

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

My contribution builds on the work of Sanders 1970, Stark 1973, Rankine 2008, Looney 2011, and others who argue that a range of features of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* owe a significant debt to the figure of Homer's archetypally polytropic hero Odysseus. In my paper, I argue that Ellison's writing reveals the influence not merely of characters and themes of the *Odyssey*, but also of Ellison's interest in formal features of the *Odyssey* as a specifically oral epic, a topic in the process of being popularized by Parry and Lord at the time Ellison was writing *Invisible Man*, but which was equally accessible to Ellison as a subject of long speculation since the days of Anthony Wood and Friedrich Augustus Wolf.

As a case study in Ellison's imitation of Homeric oral techniques on a formal level, the first half of my paper offers a reading of the beginning of *Invisible Man* as a calque on the proem of the *Odyssey*.

The second half of my paper draws on recent research at the Library of Congress to explore the avenues by which an awareness of improvisational and oral features of epic present in the *Odyssey* reached Ellison's attention and influenced Ellison's structuring and development of *Invisible Man*.

I demonstrate how Ellison's reception of oral features of Homer's poetry arises through the confluence of several distinct currents in his readings and pursuits: evidence from the Ellison collection at the Library of Congress attests to his growing awareness through his studies in music while at Tuskegee of the academic discourse on oral poetry in the form of Minnesänger and troubadours; at the same time, Ellison's lifelong love of jazz, colliding with an interest in

modern literature employing both classical and modernist formal techniques such as *The Waste Land* and Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, fueled Ellison's fascination with the analogy between jazz improvisation and modernist narrative techniques which mimic oral discourse. Finally, Ellison's work for the Federal Writers' Project forced him to consider how to represent in writing contemporary oral narratives in a manner reminiscent of the way in which contemporary Homer scholarship was in the process of arguing Homer's epics had done through the transcription of oral performances. Ellison's work for the Writers' Project includes transcripts of interviews with interlocutors whose oral narrative style echoes Homeric oral narrative devices.

We see how these strands come together in passages like the Introduction and the Jim Trueblood episode, where Ellison reflects on the "composition within performance" of jazz and blues as a form of cultural memory capable of offering transcendent access to a family's or group of people's past. While these episodes draw on a range of influences, the analogy between the *Odyssey* as a monumental text meant to preserve the oral history of a tale of homecoming and Ellison's own endeavor to invest the Nobody of his narrative with a firm identity suggests not only Jazz and Blues, but also Homer as a stylistic intertext the audience is invited to reference while reading *Invisible Man*.

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