

nary life.") But in note 18 I point out that, in delineating such relationships, Ibsen is not concerned only with women and that *The Wild Duck* is also a play "in which an obsessed idealist looks to a man to justify his dream by performing a transcendent act" (p. 21). Possibly Bird believes that I have also maligned the character of Gregers Werle, but I am inclined to doubt it, partly because of a curious moment in her comments that I think we must call an example of the psychopathology of literary life. At the beginning of her last paragraph Bird quotes me as saying, "Each [heroine] idolizes a man through whom she intends to achieve 'the unattainable.'" What I actually wrote (on p. 11) is "Each idealizes a man . . .," but that is a very different matter indeed. I thought I had written about aspiration toward transcendent ideals, not about weak sexual dependence, but I suppose that even in literary criticism we are compelled to find that which we wish to discover.

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The Works of Ralph Ellison

To the Editor:

Susan L. Blake's "Ritual and Rationalization: Black Folklore in the Works of Ralph Ellison" (*PMLA*, 94 [1979], 121–36) is essentially useful in the perspective that it draws between *Invisible Man* and Ellison's shorter fiction; since the novel stands alone as the writer's magnum opus, critical commentary usually concentrates attention there, but Blake's sketching a genesis of strategic forces at work across Ellison's literary career provides a background against which to reexamine the complexities of *Invisible Man*. To my mind, however, the critical apparatus of the essay does not sufficiently approach the very subtleties of folkloric transformation that Blake claims are effected in the novel. Because the objective contending myth that subsumes this novel has not yet liberated us from the vision or epistemology of racism, literary judgment itself gravitates toward a narrative of contending tribes—the same movement that Ellison quite correctly observes outside the text—but I see no reason to reinforce the analogy where it does not work, or where it works as the complicated function of artistic forms. I am specifically concerned with the latter aspects of analogy making as it operates in *Invisible Man*, since it is this economy of functions, I think, that Blake seriously misreads.

The Battle Royal scene, for instance, as "a series

of initiations that finally demonstrate not the politics of slavery but the chaos of the universe" (p. 123), is a symbolic split that the novel itself neither demonstrates nor implies. No individual entity of any particular historical condition ever experiences, quite likely, Blake's "chaos of the universe" in pure, abstracted neutrality. Invisible man is not meant to be, nor does he inscribe, an exception. "Politics of slavery" collapses into "chaos of the universe," or vice versa, as a perfectly synecdochic pairing, with the specific manifestation of chaos replicating in essential economy the ways and means of a general order of cases.

Surely Ellison must have had something analogous to this idea in mind when he says in "Art of Fiction: An Interview" (from which Blake otherwise quotes abundantly) that "the universe in the novel . . . is reached only through the depiction of the specific circumstance . . ." (p. 171). The "immutable laws" and "rituals across cultures" that Blake argues the Battle Royal scene represents are precisely what Ellison suggests that he is after, but for Blake to infer that the universalizing tendencies of the scene "[remove] the black experience from its historical time and place" and "[replace] it in the long run of time, erasing its distinctiveness, heightening its similarity to other experience" (p. 122) is to conceive "black," manifest in invisible man, as a monolith of forms and purposes, while presuming an accommodation of status between "other" and "universality." Folk expression is a transmutation of forms both in the novel and out of it—even now—so that *Invisible Man* articulates a response to a coeval period of consciousness in black-American identity. The protagonist is not opposed to the folk. He *is* the folk in its dynamic, diachronic, momentous reappearance. His "black experience" neither inaugurates nor concludes in the "Peculiar Institution," whose modes of violence, sanctified and profound, are still with us as metamorphoses calibrated to this moment.

Invisible man, therefore, traces in his biography those displacements of historical motivation so persistently that both John and Sambo are no longer adequate to exhaust the range of symbolic enterprise that invisible man—post-Bigger Thomas black personality—seeks to (and must) master. What does Blake imagine that the journey from "darkness" to "light" means in the novel if not the inexorable recurrence and requirement of *syntheses* that distinguish at every stage of living consciousness the contradictory nature of blackness in America? Can John or Sambo—unaided by a technic of ideas and their certain configurations—penetrate a symbolic act that no longer designates them as "niggers," at least in allegedly polite circles, but captivates their iden-

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