

## RECOGNIZING INVISIBILITY, REVISING MEMORY

Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* offers a magnificent literary reworking of the dialectics of recognition that has fascinated philosophers since Hegel. Ellison's novel transforms the tradition of the slave narrative by drawing on writers and artists in European traditions – Dostoevsky, Dante, Marx, Malraux – as well as in African-American traditions – Wright, Armstrong – to ask for more than Frederick Douglass' demand for formal equality. The recognition Ellison asks for cannot be granted by formal procedures or by individual goodwill, but only by reexamining the cultural and historical inheritance that makes up the medium of public debate in democracy, an inheritance full of achievement and damage. Moreover, such recognition will involve not only changing our understanding of historical facts, but also learning to reason historically through culture. The purpose of my paper will be to explore how Ellison helps us reason through culture, history, and difference rather than against them, as do Kantian proceduralists, such as Habermas, and postmodernist celebrators of difference per se.

My paper falls into three parts. In the first part, I briefly sketch the issues at stake in Ellison's text. In the second, I bring out the originality of Ellison's formulation by showing how Paul Ricoeur's well-known phenomenology of narrative fails to account for the dynamics of Ellison's text. In the third, I develop an alternative narrative philosophy by bringing the work of Charles Taylor to bear on the Ellisonian issues highlighted in the first section.<sup>1</sup>

### NARRATIVE, CULTURE AND PRACTICAL REASON: THE STAKES OF ELLISONIAN RECOGNITION

The Prologue of the novel announces the depth and breath of the issues at stake in the story that follows. In the opening pages, the narrator recounts the tale of a fight with a white man on the street who does not recognize him: "Something in this man's thick head had sprung out and beaten him within an inch of his life" (IM, 5). This fight, which clearly evokes the account of Douglass's fight with the "slave-breaker" Covey, also echoes Hegel's account of master and slave. I will quote from Douglass's texts on this episode just to establish the filiation: "I now resolved that however long I might remain a slave in form, the day has passed forever when I could be in a slave in fact. I

did not hesitate to let it be known of me, that the white man who expected to succeed in whipping, must also succeed in killing me" (*Narrative* 95).<sup>2</sup>

Unlike Douglass's *Narrative*, in which the reader is urged to identify with the protagonist, this drama of recognition is played out between text and reader and not just within the world of the text. Ellison's story does not ask us to see how much we share with him. Instead, he wants a new kind of recognition that calls into question the identities of the recognizers and the shape of the public world. The narrator tells us that we will misrecognize him just as the characters in the novel do, unless we are prepared to interrogate ourselves, to examine our inherited languages and histories, that are blinding us even as they enable us. (Ellison thematizes the role of the public imagination by having the fight misreported in the newspaper [IM, 5]. The taunting perplexing style of the Prologue, which is filled with literary and cultural allusions, reminds the reader that he/she will need to undergo an apprenticeship of recognition and risk losing the narrative pre-understandings through which she lives. Thus, Ellison's narrative is an argument not just with his past selves and the reader, but also with the past traditions, such as Richard Wright's naturalism and Hemingway's modernism. As Ellison says, "All novels of a given historical moment form an argument over the nature of reality and are, to some extent, criticism of each other" (SA, 117). "Reality" here refers to the public social imaginary through which communities live, the shared but contested terrain of history and fiction.

The Prologue, therefore, makes readers aware of the act of writing and remembrance, the site from which the hero's life is interpreted and not just transcribed. Like Hegel's *Phenomenology*, the novel is the quest for the site from which to tell the story. The experienced narrator of the Prologue – the self who has already completed the journey that we are about to read – tells us that he himself did not understand his invisibility until recently. The focus of the rest of the narrative is on the tension between the narrating self of the present and the experiencing selves of the past, as the protagonist reasons historically and revises his self-understandings. To develop the philosophical importance of these dimensions of Ellison's text, I will contrast Ricoeur's and Taylor's phenomenologies of narrative.<sup>3</sup>

#### RICOEUR

I start with the idea of tradition because one of the fundamental differences between Taylor and Ricoeur is the difference between the methodological individualism of the Husserlian tradition and the methodological holism of the Hegelian tradition. Ricoeur wants to dismiss rather than retrieve Hegel. This is true not only of the chapter devoted to Hegel in *Time and Narrative*, Volume 3,

where the question is whether to renounce Hegel (yes), but also in the revealing essay "Hegel and Husserl on Intersubjectivity," in *From Text to Action*. Ricoeur objects to all holistic conceptions, which include not only Hegel's *Geist* but also the finite, Gadamerian version of this Hegelian idea, tradition: "The decisive advantage of Husserl over Hegel appears to me to lie in his uncompromising refusal to hypostatize collective entities and his tenacious will to reduce them in every instance to a network of interactions" (TA, 244). To avoid such hypostatization, we must rely on "the analogy of the ego [as] the transcendental principle of all intersubjective relations" (TA, 245).<sup>4</sup>

In *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur controls his use of holistic hermeneutic concepts through an underlying Kantianism, as we can see in the idea of triple mimesis, which is at the heart of this work. Mimesis I addresses the pre-understandings of "the world of action, its meaningful structures, its symbolic resources, and its temporal character" (M1) (TN, 1, 54). Mimesis 2 examines the emplotment, which mediates pre-understandings and readings (M2), and the reading, while Mimesis 3 is the reading, "the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the hearer or reader" (M3) (TN, I, 71). The reader's response to the text (M3) folds back into M1 as part of the new pre-understandings in the lifeworld and thus completes the hermeneutic circle.

By isolating these three moments, Ricoeur freezes the historical and dialogical character of language and literature. M1 provides the conditions of possibility of M2, but these conditions are not characterized as conflicting historical arguments but rather as a mere familiarity with structural elements. Emplotment is not an interpretive act through which the subject dialogues with traditions, as it is in Ellison and Taylor. Instead, Ricoeur develops his conception of the novel as emplotment by drawing on Aristotle's *Poetics* and on Kant's *Critique of Judgment*: "I cannot overemphasize the kinship between this 'grasping together' power to the configurational act and what Kant says about the operation of judging" (TN, 1, 66–68). Emplotment "extracts configuration from a succession" in the same way that reflective judgment "reflects upon the work of thinking at work in the aesthetic judgment of taste and the teleological judgment applied to organic wholes" (TN, 66). In a stroke, Ricoeur has reduced the author's engagement with the worth and truth of the languages of tradition to a formal aestheticism.<sup>5</sup> Thus, when he says that emplotment is the "synthesis of the heterogeneous" – that is, "the diverse mediations performed by the plot: between the manifold of events and the temporal unity of the story recounted between the disparate components of the action" (*Oneself*, 141) – the substantive philosophical issues that narratives engage become a merely reflexive ordering. Even when an "aesthetic" novelist, such as Henry James or Marcel Proust, emplots, he is

not just ordering the heterogeneous in a form, but he is arguing with the narrow epistemological and moral ontology of the realistic novel, which we find in the works of Flaubert or the Goncourts.

Ricoeur tries to contain these questions by reducing the novel to narrative and ignoring the philosophical commentary offered by narrators – e.g., Balzac, Proust, and Ellison – about how to understand their narratives and worlds. However, even when the texts in question avoid such commentary – as we see in the cases of Flaubert and James mentioned above – such texts nonetheless take implicit stands on a host of philosophical issues through the presentation of language, plot, and character. Ricoeur wants to keep novelists out of the argument business, limiting them only to emplotment: “Poets ... create plots that are held together by causal skeletons. But these ... are not the subject of a process of argumentation. Poets restrict themselves to producing the story and explaining by narrating” (TN, 1, 186). Ricoeur’s supports this idea by separating the formal dimension of tradition, “traditionality,” from the material (the content of traditions), and the “apology for tradition” (TN, 3, 221ff), and these latter make no appearance in *Mimesis* 2.

By turning narrative into a merely formal question, Ricoeur abstracts generic literary issues from the historical dialogue in which they were formed and makes them mere schematic possibilities in a Kantian sense. As Kantian schematism connects the understanding and intuition, so emplotment “engenders a mixed intelligibility between what has been called the point, theme, or thought of a story, and the intuitive presentation of circumstances, characters, episodes, and changes of fortune that make up the *dénouement*” (TN, 1, 68). Ricoeur historicizes schematization by making it proceed “from the sedimentation of a practice with a specific history ... called ‘traditionality’.” This idea enables him to speak not of a conflictual historical, dialogical tradition, but rather of a “self-structuring tradition [that] is neither historical nor ahistorical but rather ‘transhistorical,’ in the sense that it runs through this history in a cumulative rather than an additive manner” (TN, 2, 14).

This transhistorical formalism emerges in his adoption of Northrup Frye’s theory of genre – myth, romance, etc. – in *The Anatomy of Criticism*. Thus, Ricoeur subordinates conflictual historical dialogue to transhistorical “narrative schematization” (TN, 2, 15). Since literature’s formal development is divorced from its substantive issues, tradition becomes a panoply of formal possibilities that are stripped of their ethical, political, and axiological importance. Ricoeur also excludes dialogue from his conception of historical change by employing the Husserlian vocabulary of “sedimentation” and “innovation.” In this the subject’s arguments with historical inheritance are

given no place: "This schematism, in turn, is constituted within a history that has the characteristics of a tradition ... A tradition is constituted by the interplay of innovation and sedimentation. To sedimentation must be referred the paradigms that constitute the typology of emplotment" (TN, I.68). Traditions are not "cumulative" sediment unless the subject's historicity is put out of play in favor of a disengaged transcendental imagination. Ellison's text is not simply an "innovation," but an argument with Richard Wright's understanding of philosophical anthropology, of democracy, and of the resources of African-American traditions and their relationships to canonical texts of American and European culture. Ellison's point is not to add to our "narrative schemas," but to repudiate debilitating self-understandings and advance an idea of democratic interpretation.

Thus, Ricoeur's discussion of the novel in *Time and Narrative* and *Oneself as Another* is remarkably ahistorical. Despite the fact that the rise of the novel is embedded in issues of modernity itself, such as individualism, liberty, and language, issues that receive in-depth treatment not just in *Invisible Man* but in Taylor's *Hegel and Sources of the Self*. Ricoeur ignores all these issues in his discussions of literature. Novels are examples of how the aporias of cosmic and experienced time are mediated by plot, or they are "thought experiments" in the Husserlian mold of imaginative variation: "Literature proves to consist in a vast laboratory for thought experiments in which the sources of variation encompassed by narrative identity are put to the test of narration" (*Oneself*, 148). This leveling transcendental eye stands far above and apart from the self-understandings of writers and readers.<sup>6</sup> These issues are not specific to Ellison. For example, we must ask how we can separate out the formal features of Kate Chopin's *Awakening* – her use of chapters, summaries, narrative voice, etc. – without understanding how her formal critique of the *Bildungsroman* is tied to issues of feminism and subjectivity, to women's oppression in cultural plots and language – that is, to questions of "material" and "legitimacy" – and to the conflicts of traditions.

Because Ricoeur follows Kant in considering a narrative text as an isolated aesthetic object, in his discussion of reception, Mimesis 3 (TN, 3, Chapter 7), Iser's and Ingarden's phenomenologies of the textual object take center stage, and they are presented as if they were merely complementing rather than truncating a dialogical hermeneutics of tradition (Jauss). Ricoeur wants to preserve the "ideality of meaning," what he calls Husserl's "'logicist' rejoinder" to historicism (IT, 90): "The text – objectified and dehistoricized – becomes the necessary mediation between writer and reader" (TI, 91). "Hermeneutics begins where dialogue ends" (IT, 32). This is far from

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