

ἄνδρα μοι ἔννεπε, μοῦσα, ἀόρατον? Ralph Ellison and the Influence of Homer's *Odyssey* on the Form of Invisible Man and on its Representation of Orality

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1. The Proem of the *Odyssey* (1.1-5)

ἄνδρα μοι ἔννεπε, μοῦσα, πολύτροπον, ὃς μάλα πολλὰ  
πλάγχθη, ἐπεὶ Τροίης ἱερὸν πτολίεθρον ἔπερσεν:  
πολλῶν δ' ἀνθρώπων ἴδεν ἄστεα καὶ νόον ἔγνω,  
πολλὰ δ' ὅ γ' ἐν πόντῳ πάθεν ἄλγεα ὃν κατὰ θυμόν,  
ἀρνύμενος ἦν τε ψυχὴν καὶ νόστον ἐταίρων.

A man for me declare, Muse—one of many turns, who far  
Wandered, after he had sacked Troy's sacred citadel.  
But many men's cities he saw, and knew their mind,  
And many misfortunes he suffered by sea; due to his spirit,  
Winning his life and his friends' fare home.

*Odyssey* 1.1-5 (Trans. Ben Haller)

2. *Invisible Man* Prologue

I am an invisible man. 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.

3. Alexander Pope, *Odyssey* 1.1-2

The man for wisdom's various arts renown'd,  
Long exercised in woes, O Muse! resound;

*Odyssey* 1.1-2 (trans. Alexander Pope)

4. *Odyssey* 1.10

Τῶν ἀμόθεν γε θεὰ, θύγατηρ Διός, εἰπέ καὶ ἡμῖν

Of these things, too, goddess, daughter of Zeus, speak to us, starting from some particular point.

*Odyssey* 1.10

(Transl. Benjamin Haller)

5. Outis/Metis/Nobody

It took me a long time and much painful boomeranging of my expectations to achieve a realization everyone else appears to have been born with: That **I am nobody** but myself (Ellison 1952: 15).

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6. Ellison's Notes from Music History (Tuskegee Institute)

Hebrews

Four Century under Egypt

Received Much Culture

Musicians were Slaves, Egyptians trained in Music

Music Based on Poetry

Parallelism: Music as Poetry

Antiphonal singing growth out of parallelism in poetry

Insts brrwd [?] from other [?] Nation mostly Egyptian – Harp was favorite

...

Greek

Contribution=Refinement

Scientific Development

Definite Art Form

Predecessor of Christian Music

Bard Homer

Epic, Lyric, Drama

7. Basement Studio (Manuscript Draft)

Here from a lonely cave in alien ground

Thick vapors rise and wave and leave the air

Entranced with echoes like the sirens sound,

Such sounds compared with certain sounds are rare.

...

Here from a lonely cave in barren ground

Where there has been no cave so very rare,

Thick vapors riseing, wave and leave the air,

Entranced with echoes of a magic sound.

Some hear and yet not hearing go earth bound

Upon their way, while others with an ear

More clear conceive more golden days appear

And soar like gulls above a blue sea sound.

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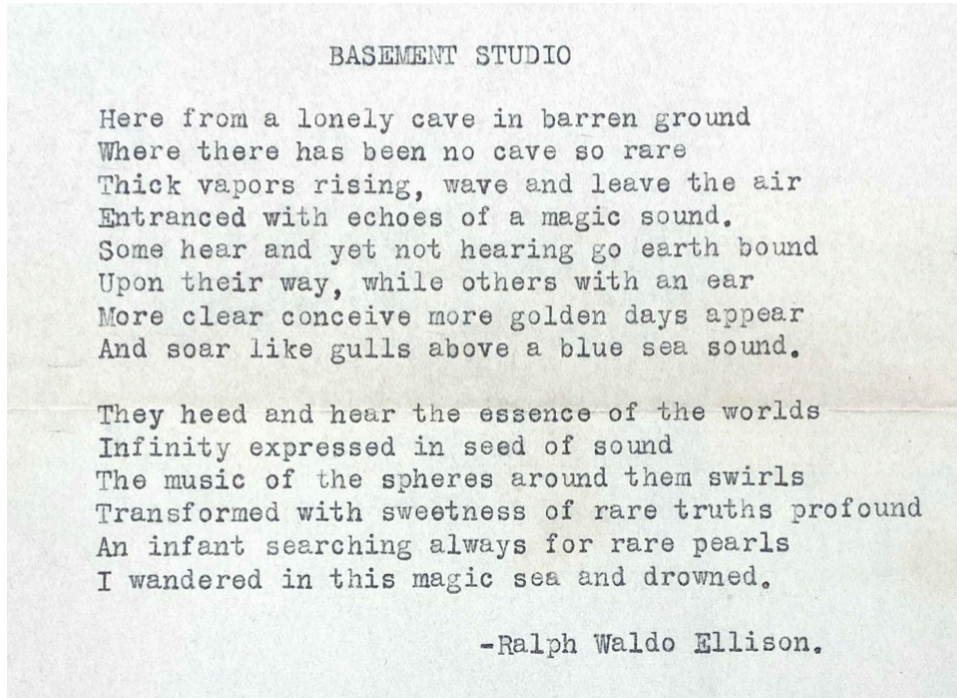
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## 8. Basement Studio (Typescript Draft)



## 9. Odyssey 5.57-68

ἦεν, ὄφρα μέγα σπέος ἵκετο, τῷ ἐνι νύμφη  
ναῖεν εὐπλόκαμος: τὴν δ' ἔνδοθι τέτμεν εὐοῦσαν.  
πῦρ μὲν ἐπ' ἐσχαρόφιν μέγα καίετο, τηλόσε δ' ὀδμή  
κέδρου τ' εὐκεάτοιο θύου τ' ἀνὰ νῆσον ὀδώδει  
δαιομένων. ἡ δ' ἔνδον ἀοιδιάουσ' ὀπι καλῆ  
ἰστὸν ἐποιομένη χρυσεῖη κερκίδ' ὕφαιεν.  
ὔλη δὲ σπέος ἀμφι πεφύκει τηλεθόωσα,  
κλήθηρη τ' αἴγειρός τε καὶ εὐώδης κυπάρισσος.  
ἔνθα δέ τ' ὄρνιθες τανυσίπτεροι εὐνάζοντο,  
σκῶπές τ' ἴρηκές τε τανύγλωσσοί τε κορῶναι  
εἰνάλαι, τῆσιν τε θαλάσσια ἔργα μέμηλεν.

Then, swift ascending from the azure wave,  
He took the path that winded to the cave.  
Large was the grot, in which the nymph he found,  
The fair-haired nymph with every beauty crowned;  
She sate and sung; the rocks resound her lays;

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The cave was brightened with a rising blaze;  
Cedar and frankincense, an odorous pile,  
Flamed on the hearth, and wide perfumed the isle,  
While she with work and song the time divides,  
And through the loom the golden shuttle guides.  
Without the grot a various sylvan scene  
Appeared around, and groves of living green;  
**Poplars and alders ever quivering played,**  
**And nodding cypress formed a fragrant shade,**  
**On whose high branches, waving with the storm**  
The birds of broadest wing their mansions form.

(Trans. Alexander Pope)

#### 10. The Vision of the Prologue: “Descended, Like Dante”

So under the spell of the reefer I discovered a new analytical way of listening to music. The unheard sounds came through, and each melodic line existed of itself, stood out clearly from all the rest, said its piece, and waited patiently for the other voices to speak. That night I found myself hearing not only in time, but in space as well. I not only entered the music but descended, like Dante, into its depths. (Ellison 1952: 9).

#### 11. The Cave of the Prologue

*And beneath the swiftness of the hot tempo there was a slower tempo and a cave and I entered it and looked around and heard an old woman singing a spiritual as full of Weltschmerz as flamenco, and beneath that lay a still lower level on which I saw a beautiful girl the color of ivory pleading in a voice like my mother's as she stood before a group of slaveowners who bid for her naked body, and below that I found a lower level and a more rapid tempo and I heard someone shout.* (Ellison 1952: 9).

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Abstract: <https://camws.org/sites/default/files/meeting2022/2635Ellison7forms.pdf>