

**Invisible Tragedies, Invisible Possibilities:
Or, Re-Reading What's Left of a Great American
(Anticommunist) Novel**

**On Barbara Foley's
*Wrestling with the Left: The Making of Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man***

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“The productive use of earlier radicalisms . . . lies not in their triumphant reassemblage as a radical precursor tradition but in their tragic failure to constitute such a tradition in the first place.”

– Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*

“Denounce [the radicals], spurn them as you spurn a water moccasin. Grind its head into the dirt as I mean to grind any sign of radicalism that rears its head here upon this campus.”

– Ralph Ellison's Dr. Bledsoe to the protagonist, in the “Campus” episode of *Invisible Man* (excised from the published text)

With the publication of Barbara Foley's *Wrestling with the Left: The Making of Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man* (Duke University Press, 2010) one of the “best kept secrets in American literary history” (23) takes a great leap towards the critical light of day. That secret, to begin, might be crudely broken into three interrelated revelations:

1) that acclaimed and influential American novelist Ralph Ellison had an artistically productive, intellectually rich, and politically impassioned relationship with the communist (and Communist) movement of the United States during the 1930s-1940s, though he later repeatedly discounted or denied it;¹

¹ Here I follow Foley's usage, with the lower case “communist” referring to the more general theoretical and practical commitment to the abolition of class society, exploitation, and those institutions and ideologies that produce and reproduce it. The upper case term “Communist” is reserved for referring

2) that the long-neglected archival record of Ellison's own communist experience as well as his contemporaneous reflections on that experience, including the (often Marxian) categories in which he represented – as well as criticized – it, differs in important and often dramatic ways from his depiction of this Left milieu in his 1952 *Invisible Man*, most notably, but not only, in terms of its treatment of the “Brotherhood.” That is to say, Ellison's own unpublished writings reveal his later portrait of the Brotherhood to be a caricature, a far cry from the Communist Left as he himself had known it up close;

3) that until quite late in Ellison's revising and editing process (up to 1949 or so, Ellison having begun the book in 1945), the notes and drafts of *Invisible Man* (hereafter *IM*) contain characters, passages, tropes and extended themes that (would have) made *IM* a radically different, more Left and communist-friendly novel.

The treasure trove of working documents and drafts that Foley examines not only give the lie to Ellison's frequent claim that the novel “wrote itself” in a relatively seamless fashion, as well as his oft-quoted protagonist's statement that “the end was in the beginning.” They reveal a complex radicalism, ranging from an explicit endorsement of, to a critically qualified or ironically tinged admiration for, the theory and practice of mid-20th century American communism. These drafts and notes demonstrate a sophisticated belief on Ellison's part in the validity of Marxism as a “lens” for making sense of (and a tool for transforming) American life, even in all its “complexity,” a belief that significantly outlived his formal association with the Communist movement (which was pretty much over by 1944.) Albeit often fragmentary or unfinished, these long-lost, excised materials that Foley brings forward demonstrate how Ellison's creative Marxism illuminated post-war American society. It wasn't until the *late* 1940s and early 1950s,

specifically to those individuals and institutions aligned with the Communist Party USA or the Communist International.

once cold war anticommunism had intensified dramatically in the USA, that Ellison fully managed to wrestle down his own novel's Marxism.

To put the "secret" more succinctly: the record reveals that Ralph Ellison was for a sustained period a passionate, sophisticated, and committed communist. He later caricatured and distorted that communist experience in his famous novel, *Invisible Man*, a novel that nonetheless itself was for a long-time a complexly Marxist, and pro-communist, book, before being wrestled down into the cold war anticommunist literary masterpiece of 1952 that we know (and often teach) today.

For *Wrestling with the Left* to bring out any *one* of these revelations in detail ought to be enough to send significant waves through Ellison and indeed 20th century American literary studies (so crucial a figure is Ellison still to this day). That Foley documents and develops *all three* of these scandalous themes in such historically informed detail ought to make her study something of a major event for both fields, one that (if acknowledged) cannot but upend much scholarship on Ellison and his moment. As Foley herself puts it, more than offering a new reading of the 1952 text, "I hope my findings will challenge existing readings premised upon un-interrogated assumptions about Ellison's political outlook" (15). Ellison biographer Arnold Rampersad writes accurately in a back-cover blurb that "This book ably fills perhaps the biggest gap in our critical and biographical understanding of Ralph Ellison." Yet considering how for more than half a century, Ellison's *Invisible Man* has "functioned . . . as Exhibit A for the case that Communism is antithetical to the interests of Americans in general and African Americans in particular" (1), Foley's volume promises not only to fill a scholarly gap, but to shake up the field, and not only in literary studies, either.

Challenging Ruling Assumptions

The "un-interrogated assumptions about Ellison's political outlook" that Foley challenges in *Wrestling with the Left* are myriad, and involve a dialectic of assumptions about both Ellison's *own* developing beliefs, and about those political options *available* to Ellison over time. Among the first type of assumption which Foley challenges is the notion that Ellison, like his narrator-protagonist, developed increasingly *sophisticated, complex, and mature* views over time, moving from "ranter to writer" as many have said,

leaving behind “narrow” notions, in favor of those more capable of grasping “the broad complexities of American life” (5), as Ellison himself would put it in his 1953 National Book Award acceptance speech.² Related to this belief has been the notion that the Marxist, communist, and Communist Left could not accommodate Ellison’s developing “genius,” that in effect – to ironically apply the famous Marxian metaphor – the narrow confines of the communist Left became *fetters* to Ellison’s developing talents, forcing him to burst their bounds (that is, if he ever bothered to pay them serious mind in the first place). More specifically, the typical views here are that the “orthodox” communist Left was (and perhaps still is) in some way opposed to deep explorations of such crucial matters as sexuality and psychoanalysis, similarly that Marxists and communists were not interested in the probing of Western myths and African American folk traditions that proved so generative for Ellison; that the “narrowly” prescribed Left styles of “naturalism” and “social realism” hemmed in Ellison’s drive to surrealism and symbolism, and that the Left – unlike Ellison – was generally hostile and vulgar in its dealings with popular culture, indeed somehow “foreign” to American culture and experience as such. Foley presents evidence from the Ellison archive that flies in the face of each of these operative assumptions. Moreover, she does so with a force that reinvigorates a number of forgotten critical left constellations in their own right. Readers will find that *Wrestling with the Left* is a book that aims to restore not only the works and ideas of the early Ellison, but, through them, the oft-neglected richness of the interwar radical left milieu.³ And yet the text does not stray far from its focus on Ellison’s writings. Rigorous close reading and historical materialist contextualization here interpenetrate, with textual fragments calling attention to historical conjunctures, and discussions of “external” politics and history illuminating particular traces in the archive.

² This speech, as Foley amply demonstrates, has exerted tremendous influence on subsequent studies and teaching of Ellison’s novel. It sets up many of the “God-Terms” by and through which *Invisible Man* is most often judged.

³ Those interested to explore Foley’s efforts to restore and re-evaluate this broader cultural and literary milieu may consult her many articles on the topic, as well as her path-breaking study *Radical Representations: the Theory and Practice of Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1940* (Duke University Press, 1993). For a sample of her thinking on the Ellison project see the interview, “Reading Forward from the Left,” in *Reconstruction* 8.1. (2008), <<http://reconstruction.eserver.org/081/ramsey3.shtml>>.

As Foley puts it, “There is . . . no inside of Ellison that can be sealed off from the outside of that history [which he lived through and studied closely]” (18).

For instance, the archives reveal that Ellison, like a number of Marxist and pro-communist writers, including his close friends and collaborators Richard Wright and Kenneth Burke, was steeped in both Marx *and* Freud (as well as materialist psychological theorists such as Erich Fromm) during the 1930s and 40s, his communist period. Indeed Foley makes a compelling argument that a commitment to communism motivated and even deepened Ellison’s interest in psychoanalysis, as the drive to tap into and to cultivate class consciousness, particularly amongst the African Americans, led him to pay close attention to the role played by the unconscious factors, and to the ways proto-political energies were coded in black culture. She further argues that the early drafts of *IM* contain a more sophisticated and, arguably, even a more subversive treatment of sexuality and gender relations than the 1952 text. This includes, for instance, an extended reflection on the relationship between Jim Crow racism and homosexuality in the South. Most significantly of all, the early drafts and notes contain a complexly and sympathetically developed interracial intra-Brotherhood heterosexual romance between the protagonist and a white comrade, Louise – a far cry indeed from the famous scenes of mutual exploitation and exoticism that are just about the only extended “romantic” relations to be found anywhere in the 1952 text. Among the impacts of these famously grotesque comic scenes has been to reproduce insidious stereotypes about Communists’ alleged use of white women to lure black men to their ranks, as well as to re-enforce the idea that despite its boldly professed anti-racism, “under the surface” the CPUSA was just as, if not *more*, racist than the society it claimed to want to “change.” In the early versions of the novel, the psychological nexus of race, sex, and gender within and around the Brotherhood appears as a much more complex and nuanced affair.

Similarly, Foley returns us to Ellison’s own extensive readings in the Marxian strain within the Cambridge School of myth criticism, as well as to the early 20th century communist discourse around black folk culture, in which Ellison was well versed. In terms of formal aesthetics, Foley reveals how Leftist political content co-existed and overlapped with surreal and symbolic elements in the early drafts, as well as in Ellison’s early short fiction. Radical politics and experimental form were not mutually exclusive –

in fact Ellison himself wrote of them as parallel in their equally “promethean” intent. A kind of proletarian high modernism was not only thinkable but imminent – indeed, legible – in Ellison’s work. Likewise, symbolic allusions to mythic and folkloric proletarian and rebel figures, such as (the martyred black worker-figure) John Henry, Hercules, and especially Prometheus (rather than Proteus, the shape-changer who is something of an Ur-figure for the published text), abound in the early manuscripts, not just “despite” but in fact often enhancing the anti-racist, pro-working class, and revolutionary communist themes of the text. As Foley puts it, for the early Ellison, “Marx and myth went hand in hand.”

Challenging the notion that the 1930s communist Left Ellison ran with was antagonistic or obtuse to popular culture, Foley uncovers a series of remarkable excised moments in the early to mid-stage drafts of *Invisible Man* that depict Brotherhood political activities, especially a series of lively mass marches through Harlem. The marches are infused with the energy and elasticity of folk and popular culture. Militant Brotherhood slogans about “Dispossession” mix and mingle with black youth playing the dozens, *while marching*. (“I dispossessed your mama ‘bout half past nine / She said ‘Come back, daddy, any ole time’” [248].) Indeed it is in part the strong reputation that the Brotherhood has earned within the community which attracts the protagonist to the organization in the first place – unlike the 1952 text, where it is a cynical hope of a pay check as a hired public speaker. Likewise, Brother Stein, the draft-precursor to the cold, aloof, and know-it-all party theorist Brother Hambro, is characterized by humility; Stein insists on the need to be *listening* and *learning* from the people, not simply imposing the dictates and “Necessities” of “History” upon them. Stein to the protagonist:

“We don’t know too much about your people. We thought we did but we don’t, even though some of us still think we do. What we have is a theory. It’s a good theory, but it’s up to you to put it into action. So instead of trying to tell you how or what to do I’ll tell you to work it out your own way . . . don’t tell us what we want to hear, tell us what we need to know.” (259-260)

The protagonist is not just to use his *voice*, but his *ears* and his *brain*, to figure out how and where to connect up with the people. While the Brotherhood has methods and goals,

it most certainly does *not* have all the answers – and its top theorist knows and admits this openly (even if some in the organization may not). The protagonist is tasked not just as an instrument, but as a leader with influence at both practical and theoretical levels. (Nor is he paid more than a pittance.) As Ellison revised his manuscript, however, the Brotherhood was turned more and more into a cynical and instrumentalizing organization, its “scientific” ideology transformed “from a means of grasping totality to an instrument of totalitarian control” (262). In short, into a cold war stereotype: “Note: Make Thrillkild [the predecessor to Brother Wrestrum] into a totalitarian type, eager to regiment all aspects of life,” as Ellison jotted in the margins of one draft. Yet the notes and the draft pages that Ellison penned when he was historically closer to his communist experiences, tell a different story.

At the same time, extended excised passages depict iconic Harlem sites such as Mary Rambo’s boarding house as infused with lively debates about politics, social struggles, and the Brotherhood’s work, even before the protagonist arrives there. As Foley writes, “Rather than a womb-like space exempt from Harlem’s class struggles, Mary’s rooming house is the site where the invisible man is readied for his initiation into leftist politics” (220). Most notable here is a warmly remembered former boarding house guest, LeRoy, a black member of the National Maritime Union who has recently been slain by racists at sea, but who has left a journal behind in the protagonist’s room. The journal is filled with radical and even outright communist reflections on the history and the prospects of the struggle for human equality (discussions of John Brown, Frederick Douglass, and Karl Marx, for starters). These the protagonist reads with great interest—and they inform his later involvement with the Brotherhood. Excised quite late in the revision process (at the insistence of Ellison’s editor, Harry Ford), Leroy, as Foley puts it, is “the invisible man within *Invisible Man*” (13).

All of this is to say, the rather neat – and rhetorically seductive – binary opposition between *Hambro and Rambo* – that is between abstract, mechanical, dogmatic “scientific” theorizing of the Brotherhood (on the one hand), and authentic, organic, emotional black culture on the other – *does not yet exist* in the earlier drafts (at least not in this simplistic form). This is also to say: the vulgar attitude of manipulation and opposition towards Black people that is attributed to the Brotherhood (and to

C/communism), and against which the protagonist stages his final underground escape/rebellion/self-emancipation, is itself predicated on a prior vulgarization. As Foley aptly points out, this simplification not only creates a straw man of the Communist Party (one that lines up again and again with stock Cold War stereotypes) but, in some ways even more troublingly, it casts the people of Harlem themselves (or even black people more generally) as epistemologically or even ontologically uninterested or incapable of concerted political or historical (rational?) thinking. The flip side of Ellison's caricaturing of the Left (and perhaps the corollary of anticommunism more generally), Foley demonstrates, is a delimiting and even demeaning de-politicization of working and oppressed people themselves. *Wrestling with the Left* usefully surveys the history of black radical organizing in Harlem from the 1930s to the 50s, reminding us again and again of how far Ellison's depiction leaps from the actuality of this moment.

Wrestling with the Left makes similar work of such prevalent biographical assumptions as the notion that Ellison had been something of a political naïf in the 1930s, someone, as it were, "close enough [to the Left] to have felt the heat but not so close as to have been burned" (3). The Ellison whom Foley reconstructs was a figure very much close to the Party – perhaps even a member, though the evidence on this front remains indeterminate – a communist with developed, studied political and social views. He was active in and committed to a range of pro-communist projects, and held fast, publicly and privately, to a number of key Communist policies and positions, though not without criticisms or concerns. He supported the Soviet Union's 1939 Non-Aggression Pact with Germany, as a matter of necessity to buy the socialist nation time against fascist aggression, following the USSR's abandonment by the Western capitalist powers at Munich in 1938. He then supported the "Win the War" turn following Hitler's invasion of the USSR in 1941, despite his concern that the party's emphasis on the war effort put local struggles versus racial oppression and class exploitation on the back-burner. Ellison was furthermore a skilled practitioner of proletarian fiction – published and unpublished – as well as Marxist journalism and literary criticism. In the early chapters of her book, Foley thoughtfully summarizes and analyzes a range of these early radical writings – likely to be unfamiliar to most readers – including a number that have never received critical attention in print. These stories reveal an Ellison who was thinking deeply and

creatively about the challenges facing the victims of Jim Crow racism and class exploitation, an Ellison who was thinking through the perspectives of would-be organic radical intellectuals struggling against oppression and exploitation: ministers, union organizers, dissident professors, and even black communists. A worthwhile endeavor in itself, Foley's short fiction readings shed further red light on Ellison's later novel writing.

Wrestling *within* the Left

While documenting Ellison's passionately pro-communist positions and practices, Foley also explores Ellison's evolving criticisms of the US communist left. Most notably she shows how Ellison's criticisms of the CPUSA were often (at first) criticisms "from the left," that is, criticisms of how the Party was *not acting radically enough* to address injustices and to build for revolution in the USA, particularly as the Party prioritized the patriotic war effort versus fascism. Similarly, she shows that Ellison often found not the "foreign-ness" of the CP, but its "American-ness" (its lack of serious Marxist theorization, its pragmatism, its pandering to patriotism) to be its biggest fault. That is, the American exceptionalism that Ellison would later trumpet (and contrast with the Brotherhood) was, earlier on, one of his main complaints against the Party itself. At one point in the notes, Ellison even privately fantasizes about a more adept Communist theorist being shipped in from abroad to help put the American party back on track. At the same time, Foley shows how Ellison, in his early writings, grasped the dialectical nature of the opposition and unity between anti-fascism abroad and revolutionary anti-racism and anti-capitalism at home. (That is to say, the waging of the anti-fascist war effort abroad was both in tension with, but also in support of, the anti-racist and working-class struggles at home.) Whatever "soft-pedaling" of anti-racist and class radicalism occurred during the war effort, Ellison – at least for a time – grasped the CP's problems as strategic and tactical-not essential or epistemological – questions of line and leadership, not of "foreign domination," or of the "totalitarian manipulation," "abandonment" or "betrayal." In other words, Ellison's own critique from *within* the Left differed radically from the discourse of "two totalitarisms" that he played upon in his 1952 version of the novel, and afterwards.

Ellison's radicalism, as Foley reconstructs it, was dynamic; it was *all about wrestling* with contradictions in the realm of ideas.⁴ Consider the following remarkable passages she brings to light from Ellison's notes, where he works at theorizing the complex problematic of revolutionary leadership. As Ellison puts it in 1942-3,

A leader while leading the ruled is still controlled by the laws which rule the group. A revolutionary transcends both the group and the laws. He is under the spell of another picture of reality. He breaks the laws and the status quo emotionally and intellectually under the influence of his will to create the new (27).

Though Ellison concludes this marginal note with the optimistic prediction that "Spartacus will come," what one takes from this recovered reflection is an insight into the difficulty of becoming or remaining revolutionary while simultaneously remaining in touch with (let alone a leader of) the actually existing group(s) formed by the society that one seeks to uproot. How can one, as revolutionary, "break the laws of the status quo" without cutting oneself off from "groups" who are still in some sense "ruled" by those "laws"? Conversely, how can one continue to effectively lead existing groups of people – say, within the framework of labor unions, electoral parties, etc. – abiding by the "laws" of this society, without losing touch with, or even giving up altogether on, one's revolutionary aspirations of overturning these very "laws" themselves? Similarly, Ellison's early notes for *IM* speak to tensions and to "wrestling" that are very much *internal* to the leftist revolutionary project. Outlining his general goals for what was to be, he hoped, a "truly progressive novel of Negro life" as well as a "sort of political allegory," Ellison foretold that his work would be among other things "the story of a man of good will who attempts to function idealistically in a political organization which cannot afford the luxury of idealism" (155). Ellison's language here suggests that it is not only (and perhaps even not so much) the "realism" of the political organization in question that will come in for critical treatment, but the "idealistic" approach of the main

⁴ This then adds another meaning to Foley's title: not only *wrestling with the left*, as in *against* it, but also *wrestling with the left*, as *a part of* that left.

character himself. Thus, again, we see the early Ellison wrestling with the dialectic of ideas – those noble, universal abstractions – and locally situated concrete practices. Ellison in such moments is very much the contemporary of thinkers (from Lenin to Mao to Badiou) who have worked to theorize the relationship between revolutionary, communist consciousness (on the one hand) and the particularity and immediacy of group demands (on the other). A long passage from Marxist psychologist William Sheldon’s *Psychology and the Promethean Will*, which Ellison copied out word-for-word in his notebooks, speaks to analogous tensions inherent in the committed intellectual life: “The Promethean conflict,” Ellison jots, “is the strife which takes place in the human mind between the yearning for understanding, and the weaker more immediate pull of those living affections and desires which are conditioned upon the good will and the support of fellow beings” (131). (Notably, the passage is part of a broader argument for political and theoretical *discipline* in the face of the flux of the modern world.) All of which is to say that Foley does not portray Ellison as having maintained some perfect or unadulterated, idealized “party line” during his radical phase – not at all, he is *wrestling* constantly – but the terms and categories under which he is struggling and against which he is “wrestling” are radically different than those we have come to associate with his name.

In this way, Foley argues that, in many respects, Ellison’s early writings exhibit not a lesser but, arguably, a *greater* sophistication in their grasp of a host of important issues that are treated more or less simplistically in the 1952 text. The relationship of black nationalism to class struggle for instance, or the relationship of domestic anti-racism to international anti-fascism, the relationship of culture to politics, and of history to African American folk culture itself, the place of American academia within racial and political struggles, the connections between Southern Jim Crow and Northern capital, even the relationship of sexuality to economics (or the “bed struggle and the bread struggle”, as he then put it) all get a supple treatment in Ellison’s early drafts and notes that makes the later version look forced and rigid by comparison.

Especially pertinent here may be the way that the early manuscripts offer implicit and even explicit challenges to some of the very ideologies and strategies for action that end up being privileged within the 1952 text. The early drafts unsettle, for instance, the Ellisonian values of liberal *pluralism* and racial *tricksterism*. “Like America, I am made

up of many strands, *most of which conflict with one another*” Ellison wrote in an early draft of his conclusion (emphasis added). By the time the novel was revised for publication, however, the *conflict* in the fabric of America has literally disappeared. From a portrait of the individual and of society characterized by struggle – and thus calling for taking sides in that struggle – we are left with a pluralistic appreciation of harmoniously blending strands. We move from dialectic to a stasis, with irony and ambivalence taking the place of transformative theory and practice, and with American “diversity” affirmed as an end in itself to be embraced (and as a liberatory counterpoint to the “conformity” of “tyrant states”), rather than, say, a tense field in which the just and unjust, the good and the bad, the oppressive and the emancipatory, contend. As Foley puts it succinctly, “Internal contradiction is reconfigured as liberal pluralism” (341).

It’s similar with Ellison’s famous *tricksterism*. Foley uncovers, among others, an extended episode, later excised, featuring a black waiter who embodies the double-consciousness and two-facedness that the protagonist’s grandfather recommends to him (“Overcome ‘em with yesses, undermine ‘em with grins, agree ‘em to death and destruction, let ‘em swallow you till they vomit or bust wide open” [Ellison, 16]). Yet this waiter’s wearing of the mask before his white customers appears to deepen and perpetuate, not overcome, his own degradation and embedded-ness within Jim Crow. However necessary or understandable they may be as an individual survival strategy, then, trickster methods are, in the early drafts, called into question as a viable mode of effectively challenging racism.

This is to say that rather than transcending the limits of Marxism and communism for a greater field of possibilities, Ellison’s anti-communist-ization of the novel coincided with, and indeed, depended upon, a multi-sided intellectual backsliding – a recourse to cold war clichés and even racial stereotypes, manichean binary oppositions, and static liberal ideology. Which is also to say: one major subtext of Foley’s argument throughout is not only that many of the positions, working assumptions, values, and representational codes of the early Ellison were radically different from those found in *Invisible Man*, but that they were, in various respects, *better*: more historically accurate, more open and inclined toward materialism, anti-racism, and emancipatory politics more generally, less indebted to a chauvinistic patriotism, elitism, to sexism, even to homophobia. If not

necessarily “better written” – for many of these episodes were never developed or polished, though many were and read very well – the early drafts present coordinates that might have made possible a narrative more sophisticated, more nuanced, and indeed “more humane,” than the treatment of the 1952 text.

Wrestling the Left Down, Late

Foley’s study goes on to elucidate not only how Ellison wrestled with social, political, and historical contradictions *as a part* of the procommunist Left, but also how he had great difficulty wrestling these Leftist tendencies *down*, as he *departed from* that Left. The evidence that Foley brings forth strongly suggests that both “the *passion* and the *paradigm*” Ellison took up from Marxist and communist literary and political movements were not marginal but central to his novelistic and social vision, so that – even despite his harsh falling out with the CPUSA – it would take years before Ellison could excise them (more or less) completely. The chronological bottom line of much of this digging comes down to the persuasive proposition that several of Ellison’s most crucial revisions and alterations came in the very *late* 1940s, or even the early 1950s. This is particularly true of those revisions that turned *IM* not just against the Brotherhood – or a mistaken line, leader, or strategy prominent within it – but against the very project and even the possibility of a scientifically informed radical, communist, inter-racial working-class organization, as such. (We might understand this as the sliding of the text from being critically pro-communist, to anti-Communist, to one that is anticommunist into its very epistemological fibers.)

This shifting of the date of de-radicalization and anti-communist-ization of *IM* from 1945 or so to 1947 or later (perhaps even as late as 1950) is in itself significant; it makes it more and more plausible that Ellison drew largely upon the intensifying ideological discourse of the cold war, rather than on actual (let alone accurate!) memories of his own experience, as the basis for his depiction of the CP-esque Brotherhood. Within this new periodization, it makes more and more sense to read *IM* as a symptomatic expression of cold war ideology, less and less to read it as an authoritative account that might in some sense substantiate that ideology, or for that matter, that might

constitute a concrete critique of the actually existing Left practice of the time.⁵ Foley refers to “the 1952 text” throughout, underscoring the contingent and history-bound nature of the “finished” work.

Moving the Left from the Margin to the Center

Of course, in a sense, bits and pieces of Ellison’s communist “secret” have been “out” for some time, at least among those who know where to look. Both major recent Ralph Ellison biographies (Laurence Jackson’s *Ralph Ellison: The Emergence of Genius* (2002), and, more recently, Arnold Rampersad’s *Ralph Ellison, A Biography* (2007)) document Ellison’s association with left-wing organizations and assorted radical individuals and publications. However, as Foley points out, these biographers tend to downplay the importance of Ellison’s left-wing years and to cast the termination of Ellison’s leftist period as more or less “inevitable,” given Ellison’s personality on the one hand, and (what these biographers depict as) the relative paucity and/or deficiency of the left-wing literary scene on the other. For Laurence Jackson, in particular, the meticulous reconstruction of Ellison’s week-to-week activities during the 1930s and 40s does not lead to a serious re-evaluation of the communist milieu itself. Rather, his study tends to reinforce the same cold war understanding of the CP Left that has been handed down to us by Ellison’s novel (among other sources). For the most part, according to Jackson, the attraction the Left had for Ellison is attributable to that which was contingent, rather than essential, to the Left. His Left-ward swerve is tied either to the charisma of particular radical individuals – such as Richard Wright and Langston Hughes, who would

⁵ I thus disagree with the argument put forth by Nathaniel Mills who argues that *Invisible Man*, despite its cold war limitations, still functions overall as a useful, even necessary, auto-critique of the left and its organizational tendencies. Mills goes so far as to liken the protagonist’s reflections on uncertainty and contingency in history to the contributions of Communist theorists Louis Althusser and Antonio Gramsci, with their interest in the semi-autonomy of cultural struggles. See his very interesting and thought-provoking, but ultimately unconvincing article, “Wrestling with Ralph Ellison,” published in *Against the Current*, available at: <<http://www.solidarity-us.org/node/3275>>. In a sympathetic treatment of Mills’ review on his blog *Marxist Marginalia*, Paul Heideman soundly refutes its major arguments. See: <<http://herrnapha.wordpress.com/2011/06/01/341/>>, “Ralph Ellison and Literary Anticommunism,” June 1, 2011. Mills’ theoretically astute response to Heideman’s criticism (in *Against the Current*, <<http://www.solidarity-us.org/node/3445>>) raises important methodological, hermeneutic, and political issues about Marxism’s relationship to historicization and to “political opportunism,” but, in fact, it leaves most of Heideman’s specific criticisms related to *IM* untouched, even as it does raise interesting questions about the ontological assumptions that support Heideman’s critique.

themselves tend away from Communist circles in the 1940s – or to the sheer openness of the path to publication that Left journals represented, compared to more exclusive “mainstream” journals. The possibility – indeed as Foley demonstrates, the *actuality* – that the ideas, goals, and frameworks of Marxism and communism were *themselves* deeply moving to Ellison, goes under-explored.⁶ For these esteemed biographers, the Left remains (properly) marginal to the study of Ellison and, one is tempted to add, to the study of American literary “genius” in general. A mass cultural and political movement becomes merely one more occasion for Ellison’s opportunistic and individualistic personality to play itself out.⁷

In contrast to personality-driven biographical approaches, which in effect “read backwards” through the lens of Ellison’s later cold war “genius” (just as much Ellison criticism sets out from the Burkean critical “god terms” that the later Ellison left behind in speeches, essays, and interviews), Foley’s method, which she refers to as writing the “biography of a text” or “reading forward,” employs a more complex notion of causality. Hers is a method that both admits various levels of historical determination structuring the processes of Ellison’s life, and especially his literary production, while recognizing the existence of subjectivity, contingency, and thus of *possibility* within that over-determined process. This approach seeks to return us to the many interconnected *decisions* that ultimately produced this text (and this historical person), including any number of moments when things could have gone differently. *Wrestling with the Left* thus returns us to a time when the “Ellison” that we take for granted now was still not yet fully formed. There were, as Foley details, various paths available in Ellison’s historical and

⁶ It certainly does not help matters either that Jackson uncritically reproduces essentially a cold war liberal narrative of the Soviet Union’s descent into “totalitarianism.” Key features of this narrative include: 1) describing the Molotov-Ribbentrop (so-called “Hitler-Stalin”) Non-Aggression treaty as a “betrayal” and an act of Soviet complicity, without even mentioning that this 1939 move was a last ditch Soviet effort to stave off invasion, following the failure of the Western Powers to join the USSR’s common defense front against Nazi Germany, in 1938; 2) offering a view of the Moscow Trials that uncritically reproduces the line of the pro-Trotsky Dewey Commission; 3) ignoring the possibility or actuality of socialism within the Soviet Union and thus treating very superficially the difficult choices that international Communists were faced with concerning the anti-fascist war effort. Not to mention the historic and almost unimaginable costs endured by the people of the Soviet Union in absorbing – and repulsing – the brunt of the Nazi war machine, about which Jackson, like so many commentators on this period, remains silent.

⁷ Foley’s own essays, which put the Left at the center, so to speak, have for years now given her readers a tantalizing taste of what the Ellison archives reveal. But they have been the exception to the rule.

political field, and so there were choices, not just abstract “free choice” but determinate options, to be selected between and among. (Once again, Foley makes mention of dozens of other black and radical writers during this time who made *different* choices, despite the pressures of anticommunism and the cold war. In fact, she argues, one of the secondary effects of raising *Invisible Man* to canonicity has been to obscure the very existence of so many other black radical writers.⁸)

Not all responsibility rests on the individual level, however. Beyond individual choices (aesthetic, political, editorial), there were also choices that took form at the level of collective, organizational practice and political line (for instance in and around the CPUSA and the Communist International). It should be noted here that Foley’s efforts to challenge *Invisible Man*’s veracity with respect to its depiction of Communist efforts in Harlem is not motivated by some simple rearguard action to protect the CPUSA from criticism. To the contrary, she has many criticisms of the Party’s positions during this period, criticisms that she makes clear. Several of the problematic or one-sided Communist Party positions that Foley identifies, in fact, appear to have helped set the stage for Ellison’s later disaffection, departure, and rightward turn. These include what Foley considers to be the nationalist and class collaborationist turn that the CPUSA took while opposing fascism during the Popular Front and Win the War periods, as well as the political ambiguity and cultural nationalism that lurked in the heart of the Party’s theory of the Black Belt Nation. (Notably *not* a major factor for Ellison was the much-derided Molotov-Ribbentrop – so-called “Hitler-Stalin” – Non-Aggression Pact of 1939, which Ellison, like Wright among other black writers, seems to have upheld both as a matter of real politic and, moreover, as an opportunity for refocusing on race and class radicalism on the domestic front.) It is at least conceivable, Foley suggests, that a Communist party that had struggled more aggressively against muddling liberal and reformist tendencies during this tumultuous war-time period might have kept the loyalty of its promising young literary star. One can conceive of a party that maintained a revolutionary approach, grasping fascism not merely as the program of a particular bloc of reactionary

⁸ Black writers and artists who kept (or established) their commitment to the pro-Communist Left – or at least continued to resist anticommunism – during the dark days of cold war include: W.E.B. DuBois, Langston Hughes, and Paul Robeson, but also Louise Meriwether, Frank Marshall Davis, John Oliver Killens, Ollie Harrington, Lorraine Hansberry, Lloyd Brown, and Alice Childress.

capitalists to build a broad coalition against – albeit at the expense of suppressing more radical activity⁹ – but, rather, as a political expression of capitalism *itself* in crisis. Such a party *may* have been able to avoid alienating some of its more radical elements, literary and otherwise, while still appealing to broad anti-fascist sectors. Without doubt the post-war repression, at home and abroad, would still have rained down – but a deeper and better schooled radical Left might have been able to meet the challenge in more effective and productive ways.

Would such a radical, revolutionary communist party, guided by a more theoretically savvy line have managed to keep Ellison's allegiance, or at least his sympathy into the Fifties and beyond? It is of course impossible to know; such a question remains largely speculative. Moreover, there are reasons to believe that Ellison's focus on "reaching millions" with his voice and achieving mass influence and fame may have made it difficult for him to keep loyalty to a Communist movement that was – despite its best efforts – having its ties to the masses (whether through mass culture, academia, or the labor movement) systematically destroyed by post-war anticommunist repression. In 1937, 1940, or even 1945, as Foley usefully surveys this history, it was still conceivable that the Left could or soon would have the ear of tens of millions of Americans. By 1950 or so, however, the more "realistic" path to a mass audience and to mainstream influence within the United States of America was to be found by turning on, rather than standing with, besieged Communists, now widely demonized as a "red menace." Nonetheless, Foley provides us with ample evidence and thus with opportunities to imagine how different choices both by Ellison, and by the CPUSA, might have created a different ending from these promising and radical beginnings of the Thirties and Forties.

Leaving Monday-morning CP quarterbacking to one side, what Foley's project doggedly upholds – and rightly so – is not so much the particular line(s) of mid-20th century CPUSA as the commitment to actualizing proletarian revolution that this Party, at its best, represented. What she upholds even more so is the actually existing, historically demonstrated potential of African American (and/or) working-class subjects to achieve

⁹ One may be reminded here of today's scare-mongering left-liberals who see fascism growing out of the Koch Brother-funded Tea Party, and thus give other capitalists and even other imperialists a pass as "progressive."

radical political consciousness and collective agency. It is this basic radical potentiality – indeed, this necessity – not only as embodied in the CP but as implied by the very existence of exploited people consciously struggling against capitalism itself, which Ellison’s novel eventually came to foreclose by 1952. It is not just the *solution* (of Communist Brotherhood), then, but the *problem* itself (capitalism, class society) which Ellison’s published text encourages us to elide, especially in its closing turn to American exceptionalism, and in its playfully cynical slippage from the epistemological chaos of the gangster-preacher Rinehart to the allegedly “limitless” social “opportunity” that the invisible man affirms at novel’s end.

Foley’s study is thus both a painstaking analysis of what *was*, but also a concrete utopian exploration of what *might have been* (and even, in some sense, what *might yet be*). By digging through the archive, Foley brings to light previously suppressed *possibilities*, possibilities that have been rendered largely *invisible* (indeed, possibilities whose very *repression* has itself been largely repressed) thanks in no small part to the cold war discourse produced in, around, and through Ellison’s celebrated novel.¹⁰ Central to Foley’s political investment in this work, then, is the belief that by rendering visible the concrete possibilities – the achievements and the missteps, the breakthroughs and the betrayals – of a prior Left moment, we open our eyes to the task of locating analogous, if not identical, possibilities in the present, and in the future. Processing the *particular* repressions, missteps, and betrayals of those possibilities we denaturalize and demystify the “inevitable demise” of the Left. Such *particularizing* of “the failures and defeats of communism” (note the plural) may in fact be a necessary step both for bringing into being a new sequence of the “communist hypothesis” in the 21st century (Badiou), as well as for guiding that new communist movement strategically, so that it can build upon both the successes and the failures – the triumphs and the tragedies, literary and otherwise – of 20th century communism, and not merely repeat its mistakes, relive its defeats.

¹⁰ One clear example of Ellison repressing the repression of the Left in his novel can be found in the excision of passages, such as the one that forms an epigraph to this essay, that suggest the violent anti-radicalism of Dr. Bledsoe. Originally the campus President was not only a trickster-opportunist but an anticommunist as well.

All of this restores a powerful element of tragedy to Ellison's dark comic-absurdist masterpiece. In fact, Foley writes that she wanted to title this study, *Wrestling with Prometheus*, to accentuate the tragic element of the narrative that she unfolds (as well as, no doubt, to underscore the way that "Marx and myth went hand in hand" for the young Ellison). Since at least the days of Marx, the figure of Prometheus, this Titan who rebelled against the gods to bring to humanity the liberating knowledge of fire (and who pays the price, cursed by Zeus to forever after have his liver pecked out daily by a vulture), has been a "patron saint of the left." Such a "Promethean" dimension was central to Ellison's novel at the outset, with the protagonist, and especially the excised LeRoy, positioned as rebels who challenge the established order with incendiary knowledge and are punished for it, cast down by the ruling powers as scapegoats. Yet as Foley points out, in the end, Ellison moved from making a communist, Leroy, the scapegoat (of ruling powers) *in* the text, to making the Brotherhood/Communists the prime scapegoat *of* the text itself. Depicted by Ellison as the cynical sacrificers – indeed, the murderers – of black Harlem, and as the scapegoat-ers of ex-Brother Todd Clifton, the Brotherhood is effectively thrown to the cold war mob, itself scapegoated, to have its organs pecked away. By its concluding "Epilogue," *Invisible Man* has cast the would-be Promethean Left outside the realms of legitimate American, and indeed human, community, with Brother Jack imagined as the foreign leader of a lynching pack out to topple the American Eagle and to castrate the protagonist.¹¹ Perhaps the ultimate tragedy of Ellison's novel, as reframed by Foley, is that, displaced into such a mutilated cold war farce, the true historical tragedy of the Left during this period never has a chance to appear.

Studying the Wounds, and Turning up Pearls

As someone who has followed Foley's work for some time now, and who has read her numerous essays (and even interviewed her) on the topic of Ellison and *Invisible*

¹¹ Foley's lucid and penetrating analysis of the ending of the 1952 text is one of the many examples where her archival work co-exists with and in fact sharpens her close readings of the published novel as a rhetorical project.

Man,¹² I was pleasantly surprised, and impressed to see how much is new in this volume. *Wrestling with the Left* is not simply a compilation of earlier work – valuable as even that would have been – nor a synthesizing of previous research under a freshened or sharpened thesis, but a qualitatively improved, more comprehensive and ambitious project altogether, both on the level of archival evidence and at the level of textual analysis and argument. Though it does not assume familiarity with that prior work – or with any text but *Invisible Man* – the volume introduces ideas and insights that will be new even to those who are familiar with Foley’s previous tracings of Ellison’s arc from pro-communist journalist and proletarian fiction writer to cold war American novelist extraordinaire.

On a level of interest to specialists, often the early and excised episodes that Foley brings to light help to explain enigmatic moments and lines that exist in the 1952 text as oddities, or apparent “throwaways.” Contrary to critical appraisals of the novel as formally seamless, and aesthetically masterful, the actual 1952 text of *IM*, Foley reminds us, contains a number of pretty rough edges, lines whose formal relation to the text as a whole is quite unclear, lines that somehow ring false, that don’t quite fit. Such lines, Foley shows, in many cases – whatever interpretations later critics have made of them – are often, strictly speaking, the remnants of past excisions; they are, in a sense, scars that mark the spot where other passages, episodes, and even entire characters and subplots that existed in early drafts of the novel, no longer can be found. So for instance, Foley shows us how the protagonist’s stated annoyance at Mary Rambo for her ostensibly repeated pressure on him to become a great leader, a point which finds next to no support within the text, correlates to a rich and extended excised portion of the novel, in which Mary’s rooming-house is the scene of lively and wide-ranging political discussion, involving tenants, neighbors, IM, and Mary herself in heated debate about issues of Scottsboro, evictions (and the grassroots struggle against them), lynching, and the role that the “Brotherhood” is playing within the community. The line from the 1952 text “makes sense” in relationship to this material in a way that it doesn’t when it is isolated.

¹² See *Reconstruction 8.1*, “‘Reading Forward’ From the Left: an interview with Barbara Foley,” by Joseph G. Ramsey <<http://reconstruction.eserver.org/081/ramsey3.shtml>> (2008).

Relatedly, often Foley elucidates how a seemingly “small” manuscript alteration – a single word excised, added, or substituted for another – radically alters, even completely reverses an earlier pattern of meaning. Revising the scenes of initiation into the Brotherhood, for example, Ellison changed the note that the protagonist is given (containing his new name) from a *typed* note to a *hand-written* one, thus laying the basis for pinning his later (anonymous and threatening) note to Brother Jack.

Foley digs up some real Ellison gems too – numerous developed and even polished passages that are of literary, philosophical, as well historical and biographical interest – including any number of fragments and episodes that one could easily imagine Ellison having included, and that would have in various ways benefited the novel. That Ellison’s editors or even Ralph Ellison himself would have buried these gems does not reduce their glimmer, though they need some dusting off.

Among these sparkling surprises for even the initiated can be counted Foley’s remarkable findings related to Ellison’s discussion of history and historical events. Ellison, we learn, at one point framed communism as an extension of the historical tradition of abolitionism, reflecting on John Brown, specific slave revolts, and even going so far as to draw extended analogies between Fredrick Douglass and Karl Marx. Readers are likely to be surprised by passages such as the following, which appears in the mouth of a sympathetic character from Ellison’s unfinished “Slick” novel:

“[Frederick] Douglass was the same type as Marx. He liked to fight, he was quick tempered and he had a great mind. And just like Marx he was for the oppressed, not just the black but the white as well; and not only in the United States but all over the world . . . [. . .] They looked very much alike. They both looked like lions . . . [with] big heads, thick manes of hair, with large beards and bushy eyebrows. And in the pictures I’ve seen of Marx he was almost as dark as a Negro, not that I’m trying to make him one, though I wish he had been, but it’s the truth. Both of them had fierce eyes and both looked like they would fight a circle saw” (Ralph Ellison, character Booker, from unfinished “Slick” novel. Foley, 129)

Ellison elsewhere jotted, without the mediation of fictional persona, that “Douglass made the mistake of trying to work on inside when outside was where he belonged” (131). Along similar lines, Leroy’s journal in the drafts contains criticism of Douglass for thinking that social change could come through oratory rather than action.

Also noteworthy is Ellison’s reflection on the tensions and opportunities inherent in the modern African American experience. Consider his analogy for the torn position of African Americans dissatisfied by the CP’s “back-peddaling” of local anti-racist struggles for the sake of the global struggle against fascism during WWII. As he wrote: “If one is being dragged by a car [Jim Crow racism] that is in danger of being struck by a train [fascism], one nevertheless struggles to be free of the car first, regardless of the lesser chance of surviving the impact of the train” (41). Or, consider this extended excised reflection on suffering and consciousness that the protagonist in *IM* gives to the magazine reporter covering his role in the Brotherhood:

“They say pearls come from grains of sand falling into the shell and irritating the delicate flesh of the oyster. Maybe that’s the way it is with consciousness. Your mind has to be bruised until it develops the peal the eye is capable of seeing. . . . [The Negro people] have given birth to the pearl, and a lens is forming out of our scars and bruises, and soon we’ll see that Brotherhood is the vision that will transform the world” (271).

In a way, as I have suggested above, Foley method is analogous; treating the wounds of the novel (that was and might have been), as lenses through which to re-examine the entire 1952 novel – and indeed, its author, and its historical moment – in a fresh and critical way.

In addition to such pearls, there are numerous passages in the early manuscripts – both realistic references, and patterned symbols – that foreground the historical specificity of the unfolding events of the narrative while simultaneously rooting that specificity in the nexus of a racist *capitalist* order. To give just one example: The base for the famous paint at the Northern factory where the protagonist works briefly is described as having been made from the sap of Southern trees, the very trees from which a black man is lynched in an early draft.

Indeed, though the later portions of the novel received the most revision, the depiction of the Jim Crow South in the early portions of the drafts renders palpable the intersection of racist violence with Northern capitalist exploitation, and patriotic ideology (that Southern sap-based white paint is then sent to cover government buildings – both the White House and the Department of Labor!). Similarly the politics of academia in class society come in for scrutiny, with trickster-opportunist Dr. Bledsoe calling for the violent squashing of radicalism on campus, and a relayed account (based on true events) of how the former head of the college once ordered a black asylum seeker handed over to a lynch mob. And on and on; there is a treasure of pearls, more than can be listed here.¹³

Abstracting from History

If one of the major revelations here is the richness, range, and radicalism of Ellison's engagement with history, perhaps one of the book's major political insights is that Ellison's *anticommunistization* of *IM* went hand in hand with a *dehistoricization*. As Foley recounts, Ellison's revising of his pro-communist novel into an anti-communist one involved, and perhaps even *necessitated*, the rendering invisible of historical figures and events that had been much more explicitly present in earlier version of the text. Especially significant – in fact totally *crucial* – was the stripping from the text of any and all references to World War II and international fascism or anti-fascism. I quote Foley at length:

Ellison's decision to excise all reference to the Second World War enabled him to avoid confronting the crisis about the meaning of democracy that the antifascist war posed to large numbers of African Americans. The omission also made it possible to evade the complicated matrix of local, national, and international considerations that had challenged the political judgment of a wide

¹³ I will however list a few more of Foley's discoveries from the early versions: The invisibility of the protagonist-narrator in the North is further layered by his invisibility as a wage laborer; the theme of sight and blindness is complicated by the prospect that the science and philosophy of the Brotherhood may act as a "lens" allowing the formerly blind to see; the electricity that the IM learns to laugh through in the Battle Royal and again in the Hospital operation, returns in early versions of the Arena speech, where the "electricity" is reflected upon, in relationship to the potential powers of radio oratory, as a means of liberation and self-affirmation, a la Charlie Chaplin at the end of the film *Modern Times* (1936). Electricity thus becomes something that can be deployed as well as survived (or stolen).

range of actors and organizations (not just Moscow-affiliated Communists)
during the war. (319)

Eliding the war (and its “complicated matrix”) and thus withholding from the reader – and the protagonist – the reasoning for and the strategy behind the Brotherhood’s sudden shifts of line – Ellison’s depiction of the Brotherhood is transposed into a universe that appears hard-wired for cynicism and disillusionment. Had the historical background been specified, the position of the organization articulated, whether or not the protagonist or the reader agrees with it, the closing orientation would be a political position, not a formal dismissal. As the novel exists, however, the actions of the Brotherhood appear irredeemable and beyond reason, “blind” and “blinding,” totally hopeless, indeed dangerous. All one can do is take cover, whether in the sewer or in the cloak of American patriotism (or, as it turns out, both).¹⁴

¹⁴ A certain defense of Ellison’s practice of historical abstraction might argue (along the lines established by Nathaniel Mills) that whatever was lost in the turn away from historical reference and immediate political facticity, the symbolic power that *IM* draws from its abstractions may have been well worth the loss. One can argue that in cutting off the text from the particularities of concrete history – of the Depression, say, or of World War II – Ellison made it available to readers beyond that immediate moment. Freed of the baggage of particular facts, the plane could fly higher and farther, so to speak. In becoming more distanced from immediate historical reference-points, goes this line of thought, *IM* gained more universal resonance, the kind of symbolic power that has allowed it to connect with readers far removed from Ellison’s immediate moment or context.

At a level of generality and possibility, this all sounds just fine. But the issue at stake is not the politics of abstraction as such. What is at issue, rather, is the politics of Ellison’s *particular* (rhetorical, historical) practice of abstraction and dehistoricization. A more grounded question then would be: What is the nature of the “universality” into which the historical particularity is transposed? Is what is stripped from the narrative (and from the purview of readers) in the process merely minor contingencies and specificities (unnecessary dates, names, and details – stuff that would needlessly weigh down the reader, matter which is of little enduring importance), or is what was stripped rather in some sense matter that was (and that *is*) essential to grasping crucial dynamics of the situation (and perhaps of American political-social situations, or of situations for radicals in the US, generally) in the first place?

If elements of what is essential are excised in the process of universalization, then, we must ask: What is the nature of, and what can be the truth, or the use value – politically speaking – of that clipped work that remains? What is gained, and what lost, to come back to *IM*, by transposing the story of racism from an international to a nationalist framework? Or by stripping radical politics of legible internal line-struggle, if not the very dimension of debate and strategy itself? Of removing from view an event such as the rise of fascism and the onset World War II, one that structured the field *IM* dwells in? To put it sharply: At what point does a savvy opportunistic radicalism become an alibi for sheer opportunism?

It should also be pointed out that this argument for Ellison’s stylization and abstraction vs. realistic reportage remains based on a false binary opposition, one already addressed above, namely the assumption that Ellison’s use of surrealism and symbolism was somehow necessarily exclusive of historical

The Ruin in the Urn

In the wake of *Wrestling with the Left*, *Invisible Man* appears transformed: no longer just the high modernist “well-wrought urn,” but also the *ruins* of perhaps the great American radical novel of the 20th century. Foley recasts the novel as a contradictory and historical process of development, and in doing so brings out the political, partisan dimensions of many features of *Invisible Man* that have generally been naturalized, taken for granted as irreducible elements of the novel as such. Without ever denying Ellison his genius, Foley shows how the very formal “greatness” of this celebrated work of American civilization is, in many instances, predicated on and pursuant of its political repressions, its silencing, its mischaracterization, its ingenious cold war rhetorical maneuvers against the Left. By so unearthing both the process of emergence and the political function of the novel’s ostensibly “merely literary” formal features, Foley challenges not only prevailing views of Ellison and *Invisible Man*, and not only dominant views of early-to-mid-20th century U.S. history involving the Communist left (literary and otherwise), but in fact, I would argue, she challenges dominant conceptions of “literature” and “literary greatness” as such.

Foley acknowledges as much when she writes, anticipating objections to her study,

Why trace the genesis of Ellison’s masterwork in such painstaking detail, when what matters is the final product, with its careful aesthetic patterning and well-honed irony? Why load so much analysis of history and politics, especially the politics of Communism and anticommunism, onto what is, after all, an investigation into a literary text? Doesn’t this practice simply reduce literature to non-literature, removing its ability to invest reality with what Ellison himself called the “bright magic of a fairy tale”? (21) [emphasis added].

realism or referentiality in this mediated sense. As we have seen, they often were not. Which is to say, Ellison not only could have but, at times, *did* craft a number of “universal” symbols that gave flight to the earthly facts of fascism and antifascism.

On the other hand, if what one means is merely that *IM* wouldn’t have been able to reach the broad audience it did, and thus to achieve “universal” status within the particular political and ideological constraints of the American literary critical scene at the height of the cold war, without making compromises and engaging in self-censorship, then that seems true enough. But it hardly amounts to a defense of the work on its political merits, let alone of its historical abstractions in particular.

Let us ask: Is *Wrestling with the Left* simply (or not so “simply”) “reduc[ing] literature to non-literature”? In a sense, we might answer *yes* to this question (minus the pejorative language), that is, if and so long as “literature” is understood – as it often is – as a realm that is characterized by its separation from and/or opposition to messy material production (meaning history as well as labor) on the one hand, and from – equally messy – politics (and rhetoric) on the other. But then again, we might just as well say that Foley’s study *expands* or *deepens* literature into the realm of “non-literature”; the choice of valence here is itself a rather subjective – and political-ideological – matter. Further, the rigor of the research and close readings here are such that Foley does not need to stoop to “loading” history and politics onto the literary text, but rather is able to expose and to decode the ways that history and politics *were and are always already there* in the literary work itself. It was just that certain all-too-*simple* forms of reading have tended to obscure them from view.

Foley’s book is a rigorous attempt to *de-fetishize* the literary. That is to say, her work asks us to reflect upon what we mean by (and how we teach) “literature” in the first place. What would it mean to approach *IM*, or other texts for that matter, not just as *finished* works (or masterpieces) but as the remains – even the ruins – of complex and contradictory political and historical *processes*? To view novels – or poems, or plays, as well as pamphlets – as irreducibly rhetorical interventions in irreducibly political and historical situations that exceed their grasp? To imagine the site of literary instruction less as the glass-cased halls of a museum (with we instructors playing the tour guides) than as a scene of a human catastrophe, a shattered site in which it is up to us (up to our students and our colleagues) to urgently discover and to devise collectively what Kenneth Burke once called “equipment for living”? Who says that what matters most about a literary text is its “finished” state upon emerging on the bookstore shelf? What (or whose) interests and values are served by such a notion? What would it mean to instead put a writer’s *process of engagement* (with history, with politics) at the center of how we teach literature? “This study,” Foley writes, “asks teachers of literature to rethink what they are doing when they teach *Invisible Man* as an instance of the modernist well-wrought urn.” As she adds:

To interpret the novel's patterning on its own terms, and not to query what is being equated with what and why, is to reproduce uncritically the ideological premises undergirding that patterning. An awareness that the symbolistic roundedness of Ellison's novel is the formal correlative of a politics of guilt by association *makes it far more difficult simply to teach Invisible Man as a novel*. It is necessary to confront the embeddedness of the political in the aesthetic" (22) [emphasis added].

Wrestling with the Left thus aims to complicate pseudo-simple critical and pedagogical practices. As her study highlights, critical or pedagogical approaches that associate the "literary" with "complexity" and with "freedom" as against the ethical and ontological tyranny of the "political" and the "historical" are themselves overly simplifying – in short, aesthetic *ideologies*. Thus, while Foley's study explicitly asks us to radically alter how we teach *IM*, implicitly it asks us to reframe and to problematize the (often somewhat Ellisonian) assumptions through which we have been taught to approach and teach "literature" as such.¹⁵

* * *

To conclude looking forward, the logical next step to follow the publication of Foley's *Wrestling with the Left* might be now for someone to bring out an edited MEGA-text edition of *Invisible Man* itself, one that would present *IM* to readers, students, and scholars in a way that would foreground rather than foreclose the vexed, historically conditioned, and politically contradictory process of which the 1952 text is but the privileged remains. If the keepers of the Ellison archive can be persuaded, such would seem like a worthy project indeed. (One hopes that Foley is available to advise the process!) Sure, Ralph Ellison might very well turn over in his grave. But then again: who cares? If the Author is now decades Dead, *so what* if the late Ellison would not approve of such a de-fetishizing of his great literary work? Who says that keeping fidelity to a writer, or an artistic project, means holding fast to where s/he or it *ended up*, as opposed

¹⁵ One of Foley's additional stated goals in fact is to expand literary studies in another sense, meaning: to bring a rigorous rhetorical and textual reading to "nonliterary" realm of anticommunism, bringing out (via the evolution of *IM*) the arti-factual, discursive nature of anticommunism itself, that oft-near undeconstructible specter informing so much of US American culture across the 20th century, and beyond it.

to where they *began*? No doubt, for starters, we would learn a lot about the politics and ideology structuring literary studies today if we had the chance to watch such a struggle over *The Invisible Man* MEGA-text unfold.