

THE ENTROPIC WORLD VIEW OF RALPH ELLISON'S
INVISIBLE MAN

By

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PREFACE

Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man has intrigued me for a number of years. Because of my inability to pinpoint exactly why, I was driven to explore Ellison's non-prose fiction and criticism of his novel to see what was operating within the novel's structure which would explain why his only novel continues to be a source of much critical attention.

Having waded through criticism ranging from arguments "based" on Ellison's racial background to studies of Ellison's use of myth and folklore, I was still left unsure until I discovered Jeremy Rifkin's Entropy: A New World View. After reading this book, in which Rifkin analyzes the need for modern states to be aware of the entropic effects of their present world views, I began to realize that Ellison was dealing with a similar theme, but on a more personal basis. Thus, this thesis explores Ellison's use of entropic imagery in terms of invisible man's development of a new world view.

This project would have been impossible to complete without the help of a number of people. First, I wish to express my gratitude to my major adviser and committee chair, Dr. Edward P. Walkiewicz, for his guidance, concern, and invaluable suggestions. Our discussions on entropy as a theme in American literature solidified and expanded many of the arguments I present in this thesis. I am also grateful for the help of my other committee members: Dr. Paul Klemp's insightful comments and suggestions about style helped me transform a glob of material into a thesis; Dr. Jeffrey Walker's critical comments and keen eye pushed me

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Some critics read Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man as an initiation story--the struggle of a black youth to find his black manhood while fighting against a white society. Others view it as a protest novel--a protest against the condition of blacks in white America. Those who view it as initiation story and as a protest novel are concerned with the world view of invisible man, his way of knowing his relationship to society. In focusing on the development of invisible man's world view, previous critics of Ralph Ellison's novel have placed Invisible Man into the following categories or combination of categories: mythic/folkloric; existential; Emersonian; and/or apocalyptic. According to the critics, each of these views offers invisible man alternatives to the world view imposed on him by white society. Thus, the emphasis is on invisible man's rejection of the place society offers him and his acceptance of one or more of the world views listed.

The mythic/folkloric world view has received the most attention. The critics who analyze this aspect of Invisible Man stress Ellison's use of Western, American, and Negro myth and folklore in developing the "new" world view reached by invisible man in the hole. Lawrence J. Clipper examines the structure of Invisible Man in terms of Lord Raglan's The Hero, which influenced Ellison when he first began to consider writing a novel. Clipper writes in "Folkloric and Mythic Elements in Invisible Man" that Ellison "superimposes" the mythic pattern on the folkloric

(231). Thus, for Clipper, the narrator has both mythic and folkloric characteristics. Clipper concludes that in the hole invisible man discovers the divinity within himself. In a somewhat different view, Susan Blake argues in "Ritual and Rationalization: Black Folklore in the Works of Ralph Ellison" that invisible man's search is for group not individual identity. Blake contends that Ellison ties "black" folklore to the myths of Western and American culture to show how "black" myth and folklore become a part of "white" society's myth and folklore (121). In this analysis, invisible man through his awareness of "black" myth and folklore is able to become a part of white society.

Robert G. O'Meally's The Craft of Ralph Ellison is the most comprehensive study of Ellison's use and understanding of myth and folklore. O'Meally traces Ellison's use of these elements, sparked by his interest in Eliot's The Waste Land, through Ellison's critical essays and fiction. By examining Ellison's use of folk history, spirituals, sermons, and the blues, O'Meally points to the world view of Invisible Man's narrator: a reliance on and acceptance of his cultural past.

In "Politics as Ritual: Ellison's Zoot Suit," an article mostly concerned with defending Ellison from the attacks of communist and "liberal" critics, Larry Neal also discusses the role of myth in Invisible Man, writing that the universe of invisible man is mythic and folkloric. Thus, invisible man is able to shape his possible future based on a usable past (51). Like Neal, Bluestein discusses the role of the blues in invisible man's new world view. In "The Blues as a Literary Theme," Gene Bluestein discusses the blues and its function as an aspect of myth and folklore in Invisible Man. Bluestein applies Ellison's writings on the blues and jazz to invisible man's "transcendence" (616) in the hole, emphasizing that invisible man's world view is not a rejec-

tion of his past but an acceptance of the values he finds worthwhile and usable in his present situation (604).

The work dealing with the existentialist world view of Invisible Man is brief. In "Existentialism in Recent American Fiction: The Demonic Quest," Richard Lehan writes that Ellison's novel is not necessarily a "consciously" existentialist work, but no matter how remote the ties to European existentialists, there is a connection (181). Claiming that invisible man is killed by the society which creates him, Lehan concludes that invisible man is an "existential martyr" (198). This analysis overlooks invisible man's comments that it is only after he has fallen underground that he is able to live. Stewart Lillard briefly mentions that on levels other than the episodic, his focus in "Ellison's Ambitious Scope in Invisible Man," Invisible Man deals with existentialism. In a more thorough analysis, Addison Gayle in The Way of the New World: The Black Novel in America writes that there is a strong link between Ellison and European existentialists because of Ellison's emphasis on the individual in relation to the chaotic world. For Gayle, this means that Ellison is unable to write a novel "beyond race" (212). To support this view, Gayle states that all of the black characters represent man's desire to remain human, whereas all of the white characters represent a history of man changed from human to machine. Thus, whites represent a dead culture, blacks the potential for a live one. Gayle accuses Ellison as critic of feeding the critics the existential criteria which they desire.

Besides the fact that they share first and middle names, the relationship between Ellison and Emerson is a close one in many respects. Robert Bone writes of Ellison's attraction to the transcendentalists, especially Emerson, in "Ralph Ellison and the Uses of the Imagination."

Bone's contention that invisible man escapes the "fixed boundaries of southern life" (45) overlooks the blindness of invisible man to his own situation, whether in the North or South, New York or Harlem. In various interviews and articles, Ellison repeatedly points out that invisible man's major weakness is his inability to see his relationship to society. In a brief comment, Bluestein writes that the world view of invisible man is partially Emersonian in the sense that the "reality of our lives needs to be held constantly to the demands of the American dream" (614). In the most thoughtful of these comparisons of Ellison and Emerson, Leonard Deutsch writes that invisible man experiences a conversion to Emersonian idealism. However, Deutsch emphasizes in "Ralph Waldo Ellison and Ralph Waldo Emerson: A Shared Moral Vision" that Ellison and Emerson have conflicting views on some issues, including the nature of the universe: Emerson believes in its innate harmony, whereas Ellison believes that the mind must impose order. Nevertheless, according to Deutsch, the similarities outweigh such differences. Refuting claims that Ellison is parodying Emerson, Deutsch writes that Ellison instead attacks the "capitalistic perversion" of Emerson's ideals (178). In this analysis, Deutsch views invisible man's development as a rejection of false gods (Norton, Bledsoe, and Jack) for the god within himself.

The emphasis on the individual is also apparent in works dealing with the apocalyptic world view of Invisible Man. In Trials of the Word R. W. B. Lewis writes of apocalypse as comedy in Invisible Man and how invisible man's understanding of the chaos of the world enables him to give meaning to his existence (218). In "The Apocalyptic Temper," Robert Alter expands on Lewis's theme, calling the narrator's development "a picaresque version of the apocalypse" (61). While admitting that Invisible Man fits other categories, Alter states that the work exhibits the

apocalyptic theme in many sections.

Zbigniew Lewicki gives the most in-depth analysis of apocalypse in Invisible Man. Writing in The Barg and the Whimper: Apocalypse and Entropy in American Literature, Lewicki contends that the apocalyptic "explosions" in the novel lead to purification and rebirth for invisible man (53). According to Lewicki, Ellison's reliance on apocalyptic structure (also indicating an apocalyptic world view) reveals Ellison's belief that white culture and black culture are completely separate. Based on this assumption, Lewicki concludes that if invisible man ever comes up from underground he will speak only for his people. Lewicki's contention avoids invisible man's comments from the hole which indicate that he speaks for all those who try to live by democratic principles and who call the nation on its failure to live up to those same principles.

Although each of the preceding views is tenable, one world view has been neglected: the entropic. Entropy is "the steady degradation or disorganization of a system or society" (Webster's Ninth). Thus, an entropic world view is a recognition of such degradation and an effort to construct one's life to better deal with the entropic process at work in the world. In this essay, I focus on three aspects of Invisible Man in terms of entropy: society as a closed system, existing in its own waste and decaying despite "signs" of control; "entropy-people," society's leaders and their helpers who become the "live-dead," to use Zamyatin's term; and invisible man's view from the hole, his reflection on life in society and his effort to develop a new world view. Through this analysis, Invisible Man transcends racial boundaries and is seen as a work dealing with the state of modern man, as invisible man comes to recognize the entropy process at work in the world around him.

CHAPTER II

ORDER TO CHAOS: MOVING TOWARD SOCIETY'S DISINTEGRATION

When invisible man describes the change in his outlook on life, he reveals one of the major, and most overlooked, themes of Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man:

Somewhere beneath the load of emotion-freezing ice which my life had conditioned my brain to produce, a spot of black anger glowed and threw off a hot red light of such intensity that had Lord Kelvin known of its existence, he would have had to revise¹ his measurements.

Throughout his novel Ellison uses images of chaos and order to reveal the entropy process at work in different societies and the physical world of his novel. Ellison often uses images relating to the changing states of water--from ice (solid) to water (liquid) to steam (gas)--showing the movement of society from ordered, controlled states to random chaos in the riots of Harlem. Invisible man's experiences begin in the closed society of the South and end, before his fall underground, in the riots of Harlem. The societies produce and live in their own waste; instead of using their energies to productive ends, making life better for the people, the societies decay. The people are materials to be used up and discarded for the good of the few. Entropy is also seen in the energy lost to society. The potential energy of society, whether white-

controlled, Bledsoe-controlled, or Brotherhood-controlled, is used only for the good of the societal scheme, the plan a group has for organizing society by whatever philosophy it espouses.

Invisible man's first encounter with a closed society occurs in the battle royal scene,² where he is the outsider trying to gain acceptance from the prominent businessmen gathered at this festivity to "honor" the students from the "colored" school. He is humiliated by the ritual boxing match (22-27) and the dives for money on the electric rug (29-30),³ an event that shows society's perverted use of technology. These episodes also represent the degradation of a white society which expresses its power over minorities (any oppressed group--poor, black, or female) by forcing them into bizarre rituals. While naively attempting to deliver his graduation address, even after being humiliated, he unwittingly reminds the leaders of their social responsibility, the need for social equality (32-33), and is put to the test in another initiation rite--being sent to college. Invisible man is still the outsider, but he does not realize that. Instead, he is happy to receive his graduation gift and scholarship to the "Negro college," setting the stage for his movement from a depraved white-controlled world into an equally depraved Bledsoe-controlled one.

Another closed system, the campus has its own power supply, ironically, a force which contributes to the entropy of the world. A monster "with its engines droning earth-shaking rhythms in the dark, its windows red from the glow of the furnace" (36), the machinery offers little comfort to invisible man because he realizes that the campus is a wasteland:⁴

If real, why is it that I can recall in all that island of greenness no fountain but one that was broken, corroded and dry? And why does no rain fall through my recollections, sound through my memories, soak through the hard dry crust of the still so present past? Why do I recall, instead of the odor of seed bursting in springtime, only the yellow contents of the cistern spread over the lawn's dead grass? (38)

The entire campus structure is an illusion, a mysterious world of decay, but with the appearance of fruitfulness: "I'm convinced it was the product of a subtle magic, the alchemy of moonlight; the school a flower-studded wasteland, the rocks sunken, the dry winds hidden, the lost crickets chirping to yellow butterflies" (38). Below the surface the waste rests, barely covered by a thin veneer of order. Norton, the white philanthropist, comments that the "beautiful campus was barren ground. There were no trees, no flowers, no fertile farmlands" (40), revealing the tenuous nature of the seemingly idyllic campus. In fact, the college is an experiment for controlling what society sees as a threat. Norton calls it "my life's work . . . my first hand organizing of human life" (43). The students are a crop to be harvested--the white leaders' version of what a "negro" should be, for they are the possible chaos, the disruptors of the closed white society. The entropic imagery of the decaying physical world, combined with this perverse philosophy, exposes the world view of the novel. Not only is the world degenerating, but man is degenerate. Invisible man's encounter with Jim Trueblood--the evil, according to society, cast outside the controlled borders of the campus--exemplifies this theme.

Driving Norton to Trueblood's, invisible man says ". . . we were swept by a wave of scorching air and it was as though we were approaching a desert" (46). A desert with cabins "bleached white and warped by the weather. Sun-tortured shingles lay on the roofs like decks of water-soaked cards spread out to dry" (46) surrounding the campus. The card houses are home to the poor, who live in a degenerate world where even the fires that the poor women use to heat water are near death: "The pot was soot-black and the feeble flames that licked its sides showed pale pink and bordered with black, like flames in mourning" (47). The energy of this world is nearly exhausted. These outcasts of the outcasts (the blacks) live in a hopeless world near the false hopefulness of the campus. In this setting, Norton comments on the change in the social structure: ". . . the human stock goes on, even though it degenerates" (47-48). But so long as a place outside white society and outside the campus exists, such "degenerate" "human stock" does not threaten the social order.

Trueblood's "abominable" sin, however, threatens the moral order of society. And Norton is dumbfounded: "You have looked upon chaos and are not destroyed!"; "You feel no inner turmoil, no need to cast out the offending eye?" (51). With a gaping facial wound caused by the delivery of an ax blow from his wife, Trueblood describes his shock at not being punished by his god:

I looks up at the mornin' sun and expects somehow for it to thunder. But it's already bright and clear and the sun comin' up and the birds is chirpin' and I gits more afraid then than if a bolt of lightin' had struck me. I yells "Have mercy, Lawd! Lawd, have mercy!" and waits. And there's nothin' but the clear bright mornin' sun. (62)

But, while waiting on his punishment from his god, Trueblood receives his reward from the whites, much to his surprise: "But what I don't understand is how I done the worse thing a man can do in his family and 'stead of things gittin' bad, they got better. The niggus up at the school don't like me, but the white folks treats me fine" (65). The chaos and degeneration that Trueblood represents threaten society's order, especially the college's. "White folk" keep Trueblood well-financed as a living representative of their stereotyped view of blacks; he is a symbol for the whites that reinforces their view that if blacks are "let in" such moral chaos will destroy their world. That is why Trueblood lives on the border, as a constant reminder, in the waste area surrounding the college.

The chaos of the Golden Day, where invisible man takes Norton, who is badly shaken by Trueblood's story, represents another threat to the social order. This entire scene is symbolic of the underlying chaos that can destroy society and of how society wastes its energy. The veterans who frequent the bar are "crazy" mostly because they have been driven "mad" by the order imposed on them by society--white-controlled and Bledsoe-controlled. Dr. Burnside is the prime example of what the white society and Bledsoe fear, a truly educated black man: "And I was forced to the utmost degradation because I possessed skilled hands and the belief that my knowledge could bring me dignity--not wealth, only dignity--and other men health!" (86). Ironically, the fact that Burnside makes sense causes him to be seen as a threat, to be seen as mad. He knows the truth and is appalled by both Norton and invisible man: "Now the two of you descend the stairs into chaos and get the hell out of here. I'm sick of both of you pitiful obscenities! Get out before I do you both the favor of bashing in your heads!" (88). Norton and invisible

man are "obscenities," products of a degraded and degenerate society, the chaos which Burnside sends them back into. But invisible man is more afraid of Bledsoe's reaction than of Burnside's pronouncements. In fact the fear of Bledsoe and the power and order he represents nearly cause invisible man to lose control of the car on the drive back to campus: "My predicament struck me like a stab. I had a sense of losing control of the car and slammed on the brakes in the middle of the road" (91). Instead of stopping, he goes back to the seemingly ordered world of Bledsoe, to whom he tries to explain the difficulty of his situation: "But it was out of my control, sir" (95). By leaving the prescribed areas of the campus, invisible man enters chaos, and he gets burned.

Back on campus, invisible man escapes the decay and degeneration of the outside chaos (Trueblood and the Golden Day), but he is confronted more forcefully than ever before by entropy. In many ways the campus is more dead than the outside world. Invisible man describes this dead world as he is on his way to his last vespers service:

[The feeling of judgment was] as though even here in the filtering dusk, here beneath the deep indigo sky, here, alive with looping swifts and darting moths, here in the hereness of night not yet lighted by the moon that looms blood-red behind the chapel like a fallen sun, its radiance shedding not upon the here-dusk of twittering bats, nor on the there-night of cricket and whippoorwill, but focused short-rayed upon our place of convergence; and we drifting forward with rigid motions, limbs stiff and voices now silent, as though on exhibit even in the dark, and the moon a white

man's bloodshot eye. (99)

The entire scene is permeated by the order--the life--imposed by the "white man's bloodshot eye." The moon is a symbol, reflecting the dying light of a fallen sun, the moral degeneracy of white society, the death of the universe. The control of the white society and Bledsoe, even if invisible man does not realize it yet, causes the students to be less than human on a campus designed to produce the "right" kind of student.

When he reaches the vespers service, invisible man is confronted by another degenerate part of society, Rev. Homer Barbee, representative of the degeneracy of the campus moral order, a part of the "vast and formal ritual" (101). Barbee conducts the ritual, sermon-giving, helping to shape the reactions of the students so as to keep the Bledsoe-controlled world orderly, in turn pleasing the white philanthropists whose money fuels the campus fires. Barbee's speech serves its purpose: invisible man accepts Bledsoe's discipline and leaves the campus, hoping to return one day and make a name for himself (133).

But even before invisible man is able to start on his new path, he is confronted by Burnside again, this time on a bus headed for New York (135). Of course, invisible man is not ready to listen to the old man's advice; he just wants to get on with his re-education: "Now having accepted my punishment, I wanted to remember nothing connected with Trueblood or the Golden Day" (135). He wants to escape any reminders of the chaos, and he longs for a new ordered way in which he can take part. But before he can escape the veteran, invisible man is warned that his new road is not going to be much different than the campus one: "New York! . . . That's not a place, it's a dream. . . . Out of the fire into the melting pot" (136). Burnside warns invisible man that the fire may

be "hot" on campus and in the South but that New York is so "hot" that he will be melted into the masses, losing any individuality he has. Thus, Burnside tells him that it is not a change in environment that will save him, but a change in the way he sees the world:

. . . learn to look beneath the surface, . . . Come out of the fog, young man. And remember you don't have to be a complete fool in order to succeed. . . . Play the game, but raise the ante, my boy. Learn how it operates, learn how you operate. . . . (137)

In other words, he must get some control of his own, and the only way to do that is by realizing that society is degenerate, that the "they" in charge can suck him under, melt him down, use him up, and then throw him away.

Responding to invisible man's question, Burnside comments on the amorphous nature of the "they": ". . . the same they we always mean, the white folks, authority, the gods, fate, circumstance--the force that pulls your strings until you refuse to be pulled any more. The big man who's never there, where you think he is" (137). But invisible man is unable to comprehend the vet's seemingly mad advice. Instead, invisible man continues on his trip to New York and in his old way, believing that "they" will help him in the big city.

Caught in the chaotic mob in the city, he is brought face to face with one of the major symbols of chaos--Ras the exhorter working a crowd: "It was ahead of me, angry and shrill, and upon hearing it I had a sensation of shock and fear such as I had felt as a child when surprised by my father's voice" (142). He fears a form of chaos he has never seen:

"I was puzzled, both by the effect of his voice upon me and by the obvious anger of the crowd. I had never seen so many black men angry in public before . . ." (142). Invisible man senses the energy of this chaotic scene, and he fears the nonconformity that is espoused. He cannot fully comprehend "the clash between the calm of the rest of the street and the passion of the voice" (143). He is in another world very similar to his old campus one with order and chaos seemingly side by side. But as before, he does not recognize the importance of the situation.

The longer invisible man is in the city the more chaotic the world becomes. Thus, he tries to latch on to some stable group, but his old world view (unthinking acceptance of society's demands) is so strong that he carries on in the old way. In a Gatsby-esque scene, he plans his future: "Then I began to map my campaign for the next day. First, I would have a shower, then get breakfast. All this very early. I'd have to move fast. With important men like that you had to be on time. . . . I would do everything to schedule" (145). Invisible man believes that by hard work and upright living he will make it in the city. But there is an underlying power that he does not see. Every time he tries to organize himself and his life, he is knocked down. When he applies for work, he meets young "out of control" (163) Emerson, "out of control" because he refuses to hold Bledsoe's plot together, thus rejecting one of society's methods of "keeping that nigger boy running." Emerson reveals the contents of the letters Bledsoe gave invisible man as a means of introducing himself to prospective employers (167-68). Invisible man is nearly devastated by this revelation.

Yet he moves on, and uses Emerson's name to get work at a paint factory (171), for invisible man a new experience with industrial

America. Kimbro, the plant supervisor, tells invisible man of his new responsibilities: "You have to follow instructions and you're going to be doing things you don't understand, so get your orders the first time and get them right!" (174); "You just do what you're told and don't try to think about it" (175). This is advice invisible man has followed throughout his life. And he has failed to understand the implications of such a philosophy. Besides an awareness of being used, he encounters here the problem of not receiving the right directions, which causes him to move from the orderly filling and mixing of paint to Lucius Brockway's steam room. When invisible man fails to do his job properly for Brockway, a boiler blows, casting invisible man outside reality:

I tried to speak, to answer, but something heavy moved again, and I was understanding something fully and trying again to answer but seemed to sink to the center of a lake of heavy water and pause, transfixed and numb with the sense that I had lost irrevocably an important victory. (201)

At least temporarily, invisible man is knocked into an equilibrium state, a state in which he exists semi-consciously, unable to protect himself from the doctors of the factory hospital. But like heavy water, the key ingredient in a fission nuclear reactor, he still has the potential energy for violent action, whether used for good or bad ends.

When shipped to the hospital, he is subjected to a different ordering process--perverted medical science. The doctors want to make a new man of him, make him a useful member of society (207). The similarities are obvious between what they do and want to do to him here and what Bledsoe, Norton, and the white city leaders of his youth wanted.

Invisible man is to be just another mindless cog in the machine, society. He is to be programmed so as not to produce any disorder. However, through the doctor's manipulation, invisible man discovers something new about himself: "I was no longer afraid. Not of important men, not of trustees and such; for knowing now that there was nothing which I could expect from them, there was no reason to be afraid" (217-18). Although unafraid, he has yet to realize that he has not escaped society's controls.

After his release from the hospital, dazed and stumbling along the streets, he is befriended by Mary, a mother figure for him, her home a safe and comfortable haven, an escape from the horrors he has experienced. She offers him a way station to rest in until he can put his life together again.⁸ Mary has faith that he will make something of himself (222), a faith that is both satisfying to invisible man and a burden (226). Nevertheless, invisible man describes her as a positive force: "[She is] a stable, familiar force like something out of my past which kept me from whirling out into some unknown which I dared not face" (225). Her understanding of how to live her life comforts invisible man as she gives him a stable environment in which to find or make sense of what has happened to him. Because of Mary's hospitality, he realizes that he must come to terms with his past before he can understand his present. While reflecting on his past, he sees the hospital experience as the most revealing of his life:

And the obsession with my identity which I had developed in the factory hospital returned with a vengeance. . . . Somewhere beneath the load of emotion-freezing ice which my life had conditioned my brain to produce, a spot of black anger

glowed and threw off a hot red light of such intensity that had Lord Kelvin known of its existence, he would have had to revise his measurements. A remote explosion had occurred somewhere, perhaps back at Emerson's or that night in Bledsoe's office, and it had caused that ice cap to melt and shift the slightest.
(226)

He explodes from this state of acceptance, creating a heat of such an intensity that the old training and its confines melt, become inappropriate.⁹ The imagery of the change from ice to water reflects the change in his state of consciousness as he throws off the limits placed on him. In order to survive and move ahead in society, be a responsible "boy," he had to check all of his emotions, even deny that he had them. Though the ice cap's shift is of the "slightest degree," it reveals to him a need for a new way of looking at the world, some new values to fill the void. The ice cap's movement casts him into more chaos than he has ever experienced. He longs for peace:

If only all the contradictory voices shouting inside my head would calm down and sing a song in unison, whatever it was I wouldn't care as long as they sang without dissonance; yes, and avoided the uncertain extremes of the scale. (226)

He has lost the stability that the emotion-freezing state had given him, and now the rantings in his head provide him with no solution; instead of the voices settling into one song, he finds another voice that leads him on--that of the Brotherhood.

His first encounter with the Brotherhood occurs as the result of his experience with society's waste--the "dispossessed." When aimlessly

walking down a street, he stumbles upon an eviction in progress:

The wind drove me into a side street where a group of boys had set a packing box afire. The gray smoke hung low and seemed to thicken as I walked with my head down and eyes closed, trying to avoid the fumes. My lungs began to pain; then emerging, wiping my eyes and coughing, I almost stumbled over it: It was piled in a jumble along the walk and over the curb into the street, like a lot of junk waiting to be hauled away. (232)

This junk is the elderly couple's possessions: a collection of memories built on a hollow promise of the society to which they were freed. Their "Pots and pots of green plants were lined in the dirty snow, certain to die in the cold" (235), just as their hopes were killed by the cold reality of life in the city. Their years of hard work at menial jobs have left them with nothing to sustain them in their old age. Society has used them up and cast them aside. Saying that these people were never a true part of society, invisible man reaches an understanding of the situation: " 'Dispossessed'! 'Dispossessed,' eighty-seven years and dispossessed of what? They ain't got nothing, they can't get nothing, they never had nothing. So who was dispossessed?" (242). In giving this speech, invisible man orders the chaos of the near-riot.¹⁰ But as the giver of order, he cannot solve the problem; he can only question why it has occurred, serving to channel the crowd's anger into a direct attack on the evictors and police. It is this power which attracts Brother Jack to him.

Representative of another kind of society, Jack successfully uses flattery in his effort to recruit invisible man to the Brotherhood:

You aroused them so quickly to action. I don't understand how you managed it. If only some of our speakers could have listened! With a few words you had them involved in action! Others would have still been wasting time with empty verbiage. I want to thank you for a most instructive experience! (251)

Because of his recent encounters with society's power lords, invisible man is unwilling to immediately leap for Jack's offer of a position working for the Brotherhood. However, Jack's comments have an effect on invisible man and make him see Mary in a new light. Disgusted with himself for taking advantage of Mary's kindness (256-57), he decides to take a position with the Brotherhood in order to get money for her. At least that is the excuse he uses.

A society in its own right, the Brotherhood offers a focus for invisible man's energies and abilities. Yet, as he rides with Jack and the Brothers on the way to a Brotherhood party, he indicates through his descriptions of the scenery that the Brotherhood is another control, another form of order about to be imposed on him:

. . . we were circling swiftly through long stretches of snow-covered landscape lighted here and there by street lamps and the nervously stabbing beams of passing cars: We were flashing through Central Park, now completely transformed by the snow. It was as though we had plunged into mid-country peace, yet I knew that here, somewhere close by in the night, there was a zoo with its dangerous animals. . . . And there was also the reservoir of dark water, all covered by snow and by night, by snow-fall and by night-fall, buried beneath black and white, gray mist and gray silence. (259-60)

Just as the "emotion-freezing ice-cap" keeps him in line, the snow covers over the potential for chaos that the zoo represents. Again, the imagery of snow and ice suggests the ordered state of society. In this case, chaos is the breaking free of the animals, the letting loose of what all societies fear--rebellion. The "reservoir of heavy water" symbolizes the equilibrium state which the society strives for. But this "reservoir" is deceptive, for there exists a great potential for violent energy in the "heavy water." The snow seals the reservoir, at least until spring, "beneath black and white, gray mist and gray silence." The acceptance of society's order by whites and blacks, the mingling of black and white into "gray mist and gray silence," allows the state of apparently minimum tension to exist. As long as the "gray mist" (unclearness of vision) and "gray silence" (uncertainty of what to say) exist, the conditions are right for that state of apparent equilibrium. But the potential for change, for chaos, still exists. Beneath the surface, tucked away, caged up, even in the center of the city, energy rests, ready to break loose, explode and destroy the current state. Anyone or any group that controls that energy can possibly control the development of a new state, which will be another state with the appearance of equilibrium, if the society, the new state, is to remain whole. The Brotherhood's goal is to channel that explosive energy into their master plan for a new society.

As the cool-headed rationalist, Jack lays out the Brotherhood's plan and invisible man's place in it:

We are all realists here, and materialists. It is a question of who shall determine the direction of events. That is why we've brought you into this room. This morning you answered

the people's appeal and we want you to be the true interpreter of the people. (266-67)

In other words, he will be responsible for giving the Brotherhood a "feel" for the people's emotions so that the Brotherhood can create the appropriate stimulus to cause the people to revolt. Once this occurs, the Brotherhood will step in to establish their new order. As throughout his life, all invisible man must do is "work hard and follow instructions" (267), only this time for the Brotherhood. The results will be the same: he will be used unless he recognizes the degenerating effects that the group will have on him. The Brotherhood, however, is acceptable to him at this point because he believes that it offers him an opportunity to take an active part in the creation of a new society.

Yet his new life, his new opportunity, has a shaky beginning. Minutes before he is to go on stage and present his first Brotherhood-sanctioned speech, invisible man steps outside the dressing room and into the alley to relieve his tension:

Without my overcoat it was cold. A feeble light burned above the entrance, sparkling the snow. I crossed the alley to the dark side, stooping near a fence that smelled of carbolic acid, which, as I looked back across the alley, caused me to remember a great abandoned hole that had been the site of a sports arena that had burned before my birth. All that was left, a cliff drop of some forty feet below the heat-buckled walls, was the shell of concrete with weirdly bent and rusted rods that had been its basement. The hole was used for dumping, and after it rained it stank with stagnant water. And now in my mind I stood upon the walk looking out across the hole past a

Hooverville shanty of packing cases and bent tin signs, to a railroad yard that lay beyond. Deep depthless water lay without motion in the hole, and past the Hooverville a switch-engine idled upon the shining rails, and as a plume of white steam curled slowly from its funnel I saw a man come out of the shanty and start up the path which led to the walk above. Stopped and dark and sprouting rags from his shoes, hat and sleeves, he shuffled slowly toward me, bringing a threatening cloud of carbolic acid. It was a syphilitic who lived alone in the shanty between the hole and the railroad yard, coming up to the street only to beg money for food and disinfectant with which to soak his rags. Then in my mind I saw him stretching out a hand from which the fingers were eaten away and I ran-- back to the dark, and the cold and the present. (292)

Here again invisible man confronts images of the cold, snowy night. Unlike the earlier scene where the animals are caged, now there are no cages. Instead the cold snow sparkles by a "feeble light," with society's energy left idling on the track, steam escaping and dissipating, losing its energy, the entropic process at work. A burnt out arena, civilization has been shaken to its very base with nothing left but "weirdly bent and rusted rods that had been its basement," a stagnant pool of "deep depthless water," and a syphilitic. Potential energy may exist here, but the depths of society's rot are represented by the rag man without fingers, unable to do any work except beg and spread his "threatening cloud of carbolic acid." This scene warns invisible man of the depth of the rot and decay of the society in which he lives and to which society will eventually sink, become invaded by the waste sur-

rounding it and created by it.

Invisible man shakes off this nightmare and delivers his speech extolling the power and benefit of the Brotherhood. When giving the speech, he dedicates himself to the audience as a means of escape from a possible fall into the pit: "The audience was mixed, their claims broader than race, I would do whatever was necessary to serve them well. If they could take a chance with me, then I'd do the very best that I could. How else could I save myself from disintegration?" (306). By accepting his role, he in fact hastens his disintegration as he becomes less in touch with humanity. The Brotherhood acts as his antiseptic, his carbolic acid, in his desperate effort to keep alive and be productive. That is what drives him to work for the movement.

However, the Brotherhood is not very eager to accept invisible man because of concerns that he may change the audience into an emotional mob that not even the best laid plans of the Brotherhood can control (304). Once again invisible man is the bringer of chaos, and once again the society which he is in feels threatened. Addressing the critics of invisible man's action, Jack defends him and his place in the plan:

Perhaps you're right, perhaps it is a mob; but if it is, then it seems to be a mob that's simply boiling over to come along with us. And I shouldn't have to tell you theoreticians that science bases its judgements upon experiment! You're jumping to conclusions before the experiment has run its course. In fact, what's happening here tonight represents only one step in the experiment. The initial step, the release of energy. I can understand that it should make you timid--you're afraid of carrying through to the next step--because it's up to you to

organize that energy. (304)

Creating the image of a crowd boiling, releasing energy like steam, just waiting to be channeled into someone's or some group's plan, Jack sees the potential energy available and reveals the Brotherhood's purpose: to use the mob's energy for the Brotherhood's gain, just as the white business leaders, Bledsoe and Norton, wish to use people's energy to their ends. In being so used, the people end up as waste like the "dispossessed"; the entropy process continues. That is why invisible man must go to Hambro's to be, yet again, re-educated (308). As before, he is to be retooled just like a cog in the machine, recharged with the sense of purpose the Brotherhood gives him. When his usefulness is gone, he also will be cast out. But invisible man's naivete drives him on. As he becomes more and more involved with the Brotherhood, however, he loses his tenuous grasp on reality.

Invisible man believes he can save the world--even without knowing how the world works and whether people want to be saved. This is illustrated as invisible man contemplates his future:

Trees were rowed the length of the long block beyond me, rising tall in dripping wetness above a series of cluttered backyards. And it occurred to me that cleared of its ramshackle fences and planted with flowers and grass, it might form a pleasant park. And just then a paper bag sailed from a window to my left and burst like a silent grenade, scattering garbage into the trees and pancaking to earth with a soggy, exhausted plop! (327-28)

The contrast between invisible man's goals and reality is obvious, but invisible man fails to realize this. ¹² In the "dripping wetness" of

the trees, invisible man sees the potential energy, but that potential is exploded by the indifference of the garbage-throwers, whose experiences have taught that more than "pleasant parks" are needed to improve this neighborhood. The "soggy, exhausted plop" of the paper bag is the "dead energy"--the inability of the garbage-throwers to improve their lives. Meanwhile, the world becomes more and more chaotic while invisible man absorbs himself in his work:

I was dominated by the all embracing idea of Brotherhood. The organization had given the world a new shape, and me a vital role. We recognized no loose ends, everything could be controlled by our science. Life was all pattern and discipline; and the beauty of discipline is when it works. And it was working very well. (331)

The Brotherhood offers invisible man a steady state of existence. So long as he "channelizes" himself into the movement's plans, his new, vital role is an important one to him. What invisible man does not realize is that while he may be disciplined, Ras and other chaotic members of reality refuse to be. Chaos always underlies the veneer of order, like the snow tenuously covering the ground until spring.

Because Brother Westrum sees the Brotherhood as a holy alliance that must be kept pure (the parallel to whites keeping out blacks, Bledsoe casting out the non-conformers, is very evident, but not obvious to invisible man), he fears the chaos that he sees invisible man bringing to his world. Westrum's comments reveal the type of discipline that the Brotherhood really desires: control and use of each individual's energy in order to develop a new society (340). That is why invisible man

stands accused as the bringer of disorder to the system, although he sees himself as the orderer of chaos. Typically, he cannot comprehend the accusations:

I looked into their smoke-washed faces; not since the beginning had I faced such serious doubts. Up to now I had felt a wholeness about my work and direction such as I had never known; . . . Brotherhood was something to which men could give themselves completely; that was its strength and my strength. . . .

(351)

Unless all members are in lock-step, the organization is ineffective. Unable to control those who question the direction of the plan, unable to check those who branch out because of their own initiative, the Brotherhood demands mindless acceptance from all its members.

In his discussion with the rich woman who wants to use him to satisfy her sexual fantasies, invisible man reveals this aspect of the Brotherhood's appeal: ". . . the emotion is there; but it's actually our scientific approach that releases it. As Brother Jack says, we're nothing if not organizers. And the emotion isn't merely released, it's guided, channelized--that is the real source of our effectiveness" (357-58). Although the Brotherhood works to release and "channelize" emotions, they cannot control the mob's reaction when sparked by invisible man striking out on his own. Thus invisible man is reassigned to "the Woman Question" (351-352), in effect keeping him out of Harlem where chaos is breaking out.

When he returns to Harlem, he finds chaos in the streets as the Brotherhood has abandoned their Harlem headquarters. Clifton, the young worker who had a prominent role in the organization, has "stepped outside

history" (374-77), refusing to accept the edicts of the Brotherhood or any other role society would require of him. By selling the Sambo dolls, Clifton lampoons his role in society. He becomes a stereotype--the dancing buffoon. Now invisible man sees the waste and decay surrounding the Brotherhood:

And although I knew no one man could do much about it, I felt responsible. All our work had been very little, no great change had been made. And it was all my fault. I'd been so fascinated by the motion that I'd forgotten to measure what it was bringing forth. (384)

Chaos, not order, is brought forth. The movement is not toward unity and brotherhood, but toward disorder and individualism, as seen at the funeral of Clifton.

After giving a lengthy "eulogy"(393-97), invisible man senses the failure of the Brotherhood and wonders what the crowd of mourners might do: "I felt confused and listless moving through the crowds that seemed to boil along in a kind of mist . . . there was still too much to be done; . . . plans had to be made; the crowd's emotions had to be organized" (397-98). Like the steam escaping from the switch-engine idling on the railroad track in his nightmare vision, the people are boiling, emitting their steam. Without direction, their energy is wasted. Now a mass of chaotic molecules of potential energy, the crowd is unwilling to be organized. As invisible man walks through the streets, the imagery of decay and entropy becomes more apparent:

Stale and wilted flowers, rejected downtown, blazed feverishly on a cart, like glamorous rags festering beneath a futile spray

from a punctured fruit juice can. The crowd were boiling figures seen through steaming glass from inside a washing machine; and in the streets the mounted police detail stood looking on, their eyes noncommittal beneath the short polished visors of their caps, their bodies slanting forward, reins slackly alert, men and horses of flesh imitating men and horses of stone. (398)

The waste of the downtown flowers highlights the state of decay in Harlem. The potential for renewal sits "stale and wilted" in a "punctured fruit juice can," while the crowd and police are waiting for the signal for action. Invisible man thinks that he can avoid chaos if only he can organize the crowd--channel the steam before it dissipates into an unusable form of energy: "And through the haze I again felt the tension. There was no denying it; it was there and something had to be done before it simmered away in the heat" (398). Invisible man recognizes that there is energy to do the Brotherhood's work, while not realizing that the Brotherhood's goal is to bottle up that steam in order to create its new controlled state. Instead of rejecting the Brotherhood, he returns to the headquarters to present his findings.

In the smoke-filled room, he receives his punishment for acting according to his "personal responsibility" (400) rather than to the plan of the committee. Jack leads the charge in an effort to whip invisible man back into the party line: "You'll learn and you'll surrender yourself to it even under such conditions. Especially under such conditions; that's its value. That makes it patience" (401). But patience for Jack means mindlessly following the plan, for invisible man ignoring the reality and consequences of the chaos boiling in the street. Because

they cannot communicate, the meeting disintegrates into name calling. Invisible man is just waiting for the moment to fight any one of them, but Jack pops out his eye and invisible man sits and listens to the rest of Jack's pronouncements (409-13). When the others leave, invisible man is left alone to evaluate the evening: "I felt as though I'd been watching a bad comedy. Only it was real and I was living in it and it was the only historically meaningful life I could live" (413). In order to continue living, invisible man has to understand the chaos. He moves on to Hambro's for more advice.

As he goes there, however, he is once again met by Ras the Exhorter, who demands "action" (419), not words, in order to overthrow society. Invisible man is nearly attacked by the crowd, and in an effort to escape, he experiments with Rinehartism¹³ and questions people's sanity because of their acceptance of him as Rinehart, the master actor: "How stupid could people be? Was everyone suddenly nuts?" (427). But it is not just the Harlem people who accept Rineharts; society, as a whole, will accept a "false" person, an illusion. Sometimes it is the only way for the individual to survive, but it costs him part of his humanity:

I recalled a report of a shoeshine boy who had encountered the best treatment in the South simply by wearing a white turban instead of his usual Dobbs or Stetson, and I fell into a fit of laughing. Jack would be outraged at the very suggestion of such a state of things. And yet there was truth in it; this was the real chaos which he thought he was describing . . .

(431-32)

Society forces men to such extremes, a sign of that society's degeneracy. The Brotherhood also suffers from this malady, a fact that causes invisible man much confusion:

Outside the Brotherhood we were outside history; but inside of it they didn't see us. It was a hell of a state of affairs, we were nowhere. I wanted to back away from it, but still I wanted to discuss it, consult someone who'd tell me it was only a brief, emotional illusion. I wanted the props put back beneath the world. So now I had a real need to see Hambro.

(432)

But Hambro only adds to his feelings that the world is in chaos. He cannot communicate with Hambro; even when he tries, "It sounded unreal, an antiphonal game" (433) in which Hambro reveals the Brotherhood's new directives to sacrifice Harlem (433).

Invisible man feels completely abandoned now: "I tried to build my integrity upon the role of Brotherhood and now it changed to water, air. What was integrity? What did it have to do with a world in which Rinehart was possible and successful?" (435). The imagery clearly suggests the entropy process at work as a more stable form of matter becomes less and less stable. Instead of the molecules being tightly bound as in a solid like ice, the molecules of air are less controlled, move about more randomly. As his integrity "changed to water, air," invisible man loses his focus--his energy for doing the Brotherhood's work. This symbolizes the collapse of invisible man's world, as does his description of Hambro's smoking: "He blew a smoke ring, the blue-gray circle rising up boiling within its own jetting form, hovering for an instant then disintegrating into a weaving strand" (435). Hambro and the

Brotherhood have been blowing smoke for a long time. The plan boils up from headquarters until it disintegrates, failing, partially, because of the leaders' inability to understand its possible effects. Yet the plan weaves its way into the life of invisible man, cutting him off from the people he tries to help.

Having lost his faith in the Brotherhood because of the waste, the chaos, which it creates, invisible man is awash, not knowing what to do or where to turn:

I had to hold on . . . and then I had an idea that shook me profoundly: You don't have to worry about the people. If they tolerate Rinehart, then they will forget it and even with them you are invisible. . . . It didn't matter because they didn't realize just what had happened, neither my hope nor my failure. My ambition and integrity were nothing to them and my failure was as meaningless as Clifton's. It had been that way all along. (438)

From the beginning at the battle royal, none of it (not even his success in being sent off to college) had been meaningful for anyone; he assumed that it was, thinking that those who cared about improving life, whether one's own or society's, could make a difference in the Brotherhood, if not at college:

Only in the Brotherhood had there seemed a chance for such as us, the mere glimmer of a light, but behind the polished and humane façade of Jack's eye I'd found an amorphous form and a harsh red rawness. And even that was without meaning except for me. (438)

Because he recognizes that there is chaos (that "amorphous form"--a form without form) beneath the veneer of order, invisible man rejects the Brotherhood, realizing that "It was all a swindle, an obscene swindle" (438). In rejecting the Brotherhood, and by planning to work within it for his own benefit, he is able to give some meaning to his life, to escape from total chaos--where values change constantly, where one's integrity is little more than a puff of smoke, where Jacks and Rineharts and Bledsoes rule.

To satisfy himself, perhaps to avenge those wasted by the Brotherhood, invisible man sets out to destroy the Brotherhood from within:

They wanted a machine? Very well, I'd become a supersensitive confirmer of their misconceptions. . . . 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 dead body, or a piece of bad meat in a stew. (440)

Invisible man decides to become the creator of chaos within the system, the impetus that causes it to degenerate completely instead of just living in its own waste. With this realization, invisible man feels "more dead than alive" (441). The weight of his new knowledge is almost too much to bear. Until he realizes that he has been used constantly for others' gain throughout his entire life, he is dead. In an effort to become "alive," invisible man sets out to attack the attacker (443).

Although the chaos of the world is so far developed that invisible man will never be given the opportunity to achieve his goal of destroying the Brotherhood, for "The community was coming apart at the seams" (444), he is now at least aware that there exists a great danger in the

swirling chaos he encounters: "I didn't like it at all; the violence was pointless and, helped along by Ras, was actually being directed against the community itself. Yet in spite of my sense of violated responsibility I was pleased with the developments and went ahead with my plan" (444). Thus he plans to use the energies he sees in the crowds against the Brotherhood, to turn the order of Brotherhood into chaos, just as the obscene order imposed by society moves to greater and greater chaos in the streets. Moving into the riot torn world, invisible man is rejuvenated, ironically, as he passes through a shower of waste:

And I looked above toward the sound, my mind forming an image of wings, as something struck my face and streaked, and I could smell the foul air now, and see the encrusted barrage, feeling it streak my jacket . . . hearing it splattering around, falling like rain. I ran the gauntlet, thinking even the birds; even the pigeons and the sparrows and the goddam gulls! I ran blindly, boiling with outrage and despair and harsh laughter.
(461-62)

"Blindly" out of control, he gains new energy from the dung, as his fires are fed with the used up matter of the birds. This passage through waste leads him directly into the riot--the final chaos he confronts outside the hole.

While running aimlessly through the street, invisible man is nicked by a bullet and falls into the street: ". . . then time burst and I was down in the street, conscious but unable to rise, struggling against the street . . ." (463). In a surreal world now, with time out of whack, he is aware of his surroundings but "unable to rise." He does not have the

energy to move even himself now, let alone the people. It's every man for himself. Society, here, is dead: "All the street's signs were dead, all the day sounds had lost their stable meaning. Somewhere a burglar alarm went off, a meaningless blangy sound, followed by the joyful shouts of looters" (465). The people are going at it, trying to gain as many material possessions as they can. Joining with the looters because they have a plan, suppressing his disbelief, invisible man becomes a member of Dupree's group: "I felt no need to lead or leave them; was glad to follow; was gripped by a need to see where and to what they would lead" (469). He seems to have lost his desire to break through the chaos and disorder, to return to a stable structured world. He is floating, waiting for Dupree's plan to be revealed.

Dupree's concern is to turn the tables on society, give back what he has been taking for all his years. To change his state of existence, Dupree finds the means (fuel) to his ends (destructive fire), and invisible man is unable to do anything except join in:

By the light of a flash I could see a row of fuel drums mounted on racks. Dupree stood before them in his new hip boots and filled each bucket with oil. We moved in slow order. Our buckets filled, we filed out into the street. I stood there in the dark feeling a rising excitement as their voices played around me. What was the meaning of it all? What should I think of it, do about it? (470)

While still under the delusion that by a few words he could re-channel the mob's energy into a more productive night of destruction, perhaps burning the white neighborhoods, he discovers that all hell has broken loose; milk and blood and beer and kerosene are running in the streets:

"It didn't occur to me to interfere, or to question . . . They had a plan" (472). Accepting their action because they have a direction, not because he realizes that he could not stop them even if he wanted, he participates in their plan. Although he does not understand that for these people the riot is the highlight of their lives, their chance to strike back, to do some destruction of their own, he realizes that in the end by striking back they are harming themselves. Along with the prompting of the Brotherhood and Ras, society has created the situation which is conducive to fire. While chaos may reign for this night, the fires will die out or be put out by society's representatives (firemen). Dupree and his mob will disappear into a world which has changed very little--except for the material possessions they have gained and lost.

For invisible man Dupree represents as much a mystery as do the actions of the people: "He was a type of man nothing in my life had taught me to see, to understand, or respect, a man outside the scheme till now" (473). The irony is that invisible man has never been taught to see or to understand any man who is capable of his own action, which Dupree seems to be. The entire episode is unreal for him ("Time seemed to hold" [473-74]), until he steps outside the burning building and is called by his Brotherhood name (475). Then Ras's men recognize him and reality comes rushing back as the chase is on.

Invisible man escapes into the chaos of the crowd, finding solace in his non-being (475). Then he overhears a man refuse to leave the streets for the "hill," a safe area: "Hill, hell! We stay right here. . . . This thing's just starting. If it becomes a sho'nough race riot I want to be where there'll be some fighting back" (478). These words give new meaning to the chaos for invisible man:

The words struck like bullets fired close range, blasting my satisfaction to earth. It was as though the uttered word had given meaning to the night, almost as though it had created it, brought it into being in the instant his breath vibrated small against the loud, riotous air. And in defining, in giving organization to the fury, it seemed to spin me around, and in my mind I was looking back over the days since Clifton's death . . . (478)

The man's words "create" a world of darkness and despair, ordering the chaos of the night and "blasting" invisible man back to reality and reminding him of the chaos he has seen and of Clifton's death. Through this "genesis of darkness" invisible man realizes his role in the entire Brotherhood sham. He remembers that he had set out to seek revenge against the Brotherhood who had set up the people, unarmed in a riot that would eventually bring society's order--the armed police.

Running down a "residential street with trees" (479), a safer area than Harlem, he confronts an ever more surrealistic scene:

The street lay dead quiet in the light of the lately risen moon, the gunfire thin and for a moment, distant. The rioting seemed in another world. For a moment I paused beneath a low, thick-leaved tree, looking down the well-kept doily-shadowed walks past the silent houses. It was as though the tenants had vanished, leaving the houses silent with all the windows shaded, refugees from a rising flood. (479)

Invisible man has entered an area of society where the energies of the Harlemites have turned into comfort for the accepted members of society.

Invisible man belongs with neither the rioters, nor the refugees. He "plung[es] in a sense of painful isolation" (480) as he tries to move down to the committee meeting. But the chaos gets worse; reality and unreality become indistinguishable:

The moon was high now and before me the shattered glass glittered in the street like the water of a flooded river upon the surface of which I ran as in a dream, avoiding by fate alone the distorted objects washed away by the flood. Then suddenly I seemed to sink, sucked under: Ahead of me the body hung, white, naked, and horribly feminine from a lamppost. . . . They were mannequins--"Dummies!" I said aloud. Hairless, bald and sterilely feminine. . . . But are they unreal, I thought, are they? (480-81)

Invisible man is stripped of possible escapes--his Rinehart glasses are crushed (481)--and Ras and his men are hot on his trail. By revealing the Brother's conspiracy, invisible man attempts to use words to sway his attackers from killing him: "They want the streets to flow with blood; your blood, black blood and white blood, so that they can turn your death and sorrow and defeat into propaganda" (483). But his words have no effect; the mob has too much momentum, its energy "channelized" into a full fledged riot. Invisible man finally realizes that no one man can halt the process, realizes that he is losing his power, running down:

I had no words and no eloquence, and when Ras thundered, "Hang him!" I stood there facing them, and it seemed unreal. I faced them knowing that the madman in a foreign costume was real and yet unreal, knowing that he wanted my life, that he

held me responsible for all the nights and days and all the suffering and for all that which I was incapable of controlling, and I no hero, but short and dark with only a certain eloquence and a bottomless capacity for being a fool to mark me from the rest . . . (483)

But he is wise enough not to become a martyr for anyone. He finally realizes that the whole societal set-up is absurd and that the only way to escape, to keep from disintegrating, to resist the effects of the decaying world, is to reject society and strike out for himself:

And that I, a little black man with an assumed name should die because a big black man in his hatred and confusion over the nature of a reality that seemed controlled solely by white men whom I knew were to be as blind as he, was just too much, too outrageously absurd. And I knew that it was better to live out one's own absurdity than to die for that of others, whether for Ras's or Jack's. (484)

To die for a cause other than his own would be to die without meaning--to be just a "raw material" for some project. That is why he throws the spear at Ras, piercing his cheeks (484). Running, he stumbles and falls into a hole, a new escape for him, one that reveals the need to develop his own new world view so that he does not become one of society's victims.

As invisible man moves from decaying controlled state to decaying controlled state, he comes to see the limitations imposed on him by belonging to any group. He never will find individual satisfaction by being a member of any of these controlled states, his "thaw" having freed

him to go beyond the bounds of societies, to riot against any order which dehumanizes.

NOTES

- 1 See Ellison, Invisible Man, 226. Subsequent references to this work are cited parenthetically.
- 2 For a discussion of the significance of this scene see Pryse 143-67, O'Meally 80-81; Klein 108.
- 3 See Ellison, Going to the Territory, 49-50, 57.
- 4 Butler discusses Ellison's use of waste land imagery.
- 5 See Baker for an in-depth analysis of the Trueblood scene; also see O'Meally 86.
- 6 See Klotman 277-88.
- 7 See Gottschalk for a discussion of Ellison's use of American authors' names.
- 8 See O'Meally 88-89.
- 9 See Lewicki 53.
- 10 See Hassan 166.
- 11 See Holland 62.
- 12 See O'Meally 89.
- 13 See O'Meally 90-91; Ellison, Shadow and Act, 181.

CHAPTER III

"ENTROPY PEOPLE": SOCIETY'S LEADERS AND THEIR HELPERS

In his graduation speech, invisible man calls for all men to act on their "social responsibility" (32), to sacrifice for the good of the larger group. As he encounters more and more of society's leaders,¹ invisible man comes to realize that they are more concerned about retaining their control over their worlds than in helping society. In order to retain their leadership positions, they do not exhibit their social responsibility as they pay service to the man in charge above them. Eventually seeing the dehumanizing effects of their efforts to remain in control, invisible man realizes that both leaders and their subservient helpers become "entropy people," those who strive to achieve an equilibrium state in their personal existence. In "On Literature, Revolution, and Entropy," which calls for a new experimental literature that looks toward tomorrow instead of resting on the past and the present, Zamyatin introduces the idea of the "live-dead," those who "produce only dead things" (16) (i.e., the conventional, the safe, the non-heretical works of art, science, politics). I have applied his term to key characters in Invisible Man who search for that comfortable way of life in which they receive society's rewards but lose their humanity in the process. While sacrificing everything to reach a state of minimum tension, these "entropy people" become so concerned with ordering their own world that they do not live life, but attempt to control it. They

use up their energies in the effort and fail to live a fully human existence. Becoming automatons, puppets, and actors, these "entropy people" mask their human qualities when placed "on stage" where they must perform their role in order to maintain their power. Invisible man comes to reject the roles society's leaders demand of him² and, in the process, he rejects the leaders who would force him into these roles.

In the campus scene, two of the characters who have a major impact on invisible man are Bledsoe³ and his helper, Barbee. Bledsoe plays out the role the white philanthropist's expect of him so that he can have power over his world and keep it ordered. He is the embodiment of the young invisible man's dream, a black man with power in the white world and the black world:

. . . he was the example of everything I hoped to be: Influential with wealthy men all over the country; consulted in matters concerning the race; a leader of his people; the possessor of not one, but two Cadillacs, a good salary and a soft, good-looking and creamy complexioned wife. What was more, while black and bald and everything white folks poked fun at, he had achieved power and authority; had, while black and wrinkle-headed, made himself of more importance in the world than most Southern white men. They could laugh at him but they couldn't ignore him. (92)

Invisible man's obsession with Bledsoe's power and the white world's benefits keeps him from seeing that Bledsoe is playing a role--black leader responsible to white society. Bledsoe is an actor and a creator, striving to make a world which is his and in which he plays the leading

role. At whatever cost, Bledsoe will create that "equilibrium world," a world in which tensions are kept to a minimum so that he can retain his position and his material benefits. Thus, when his world is challenged and he loses control of his role, he blasts away at the perpetrator, who represents a threat to the state of the campus world.

After learning that invisible man has allowed Norton to see the wrong scenes (Trueblood's and The Golden Day), Bledsoe explodes and chastises invisible man for being a fool: "Haven't you the sense God gave a dog? We take these white folks where we want them to go, we show them what we want them to see" (93). Bledsoe's angry response reveals his humanity⁴ but also his inhuman role as director and actor, creating the appropriate scenes and supplying the appropriate cast for the wealthy whites to see. Bledsoe, even when his plans are disrupted, is still the actor. Forced to appease Norton, Bledsoe checks his anger at invisible man and resumes his role as responsible black leader:

Just inside the building I got another shock. As we approached a mirror Dr. Bledsoe stopped and composed his angry face like a sculptor, making it a bland mask, leaving only the sparkle of his eyes to betray the emotion that I had seen only a moment before. (93)

Shifting roles so effectively that it stuns invisible man, Bledsoe controls his anger, his potential for violent action. To retain his position, he plays the "right" part in each situation, but becomes a robot with a malleable face, only the sparkle of his eyes betraying his human qualities.

Bledsoe is director, actor, sculptor, in control and unwilling to let anyone challenge him. Keenly aware of the benefits that go with his

position, although unaware of the effects on himself, he tells invisible man that he is the boss, ironically revealing that he is allowed to be in charge:

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

(127)

Bledsoe is well aware of the strength of his position "down here" in his subculture, outside the white world yet responsible to the white leaders who allow him to remain "at the controls." Because a challenge to Bledsoe's "power set-up" threatens the entire social structure, Bledsoe must smash anyone who steps out of line. He is able to control his emotions and his energy, in effect to give the outward appearance of calm and stability, while boiling inside. This allows him to have the power over what the whites let him have--and only so long as he plays the part

and produces the kind of graduates that society demands.

In order to keep his world in line, Bledsoe relies on others to play their parts to the hilt. The students must accept their positions or be cast out. And visiting dignitaries are brought in to perform and remind the students of the roles required of them. Invisible man's descriptions of Homer Earbee, however, reveal his awareness of the inhuman nature of Barbee's performance: "He stood before us relaxed, his white collar gleaming like a band between his black face and his dark garments, dividing his head from his body" (106-7). Playing the role Bledsoe and the whites desire, Barbee is another actor, animate when speaking the message of responsibility,⁵ "the lights catching his black-lensed glasses until it seemed that his head floated free of his body and was held only by the white band of his collar" (107). A machine-man, out of his own control, he is a separated being, non-human, plugged in, programmed, and ready to give the appropriate message. However, he and his message are "hidden behind his black-lensed glasses, only his mobile features gesturing his vocal drama" (111). He performs the "vocal drama" of the struggle of the founder and Bledsoe to build the campus in order to "help" their people, hammering home the role required of all if the plan is to be a success. The message is effective: "For a few minutes old Barbee had made me see the vision and now I knew that leaving the campus would be like the parting of flesh" (120).

But immediately after this revelation comes an even more startling one that reveals the true nature of Barbee's role and message:

. . . Barbee floundered upon Dr. Bledsoe's legs. The old man slid forward upon his hands and knees as the two white men took his arms; and now as he stood I saw one of them reach for

something on the floor and place it in his hands. It was when he raised his head that I saw it. For a swift instant, between the gesture and the opaque glitter of his glasses, I saw the blinking of sightless eyes. Homer A. Barbee was blind. (120)

Barbee is only a sightless voice, a conduit manipulated by Bledsoe and the white leaders to control the black students. He symbolizes the "entropy people" of Bledsoe's world, all who are a successful part of that world. Each participant must give the appearance of knowledge, of understanding, while fitting into and accepting the role required. There is no room for individual feelings or desires or questions. Instead each must sacrifice himself--his integrity, his humanity--for a place in the world. In doing so each individual must control his emotions, his energy: each individual must become machine-like, in control, stable, calm in a non-human state of order.

Lucius Brockway represents both the controller and the controlled. Like Bledsoe, he controls energy (here, steam; for Bledsoe, people) which he must monitor and channel in order to keep his underground world producing the power for the industrial plant above him. In his position, he is a part of the machinery with which he works. Invisible man recognizes this, describing Brockway's face as "an animated black walnut with shrewd, reddish eyes" (183), who treats men as he treats machines: push a button and the task must be carried out. Talking at invisible man, he yells, "I said I'd signal you. Caint you tell the difference between a signal and a call? Hell, I buzzed you. You don't want to do that no more. When I buzz you I want you to do something and do it quick!" (186). Like Pavlov's dog, Brockway's helpers must respond to the appropriate stimuli. No human response--no thinking, no questioning--is

allowed.

Further equating Brockway with the machinery, invisible man reveals the unreal nature of Brockway's actions and of the situation: "He started toward me as in a dream, trembling like the needle of one of the gauges . . ." (196). Like Bledsoe, Brockway will not allow his world to be disturbed. He requires his helpers to sacrifice themselves to his demands so that he can remain in charge. If one, invisible man in this case, fails to perform to his standards, Brockway will do anything--even destroy his steam room (200)--to keep his world running smoothly. Allowing no one to invade his world, he demands that his workers follow his leadership and keep their mouths shut.

When invisible man encounters Jack, the Bledsoe of the Brotherhood, he comes face to face with the most diabolical leader he will confront. Jack directs the plans of the Brotherhood,⁶ his unseen superiors directing him to create a new society at whatever expense to the people for whom invisible man cares. Jack's materialistic world view, his scientific objectivity, disgust invisible man and reveal the inhuman characteristics of this leader.

Jack tells invisible man not to be concerned with people--because they are "dead" anyway: "I only mean meta-phor-ically speaking. They're living, but dead. Dead-in-living . . . a unity of opposites" (252). Jack sees people (the dispossessed, in this case) as being in states of equilibrium--neither dead nor alive, neither active nor passive. Such "entropy people" are dispensable, according to Jack's philosophy: "They're like dead limbs that must be pruned away. . . ." (253). By pruning away these "dead limbs," Jack hopes to move those people who still have the potential for action. He sees the Brotherhood's manipulation of the people as the way to change the world, the Brotherhood the

component needed to release the waiting and wasting energies of the people. Ironically, Jack becomes like these people, more dead than alive, more inhuman than human. As with Bledsoe and Brockway, Jack's thirst for power, for control of his own world, causes him to become an "entropy person."

As described by invisible man, Jack's physical characteristics range from the animalistic to the machine-like. In their first meeting at the cafe, invisible man's description of Jack as an animal reveals Jack's thirst for power: "His movements, as he peered through the brightly lighted shelves of pastry, were those of a lively small animal, a fyce, interested in detecting only the target cut of cake" (250). Jack is interested only in getting the best part of everything for himself. His involvement in the Brotherhood offers him the chance to obtain his power.

Inhuman when the animal, Jack becomes less alive when he reveals himself as an actor, playing a part in order to trap new helpers for his plan. Invisible man describes Jack's movements:

. . . seeing him start toward me with his rapid, rolling, bouncy, heel-and-toey step. It was as though he had taught himself to walk that way and I had a feeling that somehow he was acting a part; that something about him wasn't exactly real--an idea which I dismissed immediately, since there was a quality of unreality over the whole afternoon. (250-51)

Invisible man recognizes the unreality, the non-humanness of Jack, but dismisses it because of his latest experiences in the surreal world of New York. However, Jack is truly the Bledsoe of the Brotherhood, and a Brockway in charge of a different kind of energy: each working for

unseen bosses, each performing in order to retain his station, and each using the people in his quest for power. None of these men is fully human, as each sacrifices himself for the power he desires.

Jack, though, is even more of a monster than Bledsoe or Brockway. Bledsoe can mold his face in order to regain control of himself; Brockway will sacrifice his steam room to remain in control; Jack will remove his eyeball in order to confound his underlings, as invisible man describes:

I stared into his face, feeling a sense of outrage. His left eye had collapsed, a line of raw redness showing where the lid refused to close and his gaze had lost its command. I looked from his face to the glass, thinking, he's disemboweled himself just in order to confound me. (409-10)

A cyclopean dictator, Jack will do anything to keep what limited power he has. But, in doing so, he disintegrates from human to monster: "I looked at him again as for the first time, seeing a bantam rooster of a man with a high-domed forehead and a raw eye-socket that wouldn't accept its lid" (411). The animal and the machine are mixed. Invisible man is disgusted by Jack's inhuman appearance; even more frightening is Jack's belief in the power of the machine: "But who knows, brothers," he said, with his back turned, "perhaps if we do our work successfully the new society will provide me a living eye. Such a thing is not at all fantastic . . ." (412). It may not be fantastic to Jack, but invisible man is aware of the horror that such power would cause in the hands of society's leaders.

In revealing his handicap, Jack becomes less real, thus unable to work invisible man back into the prescribed role. Invisible man, caught up in the emotion and turmoil, sees Jack as an amorphous thing: "His

face seemed to advance and recede, recede and advance" (412). Once again invisible man learns the nature of the leaders he confronts. He also learns that he must become like them if he is to succeed. Because he does not understand Bledsoe, he is cast out; because he does not follow the orders Brockway gives, he is blasted out. When he finds a place within the Brotherhood, however, he does not recognize the similarities between himself and Barbee, Bledsoe's handy-man.

In his first Brotherhood sanctioned speech, invisible man sees the crowd from Barbee's point of view: The crowd "seemed to become one, its breathing and articulation synchronized" (295). Tuned to form one mass to be manipulated by the Brotherhood, just as Bledsoe and Barbee controlled the campus crowd and Brockway the factory's power, the crowd and the speaker become inhuman. While watching the crowd, invisible man senses the unreality more so than at the campus or the factory because he is now the manipulator. Unable to make individual contact, both he and the crowd are reduced to parts of machines:

And I seemed to move in close, like the lens of a camera, focusing into the scene and feeling the heat and excitement and the pounding of voice and applause against my diaphragm, my eyes flying from face to face, swiftly, fleetingly searching for someone I could recognize, for someone from the old life, and seeing the faces become vaguer and vaguer the farther they receded from the platform. (295)

There is no human contact here: The crowd is just a mass of "heat and excitement," invisible man a camera lens sensing that energy and searching for a way to make contact with it.

Although he is acting a part in the Brotherhood's scheme, just as Barbee acts for Bledsoe, invisible man is out of control of himself and the Brotherhood when he becomes caught up in the spotlight as he begins to give his speech:

. . . entering the spot of light that surrounded me like a seamless cage of stainless steel, I halted. The light was so strong that I could no longer see the audience, the bowl of human faces. It was as though a semi-transparent curtain had dropped between us, but through which they could see me--for they were applauding--without themselves being seen. I felt the hard, mechanical isolation of the hospital machine and I didn't like it. (295-96)

The crowd is a detached unseen applause machine. The stage is set but the participants are out of touch, unable to fully appreciate each other as humans. Invisible man senses the freedom and power he now has but also the limitations, the cage of light, which cut him off from the people and himself. Able to speak to the crowd, he makes a nebulous contact: "I couldn't see them so I addressed the microphone and the cooperative voice before me" (297). Without the microphone and the power of the lights, he would not be able to do his work. Yet in doing his work, he becomes like Barbee--a sightless transmitter beaming the given message to the masses. As inhuman as Jack, Brockway, Barbee, or Bledsoe, invisible man is unable to act without a platform of power to speak from.

None of the leaders or their helpers offers invisible man hope or that vital role in society for which he searches. He eventually rejects each position, refusing to make the choice that Bledsoe, Barbee, Brockway, and Jack make--which is to deny part of their humanity, to

become actors and machines in order to gain some control over their worlds. Instead of becoming one of these "entropy people," invisible man sees several optional roles outside the scheme of mainstream society. And by examining these roles, he develops a "new" world view as he waits to make his move from underground.

NOTES

¹

For Ellison's comments on the role of leadership and the influence of Lord Raglan's The Hero on Invisible Man, see Shadow and Act, 18-19, and Going to the Territory, 43-45, 51.

²

For a discussion of societal limitations placed on invisible man, see Pryse 10 and Hassan 170.

³

O'Meally (15-18) discusses Bledsoe's role as "show man" and as a fictionalized Booker T. Washington.

⁴

Hassan calls all of the characters "sleepwalkers, captives of their particular illusion" (170).

⁵

In discussing Ellison's reactions to Tuskegee Institute, O'Meally writes that Barbee's speech is "humorously reminiscent of Founder's Day speeches delivered at Tuskegee (and at every college's ceremonial gatherings) each spring" (12).

⁶

Ellison claims that the Brotherhood represents all political parties, not necessarily the Communist party (Going to the Territory, 59-60); see also Shadow and Act 179. O'Meally (53-55) discusses the relationship between Ellison's experiences with Communists and his depiction of the Brotherhood.

CHAPTER IV

SWIMMING AGAINST THE CURRENT: INVISIBLE

MAN'S NEW WORLD VIEW

From his underground hole, invisible man reveals that he must develop a new world view in order to establish a position for himself in a world where entropy is prevalent:

The hibernation is over. I must shake off the old skin and come up for breath. There's a stench in the air, which, from this distance underground, might be the smell either of death or of spring--I hope of spring. But don't let me trick you, there is a death in the smell of spring and in the smell of thee as in the smell of me. And if nothing more, invisibility has taught my nose to classify the stench of death. (502)

Recognizing the continuing entropy of the world, the smell of "death in the smell of spring," he realizes that he must "shake off the old skin" now that he is able to see the kinds of life and death available. By looking at the diversity of the world, he is better able to appreciate himself and even society. In effect, he is able to learn how to deal with his life.

¹
Dreaming of those he has rejected, invisible man is haunted by their world view and by his own recognition that he was once their dupe. In the dream, he is castrated by them, just as he was in their reality, as they stifled his creativity, his self expression, at every turn. But

now he is free from the world above--"at a price" (493). The "price"--he is completely, at least now, outside society, thus unable to achieve the vital role for which he has been searching. But unlike Todd Clifton, who "had chosen . . . to fall outside history" (376), completely doing so as he first sells the Sambo doll and then is killed by the cop, invisible man steps back, not "outside," and through his dream sees the corruption of the world from which he escapes.

He sees not his "generations wasting upon the water," but society's entire structure: "But your sun . . ."; "And your moon . . ."; "Your world . . ."; ". . . there's your universe . . ." (493). In recognizing the decay of their world, he sees the monstrous threat of their view of history: "And high above me now the bridge seemed to move off to where I could not see, striding like a robot, an iron man, whose legs clanged doomfully as it moved" (493). Unable to stop it (the power of society) single-handedly, he refuses to reenter their world, to do battle with the whole system: "I was through and, in spite of the dream, I was whole" (494). Beginning to see that there is another battle which he must wage in order to live, he knows that no return is possible for him--no return in the sense of going back to what he once was: "No, I couldn't return to Mary's, or to the campus, or to the Brotherhood, or home. I could only move ahead or stay here, underground" (494). None of the worlds he has lived in offers him hope, the decay and corruption he saw in each forcing him to look elsewhere for a new life. He comes to realize that escaping is not enough.

He refuses to sit back safe on the sideline and watch the chaos go by: ". . . I took to the cellar; I hibernated. I got away from it all. But that wasn't enough. I couldn't be still even in hibernation.

Because, damn it, there's the mind, the mind. It wouldn't let me rest" (496). His need for information, for plugging the gaps in his life-² history, keeps him alive. When he sought to destroy the Brotherhood, his plan was to "solve the problem of information" (442). He has a similar problem now as he rejects the "they," in the words of Burnside, "the force that pulls your strings until you refuse to be pulled anymore" (137). Without knowledge of what was happening to him and through him, he would be used up by others and disintegrate in the process. Because of his desire to know, a most human quality, he questions his whole existence.

Invisible man's new philosophy is based on his awareness of the chaos³ of the world and how his mind helps him to deal with that chaos:

In going underground, I whipped it all except the mind, the mind. And the mind that has conceived a plan of living must never lose sight of the chaos against which that pattern was conceived. That goes for societies as well as for individuals. Thus, having tried to give pattern to the chaos which lives within the pattern of your certainties, I must come out, I must emerge. (502)

Invisible man must shake off his "old skin" and leave behind his old world view. This comes only after he decides to perform his "socially responsible role" (503). He bases his decision to act "responsibly" on his observation and rejection of society's leaders (as I discuss in Chapter III) and on his encounter with Rinehart.

⁴
B. P. Rinehart represents possibility--a man capable of playing any part, but controlling his world only as long as he maintains his act. Different from society's leaders and their helpers, he does not follow

orders from anyone in creating his roles. Behind his green-tinted glasses, Rinehart is one of the men "out of time" (381), mysterious men who seem to glide through the world unscathed by society. From the "Rev. B. P. Rinehart, Spiritual Technologist" (428), to "Rine the runner" (430), Rinehart is the master of deception, creating roles which allow him to exist, tenuously, in a number of worlds at the same time. He can turn one corner and move from "Rine the gambler" to "Rine the briber." His abilities impress invisible man and tempt him to experiment with "Rinehartism" (430):

He was a broad man, a man of parts who got around. Rinehart the rounder. It was true as I was true. His world was possibility and he knew it. He was years ahead of me and I was a fool. I must have been crazy and blind. The world in which we lived was without boundaries. A vast seething, hot world of fluidity, and Rine the rascal was at home. Perhaps only Rine the rascal was at home in it. (430)

That is what invisible man fears--that one can only be "productive" by being as amorphous as Rinehart. Invisible man rejects a Rinehart-type existence because Rinehart "runs and dodges the forces of history instead of making a dominating stand" (384). Thus, invisible man strives for his own "dominating stand."

Seeing possibility beyond the "fluidity" of Rinehart, invisible man is driven by his desire for more knowledge:

Without the possibility of action, all knowledge comes to one labeled "file and forget," and I can neither file nor forget. Nor will certain ideas forget me; they keep filing away at my

lethargy, my complacency. (501)

Knowledge, the mind, the inquisitive nature and the possibility of action--these are the things that keep invisible man from falling victim to a society in which everything is production and waste. These also push invisible man to find his truth beyond the surreal world of Rinehart.

When he accepts responsibility for his past actions, he begins to develop his new world view:

But deep down you come to suspect that you're yourself to blame, and you stand naked and shivering before the millions of eyes who look through you unseeingly. That is the real soul-sickness, the spear in the side, the drag by the neck through the mob-angry town, the Grand Inquisition, the embrace of the Maiden, the rip in the belly with the guts spilling out, the trip to the chamber with the deadly gas that ends in the oven so hygienically clean--only it's worse because you continue stupidly to live. But live you must, and you can either make passive love to your sickness or burn it out and go on to the next conflicting stage. (498)

Without knowledge, he will continue to be used and disintegrate. But with recognition and acceptance he can throw off his old world view: "I believed in hard work and progress and action, but now, after first being 'for' society, and then 'against' it, I assign myself no rank or any limit, and such an attitude is very much against the trend of the times. But my world has become one of infinite possibilities" (498). Even if the world, "what men call reality" is "just as concrete, ornery, vile and

sublimely wonderful as before" (498), he can live and not be caught up in the entropy, the chaos, the decay and the disintegration, if he is able to keep information flowing in to himself and see the value of diversity, as opposed to the desire for conformity above him:

I've come a long way from those days when, full of illusion, I lived a public life and attempted to function under the assumption that the world was solid and all the relationships therein. Now I know men are different and that all life is divided and that only in division is there true health. Hence again I have stayed in my hole because up above there's an increasing passion to make men conform to a pattern. (498-99)

For him, openness to new information and the ability to accept diversity offer the possibility for self and social renewal. Conforming to society's pattern, when that society is degenerate and disintegrating, destroys the individual. Invisible man knows this, moving beyond his old way of accepting society's demand. Instead, he finds his own strength, his own power to change his world view, and thus his world.

In the Prologue invisible man reveals his sources of strength and power: he has an energy source. He steals electricity from Monopolated Light and Power so as to enlighten his new home (9-10). The symbolism is obvious as he describes the effect the light has on him: "Light confirms my reality, gives birth to my form" (10); "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" (10). The light gives him a chance to live, to be in charge of his world. But he is able to

do so only at the expense of the power company--the representatives of the white society's power.⁶ By drawing energy from them, he causes chaos at the company as they are unable to determine exactly where the electricity is disappearing from (9). Thus, invisible man is pulling in energy from that source to decrease his entropy, creating an exosomatic system,⁷ a system which sucks energy from an outside source.

Invisible man's ability to use his imagination opens the possibility for stealing the electricity and creating his light board--and himself. The man behind his machine now, instead of being like Brockway, a man within the machine, he controls the light for his own benefit, instead of producing for a society that assigns him a place.⁸ Invisible man's belief in the power of invention, in the use of the imagination, allows him to establish his place in the world: "Though invisible I am in the great American tradition of tinkers" (11). His "I'll solve the problem" (10-11) attitude sets him apart from the role players he rejects. He will solve the problem for himself with as little negative effect on others as possible. As long as he has the energy from the power plant and his imagination, he will be able to live and to create.

Once he gains power of his own to fight the entropic effects of society, avoiding that "black water" (490) he describes when he first falls into the coal chute, he is able to fight the entropic effects of society. Staying put underground would turn him into an "entropy person," one who strives for a state of minimum tension, an easy escape if he wanted it. However, his first reactions to being underground reveal his awareness of the trap he would fall into if he were to stay put: "It's a kind of death without hanging, I thought, a death alive" (490). As seen in the Prologue, invisible man refuses to accept such a "death alive" underground:

Mine is a warm hole. And remember a bear retires to his hole for the winter and lives until spring; then he comes strolling out like the Easter chick breaking from its shell. I say all this to assure you that it is incorrect to assume that, because I'm invisible and live in a hole, I am dead. I am neither dead nor in a state of suspended animation. Call me Jack-the-Bear, for I am in a state of hibernation. (9)

Redefining his life in his own terms, invisible man will rise out of his hibernation, reborn, based on personal awareness and understanding of the events which put him in his hole and which will allow him to start a new life.

The assumption that invisible man rises out of his hole is based on the fact that he tells his story.⁹ That act alone symbolizes his acceptance of his socially responsible role. Through his art, invisible man makes his contribution to society and takes his firm stand, writing his own history based on the principles of American democracy.¹⁰ According to invisible man, one has to fight to keep the possibility of these principles alive. If not, they become a raw material for the strong to use to make themselves stronger. In thinking of his grandfather, he sees the options that the principles of the country offer--to those who hold them to be sacred and to those who use them for their own particular needs:

Or was it, or did he mean that we should affirm the principle because we, through no fault of our own, were linked to all the others in the loud, clamoring semi-visible world, that world seen only as a fertile field for exploitation by Jack and his

kind, and with condescension by Norton and his like, who were tired of being mere pawns in the futile game of "making history?" (497).

Those in charge make history, assigning men a place; such limitation, by society, horrifies invisible man. He is left wondering, searching for a way: "But what do I really want, I've asked myself. Certainly not the freedom of Rinehart nor the power of a Jack, nor simply the freedom not to run. No, but the next step I couldn't make, so I've remained in the hole" (497). Here he thinks that he must remain in the hole because he does not want what is offered above ground. Yet the incorruptible principle--the ideals of American democracy--offers invisible man hope, possibility.

From underground, invisible man sees the limitations placed on him above and now below. His fall into the hole is a fall into a new world of potential,¹¹ where he is able to develop his new world view:

Then I thought, this is the way it's always been, only now I know it--and rested back, calm now, placing the brief case beneath my head. I could open it in the morning, push off the lid. Now I was tired, too tired; my mind retreating, the image of the two glass eyes running together like blobs of melting lead. Here it was as though the riot was gone and I felt the tug of sleep, seemed to move out upon black water. (490)

Cut off and now only functioning by the needs of his body, for his own survival, not for a role, or for society, he sleeps for a timeless period and awakens to a new world (490) in which he must develop a new way of living. As a part of his new life, he burns the contents of his brief

case (491), a symbolic burning of his past as society's dupe¹² and an action that forces him to write his own history.

As mentioned throughout this essay, invisible man believes that the only way to live is to make an effort. His effort is to tell his story:

Life is to be lived, not controlled; and humanity is won by continuing to play in the face of certain defeat. Our fate is to become one, and yet many--This is not prophecy, but description. Thus one of the greatest jokes in the world is the spectacle of the whites busy escaping blackness and becoming blacker every day, and the blacks striving toward whiteness, becoming quite dull and gray. None of us seem to know who he is or where he's going. (499).

Entropy eventually wins, as all men must die; but if one "knows where he is going," he is at least somewhat in control. Invisible man believes that one way to win is to order the chaos of his life.¹³ However, in writing of his experiences, he feels he has negated them, toned them down:

The very act of trying to put it all down has confused me and negated some of the anger and some of the bitterness. So it is that now I denounce and defend, or feel prepared to defend. I condemn and affirm, say no and say yes, say yes and say no. I denounce because though implicated and partially responsible I have been hurt to the point of abysmal pain, hurt to the point of invisibility. (501)

He has been hurt until destroyed, hurt until used up. As long as he is invisible, those who hurt him feel no responsibility because he is not human. But he is unable to accept Ras's or anyone's call for violent action.

Ras's¹⁴ violent prophetic ravings disturb invisible man because they are beyond the boundaries of American experience--democracy. Perhaps invisible man also feels that Haile Selassie's claim to be the son of God is too implausible for him to follow Selassie's call. Thus, invisible man rejects Ras the Exhorter's call to wreak havoc in America and to return to the promised land, Ethiopia.¹⁵

The issue is more complicated to invisible man: he sees that by being violent he uses up energy and produces waste. Invisible man sees another way of surviving:

And I defend because in spite of all I find that I love. In order to get some of it down I have to love. I sell you no phony forgiveness, I'm a desperate man--but too much of your life will be lost, its meaning lost, unless you appreciate it as much through love as through hate. So I approach it through division. So I denounce and I defend and I hate and I love.

(501-2)

He refuses to zero in, to lock in to one approach. The realization that love is needed as much as hate is an effective deterrent to the entrapment¹⁶ trap; in effect, he makes himself more like his grandfather, who knows the value of the principles of American democracy:

Perhaps that makes me a little bit as human as my grandfather. Once I thought my grandfather incapable of thoughts about

humanity, but I was wrong. Why should an old slave use such a phrase as, "This and this or this has made me more human," as I did in my arena speech? Hell, he never had any doubts about his humanity--that was left to his "free" offspring. He accepted his humanity just as he accepted the principle. It was his, and the principle lives on in all its human and absurd diversity. (502)

His grandfather's advice to "agree em to death and destruction" (497)¹⁷ takes on new meaning for invisible man as he sees that he can live by the tenets of American democracy and remind Americans of them, even if society is ignorant of its perversion of these principles. His awareness of his humanity and the workings of the principles gives invisible man new life, making him see "that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play" (503).

By telling his story, he performs a socially responsible action in an entropic world: "Responsibility rests upon recognition, and recognition is a form of agreement" (16). He recognizes that the world is so chaotic that he cannot function within it and that members of the world are unaware of this chaos and the effect society's world view has on them.¹⁸ His story is as much an exposure of the degenerate world view of a society as it is his development of an identity.

Anticipating society's reaction to his story, invisible man tries to justify the way and the reason that he tells it:

"Ah," I can hear you say, "so it was all a build-up to bore us with his buggy jiving. He only wanted us to listen to him rave!" But only partially true: Being invisible and without substance, a disembodied voice, as it were, what else could I

do? What else but try to tell you what was really happening when your eyes were looking through? And it is this which frightens me:

Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you? (503)

His story gives shape to his experience, gives it an order which he imposes.¹⁹ In turn, writing the story gives invisible man permanence, diminishing the entropy of his life. Now invisible man not only siphons energy from the electric company, but also modulates it, ordering it so that he can speak out. From underground, he is able to speak his piece, broadcast his message, not the Brotherhood's or any other group's, of responsibility to all Americans. He builds a place where he can diminish his entropy at the cost of the power plant, but to the benefit of society, if it will listen to his message.

Music has a similar effect on him. If he is able to invent the end all of stereo systems,²⁰ he will be able to battle the "acoustical deadness" (11) in his hole. His experience with marijuana gives him a new insight into the orderliness of music:

So under the spell of the reefer I discovered a new analytical way of listening to music. The unheard sounds came through, and each melodic line existed of itself, stood out clearly from all the rest, said its piece, and waited patiently for the other voices to speak. That night I found myself hearing not only in time, but in space as well. I not only entered the music but descended, like Dante, into its depth. (12)

In these depths he also confronts the difficult question of his freedom.

His understanding of freedom is as confused as it was throughout the novel, but he does know that it is his to define.

Now for invisible man the battle is with entropy--which, in the dream at least, is his "profound craving for tranquility, for peace and quiet, a state I felt I could never achieve" (15). The noise is too loud, the past too vivid for him to be able to escape listening; however, feeling the words ²¹ immensely frightens invisible man:

At first I was afraid; this familiar music had demanded action, the kind of which I was incapable, and yet had I lingered there beneath the surface I might have attempted to act. Nevertheless, I know now that few really listen to this music. I sat on the chair's edge in a soaking sweat, as though each of my 1,369 bulbs had every one become a klieg light in an individual setting for a third degree with Ras and Rinehart in charge.

(15)

The 1,369 lights represent his new ordered state, also his work of art which allows him, literally, to see the perverted nature of life outside the hole. But the lights can be as much a curse as a blessing. Perhaps invisible man fears that others, especially Ras and Rinehart, will turn his creation against him and demand to know why he has created the lights for himself, forcing him to defend his work rather than allowing him to invent new devices, learn new things. The influence of the marijuana and the lights becomes too much for invisible man, and the outside world of violence and chaos becomes ever more frightening. The fact that there is more to music than sound reveals a power which invisible man fears tremendously, for to hear around corners is too much (15). To think too

much, sometimes to know too much, "inhibits action" (15-16). If the world is what he thinks it is, with entropy so prevalent, then he must battle that craving for non-action.

Like art, life is developed out of chaos. The same is true for a world view. Thus, invisible man's story challenges the reader to evaluate his own world view, see what it is based on, and see how strongly it is influenced by the need for any order. For invisible man, his early plans are not only the ones foisted upon him by others, but they are also the most available, the easiest to live with. They do not require an effort on his part. He can accept the plan and follow it, so long as he is not aware of the abuse he is suffering. The warning is to recognize the chaos underlying the development of any world view. Then the individual must decide what changes need to be made, what knowledge must be gained. Failure to do so will result in constant degeneration and decay until only waste is left if the world view is similar to the one in the novel where men are treated as raw material, not as humans.

Energy spent in constructing a more and more technological and controlled society or individual environment results in an increase in entropy. ²² The society and the individual will both crumble without an influx of energy and information. Invisible man controls his own energy and learns from the information he retrieves from his memory. He is able to sustain himself, to fend off the efforts of society to drain his energy. Finally finding his "vital role," he uses his energy to transmit his message to those willing to chance the understanding of it.

NOTES

1

See Grow for a discussion of the dream scenes in Invisible Man. See also Sypher's comments on life, dreams and "negative entropy" (74).

2

For Ellison's views on the role of history in one's development, see Shadow and Act, 57, 113-14, 166, 179, and Going to the Territory, 27-29, 47. See also O'Meally 103-4, Lee 71-72, Bigsby 89-90, and Callahan 130-31.

3

Ellison discusses the chaos of American society throughout a great number of his critical essays. For a good sampling, see the following chapters in Going to the Territory: "Going to the Territory," "Society, Morality, and the Novel," "A Very Stern Discipline," and "The Novel as a Function of American Democracy." See also Shadow and Act, "Introduction."

4

In Shadow and Act, 55-57, 181-82, Ellison discusses the source and significance of B. P. Rinehart. See also Benston 161-63, Hassan 73, O'Meally 90, and Bigsby 97.

5

See Ellison, Shadow and Act, 173, for the role light plays in invisible man's development.

6

See Bigsby 89-90.

7

For a discussion of energy intake and entropy, see Rifkin, 53, 56-57, 235, 259; see also Boulding 174, and Arnheim 25.

8

Ellison, Shadow and Act, 264-65, 270, discusses the use and abuse of technology in relation to the future of American culture.

9

Ellison, Shadow and Act, 57-58, 179, writes of invisible man rising from underground; see also Going to the Territory, 59, 288.

10

Throughout his criticism, Ellison writes of the role that the principles of American democracy play in the fulfillment of invisible man's world view, or anyone's. See especially Shadow and Act, 102-6, 182-83; Going to the Territory, 9, 15-18, 26-27, 46. See also Bigsby 89-90 and Callahan 133-38.

11

In Shadow and Act, 100, Ellison discusses the importance of the artist to reach down into the depths of the mind, a source of energy for him--the coal bin in which invisible man falls.

12

See Ellison, Shadow and Act, 177.

13

see note 3.

14

Ellison, Shadow and Act, 181, discusses his development of the character Ras. See also Kehl's article which discusses Ellison's references to Ras and Rastafarianism.

15

For a brief account of Belassie's rise and fall, see White, 29-32, 43-45, 45-48.

16

See Boulding 146.

17

See O Meally 81.

18

For a discussion of how people unknowingly develop their world views see Rifkin 4, 5-9.

19

Sypher writes that "art [invisible man's story in my analysis] is not meant to stop the stream of life," although the work of art is in a state of "final equilibrium" (56).

20

For an interesting side note in which Ellison's reveals his interest in music and stereo systems, see Shadow and Act, 187-98.

21

A good sampling of music criticism, especially of blues and jazz, which comprises a large part of Ellison's critical essays, is found in Shadow and Act and Going to the Territory. See also Bluestein's "The Blues as a Literary Theme" 593-617, and O'Meally's chapter "Invisible Man: Black and Blue," in The Craft of Ralph Ellison, 78-104.

22

See Rifkin 242.

CONCLUSION

Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man contains many themes interwoven to emphasize the main theme of invisible man's quest for his place in the world. In this thesis, I have shown Ellison's recognition of the entropy process, perhaps the most underlying theme at work throughout the world of his novel. I have also shown how invisible man is affected by this entropic world and his development of a new world view. His new world view allows him to order the chaos of his life as he gains control of an energy source, what he desperately needs after being used up by society.

The entropy process, especially as seen in the disintegration of society, knows no racial barriers. Thus, Ellison's novel is much more than just a protest by a black man against white society. It is also more than the tale of a young man's development of his identity. In Invisible Man Ellison shows the disintegration of American society caused by America's failure to follow the principles of the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. America's institutions, the businessmen's club, the "Negro" college, preach but do not practice these ideals. Thus Ellison (thus invisible man) emphasizes the key component of any democracy, the individual: the individual who is aware of not only his rights as granted by these documents, but who is also aware of his obligation to live by them and constantly remind American society of its failure to do so. These ideals give the individual power, strength, and energy to live in an entropic society.

In his non-fiction prose, Ellison discusses the potential power and the responsibility the artist and the individual have as members of what could be a great society. According to Ellison, the individual who makes the effort to perform a responsible role is the key to American society living by its values:

In the leveling process to which all things are subjected in a democracy, one must depend always upon the individual's ability to rise out of the mass and achieve the possibility implicit in the society. One must depend upon his ability, whoever he is and from whatever class and racial group, to attain the finest perception of human value. . . . Certainly the novelist must make some such assumptions if he is to allow himself range in which to work toward the finest possibilities of his talent and his form without a frustrating sense of alienation. (Going to the Territory, 271)

Making his case for the active role of the artist and the individual in American society, Ellison also discusses the obligation one has to society. The novel offers Ellison the opportunity to fulfill his obligation, to point out the strengths and weaknesses of American society.

Art (the novel) is Ellison's tool for instructing people (especially Americans) about the possibilities which the ideals of American democracy reveal. As Ellison writes, art is his stand against the chaos which surrounds him:

Man knows, despite the certainties which it is the psychological function of his social institutions to give him,

that he did not create the universe and that the universe is not at all concerned with human values. Man knows, even in this day of marvelous technology and the tenuous subjugation of the atom, that nature can crush him, and that at the boundaries of human order the arts and instruments of technology are hardly more than magic objects which serve to aid us in our ceaseless quest for certainty. We cannot live, as one has said, in the contemplation of chaos, but neither can we live without an awareness of chaos, and the means through which we achieve that awareness, and through which we assert our humanity most significantly against it, is great art. (Going to the Territory, 245-6)

Since America is ever-changing, defining and redefining itself, the artist has a great responsibility to try to establish some unwavering ground for the American to stand upon. Ellison re-reveals that ground as the strong base of the ideals of American democracy. In order to achieve any success in improving America, we must, as Ellison writes, "pursue our goals in terms of American Constitutionalism" (Shadow and Art, 270).

Ellison's "socially responsible" act reminds Americans of their freedom and of their obligation to live by the tenets that freedom demands. Part of Ellison's contribution to contemporary American literature is that same reminder--that artists have a responsibility because of their freedom.

Another aspect of Ellison's contribution is that he offers the hope and possibility that young writers can make an impact. Writing of Ellison's "insistence on the heroic impulse in black life," O'Meally discusses Ellison's influence on young writers:

He has had a lasting impact on many young writers, notably Al Young, Ishmael Reed, Leon Forrest, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and James Alan McPherson. His special contribution to the new wave of black writing is his unceasing insistence upon connections between the contemporary writer, and not only the American realistic tradition, but the symbolist tradition that nourished Melville and Faulkner, and the vernacular tradition rooted in American language and lore. (5)

In "The Heirs of Ralph Ellison: Patterns of Individualism in the Contemporary Novel," Schultz also discusses Ellison's influence on young writers, specifically Leon Forrest, Charles Johnson, John Wideman, Albert Murray, Al Young, and John McCluskey. Schultz writes that "Ellison's heirs share with him the conviction indispensable to Western civilization that the individual can shape his own destiny from a world of multiple opportunities and ambiguities; they also share with him the conviction that the individual's attempt to shape reality is not only cyclical and mythical, repeating itself endlessly throughout history, but that it is also specifically shaped by external events--accident, death, racism" (122).

As far as Ellison's influence on young writers, I can only add that Ellison can influence any writer, regardless of race, who is concerned with that "heroic impulse" (which O'Meally discusses) not just in black life, but in life in the contemporary world where all people are forced to struggle against the forces of chaos which surround us all as we attempt to "shape reality."

I think Ellison's use of entropic imagery in Invisible Man serves to open up for contemporary writers the possibility of dealing more

explicitly with the chaotic nature of America and the contemporary world. In discussing what might be the lasting qualities of his novel, Ellison responds, "If it does last, it will be simply because there are things going on in its depths that are of more permanent interest than on its surface" (Shadow and Act, 175). Because Ellison's novel displays the theme of the entropic effects of American society in the background, so to speak, later writers surely saw that and brought entropy into the foreground. Thus, Ellison may have influenced writers such as Thomas Pynchon and William Burroughs.¹

America is "possibility," as invisible man (and Ellison) would say, but "possibility" which must be continually held to the American ideals not the perversion of them. In the modern world of consumption and waste, the individual can decrease the entropic effects if he or she is aware of such "possibility." The heat death of the universe can never be halted, but the entropic effects of American society can be decreased if one carves his or her niche and performs his or her socially responsible role.

NOTE

¹

For a discussion of entropy as a theme in contemporary literature, specifically in Pynchon's works, see Cooper.

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2

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