing some twenty years, did not become alive until I discovered my invisibility.

That is why I fight my battle with Monopolated Light & Power. The deeper reason, I mean: It allows me to feel my vital aliveness. I also fight them for taking so much of my money before I learned to protect myself. In my hole in the basement there are exactly 1,369 lights. I've wired the entire ceiling, every inch of it. And not with fluorescent bulbs, but with the older, more-expensive-to-operate kind, the filament type. An act of sabotage, you know. I've already begun to wire the wall. A junk man I know, a man of vision, has supplied me with wire and sockets. Nothing, storm or flood, must get in the way of our need for light and ever more and brighter light. The truth is the light and light is the truth. When I finish all four walls, then I'll start on the floor. Just how that will go, I don't know. Yet when you have lived invisible as

long as I have you develop a certain ingenuity. I'll solve the problem. And maybe I'll invent a gadget to place my coffeepot on the fire while I lie in bed, and even invent a gadget to warm my bed – like the fellow I saw in one of the picture magazines who made himself a gadget to warm his shoes! Though invisible, I am in the great American tradition of tinkers. That makes me kin to Ford, Edison and Franklin. Call me, since I have a theory and a concept, a „thinker-tinker.” Yes, I'll warm my shoes; they need it, they're usually full of holes. I'll do that and more. (Ellison 1995:7)

As already stated, this novel is an initiation story implying that the protagonist undergoes the process of growing up and shedding his naïvely-romantic notions. In regards to that, the novel complies with the pattern of initiation. However, unlike the traditional story, the protagonist does not rise in social status. Instead, he burrows deep underground in a hole similarly to an animal looking for safety. What then is the nature of his newly-found maturity? Following disillusionment with society, invisible man chooses to escape it. This, however, is a paradox because escapism is also a form of romantic daydreaming. We might infer that the protagonist does not so much grow up, but rather, merely shifts from one form of romantic expectation, at the beginning of his journey to another, at its end. Such a conclusion is refuted by the fact that the protagonist does not intend to spend the rest of his life in this light-suffused hole, but is devising strategies to use it as a staging ground for his forays into the world up above in his new identity as a trickster figure, who is no longer circumscribed by the self-imposed limitations of his early naiveté. This is the crucial fact for the interpretation of the novel as an initiation novel. If the protagonist had declared his disillusionment as the reason for his final escape from society, the novel would be a failed initiation story. This is not the case and the protagonist adopts all the trappings of the quintessential African-American trickster figure who puts his weakness to good use in overcoming much stronger adversaries.

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