

Opponent's Report on B.A. Thesis by

Tomaš Kovařík

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

Mr. Tomaš Kovařík sets out in his thesis to illuminate the conceptual intersection between the agencies of identity, the societal and the political in Ralph Ellison’s magnum opus, *Invisible Man*. He nicely articulates his research program at the outset in a single sentence thus:

the first chapter intertwines the topics of the individual and his development within the paradigm of the Bildungsroman, the second chapter develops upon these findings by analyzing the societal status quo as presented in the novel while also discussing the question of racism, which will not be the focal point, for the sake of fulfilling the ambition of exploring the novel’s universal nature, and the third and final chapter will discuss politics in the novel in the context of the previous two chapters, analyzing how radical politics interact with the individual and social layers in the novel (1).

The thesis contains 49 pp. (vii + 42) across the following units of composition. “Introduction, Chapter 1: The Individual and the Bildungsroman, Chapter 2: A Society of Oppression, Chapter 3: The Radical Politics of Manipulation, Conclusion and Bibliography”.

As for the prose style, it reads well and has been carefully produced. There are only a few errors: “a side effect, it also critiquing” (3) needs an edit, “some the larger structures” (10) needs an “of” e.g.; “that that” (10) one of these thats should be discarded, “That is at heart of his trajectory” (13) need to add a “the”; “with one of the social” (16) should read as “what that of the social”; “tends to gets him” (25) needs a “get”; “Ras the Exhorder” (35) should be “Ras the Exhorter”.

With regard to the political entity of the Brotherhood in *Invisible Man* the candidate puts it succinctly, “With time, Invisible Man outgrows the organization as he starts realizing they are merely using him to their ends” (12). The uncharitable and instrumental aspect of the political body of the Brotherhood is also shown when we read, “Being scolded for doing something out of best intentions for the community lays bare the cold machinery of the organization which purports to be aiming to help the same community” (12). With his hard-won experience we read that Invisible Man “no longer equates his identity with the Brotherhood and is finally set to become a sovereign individual on his own terms, following the updated Bildungsroman trajectory towards his individuation” (12–13). This has the sense of a future-oriented can do attitudinal disposition. In another key passage that is fertile of insight, we read, “The narrator’s encounters with people and organizations that claim to be acting to the individual’s benefit can be read analogously to the world of mass media where one is seemingly provided with a platform to define their identity, only to later realize that the deal was too good to be true and that these same organizations are using the individual to their own economic and political benefit” (16). The candidate adds incisively, “Any person entering the world of today is faced with these issues and it is one of the merits of the *Invisible Man* Bildungsroman that it shows the difficulty of navigating a complex post-industrial society, and the importance of

personal experience to attaining selfhood and agency” (16). These are all fine observations and to the point. They also show the high quality of the thesis work.

In another salient remark we read that Invisible Man “is constantly being wronged across the narrative, sometimes even coming close to dying, and he ends up living in the shadow indeed, until he moves into a spotlight of his own making. But until he adjusts to this unjust world, he must learn the workings of power the hard way” (19–20). **This notion of experiential information is important in the book, but does the candidate think that this invites any other open questions about the authority of experience as being an overvalued or undervalued thing?**

With respect to another authority figure in the book, this one from an institution of higher education, “[Dr.] Bledsoe thus becomes a symbol of unjust treatment and lust for absolute hegemony at the expense of others. The individual is thus directly suppressed by the power embedded into the social” (21). Concerning the Brotherhood again we encounter, “This is a fitting contemplation because he likens how people exploit him the way capitalism exploits nature, a man-made construct draining something innocent of energy. It also illustrates how full of empty promises and superficiality the organization really is” (26). Crucially, Invisible Man “discovers the world beyond the discourse of politics, a world of genuine agency and thus freedom” (37). The candidate adds, “That is to become his personal politics, and it is genuine because he had come into close contact with the other available options yet not a single one of them would affirm him as a person, thus transcending the limited realms of binary politics in an unjust society and achieving essentially infinite possibility within the realm of the individual” (37).

Last not least, “On the backdrop of the complex interaction of the individual and political layers, Ellison uses a show-don’t-tell manner to answer the narrator’s question “could politics ever be an expression of love?” (Ellison, 435) by illustrating how the individual cannot trust the political, because the political is only manipulating him while being inherently embedded into the social, which, as has been shown, is also poised against the individual” (37). **Second question for the candidate: Are we meant to be hopeful and optimistic at the end of this book and if so why or why not? Or: is it perhaps yet another question altogether, or another affect or attitude that the book produces in the reader?**

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

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