

Invisible Violence: Zizek's categories of Violence and Ellison's *Invisible Man*

Joe James Holroyd, Universite Paris Dauphine (PSL)

Abstract: Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* is a violent text. It is unflinching in its confrontation with the violence at the heart of the (African-)American experience. In exploring the central role of violence here – narratively, within the novel; politically, within the culture that the novel explores – the recent work of Slavo Zizek is useful. Zizek posits a critical language which makes an important distinction between systemic violence (of the order of economic and political systems), objective violence (of the order of discriminatory patterns of behaviour), and subjective violence (of the order of individual, often spontaneous, sometimes self-directed acts – which have the effect of misdirecting and obscuring our awareness of these other two more insidious forms of violence). And, in a dialectical spirit of which both Zizek and Ellison might approve, *Invisible Man* will here reciprocally suggest an interrogation of Zizek's theories of revolutionary violence.

Introduction

In response to critics'¹ claims that there is a fetishisation of violence – as opposed to any truly progressive spirit – at the core of his work, indeed his psychology, Zizek has emphasised the spirit of pragmatic and dynamic resistance he advocates; his emphasis upon modes of thought and action which actually resist (hegemonic) systemic power in tangible, material fashion. And, moreover, that in working against the insidious, impersonal, protean nature of systemic violence, such modes of resistance must be reciprocally dynamic in thought and action – thus necessarily not enshrined in rigid, conventional leftist/liberal dogma, nor merely expressive of a position but tangible in their effects on that system – so 'violent', to use his idiom. This counter to Critchley et al. is largely valid, and as always with Zizek, the dynamic, often humorous, free-associative mode of its expression is an apt matching of form and content – much, it shall emerge, after the fashion of Ellison's novel.

Yet where Zizek's form and content becomes least consistent with his prevailing aesthetic is perhaps attributable to where something closely akin to a fetishization of revolutionary, Marxism-motivated violence enters his discourse. He is not as dogmatic in this as such detractors as Critchley (2012) suggest, not least by virtue of the aforementioned spirit of dynamism and play that characterizes so much of his discourse. He shares this with Ellison, and they both occupy a knife-edge between the progressive and the tragic – largely resisting the shackles of dogma or generic form in this interstitial space. But where Zizek's proximity to dogma – or at least 'fetishisation' – of revolutionary violence becomes far more pronounced as he contrives to rationalize it with Marxist theory, Ellison's spirit of play ultimately resists any such coalescence around violence or rationale. Ellison's narrative resists this as it is expressed 'merely' through humanity: through concrete,

¹ Most notably Simon Critchley (2012)

literary exposition of material, socio-psychological forces, rendered understandable, (perhaps tragically) inevitable and relatable, but not by any means claiming to be 'right' in any absolute sense. And where Žizek likewise generally resists any such absolutism, as he denounces vapid, conventional leftist-liberal 'tolerance', he does, at times, moot his own brand of Marxism as ultimately the only antidote to this later insidious evil of late capitalism; this is where his synthesis lies, his symphony crescendos. Where Ellison manages to maintain a space that is perhaps more truly dynamic, after the fashion of Jazz: at once perpetually tragic and progressive.

Žizek's contends that 'the fundamental systemic violence of capitalism [is] much more uncanny than any direct pre-capitalist socio-ideological violence' (*Violence* 13), 'uncanny' here denoting its insidious, almost, aptly, 'invisible' quality, since 'its violence is no longer attributable to concrete individuals and their "evil" intentions, but it is purely "objective", systemic, anonymous' (*Violence* 13). This will not be contested here. It will, however, emerge that this can certainly be said of institutions and ideologies in the broader sense (i.e. without necessarily making the same qualitative distinction with regards to capitalist institutions and ideologies that Žizek makes) – in particular those which perpetuate the oppression of the African American in Ellison's novel. For, while there certainly are concrete individuals with evil intentions at work in *Invisible Man*, manifesting the objective violence of racial hatred, bigger yet than they are the systemic forces of violence and ideology at work in this society.

Foremost, this essay will assert the overwhelming symmetries between Žizek's definition of violence, and that manifested in Ellison's novel. But it will, as a tentative afterthought and suggestion for further research, also intimate the manner in which the later manifestation endorses a more enduringly dynamic mode of critical thought than Žizek ultimately presents at his most dogmatic moments.

Invisible Violence: Zizek's categories of Violence and Ellison's Invisible Man

There is evidently much fertile common-ground between *Invisible Man* and Zizek's work in the central assertion throughout the later, that (late) capitalist modern cultural life is, like all hegemonic orders, such as those supporting racial inequity, not only deeply ideological (contrary to postmodern and other notions of 'post-ideological' culture), but that it constitutes a powerful oppressive and repressive systemic violence. But there is a fundamental short-termism to the power that this violence constitutes as Zizek writes elsewhere – 'Those who use violence may manage to temporarily impose their will, but their command is always tenuous because when the violence ends, or the threat of it lessens, there is even less incentive to obey the authorities' (*End Times*, 388) – such that when this violent apparatus of (ideological) control ebbs, violence explodes back at the system, however indirectly, in outbursts of subjective violence:

What if, in endeavouring to control explosions like the one in New Orleans [and the London 2013 riots, as Zizek validly posits elsewhere], the forces of law and order were confronted with the very nature of capitalism at its purest, the logic of individual competition, of ruthless self-assertion, generated by capitalist dynamics, a "nature" much more threatening and violent than all the hurricanes and earthquakes? (*Violence* 96)

Through a narrative mode which endeavours to honestly occupy and deconstruct such sites of violence, necessitating a dynamism and freedom of form in keeping with such 'uncanny' content, Ellison succeeds in endorsing critical thought, like Zizek, resisting, 'Engagement [which] seems to exert its pressure on us from all directions,' and instead, to find our own way by means of 'a patient critical analysis' (*Violence* 6). But where Zizek's writing is engaging, and his critique of culture lucid, there is a qualitative distinction with Ellison's text: the power of the writing, the humanity which leaps from its pages evokes the reality

of just what such critical detachment can entail on both a political, and a deeply personal level.

Ellison's prologue to *Invisible Man* establishes a highly challenging ontological/political, and indeed, narrative lens through which the novel is to be read. And it is a lens precisely in keeping with Zizek's ideas here pertaining to ideology and violence – be it within a racist or late capitalist hegemony.

Riffing on the idea of invisibility in the jazzy, free-associative mode that the narrator's thoughts often occupy, we learn that it is a 'matter of the construction of their *inner* eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality' (Ellison, 3). Our Invisible Man narrator can only be seen by those around him through a cultural and psychological – close correlatives according to Zizek's Lacanian mode of critique – lens that renders him invisible: the subordinate black man is invisible within the white hegemonic symbolic order. But immediately, lest his narrative descend into anything so simple as partisan politics, subjective violence or overt pathos, the melancholic aspect to the blues music which is a constant refrain and apt metaphor for the prose stylings of *Invisible Man*, is tempered by jazz as part of the narrator's professed endeavor here to 'put invisibility down in black and white... an urge to make music of invisibility' (Ellison 14); qualified, even perhaps ironized, never permitted to crystallise into pathos *or* dogma as he continues:

I am not complaining, nor am I protesting either. It is sometimes advantageous to be unseen, although it is most often wearing on the nerves. Then too, you're constantly being bumped against by those of poor vision. Or again, you often doubt if you really exist. You wonder whether you aren't simply a phantom in other people's minds. Say, a figure in a nightmare which the sleeper tries with all his strength to destroy... (3-4).

This is precisely the musical, poetic mode of language – and associated thought – which is apt for addressing cognitively overwhelming violence, to which Žižek is alluding when he writes:

Adorno's famous saying, it seems, needs correction: it is not poetry that is impossible after Auschwitz, but rather prose. Realistic prose fails, where the poetic evocation of the unbearable atmosphere of a camp succeeds. That is to say, when Adorno declares poetry impossible (or, rather, barbaric) after Auschwitz, this impossibility is an enabling impossibility: poetry is always by definition about something that cannot be addressed directly, only alluded to. One shouldn't be afraid to take this a step further and refer to the old saying that music comes in when words fail. (Violence 5)

This jazzy mode of narrative incrementally builds-up a complex, dialectical world view. One aspect to Ellison's craft here is to balance his more radical and overtly political interjections and ensuing discourse with episodes of fast-paced (and often violent) action. This is another aspect that is established early, in the prologue. Describing his savage beating of a blonde, white man, the incident is rendered in the visceral Anglo-Saxon of the performative and exclamatory first person; it is precisely the spontaneous eruption of subjective violence against the invisibility-rendering system to which Žižek referred above:

as my face came close to his he looked insolently out of his blue eyes and cursed me, his breath hot in my face as he struggled. *I pulled his chin down sharp upon the crown of my head... I butted him and butted him again and again until he went down heavily, on his knees, profusely bleeding. I kicked him repeatedly, in a frenzy because he still uttered insults though his lips were frothy with blood. Oh yes, I kicked him!* (Ellison 4 *italics added*)

It continues in much this manner for at least half a page. And then, the next paragraph begins thus:

Most of the time (although I do not choose as I once did to deny the violence of my days by ignoring it) I am not so overtly violent. I remember that I am invisible and walk softly so as not to awaken the sleeping ones. Sometimes it is best not to awaken them; there are few things in the world as dangerous as sleepwalkers (Ellison 5 italics added)

While the 'I' has not retreated from the narrative, the narrative mode has nonetheless shifted dramatically. Here the 'I' is no longer a violently self-determining, performative subject, but rather surrounded by qualifiers, prepositions and relative terms – even parenthesized, which is to say subordinated. But, as so often in jazz, a motif that appears to be subordinate, incidental to the apparent pulse of a piece, will often return to occupy an essential, central position. Such a motif will be all the more likely to return in this manner if its inception is, in some manner, structurally incongruous; out of tune with the prevailing pulse/harmony of the piece – however subordinated. This is precisely the case with the parenthesized qualifier '(although I do not choose as I once did to deny the violence of my days by ignoring it)'. Parentheses denote a subordinate clause of incidental, lesser importance within a sentence, according to the rules of grammar. But the use of parentheses itself is semi-incongruous, deemed to be largely inappropriate, within the conventions of prose fiction – all the more so in juxtaposition with the preceding Anglo-Saxon directness to the narration of the beating. So what we have here is a statement that occupies a contradictory position within the narrative: both requesting subordination and simultaneously clamouring for our attention in its incongruity. In an entirely appropriate manner; because this notion, that violence cannot be denied by ignoring it, whilst often merely

subordinate to the action or implicit within many episodes, increasingly looms as a central theme in the text and demands that the reader must join the Invisible Man and engage actively in radically questioning 'the violence of my [/his/our] days'. The juxtaposition of such nuanced, and contradictory, expressions of thought alongside of the aforementioned episode of brutally direct violence also establishes for the reader that characterization of our Invisible Man – as understanding the plight of his people – is going to be no easy feat. We will struggle through this experience with him. This will be a sublimely challenging text, where any facile solutions or reductions are likely to be confounded – even unto the prologue's correlative in the epilogue.

Post-prologue, Ellison plunges us straight into the violence in one of its most ritualistic incarnations. The battle royal, where our narrator is blindfolded and thrown into a boxing ring with nine other likewise blinded black boys and made to fight till the last man standing. The ceremony is drenched in symbolic ritual pertaining, not least, to white fears of miscegenation and African-American potency, as when they enter the ring pre-blindfold, they encounter not merely 'a sea of faces, some hostile, some amused ringed around us [but also] in the centre, facing us, stood a magnificent blonde – stark naked.' (Ellison 19)

The perverse nature of this scenario and the untenable position in which the black man is placed here is powerfully evoked by Ellison's prose. The cognitive dissonance the Invisible Man experiences is first articulated directly, in short, declarative sentences describing the symptoms of this sickness: 'I felt a wave of irrational guilt and fear. My teeth chattered, my skin turned to goose flesh, my knees knocked. Yet I was strongly attracted and looked in spite of myself. Had the price of looking been blindness I would have looked.' (Ellison 19)

Apart from the bitter irony of the last statement – his forthcoming blinding is the least of the prices to be paid – there is still a composure and self-awareness to this narrative. But then, as the spectacle proceeds to overwhelm such lucidity, an

incongruous sensual abandon commands the prose style as it segues into an interior monologue where lucidity and declamatory precision makes way for an immersive, expressionist conflation of contradictory impulses towards sex, violence and American patriotism:

I wanted at one and the same time to run from the room, to sink through the floor, or go to her and cover her from my eyes and the eyes of the others with my body; to feel the soft thighs, to caress her and destroy her, to love her and murder her, to hide from her, and yet to stroke her where below the small American flag tattooed upon her belly her thighs formed a capital V. (Ellison 19)

And then, a step yet further from lucidity, as her performative spectacle entirely commands his attention. Our man is certainly invisible here – a mere passive object to be sexually frustrated by her performative subject – and the descent from the earlier declarative, lucid description of his symptoms, through the interior monologue which at least expresses some self-awareness, culminates in this entirely surreal description of the obscene spectacle:

And then she began to dance, a slow sensuous movement; the smoke of a hundred cigars clinging to her like the thinnest of veils. She seemed like a fair bird-girl girdled in veils calling to me from the angry surface of some gray and threatening sea. (Ellison 19)

The episode concludes with a brief return to declarative directness – if only in the service of confirming his complete objectification, appropriate to such a spectacle of objective violence, the absence of any agency in the space this invisible man occupies before her commanding performance as she denies him his subjectivity: ‘I was transported.’ (Ellison 19). Ellison’s prose is powerful in its sparseness here; we are not told where he is transported to, and so one implication

must surely then be that he is simply 'transported'; in passage with no fixed destination: this is the abandonment of the dispossessed.

As her dance draws to a close, just before the battle royal begins, a scenario occurs where, in a paroxysm of aggression and lust, the 'big shot' white spectators,

ran laughing and howling after her. They caught her just as she reached a door, raised her from the floor, and tossed her as college boys are tossed at a hazing, and above her red, fixed-smiling lips I saw the terror and disgust in her eyes, almost like my own terror and that which I saw in some of the other boys. (Ellison 20)

The fight then proceeds with a comparable Anglo-Saxon rawness to the aforementioned description of the beating in the prologue. But there is another moment where – without breaking the rhythm of the fight narrative – we are invited, as in that moment where Invisible Man spots in the dancer's 'terror and disgust in her eyes [something] almost like my own terror and that which I saw in the other boys', to think dialectically; to recognize that there is a larger objective violence at work here whereby all (African Americans, women certainly) are violently subordinated objects, often pitted violently against one-another, under the one active subject here: the white man (and, indeed, the possessor of capital). Having been sent to the canvas, Invisible Man, 'finally pulled erect and discovered that I could see the black, sweat washed forms weaving in the smoky-blue atmosphere like drunken dancers weaving to the rapid drum-like thud of blows.' (Ellison 23)

Breaking the rhythm of the visceral, verb-heavy blind-folded fight narrative, this surreal, adjective- and imagery-drenched conflation of the combatants movements with that of the earlier dancer's is then followed by a return to the fight narrative idiom, 'Everyone fought hysterically. It was complete anarchy. Everybody fought everybody else. No group fought together for long. Two, three, four, fought one, then

turned to fight each other, were themselves attacked, (Ellison 23) as Ellison artfully reminds us once again of the greater violence at work here; an objective violence whereby the oppressed have nowhere to direct their violent response to this but towards one another. This vision of a black people chaotically preoccupied with misdirected, often black-on-black violence – misdirected subjective violence as an impulsive response to the objective violence of the ideology which has them in a boxing ring / ghetto / subordinate position in the first place – is then sketched on a larger and yet larger canvas as this unflinching narrative proceeds.

Ellison first interrogates this position of the oppressed's misdirection of violence in the form of the disgraced, incestuous sharecropper Trueblood – perhaps the most subordinated/subaltern character in the entire novel. Chauffeuring Mr Norton, a wealthy white patron of the university around the campus town, Invisible Man is horrified – his frustration here itself an example of misdirected, internalized oppressive violence – when they find themselves audience to Trueblood's incest narrative: 'How can he tell this to white men, I thought, when he knows they'll say that all Negroes do such things? I looked at the floor, a red mist of anguish before my eyes.' (Ellison 58)

Ellison's master of the different varieties of African American idiom is highly significant in narrating Trueblood's experience. Alienated by the pretentious, aspirational African American college community, and even his own family, the impoverished sharecropper fully occupies the land and animal environment, such that it pervades his very thought and behaviour. This is particularly apparent in the brutal manner in which he narrates contemplation of self-castration as the only alternative to succumbing to his incestuous desire:

There was only one way I could figure I could git out: that was with a knife. But I didn't have no knife, and if you'all ever seen them geld them young boar pigs in the fall, you know I knowed that was too much to pay to keep from sinnin'. Every-thing was happenin' inside

of me like a fight was goin' on. Then the very thought of the fix puts
the iron back in me. (Ellison 60)

Despite the crude directness of the broken-English dialect, the content of this admission is rich with subtext. The diction of 'git out' explicates what has been implicit throughout Trueblood's narration of his incestuous fall: this is not simply about crude, impulsive libido in a reductive sense; this is about the space and time that Trueblood occupies. Furthermore, it is significant that the solution to this space-time conundrum appears in a finite form, without qualification, much like the aforementioned 'I was transported.' Appearing as a discrete statement, preceded by a full-colon and followed by a full-stop – ':with a knife.' – denotes that the knife itself *is* Trueblood's solution; that violence is inevitable, regardless of its object, much as the Invisible Man was earlier 'transported', denied a space he could occupy, by the naked blonde woman's obscene dance, displaced to nowhere. Via the dehumanising example of pigs being gelded, the particular object of the knife's violence is expressed as the self, in the most viscerally tangible form of violent self-repression, of self-destruction of potency conceivable. The internalized violence is further declaimed – 'inside of me like a fight was goin' on' – and then there is that curious final statement: 'the very thought of the fix put the iron back in me.' Awareness of the situation simply reinforces the libidinous urge – there is a refutation of any other solution but a violent one here. Moreover, there is a very culturally apt set of connotations pertaining to the diction within this statement: 'puts the *iron* back in me'. To be sure, the intended figurative meaning of 'iron' here is clear – strengthening, firming of resolve (as opposed to any conventional Judeo-Christian moral notion of weakening of self and succumbing to temptation), the assumption of agency in an act of subjective violence. But perhaps there is another connotation to 'iron' here, since it takes only a slight revision – or barely that in the phonetic terms that are valid in reading dialogue – for Trueblood's speech to thus be an expression of his incestuous impulse as a consequence of his enslavement to a bigger, objective violence: 'Then the very thought of the fix I'm in puts the irons back on me.'

He proceeds to narrate the incestuous act in a compelling stream-of-consciousness narrative. There is a crude musicality to this intense barrage of words; an almost violently forceful, hypnotic pulse, evoked by the regularity with which the predominant use of short, monosyllabic words is punctuated by intermittent *vowel-accented words* (partially designated in *italics* below) within the southern dialect. His figurative language denoting the action as rather the occupation of a space develops into an extraordinarily powerful poetics of estrangement, which then expands – via his daughter’s ostensive part-complicity/victimhood in the act – to comprise the African-American experience more broadly:

Then *if* that *ain'* bad enough, Matty Lou *can't* hold out no longer and gits to *movin* herslf. First *she* was *tryin'* to *push* me away and *I'm* *tryin'* to *hold* her down to *keep* from *sinnin'*. Then *I'm* *pullin'* away and *shushin'* her to *be* quiet *so's* not to *wake* her *Ma*, when she *grabs* holt to *me* and *holds* tight, *She* didn't *want* me to *go* then – and to *tell* the *honest-to-god* truth *I* found out that *I* didn't *want* to *go* neither. *I* guess *I* felt then, at that time – and although *I* been sorry since – just 'bout like that fellow did down in Birmingham. That one what locked hisself in his house and burned him up. *I* was lost. The more wringlin' and twistin' we done *tryin'* to git away, the more we wanted to stay. So like that fellow, *I* stayed, *I* had to fight it on out to the end. He mighta died, but *I* suspects now that he got a heapa satisfaction before he went. *I* know there aint' nothin' like what *I* went through. *I* caint tell how it was. It's like when a real drinkin man gits drunk, or like when a real sanctified religious woman gits so worked up she jumps outta her clothes, or when a real gamblin' man keeps on gamblin' when he's losin'. You got holt of it and you caint let go even though you want to.
(Ellison 60)

This is precisely the violent nature of which Zizek speaks, the

'ruthless self-assertion, generated by capitalist [and racial inequity] dynamics, a "nature" much more threatening and violent than all the hurricanes and earthquakes" (*Violence* 96). It is no coincidence that the qualifying examples given here by Trueblood transition from the most crude, physical form of subjective self-violence – a man destroying his property and self in a fire – to a catalogue of the various manifestations of objective *and* systemic violence; of the various apparatuses through which the white hegemony ensure the African American remains subordinate (or, alternatively, but with much the same effect, of the psychological crutches through which they cope with this repressive violence): religion, alcohol and gambling. The sexual violence done unto his daughter is shocking, to be sure, but derives from the same cultural conditions as these other phenomena.

Within the perpetual unfolding and deepening of the lines of cultural critique, the function of the church as part of the apparatus of control, and precisely the 'ruthless self-assertion' which sustains those in power within such institutions is, of course, revisited. Again, what appears initially as a fleeting reference recurs later in the narrative to occupy a central position; there is a dialectical method in the jazzy madness of this novel.

Invisible Man returns to the university, having thoroughly failed University President Dr. Bledsoe's wishes that he insulate the rich white patron he is chauffeuring, Mr Norton, from the reality of the objective and systemic violence which dictates the lives of those such as Trueblood in their bursts of misdirected, systemic violence, and then the band of crazy drunken wartime vets upon whom they stumble. So having thoroughly failed in this, we follow Invisible Man in his guilty, anxiety-ridden return from this violent, impulsive world – itself rendered in stream of consciousness and other such jazzy, immersive narrative modes as befit the environment – to the contrastingly eerie serenity and ritualized control of the university chapel.

Into the doors and into the soft lights I go, silently, past the rows of puritanical benches straight and torturous, finding that to which I am assigned and bending my body to its agony.... Around me the students move with faces frozen in solemn masks, and I seem to hear already the voices mechanically raised in the songs the visitors loved. (Loved? Demanded. Sung? An ultimatum accepted and ritualized, an allegiance recited for the peace it imparted, and for that perhaps loved. Loved as the defeated come to love the symbols of their conquerors. A gesture of acceptance, of terms laid down and reluctantly approved.) (Ellison 110-111)

While the prose here is certainly more lucid and controlled in its linear account of his movements, it is equally richly imbued with violence – albeit precisely an entirely objective and systemic violence. In the description of the ‘puritanical benches straight and torturous’, there is not so much personification at work – in any conventionally anthropomorphizing sense – as the imbuing of active agency to this violent apparatus of control, which is anything but human; where the human objects conversely ‘move with faces frozen in solemn masks, and [we] seem to hear already the voices mechanically raised’. This later description of ‘the’ as opposed to ‘their’ voices which are ‘mechanically’ raised works in combination with Invisible Man’s ‘bending my body to its agony’ to perpetuate the aforementioned poetics of estrangement at work throughout the novel. For, while Invisible Man is at least permitted the possessive pronoun, the more natural expression would simply describe how ‘I bent over’ – the identification of the body as a distinct, perhaps independent, entity, especially in combination with that entirely ambiguous preposition-phrase ‘to its agony’ – the autonomous, sentient ‘body’s’ agony? the active-subject bench’s ‘agony?’ – creates an environment where the notion of human autonomy, agency and self-possession is thoroughly contested. What is artfully implicit within this chilling reversal of agency between the humans and the systemic violence of the physical setting of the church is then explicitly explored within a now familiar, and increasingly bold syntactical trope: the elucidation of the

emergent political issues within parentheses. Building on the aforementioned '(although I do not choose as I once did to deny the violence of my days by ignoring it)', which established a foundational line of inquiry, Invisible Man's manner of discourse here, while still discursive – and indeed, at some level subordinated or at least located in some other semantic space in keeping with the poetics of estrangement at work here, by its appearance within the parenthesis – becomes more rigorous in its cultural critique. Here, the violence of his days is not merely not ignored, but deconstructed as being systemic, and precisely symbolic after the fashion of Žižek's notion of violent inequity within the symbolic order. In a Nietzschean refutation of the slave morality of Christianity, the questions here are rhetorical, 'Loved?', their brevity and that of their emphatic end-stopped answers, 'Demanded.', expressing his violent resistance to this systemic enslavement. But, while the impulse of resistance is emphatic, it is not simply a reductively violent call to arms: we are invited to direct this toward semiotic investigation of these 'symbols of the conquerors', these 'gestures of acceptance', and so return to the narrative outside of the parentheses sharing in his indignance, to be sure, but also in his dialectical, exploratory mode of engaging with the world.

In reading the shocking episode that follows this, the following observations from Žižek are useful:

What if the true evil of our societies is not their capitalist dynamics as such, but our attempts to extricate ourselves from them – all the while profiting – by carving out self-enclosed communal spaces, from “gated communities” to exclusive racial or religious groups? ... The exemplary figures of today are not ordinary consumers who ... live in a violent world of disintegrating social links, but those who, while fully engaged in creating conditions for such universal devastation ... buy their way out of their own activity living in gated communities. (*Violence* 27)

Zizek's notion of the 'gated community', the insulated, false utopian space which wealth buys itself at the expense of an underclass is revealed in all the violence inflicted on those below it, in all the exploitation that sustains it, in the scene towards which the preceding repressive violence of the church has been building suspense. In his confrontation with Dr. Bledsoe, Invisible Man learns that the university is sustained on lies, on violent repression of truth and dignity within and beyond the community; that all of these spheres of privilege are systemically violent in sustaining their exclusivity and the self-interested power of those within their confines.

Invisible Man reacts in a manner Bledsoe deems to be naïve to his criticisms of Invisible Man taking the white benefactor he was chauffeuring beyond the confines of the gated university community where they have 'bowed and scraped and begged and lied enough decent homes and drives for you to show him' (Ellison 138). Again, a transfer of agency appears to be taking place here as these exhortations and deceptions are not only connotative of a complete lack of dignity, but seem to be directed towards the homes themselves; human agency and dignity is subordinated to the signifying power of 'decent homes' – what Zizek, after Marx, might identify as a violent reification. When Invisible Man persists, instead, in his faith in true and direct discourse with Bledsoe and the white benefactor, Bledsoe uses that most culturally violent of epithets:

"Nigger, this isn't the time to lie. I'm no white man. Tell me the truth!"

It was as though he'd struck me. I stared across the desk thinking, He called me *that*...

"Answer me, boy!"

That, I thought noticing the throbbing of a vein that rose between his eyes, thinking, *He called me that*.

"I wouldn't lie, sir," I said. (Ellison 139)

The perverse irony of the declamation 'I'm no white man' immediately after using that most violent epithet-signifier of the white man's historical power over the black man is another factor in the cognitive dissonance experienced here. And again, just as with the parentheses earlier, the convention of italicizing a qualitatively different part of the narrative – '*He called me that.*' – powerfully conveys Invisible Man's awakening to the reality of this symbolic violence; it creates a space apart in which his consciousness of this violence is awakening.

But this is just the beginning of Bledsoe's exposition of systemic and objective violence, as he continues, 'I've made my place in it and I'll have every Negro in the country hanging on tree limbs by morning if it means staying where I am' (Ellison 143). In a speech that concludes with this categorical rejection of the value of anything but power within the culture of systemic violence, humanity is shown to be entirely denied agency, entirely subordinated to a violent, self-sustaining systemic force: 'Power doesn't have to show off. Power is confident, self-assuring, self-starting and self-stopping, self-warming and self-justifying.' (Ellison 142)

Thus begins the succession of disenchantments that characterize Invisible Man's burgeoning wisdom: that subsuming one's critical faculties to any greater agency, institution or ideology ultimately only renders one vulnerable to the often violently wielded power of others, or perhaps yet worse than tangible others – certainly for the faculty of critical thought – to a faceless, impersonal dogmatic ideology or institution.

Most pronounced of these disenchantments is that with 'The Brotherhood'. Whilst certainly evoking some of the qualities of radical socialist political groups, Invisible Man's relationship with this collective of ideologues is particularly powerful by virtue its non-referentiality: Ellison is not interested in exploring the particulars of their ideology, but rather exposing the manner in which all such political institutions can misappropriate and abuse the marginalized in cynical

service of their own ideological dogma, and the manner in which Invisible Man ultimately resists this in the interests of his people and his own critical faculties.

Invisible Man falls into the service of The Brotherhood when at his lowest ebb – and it seems to initially represent precisely what he has been seeking: the opportunity for personal, institutionally ordained ‘success’, whilst serving the betterment of his people.

But right from the start of this relationship, something is awry with the dynamic. Through Ellison’s artfully non-referential portrayal of The Brotherhood, our attention is directed not to the specifics of their ideology, so much as the manner in which it insidiously coopts and prescribes human behaviour according to a singular model, ill-fit for individual expression or critical thought. One of the more subtle examples of this occurs in an apt example of what Zizek denounces in political correctness,

‘Therein resides the limitation of standard political correctness: instead of changing the subjective position from which we speak, it imposes on us a set of rules with regard to content. Don’t point out that blacks committed crimes. Don’t mention how lesbian couples mistreat their children... But all these rules on content effectively leave our subjective position untouched.’ (*Violence* 100)

A politically insensitive request for ‘one of those real good ole Negro work songs’ (Ellison 312) from one of the white members of The Brotherhood elicits a series of enraged declamations from its (also white) leader – Brother Jack – culminating in his repetition of the emphatic: ‘The brother *does not sing!*’ (Ellison 312) The white member is ultimately violently ejected, and an entirely awkward scene ensues – where certainly their subjective positions are untouched, even entrenched, as invisible man feels further alienated in this white crowd, asking ‘Why was everyone staring at me as though I were responsible? Why the hell were they staring at me?’ (Ellison 312) But the truly alienating, authoritarian and repressive nature that can reside in political correctness is evoked just after this where, in

keeping with Brother Jack's emphatic command he does not 'does not sing!', a white woman tells invisible man that: 'I would never ask our coloured brothers to sing, even though I love to hear them. Because I know that it would be a very backward thing. You are here to fight along with us, not to entertain.' (Ellison 314)

His response to this, in his own head, at her departure, is another very welcome departure into the dialectical mode of critique that punctuates these episodes of uncomfortable and ultimately (however systemic, repressive) violent action.

I was puzzled. Just what did she mean? Was it that she understood that we resented having others think that we were all entertainers and natural singers? But now after the mutual laughter something disturbed me: Shouldn't there be some way for us to be asked to sing? Shouldn't the short man have the right to make a mistake without his motives being considered consciously or unconsciously malicious? After all, he was singing, or trying to. What if I asked *him* to sing? I watched the little woman, dressed in black like a missionary, winding her way through the crowd, What on earth was she doing here? What part did she play. Well, whatever she meant, she's nice and I like her. (Ellison 314)

Juxtaposed with such reductive, declarative statements of linguistic propriety and what his role and function is to be from both the woman and Brother Jack, invisible man's contemplations here express a philosophical openness, generosity of spirit and privileging of the individual over political correctness or dogma, which will clearly prove incongruous with such ideologues. Even well before his overt disenchantment with The Brotherhood and other such violently coopting /repressive ideologies, before his absolute privileging of self and circumstance in the novel's epilogue, its embryo is evident in the manner in which this same generosity of spirit and intellect cannot but listen, cannot but find some

accommodation, however initially slight, of human voices incongruous with The Brotherhood's narrow ideology.

His first confrontation with Ras the Exhorter – where Ras rails against the work that invisible man and his companion Brother Clifton are doing for The Brotherhood – in the midst of a chaotic street brawl is one such powerful moment.

You call *me* crazy? Look at you two and look at me – is this *sanity*? Standing here in three shades of blackness! Three black men fighting in the street because of the white enslaver? Is that sanity? Is that consciousness, scientific understanding? Is that the modern black mahn of the twentieth century? Hell, mahn! Is it self-respect – black against black? What they give you to betray – their women? You fall for that?’

“Let’s go,” I said, listening and remembering and suddenly alive in the dark with the horror of the battle royal (Ellison 372)

The rhythm of Ras the Exhorter's speech – a heady mix of patois and rhetoric that, with scant interruption, spans almost five pages – has much in common with the earlier narrations of Trueblood and, indeed, the battle royal which it evokes in the memory of Invisible Man. Ridden with violence, Ras's speech taking place in the midst of a brawl, weapons drawn and ready, it is, like the earlier narratives, a powerful articulation of misdirected subjective, black-on-black violence. But it is not just rational deduction, cold logic making the connection between this scenario and the earlier one which accounts for Invisible Man's burgeoning accommodation of such voices as Ras's within his worldview. Our narrator expresses it in terms far from unconditional endorsement – ‘He was an exhorter, all right, and I was caught in the crude, insane eloquence of his plea’ (Ellison 374) – but that juxtaposition of ‘crude’ and ‘insane’ with ‘eloquence’, and the fact that he is ‘caught’ by it is telling: neither his intellect nor his humanity will allow him to dismiss this voice outright,

nor any other genuine expression of subjective human experience, however much it 'catches' against the dogma of The Brotherhood's, or any other, ideology.

But, in the jazzy, meandering mode of narrative that is so apt an expression of his incremental disenchantment with ideological dogma, it is not until almost two hundred pages later in the novel that Invisible Man faces Ras again. And it is here that Ras's exhortations against our representative of The Brotherhood, concluding in his condemnation – 'Hang the lying traitor' (Ellison 558) – evoke the conclusive phase in invisible man's awakening:

I stood there facing them, and it seemed unreal. I faced them knowing that the madman in a foreign costume was real and yet unreal, knowing that he wanted my life, that he held me responsible for all the nights and days and all the suffering and for the nights days and all the suffering and for all that which I was incapable of controlling, and I no hero, but short and dark with only a certain eloquence and a bottomless capacity for being a fool to mark me from the rest; saw them, recognized them at last as those whom I had failed and of whom I was now, just now, a leader, though leading them, running ahead of them, only in the stripping away of my illusionment.' (Ellison 558-559)

The reference to his 'eloquence' is pertinent here – for this interior monologue is particularly so – and characteristic of the mode into which the narrative shifts with this segue into the epilogue. For, where earlier, tentative expressions of the privileging of his own critical capacity and subjective experience were often subordinated, or at least differentiated, through parenthesis, italicization, or other means, here there is a fluent abandon to his own (even self-)critical thought.

‘So why do I write, torturing myself to put it down?’ (Ellison 579) asks invisible man as his epilogue nears its conclusive, metanarrational sentiments. ‘Because in spite of myself I’ve learned some things ... The very act of trying to put it all down has confused me and negated some of the anger and some of the bitterness.’ Riffing on this concept of conflated confusion and negation, he proceeds, ‘So it is now that 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’ (Ellison 579-580).

The rhythm and content – evoking the improvisational, socratic manner of his discourse – combined with the idea of this discourse sublimating difficult emotions, ‘negating some of the anger’, again evokes the quality of jazz music, which finally reaches its ultimate expression in an endorsement of such improvisational living and critical thought over and against the violence which ideological dogma imposes on real life: ‘And the mind that has conceived a plan of living must never lose sight of the chaos against which that pattern was conceived. That goes for societies as well as individuals’ (Ellison 580). Thus, such a seemingly bleakly violent text ends on a tentatively progressive note; beyond mere dogma, Capitalist or Marxist. This, it emerges, follows inevitably from the practice of the writing and the mode of perpetual critical thought which follows inevitably from such empathetic, literary exploration; from the discipline of evoking the voices of his people in all their disparate, terrible, wonderful, musical difference:

‘So I approach it through division. So I denounce and I defend and I hate and I love’ (Ellison 580).

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