

Convocation Address
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15 Years with Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man

Fifteen summers ago I stood in the now defunct Borders bookstore in downtown Boston with my summer reading list in hand. I was on my lunch break from my summer job where I interned at the Dreyfus Fund, specializing in private wealth management. I stared at the book names listed on the page. Seniors will soon know well the process of the exhibition. A student must choose and read a work of literature, research and write an essay on it, and discuss that essay in a rigorous oral. Among many options, on my list were *Memoirs of a Geisha*, *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, *Jane Eyre*, *The Chaneyville Incident*, and *The Sound and The Fury*. My finger trailed the spines of fiction titles in a display labeled "Best Books." I hovered over the maroon-colored binding, then picked up Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. I scanned that first sentence, "I am an invisible man." Intrigued, my 17-year-old eyes read on:

No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids – and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me... When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination – indeed, everything and anything except me.

This sounded like some kind of horror book. Granted, there are some terrifying and otherworldly elements in the text, yes – when treachery is revealed, when sudden violence occurs – but not what I expected. The shock of the novel lay, not necessarily in the gruesome or the bloody (though that certainly is present), but in Ellison's ability to utterly baffle me and then, in other moments, to probe the hidden most parts of my consciousness. I didn't know it then, but this one reading assignment would be the beginning of an intense thought relationship.

I'll share today some of my meditations on *Invisible Man*, those that began at 17 and continue still. My most recent realizations coming just a couple of days ago after a brief conversation with Nicole Lopez '19 as we walked back to L Dorm, and then yesterday at sit-down lunch with Mia Beams '19. I'm afraid I can't share my final exhibition paper with you – it's been lost. What remains are notes I found in a dusty box in my parents' basement and an old copy of the book. The paper itself has disappeared; written pre-Google Docs and in a computer lab in the current husk of Amos Hall. I have spent many an hour submerged in the rich and troubling world crafted as much by Ellison's gritty imagination as it was by the social, political, and intellectual issues facing America in the early 20th century. Problems that resonate as much now in 2018 as they did in 1952 when the novel was first published. We, too, as a nation grapple with the realities of societal alienation and racial disenfranchisement. We, too, are grasping at peace.

I have reread *Invisible Man* every July or August returning sometimes to my favorite chapters, or just a line, other summers reading it in its entirety. The nameless protagonist (identified by name only as an “Invisible Man”), has been a companion. Just as any friend can be supportive and frustrating, his at times puzzling reflections have been an unlikely assistant in my own pursuit to understand who I am. One of my favorite lines early in the novel is when Invisible Man says, “But that’s getting too far ahead of the story, almost to the end, although the end is in the beginning and lies far ahead.” This line – “the end is in the beginning and lies far ahead” – has driven me bonkers for years, spiraling in my brain. It makes no sense, but is so fascinating. The end (whatever that means – it could be the end of a story, the end of a relationship, the end of a sentence) is intimately connected to the beginning of something else. There is a cyclical nature to things, Ellison contends, a thinness in the boundaries between where or how we finish one thing and where or how we begin another. I am acutely aware of this point as we begin the school year – many of my own commitments from last year concluded are fresh in this new beginning with all of you.

I am getting a little ahead of myself, but since we are still in the beginning, I’ll share what’s in the end – why this book has persisted in my life for so long. Three reasons: One, I have yet to read another book that forces me to wrestle with my relationship to myself and how I relate to those around me. Two, this story is epic; it’s literally an epic. Ellison echoes Homer’s *Odyssey*, James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, and Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* intentionally to cement the mythical and colossal journey of his titular character. Three, Ellison is a tinkerer of words. His language is unparalleled in its depth and its brutality. I have read some of the oldest epics to date in their original Greek, Latin, and Egyptian Hieroglyph. Ellison’s English is, I must say, my favorite. With *Invisible Man* he offers a comparative study of humanity in a way no other epic poem quite achieves to me. He blends the grotesque and the mundane, comedy and violence, contorting time itself to tell his story.

I promise I will not distill all 581 pages. Today I’ll only share a few moments that represent the complexity of this work. The novel catalogues the journey of a black man, recently graduated from high school, who dreams of becoming a great orator, a spokesman for the social and political advancement of his race. Some major themes to be aware of include the intersections between blindness and sight, darkness and light, truth and lies, trust and deception. There is also something happening with the color blue that I have yet to discern. Blue shows up everywhere and I still haven’t figured out why. Maybe I’ll figure it out next summer.

For me, the most urgent element of this text has always been about visibility. Or rather, the tension between seeing and being seen; between others’ perception of me and my reality. Invisible Man’s stumbling search for certainty in who he is and how he navigates his own beleaguered quest for the truth of self-definition has compelled me. We need a little historical context both for the author and his time in order to better understand what has led to that first sentence assertion, “*I am an invisible man.*”

Ellison grew up in Oklahoma and then in Indiana. He was an athlete, playing both tackle and running back on his high school football team. He was also an excellent student, ultimately winning a state scholarship to attend a prestigious black college in Alabama called the Tuskegee Institute. He attended Tuskegee after being initially denied admission. He got rejected from

college the first time around and it was alright! He earned the 1953 National Book Award and later two Presidents Medals from Lyndon B. Johnson and Ronald Reagan, so I think he did pretty well.

The university's orchestra was in need of a trumpet player that year and Ellison's musical talent helped him to gain admission in 1933. His passion for music, his love of audio technology, literature and photography took him north to New York. He moved to Harlem where he met among others the black literary giants and artists Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, and Romare Bearden, who encouraged him to pursue fiction writing. In his 1948 essay, "Harlem is Nowhere," Ellison wrote about the singular possibilities of Harlem, then known as the "culture capital of black America." He wrote:

Here the grandchildren of those who possessed no written literature examine their lives through the eyes of Freud and Marx, Kiekegaard and Kafka, Malraux and Sartre. For this is a world in which the major energy of the imagination goes not into creating works of art but into overcoming the frustrations of social discrimination. Not quite citizens and yet Americans, full of the tensions of modern man but regarded as primitives, Negro Americans are in desperate search for an identity. Rejecting the second-class status assigned them, they feel alienated and their whole lives have become a search for answers to the questions Who am I, What am I, Why am I, and Where?"

Harlem gave Ellison the opportunity to gain a new perspective on the African American experience. His questions articulate the challenge of black men and women in post-Reconstruction, Jim Crow America. Today, too, we must engage what it looks like to live fully in a multi-racial democracy and what it feels like to allow each citizen to enjoy, unmolested, those rights.

I didn't know any of this the first time I read *Invisible Man*, but the scholarship I've read in the intervening years has allowed me to articulate what, even at 17, drew me to this book. Ellison's probing questions of identity, the "Who am I?, What am I?, and Where?" and those responses formulated by his anonymous narrator have prompted me to return again and again to this text at every stage of my life.

This summer I flipped through my first copy of the book and reviewed an annotation from my 18-year-old self. It's the line we heard earlier that reads, "*I am invisible, understand simply because people refuse to see me.*" My annotation says, *How can he be visible if no one sees him?* It was the summer before I entered college. I know how old I was because the second summer I read the novel I began to date my annotations. In this moment I know I was worried about being in a new place, making friends, and being seen by those around me. Seen as what? I'm not sure exactly. Probably, I wanted people to see me as funny, mysterious even, and smart. In the upper margin nearby, almost as if in response to my pre-college question, was a black-inked note dated from my 25-year-old self. *No one controls the sight of you. You are your own person. Don't depend on others,* I wrote. This was written just a few months before I got married. Clearly I was

working through something there around independence... You can understand now, how I have wondered for fifteen years, *What does it mean to be seen? What are the consequences of being invisible?* These final two questions are actually annotations from my 22-year-old self, post-college and moving across the country to California to attend graduate school for the first time.

Invisible Man has, for a long time, forced me to challenge my assumptions about how I understand the world. At the novel's outset, Ellison immediately turns the reader's perception on its head. The book is told from a hole underground – an actual hole, a place identified as having a certain quality of “acoustical deadness.” Invisible Man recounts his memoir from the protection of his hole; it is his “home.” He says:

Now don't jump to the conclusion that because I call my home a “hole” it is damp and cold like a grave; there are cold holes and warm holes. Mine is a warm hole. And remember, a bear retires to his hole for the winter and lives until spring... I say all this to assure you that it is incorrect to assume that, because I'm invisible and live in a hole, I am dead. I am neither dead nor in a state of suspended animation.

Ellison is defying our notion of space, form, and sight. We might think holes are cold. His is warm. He is thriving, not dead in a grave. Invisible Man continues:

My hole is warm and full of light... And I love light. Perhaps you'll think it strange that an invisible man should need light, desire light, love light. But maybe it is exactly because I am invisible. Light confirms my reality, gives birth to my form.

Again, Ellison challenges our preconceived notions. We might think holes are shrouded in darkness, Invisible Man's is suffused with light. 1,369 light bulbs to be exact – he is precise, showing us exactly how wrong our assumption is about the darkness and quality of his home. From the beginning of this story we know that he has withdrawn from society, living alone after surviving multiple deceptions at the hands of those whom he once trusted. He exists in a state he calls “hibernation.” We might assume this state of hibernatory aloneness is unfortunate. It isn't. We don't know the circumstances surrounding his isolation yet, but we do know that Invisible Man's reclusion is a choice, hard-won and satisfying.

So this guy is in a warm, bright hole. It's also a hole full of sound. He is enveloped by music. Jazz, specifically, figures critically into the novel as it did in Ellison's life. Music is everywhere in this book, making listening a vital component to my reading experience. Music appears overtly in the resonant, achy measures of Louis Armstrong. You heard Armstrong's song “Black and Blue” as you entered this hole of ours today. This same song reverberates throughout the novel. Invisible Man says, “*Louis bends the military instrument into a beam of lyrical sound.*” Ellison is making an explicit connection here between sound and sight. He refers to the playing of the trumpet, identifying the notes of Armstrong's music as giving shape to his invisibility.

He says, “*Perhaps I like Louis Armstrong because he’s made poetry out of being invisible. I think it must be because he’s unaware that he is invisible. And my own grasp of invisibility aids me to understand his music.*” There is a reciprocity between the music itself and his invisibility – each one making the other possible. The sonorous melody of “Black and Blue” emerging as comfort and confirmation of his invisible form. Ellison is inviting us here to use one sense (in this case hearing) to enable another (sight).

This sensory correlation is intensified in large and small moments throughout the text. It is the outraged ruse of opening a letter of condemnation, it is the rambunctious shouting at a political rally, or the muted crunch of gritting teeth. Ellison creates a sonic experience that, sometimes even in the same instance, can be quiet and deafening.

At this point, you might be wondering “What makes a person invisible?” or “Why are there musicians on stage?” or even “What is she talking about?” I’m still figuring that out! Remember, in the lines that I annotated Invisible Man says that he is “*invisible simply because people refuse to see*” him and yet, he proudly and repeatedly declares his invisibility. He owns it, and I think maybe it’s that self-awareness which allows him to embrace his invisibility fully. Recall that Invisible Man is African-American. Though we receive no substantive indication of what he looks like – no clear description of his face, his height, or skin tone – we know he is black. We know that at one point he was eager to attend college and that by the end of the story he is secluded in a hole. We also learn that his withdrawal is intimately connected to his race, to his identity as a black man. But why? Is it the laws of Jim Crow? Is it the legacy of slavery? Is it Invisible Man himself? *What* is it that renders him invisible? I don’t necessarily have all of the answers – you’ll have to read the book and come to your own conclusions. Spoiler alert: It’s everything! What I will say is that, perhaps the most fundamental element of his invisibility – what gives us a clue about *why* he is invisible, is its source. He says:

Nor is my invisibility a matter of biochemical accident to my epidermis. That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality.

Close your eyes. Try to feel if there is a “peculiar” place in your inner eye that creates a blind spot in your mind; a place that renders others or yourself invisible. I try to do this every so often to see if there is indeed a physical space that controls my unconscious responses to people. I want to test myself, to learn if Invisible Man is right.

What does that even mean? “What does that even mean?” is also one of my original annotations, written near the line about “the construction of their inner eyes.” *What does that even mean?* What I think Invisible Man is doing in this line is asserting that, yes, someone can affirm or deny his existence. He’s also establishing his unique power to determine the tangibility of his own form. Someone can “refuse” to see him, but if he embraces that refusal it is a rejection on his own terms. It is a repudiation of that individual’s (even society’s) assessment of him. Have you ever wanted to reject someone else’s estimation of your worth? Push back on what message society gives you about your value in it?

Ellison proclaims that it is not actually Invisible Man who has the problem of sight or physical form. It is not a science experiment gone wrong or accident of transparency that renders him invisible. Rather it is the error of those looking at him through their own flawed vision. It is all of us looking out and not seeing him. Throughout the novel Invisible Man encounters characters, black and white, male and female, who fail to see him. These named others manipulate him for their own purposes and seek to make themselves stronger by controlling his speech and actions. In some instances that exploitation comes from those people whom Invisible Man trusts the most – his mentors. “A matter of the construction of their *inner eyes*,” he says. It is not him. It is them.

We’re getting to the beginning of the end now, and I want to share a brief, dreamlike scene to illustrate the location of invisibility in the eyes of others. Invisible Man recounts an experience between himself and a blonde man walking on the street. You will witness Davis Scott ’19 and Mr. Gilheany enact a tableau choreographed by Ms. Wilson. It is one of the most gripping scenes in the novel’s opening. You’ll hear the disembodied voice of Mr. Dave Myers. Like Invisible Man as he listens to Louis Armstrong, try to hear and see the beats of invisibility. You can look or listen, or do both. Either way, I want you to consider the dynamic role that lack of vision plays in the interaction between these two strangers.

One night I accidentally bumped into a man, and perhaps because of the near darkness he saw me and called me an insulting name.

I sprang at him, seized his coat lapels and demanded that he apologize. He was a tall blond man, and 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, butting him as I had seen the West Indians do, and I felt his flesh tear and the blood gush out, and I yelled,

“Apologize! Apologize!” But he continued to curse and struggle, and I 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! And in my outrage I got out my knife and prepared to slit his throat, right there beneath the lamplight

in the deserted street, holding him in the collar with one hand, and opening the knife with my teeth – when it occurred to me that

the man had not seen me actually; that he, as far as he knew, was in the midst of a walking nightmare! And I stopped the blade,

slicing the air as I pushed him away, letting him fall back to the street. I stared at him hard as the lights of a car stabbed through

the darkness. He lay there, moaning on the asphalt; a man almost killed by a phantom. It unnerved me. I was both disgusted and

ashamed. I was like a drunken man myself, wavering about on weakened legs. Then I was amused: Something in this man’s thick

head had sprung out and beaten within an inch of his life. I began to laugh at this crazy discovery. Would he have awakened at the

*point of death? Would Death himself have freed him for wakeful living? But I didn't linger.
I ran away into the dark, laughing so
hard I feared I might rupture myself. The next day I saw his picture in the Daily News,
beneath a caption stating that he had been
"mugged." Poor fool, poor blind fool, I thought with sincere compassion, mugged by an
invisible man!*

This scene has always harbored a controlled wildness in it to me. The accidental, peripheral mistake of bumping into another person (such a commonplace action!) elicits vitriol from the white man. What does he see or feel in the closeness of that small collision that causes him to call out an insulting word? What is the word? Even after fifteen years it's still remarkable to me that Ellison doesn't include on the page what the insult is. But every time I read this text I hear the same racial slur, springing forth from the unwritten just as Invisible Man did to demand that apology. Where in my brain does the sound of the insult come from if I don't see it on the page? What word did you hear as you watched and listened? The quick violence, the pushing and kicking in frustration, Invisible Man's preparation for murder. It all ends in the quiet of a moan and with deranged laughter. These sounds signal a realization that the blonde man had "not actually seen him" – that he does not recognize Invisible Man as human. He is a "phantom", a part of a "nightmare." The comprehension of his perceived lack of humanity leaves Invisible Man "unnerved," "amused," "disgusted," and "ashamed." What still remains curious to me is that the blonde man's inability to see Invisible Man leads to pity and then compassion. He says "with sincere compassion," "poor fool, poor blind fool... mugged by an invisible man!" How could he blame the blonde man for the very construction of his eyes?

It isn't just his race that renders Invisible Man invisible. It is not so clear as black and white. It is also the expectations placed upon Invisible Man by the blonde man's eyes that produce his invisibility. Blonde man, assuming he is a threat, hurls insults at Invisible Man. In other moments, it is his black teachers and even family members whose expectations echo out, beating a drum for Invisible Man's obedience. He must go to a certain school, must speak a certain way, must contribute to society in a certain way. It is also Invisible Man's early and tacit agreement that he accept and adopt what they expect him to be that makes him invisible. There is a repeated narrative pattern of people around Invisible Man telling him who he is, how to act, and who to be.

They use their eyes and their assumptions to give him form, and for a time, he willingly embraces the identities they cloak him with. What he comes to realize is that for most of his life, he had been searching for the answers of who he was in the wrong places. In the end of his story, Invisible Man says:

*All my life I had been looking for something, and everywhere I turned someone tried to tell me what it was. I accepted their answers too,
though they were often in contradiction and even self-contradictory. I was naïve. I was looking for myself and asking everyone except
myself questions which I, and only I could answer. It took me a long time and much painful boomeranging of my expectations to*

achieve a realization that everyone else appears to have been born with: That I am nobody but myself. But first I had to discover that I am an invisible man!

The ways in which other characters manipulate him actually reveal the pervasiveness of their self-interest, enabling Invisible Man to stop looking to others for who he is, and to look instead within himself. His confidence, his lack of compliance, has illuminated my own search to pinpoint the relationship between how I am seen in the world and how I see myself. It was in that conversation on the way back to dorm that something finally clicked for me in that line, “*I am nobody but myself.*” It is Invisible Man’s acceptance of who he is on his own terms, and not the preferences or assumptions of others, that make him powerful. He might be living in a hole, but the light of his self-awareness, his self-definition, and his music radiate.

I don’t know how I missed that for so long! How I missed this reality that other people will likely see what they want to see in me and that recognizing that fact actually makes me powerful. I recently had the experience on move in day of someone asking me what grade I was in. “The 33rd grade,” I responded with a laugh. They looked perplexed. You see, how I appear may be interpreted through the eyes of others, but who I am is determined by me alone. I am a woman, a mother, a wife, an educator; always I am a student. I am the daughter of immigrants. I am impatient and critical. I am also intimately familiar with the weight of others’ expectations of who I should be. “*I am nobody but myself,*” Invisible Man says, his certainty offering a mold for my own.

For the first time this summer I read the introduction to the novel, written on the book’s 30th anniversary. In it Ellison outlines his motivations for writing the book. I am not a crier, but the first time I read this I nearly did. So penetrating and timely are his words. Ellison writes:

So if the ideal of achieving a true political equality eludes us in reality – as it continues to do – there is still available that fictional vision of an ideal democracy in which the actual combines with the ideal and gives us representations of a state of things in which the highly placed and the lowly, the black and the white, the northerner and the southerner, the native-born and the immigrant are combined to tell us of transcendent truths and possibilities such as those discovered when Mark Twain set Huck and Jim afloat on the raft. Which suggested to me that a novel could be fashioned as a raft of hope, perception and entertainment that might help keep us afloat as we tried to negotiate the snags and whirlpools that mark our nation’s vacillating course toward and away from the democratic ideal.

Ellison is spurring us on to pursue relentlessly and make real together that ideal of democracy that must be the American way. That’s why he wrote a novel about invisibility – to elucidate the darkness of our own intentional and yet arbitrary division.

In her recently published work *Race Sounds: The Art of Listening in African American Literature*, one of the most respected scholars in my life on *Invisible Man* describes the opportunity in Ellison's work. Dr. Nicole Brittingham Furlonge, former chair of the English Department here at St. Andrew's and current Director of the Klingenstein Center at Teachers College, Columbia University, writes about *Invisible Man*. She concludes, "Here listening emerges as an ethical practice, one whose purpose largely is to hear and record those who are inaudible and, therefore, ignored." Dr. Furlonge argues that embedded in the very act of listening there is a "public purpose," one whose responsibility is to witness, and I would reckon, to document and in doing so to ameliorate the experience of those who have been silenced. It is those stories of "*the highly placed and the lowly, the black and the white, the northerner and the southerner, the native-born and the immigrant,*" those are my stories and yours too, and when told and heard in concert with one another they bring us ever closer to the democratic ideal. The responsibility of seeing and listening ethically is the most challenging and most needed work that we can do.

I have one final exercise for you. I've commissioned Mr. Geiersbach and our musicians to, like Louis Armstrong did for *Invisible Man*, give a kind of form to my invisibility. I have asked them for discordance and disillusionment, for tempered resentment, for joy. They will share an active and scholarly genre in the jazz world, one that I hope provokes you and makes you impatient, or even annoyed. As the musicians play, I hope you take apart the language of invisibility and reassemble it into coherence in your own mind, just as *Invisible Man* did. I hope you think on where you look to find the answers to those questions of self-definition that are so much a universal part of the human experience. I hope you stretch to hear those parts of yourself that are visible to the world and those that remain yet unseen.