

Supervisor's report on B.A. thesis by Tomáš Kovařík

“Triangulating Agency: Identity, Society and Politics in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*”

In his thesis, Tomáš Kovařík examines Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* to argue that the novel is a universal text about reaching individual agency, and is analogical to today’s late capitalist society. Kovařík doesn’t ignore the typical interpretation of the novel as a book about race, but instead focuses more intently on the novel’s portrayal of interactions among the individual, social and political layers of experience. In order to do so, the thesis analyzes the effects of Ellison’s employment of the Bildungsroman format. Having established that, the thesis then examines the societal status quo as presented in the novel and discusses the way that Ellison portrays and explores politics.

Ellison’s novel is the primary source for the thesis, but Kovařík also makes use of a wide variety of late-20th-century and contemporary critical, cultural and political theorists, including Deleuze and Guattari, and Timothy Snyder, among others. The result is an informed, incisive argument that offers an original reading of the novel that synthesizes several fruitful approaches.

The thesis contains an introduction, three chapters that constitute the body of the thesis, a conclusion and a rich bibliography. The first chapter, “The Individual and the Bildungsroman,” examines *Invisible Man* as a Bildungsroman, arguing that the novel simultaneously makes use of this form and veers away from some of its typical characteristics. The second chapter, “A Society of Oppression,” analyzes the society that Ellison presents in his novel, examining the book’s portrayal of racism while also arguing that it is ultimately a universal work of literature. The third chapter, “The Radical Politics of Manipulation,” discusses the novel’s politics, building on the foundation of the previous chapters to analyze how radical politics informs and influences the behavior and thinking of the protagonist as he navigates society. Working chronologically through the novel while making use of more recent writers, critics and theorists to widen the scope of the argument, the thesis argues for the continued political relevance of Ellison’s novel and suggests that his protagonist ultimately arrives at agency.

Tomáš worked hard on the thesis and did much of his work independently after an initial meeting. We did not get to collaborate as closely or in as timely a manner as I had anticipated, yet this did not seem to significantly hinder his work.

In light of the above comments, I have three questions to pose:

- 1) Does your argument about the universal significance of the novel detract from an interpretation privileging the novel's racial elements?
- 2) How valuable is it to apply theoretical frameworks to writers who were not aware of them? Are there any reasons to be cautious about doing so?
- 3) Does Ellison's novel offer a workable line of flight for escaping the radical politics of manipulation? If not, is it therefore a failure?

In light of the foregoing, I hereby recommend the mark of 1 (výborně) for this thesis work.

Stephan B. Delbos, MFA, PhD

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