

## Final Note – Part II: Trueblood’s Jaybird

### I. Epigraphs: Question and Answer

"You are saved," cried Captain Delano, more and more astonished and pained; "you are saved: what has cast such a shadow upon you?"

--Herman Melville, *Benito Cereno*

Not here, but in Melville’s story, Cereno’s reply is: “The negro.” -- an answer that could refer to Babo specifically but also generically to all negroes. My hypothesis is that Ellison supplies his own answer.

There is a clue in the second epigraph:

HARRY: I tell you, it is not me you are looking at,  
Not me you are grinning at, not me your confidential looks  
Incriminate, but that other person, if person,  
You thought I was: let your necrophily  
Feed upon that carcass. . .

--T.S. Eliot, *Family Reunion*

"That other person" is more defined in the last line of *Invisible Man*:

*. . . it is this which frightens me: Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?*

## II. The ending of Chapter 25, leading into the Epilogue

### 1. Trueblood’ jaybird:

At the end of Chapter 25, Our Man enters into a state he describes as being between dreaming and waking, liking his situation to that of Trueblood’s jaybird:

It was a state neither of dreaming nor of waking, but somewhere in between, in which I was caught like Trueblood's jaybird that yellow jackets had paralyzed in every part but his eyes. (456)

Here is Trueblood’s jaybird:

“ . . . It seems to me that all I can do is take my punishment. I tell myself, Maybe if you suffer for it, it will be best. Maybe you owe it to Kate to let her beat you. You ain't guilty, but she thinks you is. You don't want her to beat you, but she think she got to beat you. You want to git up, but you too weak to move.

"I was too. I was frozen to where I was like a youngun what done stuck his lip to a pump handle in the wintertime. I was just like a jaybird that the yellow jackets done stung 'til he's paralyzed -- but still alive in his eyes and he's watchin' 'em sting his body to death.” (my italics) (54)

### 2. Free from Illusions?

After the above quotation there is a jump to the play of Our Man’s mind as it hovers between dreaming and waking. The description is all in italics, a technique Ellison has likely adopted from Faulkner. As Our Man, now a prisoner of those who have kept him on the run (Norton, Bledsoe, Jack, etc.), declares he has seen through all their illusions and lies, one-eyed Jack replies, “Not quite,” then seemingly castrates him, leaving his genitals

hanging from a bridge, though it may otherwise be Our Man's eyes, making the case all the more like that of Oedipus. Jack declares that now Our Man is free of illusions, but Our Man laughs, and Jack is curious:

*"Why do you laugh?" he said.*

*"Because at a price I now see that which I couldn't see," I said.*

*"What does he think he sees?" they said.*

*And Jack came closer, threatening, and I laughed. "I'm not afraid now," I said. "But if you'll look, you'll see . . . It's not invisible . . ."*

*"See what?" they said.*

*"That there hang not only my generations wasting upon the water --" And now the pain welled up and I could no longer see them.*

*"But what? Go on," they said.*

*"But your sun . . ."*

*"Yes?"*

*"And your moon . . ."*

*"He's crazy!"*

*"Your world . . ."*

*"I knew he was a mystic idealist!" Tobitt said.*

*"Still," I said, "there's 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 now the bridge, from which his genitals or eyes are hanging, morphs into the threatening image of an "iron man":

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 iron legs clanged doomfully as it moved. And then I struggled up, full of sorrow and pain, shouting, "No, no, we must stop him!" (457-457)

This is an image of the world as all outside with no inside. No ghost in the machine.

### 3. Fully Awake

Of course, this description of becoming free of illusion is itself but an illusion. It's like Hume suggests, we can only correct impressions by another impression, which will require yet another impression to validate, etc. So it seems with illusions: the freeing from one illusion entangles us in yet another. How do we stop this whirligig? What would it mean to be illusion-free? Would the universe itself vanish? It seems we have no choice but to be illusion-bound. There appears to exist, however, a time and place in the Underground where we may yet stand between an old illusion and a new one, at least until we are chased out or ready to move ahead, knowing that we are each feeding upon illusion (i.e. Eliot's "necrophily"), invisible to each other:

And I awoke in the blackness.

Fully awake now, I simply lay there as though paralyzed. I could think of nothing else to do. Later I would try to find my way out, but now I could only lie on the floor, reliving the dream. All their faces were so vivid that they seemed to stand before me beneath a spotlight. They were all up there somewhere, making a mess of the world. Well, let them. I was through and, in spite of the dream, I was whole.

And now I realized that I couldn't return to Mary's, or to any part of my old life. I could approach it only from the outside, and I had been as invisible to Mary as I had been to the Brotherhood. 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. So I would stay here until I was chased out. Here, at least, I could try to think things out in peace, or, if not in peace, in quiet. I would take up residence underground. The end was in the beginning. (458)

Perhaps now at least we will be restrained by reminding ourselves that *our* truth is itself yet another illusion.

### III. The Epilogue

#### 1. How do we account for “death and destruction” in the new interpretation of the grandfather's advice?

We now return to where the Prologue ended, still underground. Our man has told us his story, and we are waiting for him either to be chased out or choose for himself to move ahead. In the Epilogue, he thinks again of his grandfather's deathbed advice and arrives at a radically new interpretation:

*-hell, he must have meant the principle, that we were to affirm the principle on which the country was built and not the men, or at least not the men who did the violence. (460)*

It is striking that Our Man never actually tells us what that principle is, leaving it perhaps to readers to say or rather formulate for themselves, e.g. All men are created equal. It seems to be much the same situation in which we find ourselves with respect to the name of Our Man. Ellison waits for each reader to insert his own. Yet, we cannot help but wonder how it is that the words of the grandfather in Chapter 1 can possibly be so interpreted. It seems a leap beyond the words:

"Son, after I'm gone I want you to keep up the good fight. I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open." (13)

How does Our Man account for “death and destruction” in the new interpretation? Here's the reasoning:

Hell, weren't they their own death and their own destruction except as the principle lived in them and in us? And here's the cream of the joke: Weren't we part of them as well as apart from them and subject to die when they died? I can't figure it out; it escapes me. But what do I really want, I've asked myself. Certainly not the freedom of a Rinehart or 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. (461)

Surely this is not the grandfather – it is too great a leap! (See note below at III.4). This must be Ellison himself speaking through the mask of his Invisible Man, acknowledging his own evident “sickness” in what he has written:

The fact is that you carry part of your sickness within you, at least I do as an invisible man. 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. (461, my italics)

Ellison then adds a melancholy note, “*None of us seems to know who he is or where he's going*” (462).

#### 2. The Underground Man Out and About

Strangely, Our Man tells us from his underground residence that “the other day” he met Mr. Norton on the subway. Norton fails to recognize him and grows apprehensive. Our Man gleefully mocks him:

*"Don't be afraid, Mr. Norton," I said. "There's a guard down the platform there. You're safe. Take any train; they all go to the Golden D --"But now an express had rolled up and the old man was disappearing quite spryly inside one of its doors. I stood there laughing hysterically. I laughed all the way back to my hole. (464)*

It may be with some surprise that we now know Our Man has been out and about. Though it must be true that Our Man has come out before to get supplies, this sole mention seems meant to drive home the point that the “hole” he lives in is a residence he carries within himself. Returning to “his hole” means returning to solitary thinking. This revelation is in step with the realization that it is now Ellison talking to the reader. (see III.1 above). It allows us to see what we have implicitly understood all along the way: the underground is a metaphor for that within that passes show.

### **3. So why do I write?**

After the encounter with Norton, Ellison again seems again to speak for himself through Our Man’s mask:

So why do I write, torturing myself to put it down? Because in spite of myself I've learned some things. 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. Why should I be the one to dream this nightmare? Why should I be dedicated and set aside -- yes, if not to at least tell a few people about it? There seems to be no escape. Here I've set out to throw my anger into the world's face, but now that I've tried to put it all down the old fascination with playing a role returns, and I'm drawn upward again. So that even before I finish I've failed (maybe my anger is too heavy; perhaps, being a talker, I've used too many words). But I've failed. 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. 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 approach 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. (465)

### **4. The grandfather's humanity:**

Immediately after the passage above, Ellison addresses the problem we noted above (III.1) about the re-interpretation of the grandfather’s advice, speaking again in the voice of Our Man:

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. So now having tried to put it down I have disarmed myself in the process. You won't believe in my invisibility and you'll fail to see how any principle that applies to you could apply to me.(465)

Ellison has, as he says, disarmed or rather unmasked himself.

### **5. Necrophily** (see discussion of epigraphs above):

Our man now tells us the “hibernation” is over, his nose full of a most literary stench:

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. (466)

It is a nose for ‘necrophily’ that all writers of “true fiction” must cultivate. In the final lines of the novel, Ellison speaks on behalf of the brotherhood of writers of fiction:

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?

We are now back at the very beginning of the novel, prepared to answer Delano's question. (See discussion of epigraphs above.)

### **Final Word:**

What I have read time and again in Ellison's essays and interviews and then again in the words of Trueblood and echoed as well in the words of Ellison's *Invisible Man* is, "I ain't nobody but myself." For Ellison, that means primarily a man among other men, who cannot be simply defined as an African American writer, but rather as one who uses the experiences and the resources available to him just as other writers have done in the long tradition of which he has his place right alongside Joyce, Melville, Faulkner and even Homer. Do we not all, as surely as we live in our own place and time, jump the gap of time and live in Yoknapatawpha, Dublin, Ithaca, Harlem, and on the high sea with Ishmael?

It yet may be understandable that Ellison's novel has not received unmixed reviews, particularly from black audiences in particular. Indeed, on one occasion at least he was called an Uncle Tom to his face. It may even be that Ellison anticipated this attack, though we should be careful not to simplistically identify the author with his character:

"Ignore his lying tongue," Ras shouted. "Hang him up to teach the black people a lesson, and therer be no more traitors. No more Uncle Toms. Hang him up therer with them blahsted dummies!" (557)

Those who would use such a pejorative have likely never read *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Still, it hurt Ellison deeply.

The following is Ellison's reply to a West Point student who asked if Ellison considered *Invisible Man* to be a protest novel:

I would think that implicitly the novel protests. It protests the agonies of growing up. It protests the problem of trying to find a way into a complex, intricately structured society in a way which would allow this particular man to behave in a manly way, and which would allow him to seize some instrumentalities of political power. That is where the protest is on one level. On another level, the protest lies in my trying to make a story out of these elements without falling into the clichés which have marked and marred most fiction about American Negroes—that is, to write literature instead of political protest. Beyond this, I would say simply that in the very act of trying to create something, there is implicit a protest against the way things are, a protest against man's vulnerability before the larger forces of society and the universe. We make fiction out of that kind of protest, which is similar to the kind of protest that is involved in your mastering your bodies; your mastering the physical, intellectual, military and legal disciplines which you are here for. All of this is a protest, a human protest against that which is, against the raw and unformed way that we come into the world. I don't think you have to demand any more protest than that. I think, on the other hand, if the novelist tells the truth, if he writes eloquently and depicts believable human beings and believable human situations, then he has done more than simply protest. I think that his task is to present the human, to make it eloquent, and to provide some sense of transcendence over the given—that is, to make his protest meaningful, significant and eloquent of human value.

It is unlikely this "eloquent" reply would have satisfied Ellison's detractors. For them, Ellison is trying too hard to be accepted by the white literary establishment. I am myself sensitive to the argument that Ellison's explanation gives comfort to his white readers when he perhaps should have made them "vomit and burst wide open" as the grandfather suggests. In fact, I believe Ellison does this. It is difficult to read scenes like the Battle Royal or Sibyl begging to be raped by a black "buck" without wanting to vomit. It may that such a result is the

hidden meaning behind the grandfather's advice which he actually gave not to the grandson, but rather to the father of Our Man, Ellison himself.

To ask more of Ellison seems unfair. Ellison grew up with what is sometimes called the western canon, reading Homer, Eliot and the rest. As Trueblood says, "I ain't nobody but myself."

May we all avoid the fate of Trueblood's jaybird!

" . . . a jaybird that the yellow jackets done stung 'til he's paralyzed -- but still alive in his eyes and he's watchin' 'em sting his body to death."