My exploration of marked characters in American fiction ends with the following discussion of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. There are conspicuous omissions from my study, as I discussed in chapter 1; however, only Ellison's novel attempts the epic scope Hawthorne, Melville, and Faulkner achieve. *The Scarlet Letter, Moby-Dick, Light in August*, and *Invisible Man* are all appropriately described as quest narratives. The pursuit that begins with Hawthorne's study of social exclusion, that Melville develops in his narrative of Ishmael, who chooses to isolate himself in order to achieve omniscience, and that Faulkner explores as emblematic of a search for identity in Christmas's self-exclusion, reaches its most recent variation in Ellison's novel, a twentieth-century fusion of the "heroic fugitive" school of Negro writers of the early and mid-nineteenth century (the most significant text is Frederick Douglass's autobiographical *Narrative* of 1845) and the heritage of the American transcendentalists, which has gone "underground," like Ellison's narrator, since the 1840s.

Like Joe Christmas, Ellison's *Invisible Man* is a victim of society's insistence on revealed meaning. What his stigma—that he is black—reveals hides the person he thinks he is. The irony of the novel is that invisibility becomes a stigma that *Invisible Man* embraces. However, his affirmation of invisibility is much more complex than Joe Christmas's choice to become a marked member of his community. As Hightower's transcendence and Byron's love for Lena ultimately show, the outcast's crucifixion may lead to social transfiguration. That is, Christmas's martydom, in spite of its tragic indictment of the community of Jefferson, contributes to comic resolution at the end of the novel. Christmas himself dies, but in the aesthetic distance Faulkner achieves in Byron's eternal pursuit, he suggests the possibility of redemption.
Like Faulkner, Ellison attempts to transcend the limitations Puritanism has imposed in American society. Ellison uses comedy to avoid imposing "revealed meaning" on chaos; like Faulkner's narrator, Invisible Man embraces ambiguity. Yet Faulkner's vision yields to Ellison's insistence that humanity must precede community. Unlike Faulkner, Ellison has no vision of community to offer us. Yet in Shadow and Act, he accords Faulkner the highest praise when he states,

Indeed, through his many novels and short stories, Faulkner fights out the moral problem which was repressed after the nineteenth century, and it was shocking for some to discover that for all his concern with the South, Faulkner was actually seeking out the nature of man. Thus we must turn to him for that continuity of moral purpose which made for the greatness of our classics. As for the Negro minority, he has been more willing perhaps than any other artist to start with the stereotype, accept it as true, and then seek out the human truth which it hides.

The "human truth" for Ellison involves more than an individual's relation to the community; it requires recognition of those elements of personal identity that are "invisible" to society. In spite of Invisible Man's incessant search for "brotherhood," the novel focuses on the individual. As I will discuss in this chapter, Invisible Man's search for a badge of acceptance in a group allies him with Ahab; when he fails, he manages to become an Ishmael. In attempting to "join," he demonstrates Christmas's despair; when he goes underground at last, he learns the comic force of Byron's "religion," by which he "binds himself back" to his source.

Robert Bone writes, "The bursting forth of Negro personality from the fixed boundaries of Southern life is Ellison's essential theme. And it is this, at bottom, that attracts him to the transcendentalists. ... In broader terms, it may be said that Ellison's ontology derives from transcendentalism." Ellison explores his narrator's relationship to American history and American literary history and indicates that the American identity remains an object of transcendental quest. In Invisible Man, naming is an analogue for marking: by emerging gradually from one experience after another with people who would keep him anonymous, the narrator earns his self-assigned name. Like Hawthorne, Melville, and Faulkner, Ellison too, as Robert Bone suggests, epitomizes the pervasive presence of the transcendental imagination in American fiction.

I

The Epilogue to Invisible Man ends with a question: "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?" The Prologue
begins with a statement: "I am an invisible man." It has become a critical cliché to interpret ends of literary works as recycling mechanisms, redirecting the reader back into the text. Ralph Ellison is conscious of this paradigm, and his narrator explicitly states in the Prologue, "the end is in the beginning" (p. 9). The beginning, the narrator's opening statement, is also his goal of affirmation and realization. If we view the closing question with the opening statement in mind, we are compelled to ponder how Ellison's narrator does indeed speak for us. To what extent does the reader become the protagonist; to what extent does he share the narrator's invisibility?

It comes as a surprise to the literary critic to face such a question in response to the work, and perhaps his first inclination may be to avoid doing so. If he chooses instead to explore the novel's central theme— invisibility—he is partially foiled by Ellison's narrator, who insists on interpreting the novel for us in the Prologue-Epilogue frame. What is left to the critic but revelation and reiteration of the obvious? The narrator admits as much in the last paragraph of the Epilogue when he states,

"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? (p. 503)

He addresses us as contributors to his invisibility, as conspirators with those people who "refuse to see me": "When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me" (p. 7). But he speaks also as a narrator to his readers, justifying his role as commentator and interpreter. And as such, he directs our attempts to explain "what was really happening" in the novel. His justification for blocking our literary critical attempts is enlightening: it is to compensate for his substancelessness, his "disembodied voice." Preventing, by answering, the critical question, What is the novel about?, the narrator forces the more personal question, Who is the novel about? If we succeed in reading the novel without asking this question, we run the risk of Ellison's invisibility. We become, likewise, a disembodied voice.

In what amounts to a theory of literary criticism, Ellison states in a footnote in Shadow and Act:

Perhaps the ideal approach to the work of literature would be one allowing for insight into the deepest psychological motives of the writer at the same time that it examined all external sociological factors
operating within a given milieu. For while objectively a social reality, the work of art is, in its genesis, a projection of a deeply personal process, and any approach that ignores the personal at the expense of the social is necessarily incomplete. (p. 27)

In what way is it possible to write about *Invisible Man* in terms of Ellison's own "theory" of literary criticism? Ellison stresses that personal and sociological motives operate "at the same time." It would not seem appropriate for the reader to catalog his own experiences of invisibility. To do so would be not to participate in Ellison's dialogue but to write another novel. What the narrator needs in order to achieve self-realization is a social and historical context. He decides to emerge from hibernation, to "come out" of the hole he is in, but not yet. The reader's half of the exchange must provide this context, must embody the voice. If the narrator's final appeal to our "lower frequencies" succeeds, he is out of his hole. We let him out, because we put him in. And we do the same for ourselves.

What context does the narrator demand? The range of possibilities for his "coming out" is as vast as the range of possibilities the invisible man himself sees as the "next phase" of his conflict: "Until some gang succeeds in putting the world in a strait jacket, its definition is possibility. Step outside the narrow borders of what men call reality and you step into chaos—ask Rinehart, he's a master of it—or imagination" (p. 498). The "narrow borders of what men call reality" is a euphemism in the novel for history, as history is one reconstruction of chaos, one definition. The narrator reflects that Tod Clifton died for his right to "plunge outside of history... into nothingness, into the void of faceless faces, of soundless voices lying outside history" (p. 379). He looks about him on the subway at "men out of time, who would soon be gone and forgotten" (p. 381). Who would record and document the lives of these men like Clifton? "They were outside the groove of history, and it was my job to get them in, all of them" (p. 383). Thus it becomes Invisible Man's responsibility at Clifton's funeral "to put his integrity together again" (p. 387).

He states in his eulogy that Clifton "lost his hold on reality" (p. 395). Invisible Man translates Clifton's coffin into the ghetto "box," attempting to remind the mourners of their reality:

"It has a cracked ceiling and a clogged-up toilet in the hall. It has rats and roaches, and it's far, far too expensive a dwelling. The air is bad and it'll be cold this winter. Tod Clifton is crowded and he needs the room. 'Tell them to get out of the box,' that's what he would say if you could hear him. 'Tell them to get out of the box and go teach the cops to forget that rhyme. Tell them to teach them that when they call you nigger to make a rhyme with trigger it makes the gun backfire.'" (p. 396)
When he finishes his speech he states, "as I took one last look I saw not a crowd but the set faces of individual men and women . . . Tod Clifton was underground." The reconstruction of Clifton's history permits Invisible Man to see the individuality of faces in the crowd; each individual becomes a manifestation of the dead man, "our hope shot down." Similarly, by becoming such a manifestation of the narrator, in admitting the invisibility we share, we in turn pull him out of his box, his hole. The attempt involves nothing less than a rewriting of history, a new Reconstruction.

The gun that backfires is the grandfather's gun. The grandfather's deathbed advice, in the opening pages of the novel, creates a puzzle that the narrator discovers he must recreate in order to resolve: "'Son, after I'm gone I want you to keep up the good fight. I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction'" (p. 29). But it becomes the reader's gun as well, and the reader's puzzle.

Historically wars and revolutions form the background for the high periods of the novel, and civil wars, Hemingway has written, are the best wars for the writer. To which we would add, yes, because they have a way of continuing long after wars between nations are resolved; because, with the combatants being the same people, civil wars are never really won; and because their most devastating engagements are fought within the individual human heart.

The combatants are the same people; the reader is one of the individual faces in the crowd at Clifton's death; history is our reconstruction; we are all invisible; and until we recognize our internal state of civil war, we are trapped underground.

In *Shadow and Act*, Ellison analyzes the effects of the Civil War on the American consciousness. In reading Whitman, Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, and Mark Twain, "we are reminded that from 1776 to 1876 there was a conception of democracy current in this country that allowed the writer to identify himself with the Negro." For his nineteenth-century predecessors, "slavery (it was not termed a 'Negro problem' then) was a vital issue in the American consciousness, symbolic of the condition of Man, and a valid aspect of the writer's reality." In what Ellison terms "the counter-revolution of 1876, . . . the Negro issue [was] pushed into the underground of the American conscience and ignored" (p. 98). "I felt that except for the work of William Faulkner something vital had gone out of American prose after Mark Twain . . . Whatever [the nineteenth-century novelists] thought of my people per se, in their imaginative economy the Negro symbolized both the man lowest down and the mysterious, underground aspect of human personal-
ity. In a sense the Negro was the gauge of the human condition as it waxed and waned in our democracy” (p. 104). The difference between the “underground of the American conscience,” and that “underground aspect of human personality” in which “the Negro was the gauge of the human condition,” is the difference between a cold hole and a warm hole. As the narrator of the novel’s Prologue warns, “Now don’t jump to the conclusion that because I call my home a ‘hole’ it is damp and cold like a grave; there are cold holes and warm holes. Mine is a warm hole . . . warm and full of light” (p. 9). Invisible Man prefers his state of hibernation to the version of American reality that would term his “hole” a grave.

R. W. B. Lewis acknowledges Invisible Man’s position in the heritage of the American Adam, “the authentic . . . figure of heroic innocence and vast potentialities, poised at the start of a new history.” For Lewis, a study of the all-but-lost archetype of emancipation, innocence, and self-reliance may be one means of “hoisting” the American identity to a higher “plane of understanding.” “We stand in need of more stirring impulsions, of greater perspectives and more penetrating controversies. Perhaps a review of that earlier debate can help us on our way. We can hardly expect to be persuaded any longer by this historic dream of the new Adam. But it can pose anew, in the classic way of illumination as it did in the nineteenth century, the picture of what might be against the knowledge of what is, and become once more a stimulus to enterprise and a resource for literature.” Invisible Man’s lighted hole acts precisely as this kind of “classic illumination,” and the only impetus to rebirth that is lacking is “a review of that earlier debate,” the dialogue of Ellison’s socially conscious literary criticism.

The novel urges, then, that the reader place Invisible Man back into history and provide his embodiment, his American context. It is to this end that the multitude of symbols and structures the novel provides must be interpreted. For the invisible man, “to be unaware of one’s form is to live a death” (p. 10). To free ourselves from the same formlessness of invisibility, it is necessary to reintegrate our awareness of the historical, literary, and sociological aspects of the changing American identity that lead to Invisible Man’s self-realization.

II

The first six chapters take place in the South, converting into “symbolic action” the necessity that the protagonist move North.” In a Paris Review interview reprinted in Shadow and Act, Ellison states:
In my novel the narrator's development is one through blackness to light; that is, from ignorance to enlightenment: invisibility to visibility. He leaves the South and goes North; this, as you will notice in reading Negro folktales, is always the road to freedom—the movement upward. You have the same thing again when he leaves his underground cave for the open. (p. 173)

Historically, as Ellison suggests, the road North was "the road to freedom"—for Frederick Douglass, Eliza, Uncle Tom's Children, James Baldwin's Florence in Go Tell It on the Mountain, and Ellison's Brother Tarp, who reminds Invisible Man of his slave history by giving him the filed chain link. With the gift, Invisible Man inherits an obligation to become, himself, a link in the chain of black emancipation. Tarp acted nobly and essentially: "'I lost my wife and my boys and my piece of land. . . . I said no to a man who wanted to take something from me'" (p. 335). By the same means, as he wrote in his autobiographical Narrative of 1845, Frederick Douglass began his escape from slavery—by physical resistance to Edward Covey. "You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man." The same resistance ultimately permeates Invisible Man and other contemporary fiction. As Thomas Vogler expresses it, "the novelists seem to agree that violence and distortion must be the means of projecting a vision to which society is hostile. They seem further to agree that the contemporary world presents a continued affront to man, and that his response must therefore be at least in part that of the rebel." In the literal sense of his name, however, Tarp acts as a "cover"—for emancipation has become a false construct for the contemporary heroic fugitive. The intellectual rebel no longer confronts a tangible bondage—as Ellison writes, "reality is difficult to come by."

In retrospect, the narrator's "beautiful college" in green and white becomes a "flower-studded wasteland" (p. 38). His memory of the bronze statue of the Founder, "hands outstretched . . . above the face of a kneeling slave," is altered by his later perception, in which he is "unable to decide whether the veil is really being lifted, or lowered more firmly in place" (p. 37). Yet he realizes that at one time, in his pastoral innocence, he was unable to hear the "stagnant stillness" for the humming of bees and the sound of mockingbirds. Part of the pastoral nostalgia that Invisible Man feels for the South he owes to that historical road, open to the slave, that is no longer open to him. Filing a chain link, real as well as symbolic action, literally frees. When external conflict becomes internalized, "repressed," as Ellison would have it, reality becomes pastoralized and man, "invisible."

The South, as the narrator remembers it, is only a beautiful place for those who lack consciousness, and retrospectively it bears the
burden for his suffering. "Since then I've sometimes been overcome
with a passion to return into that 'heart of darkness' across the
Mason-Dixon line, but then I remind myself that the true darkness
lies within my own mind, and the idea loses itself in the gloom. Still
the passion persists. Sometimes I feel the need to reaffirm all of it,
the whole unhappy territory and all the things loved and unlovable
in it, for all of it is part of me. Till now, however, this is as far as I've
ever gotten, for all life seen from the hole of invisibility is absurd"
(p. 501). What is "absurd" about the South, for Invisible Man, is not
the "darkness" but the unreality. He sees his college as defined
totally in terms of black and white—even to the white line on the
highway that separates the college from the "trash" section of
town—and more important, as totally defined. For example, Norton
implies that Invisible Man may choose his "fate" from among a
multitude of possibilities: "If you become a good farmer, a chef, a
preacher, doctor, singer, mechanic—whatever you become, and even
if you fail, you are my fate" (p. 44). In fact Norton's very catalog,
omitting artist, intellectual, statesman, teacher, and capitalist, also
expresses the limitations of that fate.

What Vogler calls the "vestigial aura of Edenic simplicity" which Ellison, like Faulkner, attributes to the South, is the simplic-
ity of definition, the American Adam's ability to create "language
itself by naming the elements of the scene about him." Invisible
Man is named, defined, categorized—in the South by Norton and
Bledsoe, in the North by the Brotherhood—until he begins to
"awake" from the nightmare of (his own) history. Yet even though
he claims as his own the power that for so long worked against him,
he does not find the strength to emerge from his hole. He leaves the
South in order to extend his range of possibilities but ends still
choosing definition (even if, this time, it is self-definition) as a sub-
stitute for reality—"Until some gang succeeds in putting the world
in a strait jacket, its definition is possibility" (p. 498). Leaving the
South is only useful as a metaphor for liberation. The North (con-
trolled by the Nortons, Emersons, and Brother Jacks) falsifies and
demythologizes the metaphor for Invisible Man. In viewing the
South with pastoral eyes, as a region from which he has "escaped"
and to which he cannot return, Invisible Man fails to perceive how
clearly he carries his own "south" within him into Harlem.

The theme of escape from the South runs through white as well as
black fiction, and includes William Styron's Peyton Loftis, Eudora
Welty's King MacLain in The Golden Apples, and Faulkner's Quen-
tin Compson, whose attempt to come to terms with his Southern
heritage leads to suicide. Quentin protests to Shreve in Absalom,
Invisible Man, "Gettysburg. . . . You can't understand it. You would have to be born there." The articulation of this theme in *Invisible Man* and all of southern fiction poses a challenge to northern readers, who were not "born there." Unlike Invisible Man, northern readers do not have open to them even a symbolic avenue of escape. Keats's "negative capability" comes close to characterizing the move North as Faulkner and Ellison explore it, and historically, Keats's expression finds no more appropriately American symbol than the myth of the Mason-Dixon line. As Invisible Man puts it, "In the South everyone knew you, but coming North was a jump into the unknown" (p. 431).

It is one of the ironic attractions of southern literature and black literature, for many of us, that we can get outside the southern and black experience precisely because we were born outside it. We can look at it because we are not it. But the semantics of this distinction may trap us, blind us as it does the Indians in "Red Leaves." Faulkner realized that definition is only possible through negation, what Erich Neumann called "the acceptance of the shadow." In "Red Leaves," the Negro body servant experiences what life means by becoming a heroic fugitive from death. Quentin Compson goes North to find out his southern identity, and, unable to affirm it, succeeds at least in denying his denial. Shreve asks him, at the end of *Absalom,* why he hates the South. The passion of ambivalence Quentin reveals—"I don't hate it! I don't hate it!"—cannot be understood by Shreve; but it is understood by Ralph Ellison, who would suggest that the North/South dichotomy is only part of the "American" experience. By the intuitive logic of this argument, it should be easier for the northerner and the white reader to realize the affirmation Quentin and Invisible Man just fail to achieve. We need only direct our attention—we need only *look*—in order to see and thus restore the narrator and ourselves to visibility: "I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me" (p. 7).

A problem emerges. Given our refusal to see, is it possible for Invisible Man, one representative of a mass of white and black individuals, to achieve by moving North an alternative identity that will endure for an individual, a group, or a race? Ellison offers the blues as a lyrical expression of personal catastrophe, and states, "They fall short of tragedy only in that they provide no solution, offer no scapegoat but the self." Ellison's alternative to a redemption that depends on the recognition of his visibility lies in self-sacrifice. He defines "humanism" as "man's basic attitude toward a social order which he accepts, and individualism his basic attitude toward one he rejects." Individualism becomes a means of affirma-
tion, but its price is great: there is "no scapegoat but the self." Moving North becomes a move to anonymity: "How many days could you walk the streets of the big city without encountering anyone who knew you, and how many nights?" (p. 431). But it also cuts him off from community. Ellison explains,

The pre-individualistic black community discourages individuality out of self-defense. Having learned through experience that the whole group is punished for the actions of the single member, it has worked out efficient techniques of behavior control. . . . Personal warmth is accompanied by an equally personal coldness, kindness by cruelty, regard by malice. And these opposites are as quickly set off against the member who gestures toward individuality as a lynch mob forms at the cry of rape.20

"The horrible thing," Ellison stresses, "is that the cruelty is also an expression of concern, of love."

III

It is not surprising, in the attempt to depict a society where "there is in progress between black and white Americans a struggle over the nature of reality,"21 that naturalism should not be an effective or even an appropriate mode of aesthetic discourse. Ellison explains, in part, his choice of allegorical mode: "I was forced to conceive of a novel unburdened by the narrow naturalism which has led, after so many triumphs, to the final and unrelieved despair which marks so much of our current fiction."22 As a novelist Ellison confronts the problem his narrator expresses in the Prologue: "Responsibility rests upon recognition, and recognition is a form of agreement" (p. 16). Invisible Man justifies here his own withdrawal from "social responsibility" when he goes underground—the terms of "agreement" between himself and his society have not been mutually acceptable. It is not "final and unrelieved despair" that Ellison's narrator avoids when he avoids naturalism, but a presentation of reality that might be subject to "agreement."23

To understand this, it is only necessary to review controversies over two novels about black protagonists, Richard Wright's Native Son and William Styron's The Confessions of Nat Turner. Ellison summarizes the complaints against Native Son in Shadow and Act: "I felt that Wright was overcommitted to ideology. . . . You might say that I was much less a social determinist. But I suppose that basically it comes down to a difference in our concepts of the individual. I, for instance, found it disturbing that Bigger Thomas had none of the finer qualities of Richard Wright, none of the imagination, none of the sense of poetry, none of the gaiety. And I preferred
Richard Wright to Bigger Thomas" (p. 16). This statement amounts to an attack on the novel's presentation of reality and recalls an earlier criticism by James Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel": "The failure of the protest novel lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended."24 Irving Howe, in his famous essay "Black Boys and Native Sons," defends Richard Wright. "How could a Negro put pen to paper, how could he so much as think or breathe, without some impulsion to protest, be it harsh or mild, political or private, released or buried? The 'sociology' of his existence formed a constant pressure on his literary work, and not merely in the way this might be true for any writer, but with a pain and ferocity that nothing could remove."25 He goes on to attribute the success of "younger novelists," Baldwin and Ellison, in moving "beyond Wright's harsh naturalism and toward more supple modes of fiction" to the fact that "Wright has been there first, courageous enough to release the full weight of his anger."26

Robert Bone agrees with Baldwin's statement when he writes, "Protest fiction, by portraying sociological types, holds its readers at a distance from the human person."27 In Wright's insistence that it is "categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended," to use Baldwin's words, he expresses the problem of naturalism where there is disagreement over the nature of reality. Allegory automatically forces the reader to "transcend" social categories in order to determine the significance of the work. Allegory is symbolic, comprised of representative men. Therefore in writing allegory, Ellison compels even his white readers to "transcend" the very "reality" they would not have otherwise agreed upon long enough to ponder its meaning.

It is clear how this works if we consider one contrast between Joe Christmas and Invisible Man. Howe writes about Wright's Bigger Thomas, "only through violence does he gather a little meaning in life, pitifully little."28 The same statement holds true when applied to Joe Christmas, even though Faulkner's novel does not begin to approach the harshness of Wright's. When Christmas is castrated by Percy Grimm, the novel soars to its "unbelievable crescendo"29 in a catharsis of pain. The closest Invisible Man comes to castration is his dream about it at the end of the novel, and even there, as I will discuss later in this chapter, Ellison uses castration not referentially but symbolically, as an image of blinding.

Similar conflict inspires the essays in Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond. John Oliver Killens sums up the collective thesis
of these essays, calling Styron's "pretense" to adopt Turner's point of view "a colossal error, one that required tremendous arrogance."³⁰ "This is all just a way of saying that the story of Nat Turner is still to be written, and it will be up to a black man to write this great American tragedy."³¹ Naturalism becomes an epistemological tool in the struggle over the nature of white and black reality, as if the vehemence of argument served as a catalyst for social change.

Ellison denies the assumption and rejects naturalism. However, this artistic repudiation places limitations on Ellison's narrator-protagonist. "You ache," he says in the Prologue, "with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world" (p. 7). We might ask whether or not the protagonist of the novel, in achieving a new identity, succeeds in convincing himself of his reality. More important, does he convince anyone else? The problem of naturalism for the narrator and the protagonist's ache for reality become part of the same dilemma. "'I too have become acquainted with ambivalence. . . . That's why I'm here,'" Invisible Man writes in the Prologue. He proposes this ambivalence, underground, as a solution to his conflict in the real world. Paradoxically, just as he discovers his southern identity in the North—"I yam what I am" (p. 231)—so he resolves his anonymity by making visible his invisibility. The protagonist's struggle becomes the narrator's allegory: "I am an invisible man."

To the extent that the narrator's fictional world articulates ambivalence—as he states in the Epilogue, "too much of your life will be lost, its meaning lost, unless you approach it as much through love as through hate" (p. 501)—the particular characters within it become less free to do the same. The protagonist encounters other people as symbols, refusing or unable to see them as less phantom-like than himself, as Clifton's funeral and his emotional transactions with Mary Rambo or Brother Trap indicate. Ellison says in the Paris Review interview, "I felt that such a man as this character would have been incapable of a love affair; it would have been inconsistent with his personality."³² There is more than the lack of a love affair that strikes the reader—there is a lack of love, constraining the protagonist and inhibiting the narrator. His depiction of characters becomes "black and white." Only after Clifton achieves mythical proportions for Invisible Man does he elicit the protagonist's "love." The narrator chooses "symbolic action" as method and response to his lack of reality.

As The Scarlet Letter demonstrates, at the moment when questions of art become real confrontations (when Chillingworth views Dimmesdale's naked breast but Hawthorne's narrator averts his
eyes), Hawthorne withdraws into allegory. In so doing, Hawthorne expresses his Puritanism, his need for a container, for a scaffolding on which to rest his narrative. Ellison's choice of allegory is not quite a withdrawal. Ellison needs aesthetic distance and he also does not believe white readers will accept his naturalistic version of reality. In order to prevent disagreement, Ellison transcends the literal and embraces the allegorical mode. Allegory, for Ellison as much as for Hawthorne, if for different reasons, becomes a form of artistic "underground."³³

IV

In his allegorical interpretation of his protagonist's behavior, the narrator of Invisible Man attempts to break out of his isolation. Erving Goffman's distinction, in Stigma, between persons who feel visibly "discredited" and those who feel relatively invisible but still "discreditable" provides a model for interpreting this isolation sociologically as well as historically. As Goffman implies, visual discredit limits social behavior in a predictable and therefore manageable way; whereas the individual who remains only discreditable attempts to "pass" but chronically experiences the fear that his stigma will be recognized and his behavior then limited. To the extent that he "passes," we might call him successfully invisible: he wears a mask of social ease to cover up real or imaginary, social or psychic "dis-ease."³⁴ Even the most visibly marked individual is not stigmatized in every social group, however—especially when the group itself holds a particular stigma as its principle of organization. Thus Richard Wright is not born with the knowledge of his "blackness" because he is born into an all-black community. He learns it as he learns, in Black Boy, that he is stigmatized in the presence of whites. There is something "wrong" with him. Wright's friends, Griggs in particular, try to teach him that playing the "nigger" role is a more "manageable" and physically safer way of dealing with the white world.

Quentin Compson summarized the complexity of the problem in The Sound and the Fury:

When I first came East I kept thinking You've got to remember to think of them as coloured people not niggers, and if it hadn't happened that I wasn't thrown with many of them. I'd have wasted a lot of time and trouble before I learned that the best way to take all people, black or white, is to take them for what they think they are, then leave them alone. That was when I realized that a nigger is not a person so much as a form of behaviour; a sort of obverse reflection of the white people he lives among.³⁵
A "nigger" is an "obverse reflection" in the sense that his behavior conforms to white expectations; "nigger" behavior makes visible those human qualities that "white people" do not choose to recognize in themselves. It is ironically by reflecting white expectations that the "nigger" displays most clearly what the "white" wishes to remain hidden. In suggesting this paradox, Quentin suggests the realization that will reverse the obverse: and, as Ellison's protagonist learns, in recognizing that "nigger" is a form of behavior, a social role, he becomes a person.

It is clear that the more the "nigger" role is overplayed, the more visible it is, the more it earns the player a measure of anonymity, of invisibility. Melville explored this in *Benito Cereno*, where the artful subservience of Babo and Atufal hides their actual command over the *San Dominick* from Captain Delano of the *Bachelor's Delight*. Any assertion of individual decency, responsibility, or intelligence may serve to differentiate one Negro from his fellows and put him next in line for real or ritual lynching. These human qualities, then, must be hidden if not completely denied, in order to prevent the individuality of the Negro from becoming visible to whites. In the novella, when Don Benito's friend Aranda describes the Negroes as "tractable," he ironically indicates the potential success of the blacks' plan for revolt from the slavery to which they are being transported. The black's "brain, not body, had schemed and led the revolt, with the plot" and the *San Dominick* only fails in its mutiny because of the superior arms of Captain Delano's crew.

Just as it is for Will Mayes in Faulkner's "Dry September," for the nineteenth-century Negro in the South, individuality was a death warrant. The man who rebelled against the acceptance of stigma, who refused to accept the subordination of his own identity into the shadow of blackness, could hope only to go North, where he might lose his stigma. Melville's literary analogue is the shipboard mutiny. The shadow the Negro casts on Don Benito, even after he has been saved, symbolizes the failure of all men to escape bondage, even when they have proven themselves morally and intellectually superior to the bonds that physically constrain them. Similarly, Ellison's novel explodes the myth of the North as the road to freedom; for it is in New York that the protagonist first begins to experience invisibility.

In Goffman's terms, Invisible Man does not lose his stigma in the move North but rather undergoes a transformation from discredit to discreditability—from a position of social certainty to one of insecurity. In this way Invisible Man shares the experience of both Hester and Dimmesdale, and resembles Joe Christmas in his inability, in the North, to be certain who he is. At his southern college, im-
plicitly accepting his discredit (without "seeing" that he was doing so), he enjoyed the security and protection of the Founder's benevolence (as well as the limits of vision the blindfold symbolizes). He first begins to recognize his invisibility when Bledsoe, in forcing him to leave, denies this security. The concept of invisibility "embodies the complex psychological dilemmas of men without a sense of vital group identity, whose sense of individual human identity is often denied by the dominant society." Learning the distinction between "group identity" and "individual human identity" is one means of overcoming the split Goffman's stigmatized individual experiences, between his "virtual social identity" (our expectations of his character, appearance, and occupation) and his "actual social identity" (the category and attributes he could in fact be proved to possess). Ellison's protagonist, at the beginning of chapter 1, does not recognize the distinction. His role as an ambitious student who wants to follow Bledsoe's example provides him with his "vital group identity." He equates his personal responsibility with his social responsibility, equates his identity with his social role. The narrator, retrospectively, attributes this equation to Invisible Man's blindness.

As an ambitious student, Invisible Man wants recognition; he wants to distinguish himself in Bledsoe's eyes from the mass of his schoolmates, and his assignment to act as chauffeur for Mr. Norton becomes his "golden" opportunity to do so. Thus his crime originates in his desire for visibility; and, ironically, he achieves "recognition" from Bledsoe, even though he doesn't understand his expulsion this way. The punishment results not from his action—as Norton explains, "nor was the boy responsible" (p. 94)—but from the visibility he acquires in performing it. Unlike the escaping slave, Invisible Man does not see his move North as an escape—because he does not choose to act. Both Bledsoe and, in effect, his historical situation make his choice for him.

Invisible Man's social exclusion is a kind of "lynching"; Bledsoe cuts him off from the opportunity to distinguish himself. Such distinction presupposes membership in a group. Thus, once in the North, even after Bledsoe's letter to Emerson destroys his dream of reintegration with his college, Invisible Man continues to associate the pursuit of identity with membership and distinction in an organization—Men's House, the union meeting at Liberty Paints, finally the Brotherhood. He doesn't realize that the only membership card he can hope to receive is the mark of exclusion, the stigma of social difference.

At the opening smoker, the protagonist merited the audience's laughter when he used the phrase "social responsibility," which he envisions as "social equality" and which they translate as "you've
got to know your place at all times" (pp. 32–33). In the last meeting with the Brotherhood, he explains that he acted on his own "personal responsibility" (p. 400) in deciding to hold a public funeral for Tod Clifton; Brother Jack replies, "You were not hired to think" (p. 405). The social yields to the personal for the narrator by the end; Invisible Man tries to separate his identity from his social role. Thus, although his desire throughout the novel to become an integral part of a community seems to reflect his "social responsibility," his failure to do so becomes his path to self-discovery. He wants to "join" an established unity because he has not yet become aware that the strength and power that originate in union lie within himself. His isolation is metaphysical as well as social.

V

In an interview with Allen Geller, Ellison agreed to term Invisible Man "an example of a social rebel," but stated that "he doesn't have that level of conscious revolt" that might make him, like Ahab, a metaphysical rebel. At the same time, in Shadow and Act, Ellison states that the novel expresses Invisible Man's "restlessness of spirit, . . . an American condition that transcends geography, sociology, and past condition of servitude" (p. 57). Ellison's debt to Melville has been more often attributed to The Confidence Man than other works, but it may also be read within the tradition of Moby-Dick and Ishmael's own "restlessness of spirit." Ellison's interpretation to the contrary, his own narrator moves beyond Ahab's exploration of the metaphysical.

In Moby-Dick Ahab fails to see himself as viewing the world from behind a mask, but rather sees the world itself—"all visible objects"—as the mask. Unlike Ishmael, who accepts the existence of the metaphysical in the physical world, for Ahab, all outward manifestations are unreasoning walls that must be thrust beyond. Thus the external world, which the white whale symbolizes for Ahab, limits his vision. He hates "that inscrutable thing" precisely because it is inscrutable, cannot be scrutinized, can only be made visible by destroying it and destroying himself in the process.

The character in Invisible Man who most closely resembles Ahab in his hatred is not the protagonist but rather Ras the Exhorter. For Ras, as for Ahab, white symbolizes evil; and Clifton and Invisible Man are two of evil's agents. His view prevents him from seeing beyond the wall, so that the protagonist is as invisible to Ras as he is to the Brotherhood. In the triumphant action that places him in immediate jeopardy and motivates his descent underground, Invisi-
Invisible Man confronts Ras on the streets of Harlem at the culmination of the riot. Ras spots him, as if he has been looking for him, shouts "'Betrayer!'" and "flung, of all things, a spear" (p. 482). The spear may be the African symbol of Ras's chosen identity—as Vogler points out, "Ras" may be pronounced "race"—but it is also Ahab's harpoon. Ahab tries to kill the whale moments before his own death: "Thus, I give up the spear!" 42

Invisible Man recognizes the double futility of Ras's action and his own passive "agreement."

I stood there, knowing that by dying, that by being hanged by Ras on this street in this destructive night I would perhaps move them one fraction of a bloody step closer to a definition of who they were and of what I was and had been. But the definition would have been too narrow; I was invisible, and hanging would not bring me to visibility, even to their eyes, since they wanted my death not for myself alone but for the chase I'd been on all my life; because of the way I'd run, been run, chased, operated, purged—although to a great extent I could have done nothing else, given their blindness (didn't they tolerate both Rinehart and Bledsoe?) and my invisibility... And I knew that it was better to live out one's one absurdity than to die for that of others, whether for Ras's or Jack's. (pp. 483–84)

The "stricken whale" carries Ahab, the Pequod, and all its crew except Ishmael into the vortex. Faulkner's body servant and Joe Christmas run their captors' race. Invisible Man dodges the spear, refusing to be drawn into Ras's absurdity and instead of continuing to run, he throws it right back:

So when Ras yelled, "Hang him!" I let fly the spear and it was as though for a moment I had surrendered my life and begun to live again, watching it catch him as he turned his head to shout, ripping through both cheeks, and saw the surprised pause of the crowd as Ras wrestled with the spear that locked his jaws. (p. 484)

The impulsive and decisive act sends Invisible Man underground as he flees from capture, and it makes his narrative necessary, as a means of further exploration and understanding. In this action Invisible Man cannot be compared to Ahab, but rather tries to achieve the "transcendence" of an Ishmael.

Ellison denies the metaphysical implications of Invisible Man's search because, as he states in the interview, "This is not a God-constructed world. I don't think God constructed society. I think it's man-made." 43 In spite of Ellison's remarks, Invisible Man resembles a twentieth-century version of Ishmael. Ishmael chooses a masthead distance; Ellison's protagonist climbs the ghetto steps and the stage podium—his variation of Ras's ladder—and ends even further removed, ends underground. Like the dramatic chapters of Moby-Dick
and Ishmael’s withdrawal as omniscient narrator, the “symbolic action” of Invisible Man achieves metaphysical distance for Ellison’s narrator. Both Ishmael and Invisible Man have earned self-designated names that express their namelessness. Both recognize that their invisibility is the price of vision; and both see their search as motivated by internal need for light.

In the Prologue to Invisible Man, the narrator compares his own search to the whaleman’s search for light, and states that the blackness of invisibility puts you “glory, glory, Oh my Lawd, in the WHALE’S BELLY” (p. 13). Like Jonah, Invisible Man tried for a long time to avoid his mission by not recognizing it. And like Ishmael, he fuses his social search with his soul’s search: “I carried my sickness and though for a long time I tried to place it in the outside world, the attempt to write it down shows me that at least half of it lay within me” (pp. 497–98). It may not be a God-constructed world. As Ellison suggest, it may be only the social equivalent of the Leviathan that a man may now pursue. But within their different historical spheres, Ishmael and Invisible Man end by confronting the same problem. Ishmael’s moment of transcendence is only temporary: when he is picked up by the “errant” Rachel, he is pulled back into the physical world with its old problems and no new solutions. Invisible Man does not let himself get picked up by the Rachel (or her counterpart, Mary Rambo); yet, as he contemplates returning above ground, he faces a question he cannot answer: does he return to a world that is all model, that may be adequately explained by sociologists, that cannot “see” his invisibility and thus make possible his humanity; or has he achieved permanent realization, which goes beyond Ishmael’s limits, in the recognition that because society is man-made, man can make a better one?

VI

Invisible Man’s search for a brotherhood is a social variation on Ishmael’s metaphysical struggle for a focus that will engage his subjectivity. Robert Bone calls Ellison’s heritage picaresque and Invisible Man’s journey not a “religious quest or pilgrimage, but a journey toward experience, adventure, personal freedom”.

In the South everyone knew you, but coming North was a jump into the unknown. . . . You could actually make yourself anew. . . . All boundaries down, freedom was not only the recognition of necessity, it was the recognition of possibility. And sitting there trembling I caught a brief glimpse of the possibilities posed by Rinehart’s multiple personalities and turned away. It was too vast and confusing to con-
template. Then I looked at the polished lenses of the glasses and laughed. I had been trying simply to turn them into a disguise but they had become a political instrument instead. (p. 431)

By wearing Rinehart's glasses, Invisible Man enacts his invisibility; he is taken for someone he is not. His own invisibility, his greatest mask, becomes his political instrument; his personal freedom lies in the ability to be a phantom. What society does not recognize, it cannot control; and it does not recognize an invisible man.

Invisible Man thus affirms invisibility because he has transformed it, underground, and by his art, from a symptom of personal disorder to a symbol of social rebellion; it becomes his modus vivendi, where the self may correspond to no definition of identity but its own. This affirmation leads to his personal transcendence of social problems but fails to link his new identity as an invisible man with a program for social behavior. How does naming oneself or pointing out moral issues ease his reintegration? Where is the social potential and the ontological realism of "symbolic action"?

This is the question with which the novel ends. And, without an answer to it, Invisible Man remains underground. In Shadow and Act, Ellison talks about "that intensity of personal anguish . . . any and everything in this life which plunges the talented individual into solitude while leaving him the will to transcend his condition through art" (p. 130): "My goal was not to escape, or hold back, but to work through; to transcend, as the blues transcend the painful conditions with which they deal. . . . if there is anything 'miraculous' about the book it is the result of hard work undertaken in the belief that the work of art is important in itself, that it is a social action in itself" (p. 137). Ellison asserts that art is social action by implicitly recognizing that the vision of the artist and the vision of the stigmatized are intimately related.

The "joke" at the center of Invisible Man is the conclusion that, in order for the narrator to achieve integration with his society, he must become visible again. By enacting invisibility, he resumes the stigma that originally protected him against lynching. But his new visibility would be self-conscious strategy. "Before that I lived in the darkness into which I was chased, but now I see. I've illuminated the blackness of my invisibility—and vice versa. And so I play the invisible music of my isolation. . . . Could this compulsion to put invisibility down in black and white be thus an urge to make music of invisibility?" (p. 16). His experience as a discreditably invisible man gives him the "second sight" of the visibly stigmatized and leads to his "attempt to write it down" (p. 497).
Out of invisibility comes the artist's vision. In the closing scene, Invisible Man in a waking dream sees himself castrated by Jack, Emerson, Bledsoe, and Norton.

But now they came forward with a knife, holding me; and I felt the bright red pain and they took the two bloody blobs and cast them over the bridge. . . .

And I looked up through a pain so intense now that the air seemed to roar with the clanging of metal, hearing, HOW DOES IT FEEL TO BE FREE OF ILLUSION. (pp. 492-93)

The image of the "bloody blobs" develops the image of Jack's "two eyes in the bottom of a glass" and the full impact of blinding-as-castration fills the dream. At the same time, his castration becomes Jack's blinding as well as his own, and he shouts,

"there hang not only my generations wasting upon the water—. . .
But your sun . . .
And your moon . . .
Your universe, and that drip-drop upon the water you hear is all the history you've made, all you're going to make. Now laugh, you scientists. Let's hear you laugh!"

And I awoke in the blackness. (pp. 493-94)

Invisible Man resembles White-Jacket here in his realization that, without his straitjacket, he can "see" more. And, as Earl Rovit writes, "In accepting himself as the Invisible Man he assumes the historic role which Emerson unerringly assigned to the American poet; he becomes 'the world's eye'—something through which one sees, even though it cannot itself be seen."48 From his position as a man-of-war, a man-at-war, upon his arrival in the North, he becomes "the world's eye."

But out of vision comes visibility, and in this transformation art becomes social action. This is the "compulsion to put invisibility down in black and white"—the compulsion to make it visible and symbolically act it out in order to externalize it, then transcend it. As the black woman in the Prologue redefines freedom, ""I guess now it ain't nothing but knowing how to say what I got up in my head. But it's a hard job, son. Too much is done happen to me in too short a time. Hit's like I have a fever"" (p. 14). The myth of the road North is gone; Brother Tarp's physical flight to freedom is no longer an option for Invisible Man. "Knowing how to say" replaces the file as the narrator's political instrument. Unlike Ahab, Invisible Man need not destroy the evil that is white in order to strike through the mask. Like Ishmael, he reconstructs his journey to omniscient invisibility and begins to create a new myth.
To reconstruct mystery is to take possession of the powers of language: "Stephen's problem, like ours, was not actually one of creating the uncreated conscience of his race, but of creating the uncreated features of his face. Our task is that of making ourselves individuals. The conscience of a race is the gift of its individuals who see, evaluate, record" (p. 307). Such creation is possible in fiction, which formulates experience. As Ellison writes, "the function, the psychology of artistic selectivity is to eliminate from art form all those elements of experience which contain no compelling significance." Ellison's fiction marks this "compelling significance" and, like the scapegoat, brings to visibility hidden human truths, not to conform to reality, like *The Scarlet Letter*, but to reform it. Thus the fiction writer usurps the power of the social group—he stigmatizes for his own ends, destroying the Light and Power Monopoly of the lynch mob by stealing its catharsis. At the same time he provides a formula for reconstructing reality. For Ellison, the search for identity "is the American theme." In art, "the identity of fictional characters is determined by the implicit realism of the form, not by their relation to tradition; they are what they do or do not do. Archetypes are timeless, novels are time-haunted." In *Invisible Man*, where identity is a problem, to take control of the creation of realism would be to alter reality in the process, and the novel is "implicitly realistic" because the narrator's choice of allegory has been socially determined: the escaping slave is an archetype; an invisible man is a new creation, or at least a new reconstruction. But Ellison avoids strict literary realism. At the end, his narrator does not say much about what it means to be an American. Perhaps his greatest accomplishment is his attempt, in the tradition of his predecessors, to write "the great American novel." For it is the attempt that defines what is American about this book. "As Henry James suggested, being an American is an arduous task, and for most of us, I suspect, the difficulty begins with the name."

The final solution to the narrator's dilemma remains the reader's acceptance of his own responsibility. It is not up to *Invisible Man* to emerge from his hole; we must join him there. The artist and the minority member confront the whole world. Until illumination becomes universal, we shall all be on the same train; and like Mr. Norton's, ours does not get to Centre Street without passing through the Golden Day. *Invisible Man* is Ellison's attempt to turn the literary mark into social password. By asserting that "black is beautiful," the formerly stigmatized minority member gains control of his own stigma. "I carried my sickness, and though for a long time I
tried to place it in the outside world, the attempt to write it down shows me that at least half of it lay within me" (p. 498). For the narrator, writing eases his condition by revealing to him his own position; and, even if that position is not yet affirmed "outside" his hole, "in spite of myself, I've learned some things" (p. 501).

Ellison talks about the "special role" American fiction has played "in the development of the American nation. It had had to play that role, had had to concern itself with certain uniquely American tasks even in those instances in which it was not read (or not widely read, and I think here of Moby-Dick). And this for a number of reasons. One, as a literary form the novel has been primarily concerned with charting changes within society and with changes in personality as affected by society. . . ."54 In this quotation, Ellison implies that the classic American novelist supposes an ideal reader, as by writing a book for such an individual might, should the book acquire readers, create an entire society of such people. The novelist changes the world the novel portrays, then, by changing the novel. He or she does this, I have tried to argue throughout this book, because the making of fictions, as Hawthorne, Melville, and Faulkner all knew, makes things visible that might have remained hidden. Fiction is Ellison's new "mark," both the vehicle of his discovery and the record of its accomplishment; the "second sight" of the stigmatized and the "inner vision" of the artist become yoked towards new integration.

Notes
1. As Earl Rovit writes, Ellison's comic art "will inevitably probe the masks of identity and value searching relentlessly for some deeper buried reality, . . . while accepting the fundamental necessity for masks and the impossibility of ever discovering an essential face beneath a mask. That is to say, this comic stance will accept with the same triumphant gesture both the basic absurdity of all attempts to impose meaning on the chaos of life, and the necessary converse of this, the ultimate significance of absurdity itself." (From "Ralph Ellison and the American Comic Tradition," Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature 1 (1960): 34-42. Copyright 1960 by the Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System. (Reprinted in Twentieth Century Interpretations of Invisible Man, ed. John M. Reilly [Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1970], p. 57. All references to this work are to the reprint edition.)
3. Bone, "Ralph Ellison and the Uses of Imagination," in Reilly, pp. 27-28. Bone goes on to say: 'One senses in his work an unseen reality behind the surfaces of things. Hence his fascination with guises and disguises, with the con man and the trickster. Hence the felt dichotomy between visible and invisible, public and private, actual and fictive modes of reality. His experience as a Negro no doubt reinforces his ironic awareness of 'the joke that always lies between appearance and reality,' and turns him toward an inner world that lies beyond the reach of insult or oppression. This world may be approached by means of the imagination; it is revealed during the transcendent moment in jazz or the epiphany in literature. Transcend is thus a crucial word in Ellison's aesthetic.'
4. Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man (New York, 1952), p. 503. All further references to this work in this chapter appear in the text.


8. Ibid., p. 9.


14. Lewis, p. 5.


18. See the end of "Richard Wright's Blues," in *Shadow and Act*, p. 94.

19. Ibid., p. 33.

20. Ibid., pp. 90–91.


22. Ibid., p. 104. Irving Howe, "Black Boys and Native Sons" (anthologized in Trimmer) scoffs at Ellison's statement—"as if one could decide one's deepest and most authentic response to society!" (p. 159). Howe says that Richard Wright would have said "that only through struggle could men with black skins, and for that matter, all the oppressed of the world, achieve their humanity" (p. 159).

23. Robert Bone supports this point. In order to place Ellison in his twentieth-century tradition, he writes, "What is involved is a rejection of the naturalistic novel and the philosophical assumptions on which it rests. . . . One idea emerges with persistent force: Man is the creator of his own reality. If a culture shapes its artists, the reverse is equally the case: The American novel is in this sense a conquest of the frontier; as it describes our experience, it creates it. This turn toward subjectivity, this transcendence of determinism, this insistence on an existential freedom, is crucial to Ellison's conception of the artist. It finds concrete expression in his work through the devices of masking and naming" (in Reilly, p. 29).


26. Ibid., p. 152.

27. Bone, p. 31.


31. Ibid., p. 44.

33. Ellison's recently published fiction affirms his continuing choice of allegorical method. The narrator of "Cadillac Flambe," because he happens to carry a tape recorder, captures the exact words of LeeWillie Minifees as he proceeds to set fire to his "Coon Cage Eight." The other characters who appear in the story—the narrator, the senor, the people on the lawn, the police—act as audience, stage props, or technical crew for LeeWillie's spectacle. In a fictional conflagration not unlike Hawthorne's "Earth's Holocaust," the narrator allegorically interprets Minifees's action as "almost metaphysical" (American Review 16 [New York: Bantam, 1973], pp. 249-69).


36. On Ellison's remarks concerning the suppression of individuality within the black community, Bone writes: "As soon, however, as this forbidden impulse seeks expression, an intolerable anxiety is aroused. Threatened by his own unfolding personality as much as by the whites, the Negro learns to camouflage, to dissimulate, to retreat behind a protective mask" (in Reilly, p. 29). See also Richard Kostelanetz, "The Politics of Ellison's Booker: Invisible Man as Symbolic History," in Trimmer, pp. 281-305, for a discussion of Booker T. Washington's prescriptions for conduct, both within the black community and in dealing with the white world.


40. With reference to the way the Negro community discouraged individuality, Kostelanetz makes the following statement about Invisible Man's "social equality": "Challenged by the audience, he quickly reverts to the traditional unrevolutionary phase. Ellison here illustrates that as the speaker's censor relaxes, his true desires are revealed; but as soon as he remembers the power of Southern authority, he immediately represses his wish" (p. 9).


42. Moby-Dick, p. 468.


44. Bone, in Reilly, p. 27.

45. Critics have stressed the usefulness of the narrator's art as a means of his self-realization. Robert Bone speaks of Ellison's novel as "an act of ritual naming, the novelist as a 'moralist-designate' who names the central moral issues of his time" and thus accepts the burden of his given name—Emerson (p. 31). Thomas Vogler views artistic activity as a process of self-examination, where Invisible Man "is forced, in the darkness of his hole, to explore the contents of the briefcase which are the real clues to his identity and the only source of light" (p. 71).

46. T. M. Lieber writes, "All men, unless their identity corresponds completely to someone else's image of reality, are at least partially invisible in Ellison's terminology" (p. 99).

47. Joel Porte says about Hawthorne: "Hawthorne can never really leave Salem, just as Hester can never quit the Boston of her tale, because the strength of the romance artist is based on his reviving and coming to terms with past pain" (The Romance in America: Studies in Cooper, Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, and James [Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1969], p. 100). The quotation is applicable to Ellison in his use of the blues as an analogue for his own attempt in Invisible Man.


49. Rovit supports my argument. By the epilogue, he writes, "the hero has created the features of his face from the malleable stuff of his own experience. He who accepts himself as 'invisible' has ironically achieved a concrete tangibility, while those characters in the novel who seemed to be 'visible' and substantial men (Norton, Brother Jack, and even Tod Clifton) are discovered to be really 'invisible' since they
are self-imprisoned captives of their own capacities to see and be seen in stereotyped images" (Ibid., p. 58).

50. Shadow and Act, p. 82.

51. Ibid., p. 57.

52. Whether he succeeds or not, the attempt places him in the classic American tradition. As Robert H. Moore writes, "even if we concern ourselves with those American writers who were not novelists, we see that the makers of American literature had been also concerned with spelling out that which was peculiarly American about the American experience . . ." ("On Invitation Rites and Power: Ralph Ellison Speaks at West Point," Contemporary Literature, 15 [Spring 1974], p. 172). And as William J. Schafer states, "Ellison's novel . . . is above all an American novel . . . It simply extends and develops Richard Wright's aphorism, 'The Negro is America's metaphor'" ("Ralph Ellison and the Birth of the Anti-Hero," in Trimmer, Casebook, p. 225).

53. Shadow and Act, p. 166.

54. Moore, p. 172.