

tities in an immanent and unchanging linguistic space?

The Battle Royal scene repeats an elaboration of primitive consciousness in which Ellison shows the spectacular array of sexual fantasy in a perverted connection with blood lust. Ellison quite appropriately interprets this “ritual of situation” religiously, as a “keeping of taboo to appease the gods and ward off bad luck” (“Art,” p. 175), because he has in mind, I think, the *sacrificial nature* of the relationship between oppressed and oppressing social forces. The agents that the scene mobilizes are perceptible on different, but complementary, levels of interpretation. Its social and psychological elaborations as a local display of the economy of victimage and sacrifice certainly do not speak falsely of “black experience” or excise its distinctions. What the scene does provide, however, is a systematic hypothesis on the initial analogy that appears to engender racism. That violence and ritual victimage are central to racial experience in its apparently infinite disguises will not be news to the thoughtful, nor will the terminology of the sacred in its specific application to the black experience of invisible man appear thoughtless.

Blake misses Ellison’s recovery of a dialectical motion traditionally suppressed in the interest of Manichaean display, whose theme resounds in her piece with unbroken and obscurantist conviction. The “. . . reaffirmation of the identity provided by the white culture” as the significance of *Invisible Man* is certainly much—thick, in fact—but if one wants to say that the manipulation of symbols, or the mastery of symbols and the bending of them to the human will, is coterminous only with white culture, whatever that is, then the linguistic and philosophical impoverishment that riddles this essay will likely complement that bedazzled perception.

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To the Editor:

I find Susan L. Blake’s attack on Ralph Ellison deeply disturbing because it combines some of the worst features of an earlier generation of American criticism with a distressing, and apparently spreading, distortion of criticism in our own time. I refer first to the time-honored practice of approving or condemning authors according to whether or not they touch—and touch obviously—the right ideological bases, or, to put it more simply, the plain confusion of literature with propaganda. To this our contemporaries have added a tendency to fragment

literature and its criticism into ghettos, so that women’s literature must properly be written, criticized, and taught by women, Jewish literature by Jews, black literature by blacks, and so forth. Ellison’s sin, in Blake’s eyes, is evidently that, although he is a black writing about blacks, he universalizes his situations and characters and portrays heroes who are not only black but human. It is not enough for one story to describe the oppression of blacks in a white world; every other story must do the same thing, while such subjects as coming to terms with maturity or sexuality cannot be allowed until the situation of blacks has been entirely corrected—and the millennium is at hand.

Thinking along these lines, Blake asserts that slavery is “so abnormal a condition” (p. 122) that it is illegitimate to universalize it or make it into myth—just because it is “abnormal,” uniquely set in the history of black experience in America. But, unhappily, slavery and oppression are abnormal only from a moral point of view. They have been only too common, throughout history and among a great variety of peoples and cultures. While Ellison is, of course, concerned with the enslavement of blacks by whites in America, is he wrong—or wrongheaded—to suggest that this abnormal situation results from a deep-rooted human evil, which is universal, as well as from a particular historical situation? Or that oppression and suffering are more than local phenomena?

Blake’s treatment of the Icarus myth equally reveals the shortcomings of her assumptions. Flying, Blake says, represents “the superhuman power of the gods” in “Greek mythology,” “male sexual potency” in “Freudian psychology,” and “freedom” in “black-American folklore” (p. 124). Her unspoken assumption is that flying can only mean distinct and different things to different groups. But Freud would have had no difficulty in adapting (as was his habit) this Greek myth to his system, while Blake seems to have forgotten that, according to the Greek story, Daedalus and Icarus donned their wings to escape a tyrant, who was keeping them prisoner in order to make them work for him. Scarcely irrelevant to black experience, the flight of Icarus was, among other things, a flight homeward toward freedom.

Early in our century, Irish patriots attacked Yeats and O’Casey for not supporting their revolution single-mindedly. But, as Yeats argued, such single-mindedness becomes inhuman. It may be a tragic necessity in the revolutionary, but it is no proper part of an artist’s equipment. Just as Yeats and O’Casey are remembered, while their critics are forgotten, Ellison too will survive his detractors, to take his place among those voices who will interpret

black experience—and human experience—in America to future generations.

ANTHONY LOW
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Ms. Blake replies:

Hortense J. Spillers and Anthony Low both miss the point of my article. Spillers concludes that I “[miss] Ellison’s recovery of a dialectical motion.” On the contrary, I agree that Ellison pursues the synthesis of opposites, and I devote most of the discussion of *Invisible Man* to demonstrating how he dramatizes that synthesis. The purpose of my article, however, is to go beyond recognition of synthesis in general and to explore the implications of the particular synthesis of black and white images of black identity.

Low believes that I attack Ellison for portraying blacks who are also human beings. Not at all. I point out the illogic and danger of claiming distinctiveness for black identity and then defining distinctiveness as universality. Ellison in effect portrays black-American experience as *only*, not *also*, human experience and thus implicitly minimizes or excuses the specific cause of its distinctiveness, racial slavery. As the last sentence of the article specifies, universalizing black experience does not necessarily distort it unless one claims in the process to be particularizing it.

Low misreads or reads out of context the specific points in the article that he refers to in his letter. The distinction between social and individual themes in Ellison’s early short stories does not imply that “coming to terms with maturity or sexuality cannot be allowed”; it simply shows that

Ellison’s themes and his uses of folklore changed as he developed. The “unspoken assumption . . . that flying can only mean distinct and different things to different groups” is so thoroughly unspoken as to be directly contradicted: “Although the mythic and sexual meanings of the metaphor are of course implicit in the aspiration to freedom, the emphasis in the folk concept of manhood is on the freedom . . .” (p. 124). The issue in the discussion of “Flying Home” is emphasis. Each of the folktales and myths the story alludes to offers some definition of freedom. When Ellison transforms the down-to-earth buzzard into a phoenix at the end of the story, he leaves us with a definition of freedom as renunciation: if “this world is not my home,” freedom in this world is irrelevant.

The “tendency to fragment literature and its criticism into ghettos” is neither confirmed nor even suggested by my article, which deals with what is said, not with who says it. Low is correct, however, that what he calls “the confusion of literature with propaganda” and what I call “the belief that literature has meaning” is a basis for my article. It is also a basis for his letter. The core of Low’s criticism of the article is a challenge to the assumption that American racial slavery represents a unique experience. Although it is clear to me that a form of slavery based on a color mythology that antedates and survives it is different from Roman or African slavery or the various other forms oppression has taken, I do not want to debate historical interpretation. I do want to point out that Low’s position is based on historical interpretation just as clearly as mine is. We respond to meaning in literature whether or not we acknowledge that we do.

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