

RALPH ELLISON

TRAVELS TO DENMARK:

Invisible Man/Usynlig Mand

and the World Location of American Literature

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Abstract: This essay argues that the 1969 Danish translation of *Invisible Man* (1952), Ralph Ellison's prize-winning debut novel, offers a set of spatiotemporal coordinates with which the world location of postwar American literature can be mapped. By reconstructing how *Invisible Man* was received both in the United States and Denmark, I show that the evaluative criteria by which the novel was judged to be a valuable work of art break down the geographical delimitation of national literatures. To that effect, the construction of the author figure "Ralph Ellison" was contingent upon his fiction conforming to criteria of evaluation formalized by cultural institutions such as newspapers, universities, and literary prizes. These criteria were often derived from aesthetic principles associated with European modernism, and they come into full view in my reconstruction of *Invisible Man's* publication and (Danish) translation history. I conclude that the residue of *Invisible Man's* paratextual apparatus which has survived to this day, as well as the global connections this residue signifies, expose the discursive construction of a nationally specific American literature as an ideological fiction, not a material fact.

Keywords: Ralph Ellison, American literature, world literary space, economies of prestige, translation, Danish newspaper archive, cultural institutions

Introduction: Situating Ralph Ellison

In *Literary Ambition and the African American Novel* (2019), Michael Nowlin argues that twentieth-century Black writers who kept fidelity to the aesthetic doctrines of Western European modernism on occasion managed to carve out what Pierre Bourdieu calls a “dominant” position in the American literary field.¹ According to Nowlin, the formal particularities of literary modernism afforded Black writers a modicum of autonomy from the marketplace’s commercial impetus, on one hand, and an ability to mobilize their racial identity in formally new ways, on the other. This relative autonomy supplied Black writers with creative license to depict lifeworlds with an aesthetic and artistic ambition that brought their full complexity into view.

In Nowlin’s study, Ralph Ellison stands out as an exemplary figure who epitomizes the intricate relationship between a minoritized author identity and “the worldwide authority—even tyranny—of European high modernism by mid-century” (179). As the winner of the National Book Award for Fiction in 1953, Ellison’s debut novel, *Invisible Man* (1952), was celebrated as a prophetic account of the limits and possibilities of Black life in the United States, including how these limits and possibilities are entwined with the nation’s democratic horizons. According to Mark Greif, indeed, *Invisible Man* “quickly [came] to stand out as the best-regarded novel of the entire postwar period (1945-1989), a stature that has never seriously been challenged through the beginning of the twenty-first century” (145). Following an unnamed Black protagonist’s picaresque journey from the American South to New York City, Ellison’s novel critiques political and philosophical conundrums that affected mid-century Black American life. Most notably, the nameless protagonist’s caution-inducing encounters with satirized versions of the Communist Party and Black nationalists signpost Ellison’s reservations about, respectively, revolutionary class struggle and racial sedition. As an

alternative to these political projects, *Invisible Man* proposes that a dialectical relationship between the white dominant social group and minoritized Black subjects historically has structured the organization of American life and culture. “Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?” the invisible man ponders in the novel’s concluding sentence (582), thus suggesting that one part of the pair is fundamentally inseparable from the other.²

Revered as an insightful critic of American society and culture, Ellison was throughout the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s able to promote a vision of literary production that tied the aesthetics of *Invisible Man*, and of American literature more broadly, to a philosophical meditation about the state of the nation. “I do happen to feel,” he remarked in a 1967 lecture, “that in this country the novel . . . found a [democratic] function which it did not have in any of the nations where it was developed by artists who made it resound so effectively with their eloquence” (“The Novel” 308). Wittingly or not, Ellison attributed to the *American* novel an exceptionalist status that marked it as a different textual object than, say, the French or the English novel. His contention that “the chief significance of *Invisible Man* as a fiction” was “its experimental attitude” is paradoxical in this light (“Brave Words” 151). The concept of “American literature” can be ideologically operationalized as a monolingual and monocultural construct, to be sure, but the process of literary production, when assessed as a historically contingent practice, always connects the American writer to a deeper history of cultural production and reception that transcends territorial borders. As the “transnational turn” in American studies has highlighted, the notion of a fixed or immobile national literature is nothing more than an ideological invention.³ In contrast to geographical borders, literary borders are always porous and symbiotic. In the case of *Invisible Man*, the novel’s nationally specific content is formally figured by the “experimental attitude”

that typified Western European modernism. Even writers such as Ellison who are conceptually committed to the project of a specifically *American* literature cannot help but unintentionally reinforce the critical notion that American literature is, in both figurative and material terms, an *international* undertaking.⁴

Despite Ellison's proto-nationalist conception of what American literature was, or should be, the social distinction he was afforded in the United States resonated across the Atlantic. As the Danish newspaper archive reveals, Ellison's dominant position in the American literary field influenced how *Invisible Man* was received by Danish critics. By homing in on the reception of the 1969 Danish translation of *Invisible Man* (titled *Usynlig Mand*, translated by Mogens Boisen), this article unpacks the relationship between the national orientation of Ellison's novel and its circulation in what literary theorist Pascale Casanova has called "world literary space," a networked field of literary production and reception that has a global reach (82–102).

The construction of Ellison as an important author figure in the dominant American literary culture—mediated, as it was, by cultural institutions such as newspapers, universities, and the prize industry, as well as the geopolitical situation around the globe during the Cold War—necessarily affected the construction of Ellison as an author figure in the marginal Danish literary culture. Situated within this literary-historical frame, my essay tackles two interrelated problems. First, I investigate the aesthetic and political criteria that both American and Danish critics used to evaluate *Invisible Man*. In doing so, I emphasize that it does not make sense to speak of a geographically delimited American literature since the production *and* reception of novels involve ideas about art and literature that transcend national borders. With this international perspective in mind, I then explore the materiality of American literature's global presence by

reconstructing from newspaper articles and other ephemera the journey *Invisible Man/Usynlig Mand* embarked on when it was translated into Danish. The archival evidence I have extracted from the cultural context of postwar Denmark offers a revealing perspective on the conceptual construction of "American literature." The Danish newspaper archive underscores that processes of literary production and reception are socio-institutionally mediated, certainly, but it also suggests that these processes cannot be contained by national borders. As an object of public commentary and evaluation, *Invisible Man/Usynlig Mand* accordingly provides a set of spatiotemporal coordinates with which it is possible to map the world location of postwar American literature.

***Invisible Man* in the United States**

According to his biographer Arnold Rampersad, Ellison had a powerful voice in various artistic and intellectual domains. He even spoke with "unprecedented authority for a black American" in the wake of *Invisible Man's* publication in the United States (275). This authority—fickle and elusive as that concept necessarily is—was intimately related to the institutional infrastructure according to which information and knowledge were circulated in the mid-twentieth-century United States.⁵ The publication of *Invisible Man* occasioned a moment of instant institutional gratification, and the critical discourse that developed in the wake of this literary event attributed to Ellison a level of social distinction that resonated with the period's cultural elite. To that effect, it was not unusual for critics affiliated with influential cultural institutions to link *Invisible Man's* style and symbolism to the literary tradition of high modernism. The "*Herald Tribune Book Review* dubbed Invisible [the novel's protagonist] 'the young dark Ulysses,'" for example, thus wedding Ellison's debut novel with James

Joyce's celebrated tome (Rampersad 260). In another laudatory review, the writer Saul Bellow noted that a critically acclaimed excerpt published under the title "Battle Royal" in a 1947 edition of *Horizon* had "turned out to be not *the* high point [of the novel] but rather one of the many peaks of a book of the very first order, a superb book" (27). Ellison had proved, Bellow assessed, "that a truly heroic quality can exist among our contemporaries," a feat "that can only be done by those who resist the heavy influences [of institutions] and make their own synthesis out of the vast mass of phenomena, the seething, swarming body of appearances, facts, and details" (28). These praising comments notwithstanding, Bellow's attribution of aesthetic autonomy ("resist the heavy influences") to Ellison's novel failed to consider the irony that the ascription of autonomy itself relied on a media ecosystem in which various institutional sites that all exerted a significant pressure on the formation of aesthetic hierarchies were connected. It was the *appearance* of autonomy that mattered to Ellison's literary reputation, not an actual detachment from the institutions that regulated the distribution of literary value in the mid-twentieth-century United States.

The public-facing evaluation of Ellison's work was not without detractors. J. Saunders Redding complained that Ellison "has put all of his power into describing the diurnal life of gnats" (qtd. in Rampersad 262). Similarly, the communist intellectual Lloyd L. Brown was revolted by Ellison's style. In his early review of *Invisible Man*, Brown accused Ellison of conforming "exactly to the formula for literary success in today's market" (31). Ellison, Brown fulminated, belonged to a cluster of chic, anti-communist Black writers whose foremost character trait was "their servility to the masters" (32). Although it dismayed Party-affiliated intellectuals such as Brown, *Invisible Man's* critical depiction of "the Brotherhood"'s exploitation of the protagonist as a tokenized

mouthpiece for the project of communism typified the waning influence of communist thought on mainstream Black American writing in the postwar United States. Communism had been imbricated with Black American cultural production during the interwar years—Langston Hughes, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Paul Robeson all sympathized with the communist cause, for instance—but the Party's broken promise to "hurry racial capitalism to its grave" dissolved some of the bonds that bound minoritized cultural producers in the United States to ideological allies in a global commons (Maxwell 5). Novels such as *Invisible Man* transformed this broken promise into a creative source for political critique. Ellison, William J. Maxwell notes, "distinctly figure[d] the party as another pale patron holding puppet strings, one more shortsighted white projector onto the screen of blackness" (4). As depicted in *Invisible Man*, communism was yet another political movement incapable of seeing beyond the surface characteristic of skin color.

Controversy, or even scandal, is not a deathblow to a literary artifact. In a roundabout way, the sort of public disagreement that followed *Invisible Man's* entrance into the literary marketplace—whether centered around Ellison's depiction of political movements or something else—reinforced the novel's status as a culturally legitimate object worthy of discussion. In the context of the prize industry, James English has instructively commented that "indignant commentary about [a cultural prize] is an index of its normal and proper functioning" (208). A similar logic structures public debates about books. The "indignant commentary" that decried the literary value of *Invisible Man* attributed a specific type of cultural legitimacy to this artifact that crystallized in both symbolic and material ways shortly after the novel's publication. On one hand, Ellison and his defenders could comment on the crude, unimaginative modes of conferring value upon works of fiction that informed ideologically

inclined critics, as when Ellison publicly reprimanded the literary critic Irving Howe for insisting that “unrelieved suffering is the only ‘real’ Negro experience” (“The World and the Jug” 159). On the other hand, Ellison could also capitalize financially on *Invisible Man’s* enhanced visibility in publicly mediated conversations about literature and across commercial markets.

The stakes of Ellison’s case for literary renown had been raised when he became the first Black author to win the National Book Award for Fiction, a literary prize founded in 1949. In his own words, Ellison surmised that this prestigious award stimulated both the symbolic power and commercial success of *Invisible Man*. “Dear Herbert,” he began a June 5, 1953, letter to his estranged younger brother. “I suppose you know by now that my book won the National Book Award for Fiction, which carries no money but quite a lot of prestige and what is much better an increase in sales” (*The Selected Letters* 323). Ellison was able to enjoy the financial fruits of his creative labor while also preserving the artistic integrity that distanced him from the economic logic of commercial publishing. *Invisible Man*, he rightly recognized in the letter to Herbert, could now be distributed to a broad audience with few symbolic repercussions because cultural institutions that had an outsized influence on the criteria of aesthetic judgment sheltered Ellison and his novel from market “contamination.” In the end, then, the social forces that underpinned the mid-twentieth-century American “cultural economy” protected *Invisible Man* from the aesthetic corruption typically associated with processes of commodification, even as the novel was distributed to a broad audience (English 10).

Contextualizing *Invisible Man’s* Arrival in Denmark

When books travel, unexpected obstacles almost always arise. Consequently, the relationship between a national literature and world literary space is more complex than the mere historical fact of that relationship can hope to explain. One must account for the influence of cultural institutions that mediate the circulation and reception of translated books, say, and it is also necessary to consider how an author figure is dispersed within the receiving cultural system before a book is translated. Translation theorist Susan Bassnett rightly notes that translated texts “operate in a web of interconnections,” and some of this web’s connective tissue is constituted by the public mediation and circulation of author figures prior to the actual translation of their books (180).

The challenge of reconstructing a novel’s reception in new cultural contexts is not eased by the fact that temporal lags always accompany processes of literary institutionalization. It quite literally takes time to consecrate a nationally specific author’s literary output in another part of the globe. Consecration’s temporal lag is affected by communication technologies since these determine the speed and reach with which a writer’s oeuvre and cultural presence can be translated and potentially recognized elsewhere. The transatlantic circulation of the author figure “Ralph Ellison” followed this media-systems formula as he initially was brought to Denmark through newspapers. In 1952, the year of *Invisible Man’s* publication, the Danish literary commentator Jytte Seidenfaden predicted in *Information* that “we probably will see translations [of *Invisible Man*] in Denmark” (2).⁶ This prediction came to fruition, albeit not until 1969, at which time Ellison’s renown in the United States rested not only on the publication of *Invisible Man*, but also on his vocation as a revered public intellectual, university teacher, essayist, and literary critic.

Temporal lag was not the only hurdle to the production of Ellison's status as an important writer in Denmark. Indeed, the most significant obstacle to the reception of his book had nothing to do with the form or content of *Invisible Man* as such. Rather, it was the generally dismissive (or critical) attitude that many Danish contributors to public discourses about literature shared towards the United States, as well as American literary production, that gave Ellison's delayed reception in Denmark an uneven ground to stand on.⁷ In a 1959 opinion piece in *Dagens Nyheder*, for instance, a then-young literary critic by the name of Hans Hertel diagnosed several impending problems that in his view threatened to derail the production and evaluation of American fiction. In Hertel's account, the direst threat to American literary production was the institutionalization of New Criticism as a dominant paradigm for critical analysis and interpretation. "New Criticism has been of immeasurable importance to the modern conception of literature," Hertel readily acknowledged, "but its formerly heretical views [of literature] have now become stagnant aesthetic doctrines, high-school curricula, and property of the everyman, and it performs a conspicuous taste-tyranny that propels American literature towards the academic and the sterile, away from the spontaneous" (10). Innovation ("the spontaneous") is a foundational pillar of artistic creation, Hertel contended, but the rigid academic structure that American educational institutions to his mind imposed on literary practitioners and evaluators, not to mention lay readers, was detrimental to the production of a free, autonomous literature. "An increasing number of young writers," he cautioned, "are employed as university teachers and forced into standardized authorships devised in accordance with poetic formulae at creative writing-schools (10). From Hertel's youthful perspective, the advent of what Mark McGurl describes as "the program era" was characteristic of "the academic and . . . sterile" quality

of postwar American literature (Hertel 10). Not quite able to appreciate how the new conditions of literary production also diversified the output of textual objects produced in the United States, Hertel failed to distinguish between the general standardization of creative paradigms and the ways in which, say, minoritized writers had transformed lived experiences of marginality into rich creative sources by connecting the particularities of their lifeworlds to new formal registers.⁸ The formalization of literary production within the system of higher education did not only lead to mass-standardization, that is; it also afforded writers of less privileged backgrounds an institutional framework within which they could experiment with, and further hone, their craft.

Although he published it before the outright institutionalization of American literary production in the 1960s and 1970s, Ellison's prize-winning debut novel was in many ways a prototype of the aesthetic formation McGurl calls "high cultural pluralism"—an aesthetic formation where minoritized writers, as Nowlin also argues, mined both their own identity and the formal register of literary modernism to produce experimental accounts of life in the United States (McGurl 56–63). Even so, Ellison's status as a literary pioneer in the United States was not unconditionally recognized in Northern Europe, where his arrival on Danish shores was impeded by the delayed translation of *Invisible Man*. In an otherwise complimentary September 5, 1969, review of *Usynlig Mand* in *Information*, the cultural critic Erik Wiedemann hyperbolically remarked that Ellison had been "just about as invisible" in public discourses about literature as his novel's nameless protagonist ("Ralph Ellisons Frekvenser" 4). Ellison's cultural importance in Denmark was unquestionably insubstantial in comparison to that of Paris-based Black American authors such as Richard Wright and James Baldwin, but, as another critic pointed out, there had "in the past seventeen years been written a

good deal about the now fifty-five year-old Ralph Ellison's heretofore only novel, *Invisible Man*" (Neiiendam 4).

Once it was published, the reception of the Danish translation of *Invisible Man* was predominantly positive. The slew of favorable reviews was in part anchored by the laudatory discourse that the Danish literary commentariat had constructed around Ellison's novel even before the publication of the 1969 translation. In a 1964 opinion piece in *Berlingske Aftentidende*, for example, the critic Leonard Malone noted that "*Invisible Man* is narrated with a freedom which no other Negro writers have achieved." The path-breaking narrative mode championed by Ellison freed *Invisible Man* "from the fetters of protest literature, which makes it possible . . . to provide an illuminating description of the duality and irony of Negro life" ("Fra 'Søn Af De Sorte'" 5).⁹ Gesturing toward Ellison's imagined artistic autonomy, Malone stressed that *Invisible Man* transcended the explicit politics which usually inhibited Black American novels from having the status of a valuable work of art conferred upon them. Only a few Danish critics rejected claims made on behalf of Ellison's literary renown. "Clothed in too much palaver and nonsense," John Carlsen dismissively commented, "this banal experience [invisibility] is imagined to be a philosophical revelation and partially explaining the Negro neurosis in America" (19). Unimpressed with Ellison's formal and philosophical experimentation, Carlsen *did* acknowledge that the novel contained certain worthwhile, authentic elements, but his final verdict remained negative: "A medley of themes and a mixture of styles makes *Invisible Man* an original and failed book. Original and moving in its realism and rich, human sensitivity—and failed and dull in its abstract and philosophical passages" (19).

Danish Literary Criticism in World Literary Space

If nothing else, the discrepancy between the positive and negative Danish reception of *Invisible Man/Usynlig Mand* underscored the novel's status as a work of world literature. In David Damrosch's formulation, the "variability of a work of world literature is one of its constitutive features—one of its greatest strengths when the work is well presented and read well, and its greatest vulnerability when it is mishandled or misappropriated by its newfound foreign friends" (5). In the context of Ellison, this duality may have had little to do with the state of American fiction as such, and more to do with Danish critics' perception of the United States. As Damrosch puts it, "even a single work of world literature is the locus of a negotiation between two different cultures" (283). Whether in its original or translated edition, Ellison's novel formed a site through which the organizing tenets of American literature, culture, and politics were refracted by the Danish reading public's own literary, cultural, and political biases.

A strict juxtaposition of the Danish and American literary fields insufficiently explains the social forces that operated on Ellison's translated novel, however. World literary space is a tumultuous, networked field where sites and actors always are related to each other in both more and less meaningful ways. Opining in *Berlingske Tidende* on May 18, 1966, Erik Wiedemann implicitly suggested that the practice of literary criticism in Denmark was blinded by its submissive relation to Western European modernism. The inclusion of American modernists in two anthologies about modernist painting and music (edited by, respectively, Ole Schwalbe and Jan Mægaard) had not been replicated in anthologies about literature, Wiedemann complained, and so "Professor Billeskov Jansen's" anthology of literary modernism "has the limiting subtitle 'European modernism after the war.'" While one could "assume" that the American art scene was

“impossible to elude” in the anthologies about modernist painting and music, “Billeskov Jansen has determined that the new American literature is sufficiently peripheral that it *could* pass unmentioned.” Literary commentators, Wiedemann lamented, were myopically invested in the evolution of literary production in the “oldest” locations in world literary space. Public-facing critics of “English, French, and German literature” were on average “far more aware of the new developments in their fields than those who review American literature” (Wiedemann, “USAs Modernister” 20). In Wiedemann’s view, that is, Danish literary critics were oblivious to the American literary landscape’s postwar transformation. Paris, London, and Berlin dominated the production of public literary knowledge in Denmark, and these circumstances ultimately stripped both Danish readers and writers of the opportunity to encounter and experience modernist prose produced across the Atlantic.

Despite his public endorsement of American modernism, Wiedemann’s critique failed to properly situate American works of fiction within the complex of social forces that structured the production and circulation of literary knowledge in the postwar period. The paucity of public commentary and literary criticism devoted to American literature Wiedemann identified did not outright disqualify American literary artifacts such as *Invisible Man* from acquiring a certain kind of social distinction in Denmark, nor was his 1966 public call for a re-evaluation of aesthetic hierarchies completely in line with the ways in which US-based cultural institutions had begun to impose themselves on European and Danish systems of literary knowledge production after World War II.¹⁰ Indeed, the burgeoning presence in Denmark of scholars and critics who had been raised and/or educated in the United States gradually rectified what literary commentators such as Wiedemann considered an inadequate exploration of American literature. Paul Levine,

for example, was a credentialed expert on American literature who was already working on a book about modern literary criticism and innovative American writers such as “J. D. Salinger, Saul Bellow, Ralph Ellison, Truman Capote, Flannery O’Connor, and William Faulkner” when he arrived in Denmark in 1960 (Malone, “De Kommer” 6).

Levine turned his initial visit to Denmark into a career as a professor of literature at the University of Copenhagen. In 1999, when he reviewed Ellison’s posthumously published *Juneteenth* (1999), Levine situated *Invisible Man* at the advent of a revitalization of American literary production. “*Invisible Man* was published at the beginning of what proved to be a golden era in American fiction,” he wrote. “Just think of Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*, Bellow’s *The Adventures of Augie March*, Flannery O’Connor’s *Wise Blood*, William Gaddis’ *The Recognitions*, Malamud’s *The Assistant*, and Nabokov’s *Lolita*” (15). With the exception of Ellison, Black writers are conspicuously absent from Levine’s indexation of American literature’s postwar revival. This was not an unusual distinction to make. Danish literary commentators had already distinguished Ellison from other Black novelists following the original publication of *Invisible Man* in 1952. Aspiring to a high degree of literariness, Ellison’s debut novel epitomized from the initial moment of its international lifecycle the modernist aesthetic principles that exerted dominance over world literary space. In a February 28, 1953, article surveying the depiction of Black characters throughout American literary history, Niels Kaas Johansen praised the modernist thrust of Ellison’s literary enterprise, in turn associating him with the upper echelon of Anglophone artistic autonomy. “It is characteristic [of Ellison] that *Invisible Man* is prefaced by an epigraph from the literary mandarin T. S. Eliot,” he commended. While he held the view that Ellison’s technique needed improvement, Johansen still conferred the status of an important

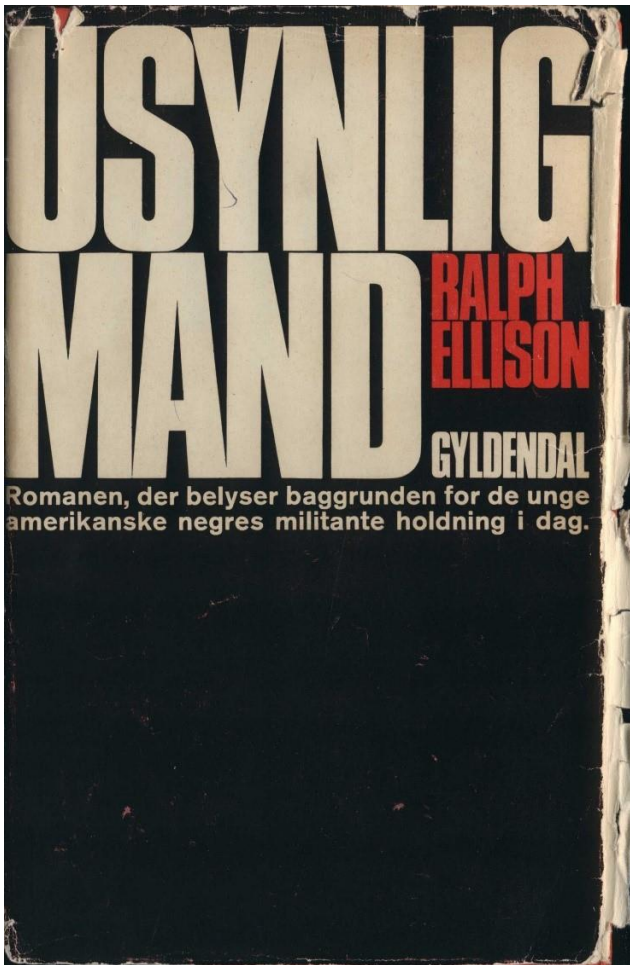
work of art upon *Invisible Man*. The novel “is not prone to sacrifice anything for the sake of exciting effects,” he judged, and Ellison had accordingly managed to “induce awareness among the public about the hopelessness of the social condition of the black race” by raising his “debut novel above . . . documentarian portrayals of society” (2). In Johansen’s view, *Invisible Man* transcended the political orientation of Black American protest novels whose ethnographic descriptions of socio-political demise failed to appease the literary tastemakers’ aesthetic cravings. Although it is difficult to assess its impact, Johansen’s review entrenched Ellison in an economy of socio-cultural distinction, which on one hand attached him to what Casanova calls the “Greenwich meridian” of literary modernity, and on the other set him apart from Black writers whose literary outputs were assessed to be of a more provincial character.¹¹

If *Invisible Man* in some ways operates as a work of world literature, then evaluations of Ellison’s literary reputation in Denmark are “always as much about the host culture’s values and needs as [they are] about a work’s source culture” (Damrosch 283). More than that, however, these evaluations are also a product of Denmark’s relatively marginal position within world literary space. Danish literary critics’ evaluation of textual objects in the immediate postwar period often imitated the ways in which aesthetic judgment was conferred in the “literary capitals” of the world republic of letters. The modes of literary expression that were in vogue in these locations exerted a kind of symbolic dominance upon many, if not all, Danish critics so that the process of aesthetic evaluation in Denmark resembled the process of aesthetic evaluation in more “modern” sites. Considered from this vantage point, Johansen’s 1953 commentary is in part an expression of the high regard he had for Ellison’s novel, yet it is also an indication of how the formal and aesthetic particulars that but-

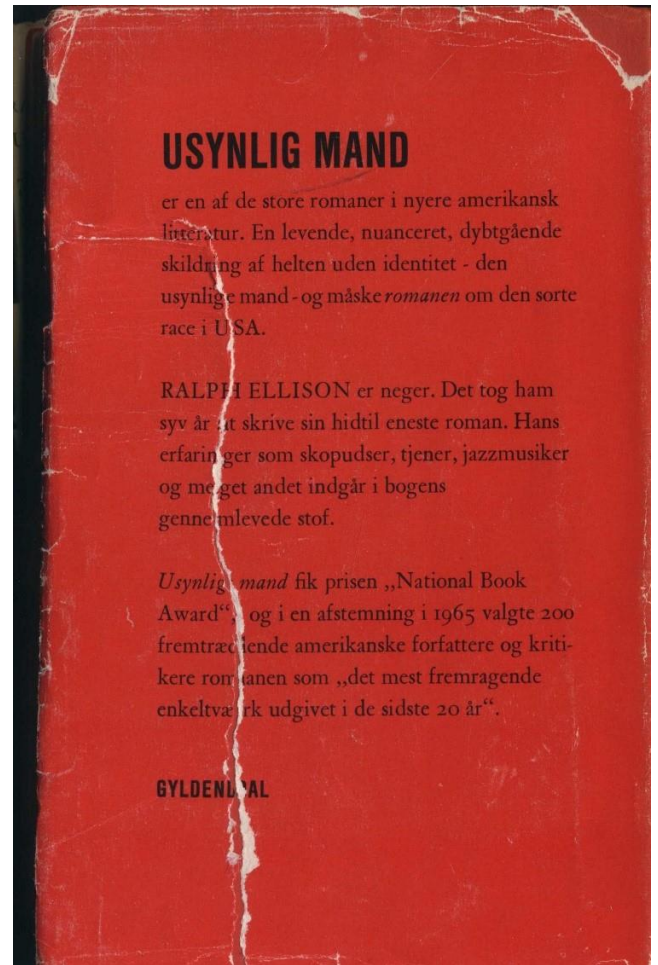
tressed Western European modernism diminished the literary value of nonconforming genres such as the social protest novel. Simply put, in the early 1950s, the main currents in world literary space led through the literary capitals of Western Europe, and the Danish literati unsurprisingly addressed themselves to the locations where they imagined that pure and autonomous literature was produced.

The Materiality of *Usynlig Mand*: Mapping the World Location of American Literature

In the seventeen years spanning the publications of *Invisible Man* and *Usynlig Mand*, American literature came to inhabit a more influential position in world literary space.¹² The reconfiguration of world literary space was inscribed on *Usynlig Mand*’s materiality. Published by Gyldendal, the largest and most storied publishing house in Denmark, *Usynlig Mand* was marketed as a prophetic work of literature. In addition to carrying the title of the novel, the front of the dust jacket offers an intriguing blurb: “The novel that explains the young Negroes’ militant attitudes today.” As an influential institution in the literary marketplace, Gyldendal’s endorsement of the book was intended to maximize its commercial potential. However, the commodification of Ellison’s art, not to mention the Black Power movement, encountered resistance among literary commentators. Henrik Neiiendam celebrated the artistic qualities of *Invisible Man/Usynlig Mand*, noting as well that “Ellison can refer to the fact that his *Invisible Man* is the only Negro novel whose protagonist suffers from a universal problem” (4). Imposing a “color blind”—that is, white—standard of evaluation on the book, Neiiendam rehearsed a typical line of praise: Ellison had managed to transcend the literary idiom of Black American literature, and as a result his novel had something profound to say about the human condition as such.



Front cover of *Usynlig Mand*, the 1969 Danish translation of *Invisible Man*.



Back cover of *Usynlig Mand*, the 1969 Danish translation of *Invisible Man*.

In Neiiendam's view, it was therefore "false advertising when the seventeen-year-old book now is being launched as 'the novel that explains the young Negroes' militant attitudes today'" since the protagonist "exactly" is "not tricked into thinking that he should react militantly towards the surrounding world's blindness" (4). Neiiendam's observations bespeak how Gyldendal, in his view, misled the reading public by construing *Invisible Man* as a text that could not just illuminate but also explain contemporary social and political conflicts. In an unapologetic attempt to enhance sales numbers, the publishing house promoted an alternative portrayal of Ellison's novel that accorded with the broader reading public's practical uses of literature (as a source of entertainment, self-enlightenment, etc.).

Gyldendal's marketing campaign, one might even say, resembled propaganda. Contrary to Neiiendam's critique of Gyldendal's advertising strategy, however, the conceptual properties of "propaganda" do not only carry connotations of deception and misinformation. As Russ Castronovo explains, "propaganda may be defined as publicly disseminated knowledge that serves to influence others in belief or action" (10). Undoubtedly, Gyldendal sought to enhance the commercial value of *Usynlig Mand*, but the historical conditions that underpinned the publication of the translated text might also have affected, even if unintentionally so, the Danish reading public in other ways. After all, Ellison's novel *had* anticipated many of the social and political developments of the explosive 1960s (race

riots, police brutality, etc.). Gyldendal undoubtedly propagated an ahistorical representation of Ellison's novel, but this representation also sought to optimize its circulation across printscapes and in networks of cultural consumption. Perhaps, given the narrative authenticity Neiiendam attributed to *Usynlig Mand*, the propagation of Ellison's thesis about the American nation-state's dialectical constitution to a Danish audience could even be conceptualized as a form of public good. "Texts," Castronovo points out, "are certainly written and imprinted, but propaganda makes them mobile," and this mobility can potentially bring their political visions to life in the social world (10).

Notwithstanding disagreements about Gyldendal's propagandistic presentation of *Usynlig Mand*, the translation of Ellison's celebrated novel had been a highly anticipated literary event. The fact that the novel was translated by Mogens Boisen, a prolific and highly regarded translator whose impressive oeuvre includes translations of Joyce's *Ulysses* (1920) into Danish, suggests as much. According to Ida Klitgård, Boisen was "Denmark's most remarkable translator," and he "allegedly translated around 800 books from English, German, Swedish and French into Danish" (16). *Invisible Man/Usynlig Mand*, it seems, was marked as a potentially important book even before its publication. This hypothesis is further substantiated by the Danish literary commentariat's fabrication of the author figure "Ralph Ellison" prior to Boisen's translation. As noted above, Leonard Malone praised Ellison for his unwillingness to conform to the political doctrine of protest, and he was consequently befuddled that *Invisible Man* had yet to be translated into Danish at his time of writing in 1964:

But when you consider the lively Scandinavian interest in the American race problem, as well as all the literature concerned with this topic that in recent times has

been translated into Scandinavian languages, it is rather curious that *Invisible Man*—the only novel that describes how it *really* is to be an American Negro—still is not translated. ("Fra 'Søn af de Sorte'" 5)¹³

Newspaper ephemera such as Malone's opinion piece validated the narrative authenticity of *Invisible Man* while also imbuing the novel with the power to explore the social ills of a minoritized lifeworld. Even then, it is perhaps Malone's recognition of the "lively Scandinavian interest in the American race problem" that should occasion further investigation since it points toward a general transformation of the Danish perception of the United States in the mid to late 1960s. As a postscript to Malone's immersive article, *Berlingske Aftenavis* wrote: "Seven years in the making, *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison's first novel, was awarded the American literature prize 'National Book Award.'" Despite also including a wildly misleading factoid about Ellison's next book project, the postscript concluded by noting that "Ellison . . . recently" had "been elected to 'The American Academy of Arts and Letters.'"¹⁴ The public's proliferating interest in American culture and politics had seemingly engendered a reaction in the Danish literary field. In this historical moment, indeed, American cultural institutions had enough symbolic sway to warrant inclusion in public discourses about American books in Denmark.

The prestige associated with the American literary scene was incrementally transformed into a valuable symbolic asset during the 1960s. That, at least, is the conclusion which the back of *Usynlig Mand's* dust jacket gestures toward. "*Invisible Man* received the prize 'National Book Award,'" a blurb on the dust jacket reads, "and in a 1965 survey 200 prominent authors and critics selected the novel as 'the most outstanding work of fiction published in the past 20 years.'" As an integral part of its marketing strategy, the publishing house attempted to negotiate the literary

value of *Usynlig Mand* by having recourse to *Book Week's* 1965 survey, where two hundred credentialed authors and critics selected *Invisible Man* to be the work of literature that best represented the preceding twenty years in the United States. Of course, one should not uncritically project Gyldendal's marketization of *Usynlig Mand* onto a broader discussion about literary trends across the globe; doing so risks overstating the significance of a single instance of cultural valuation. Even so, as Michael Maguire remarks, the literary blurb is a paratextual "instrument of distinction and affiliation, hierarchization and classification." So, while *Usynlig Mand's* dustjacket offers no conclusive insights about the actual reception of Ellison's translated novel, it does provide specific cultural-aesthetic and institutional coordinates with which a provisional map of the Danish literary field in the late 1960s can be sketched. According to this map, American literary criticism and US-based literary prizes had reached a level of cultural resonance in Denmark that allowed Gyldendal to convert the symbolic power associated with Ellison in the United States into a commercial asset in Denmark. Cultural actors and institutions that nominally belonged to different domains in the global field of cultural production thus worked symbiotically together to construct in the imagination of the Danish literary public the author figure "Ralph Ellison" and the book *Usynlig Mand*.

Conclusion

My reconstructive analysis of the 1969 publication and reception of *Usynlig Mand* points to the world location of American literature. The residue of the novel's paratextual apparatus that has survived to this day exposes the construction of a geographically delimited American literature as an ideological fiction, not a material fact. For one thing, the translation of novels into other languages makes these books available to new reading publics, and thus new systems of

reception and evaluation. More importantly, though, criteria of evaluation that have been imported from the most dominant locations in world literary space shape the backdrop against which a literary artifact such as *Invisible Man* can be comprehended as a valuable work of art in the first place—in the United States, in Denmark, or elsewhere.

Aesthetic principles are not confined by geographical borders in the same way that political subjects are, and they can in fact exert their own kind of symbolic dominance over the global field of cultural production. This was certainly the case in the mid-twentieth-century transatlantic world where, as Richard Jean So has demonstrated, a carefully curated selection of Black American writers were—and have continuously been—tokenized to represent a supposed transformation of twentieth-century American literary production. The institutionalization of American literature's supposed postwar diversification hinged on the embrace of minoritized authors—especially Black authors—who incorporated a modernist, and later on a postmodernist, aesthetic into their writing. Accordingly, as the case of Ralph Ellison suggests, this institutionalization process was not delimited by territorial borders. Literary cultures outside the United States are affected by the evaluation and reception of texts performed by US-based critics and institutions, but these texts are in turn legitimized as artifacts worthy of critical engagement when they are received well in new cultural contexts. This was certainly the case in the postwar transatlantic sphere, an historical moment during which the major nodes of world literary space were in flux, gradually shifting from the literary capitals of Western Europe to locations in the United States such as New York City.

The seventeen years of literary history explored in this article—1952 to 1969—reflect the reorganization of postwar world literary space. More than that, however, the article's immersion in

this historical period also breaks down neat, nationally specific divisions of literary production, reception, and institutionalization. The discursive construction of the author figure “Ralph Ellison” in the American literary field can be *distinguished* from the construction of “Ralph Ellison” in the Danish literary field, for example, but these two processes are still fundamentally inseparable. The power structure that underpins relations in world literary space turns on an uneven formation of aesthetic dominance and sub-

mission, to be sure, but it still pinpoints an inevitable form of literary relationality that transcends the nation-state. Taking seriously the proposition that literary borders are porous and symbiotic, and that literary production and reception always occur as part of a networked global field, thus affords a strategy for specifying the world location of American literature.

Notes

1. For more on Bourdieu's writings about the literary field, see *The Field of Cultural Production* and *The Rules of Art*.

2. For more on Ellison's political and philosophical visions, see Morel, ed. *Ralph Ellison and the Raft of Hope*.

3. For a critical assessment of "the transnational turn," see Fluck, Pease, and Rowe, eds., *Re-Framing the Transnational Turn in American Studies*.

4. Ellison scholars have too frequently been blinded by the author's own insistence on theorizing a relationship between his novel and the American nation-state. See for example Conner and Morel, eds., *The New Territory: Ralph Ellison and the Twenty-First Century* and Muyumba, *The Shadow and the Act: Black Intellectual Practice, Jazz Improvisation, and Philosophical Pragmatism*. In recent years, critics have started to unpack the global complexity of Ellison's authorship. For more on Ellison's international author location, see Devlin, ed., *Ralph Ellison in Context*.

5. For a rich and theoretically dense definition of "authority," see Leypoldt, "Introduction: Authority and Trust in the United States."

6. I am responsible for this translation, as well as all other translations included in this article.

7. For an historical account of the Danish public's many-sided and not always affirmative views on the United States, as well as the Cold War more generally, see for example Petersen and Sørensen, eds., *Den Kolde Krig På Hjemmefronten*.

8. For more on the transformation of institutional conditions of literary production in twentieth-century United States, see McGurl, *The Program Era*.

9. Born and raised in the United States, Malone, a Black man, had settled in Denmark in the early 1960s. He was an important contributor to public debates about Black American culture and politics.

10. The American-Scandinavian Foundation's Fellowships and Grants program, founded in 1912, tangibly influenced the production of literary knowledge at the University of Copenhagen in the latter half of the twentieth century, for instance. Moreover, cultural diplomatic initiatives such as the Fulbright Program allowed American critics and scholars to involve themselves with Western European publics and insti-

tutions. For more on how the Danish media landscape was affected by "Americanization processes," see Rasmussen, "Educational Exchange as a Cold War Weapon" and "The Americanization of Danish Journalism."

11. For more on the Greenwich meridian of literary modernity, see Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, 82–102.

12. This development was not unlike the changes that manifested in the transatlantic cultural sphere more generally. Various described as processes of "Americanization" and "cultural imperialism," all things American saturated Western Europe in the 1960s. For an exhaustive account of how the American state apparatus recruited and economically subsidized writers, intellectuals, and artists so they would produce works of art and thought that aligned with the ideological outlook of the United States, see Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War*.

13. Similar to other Danish literary commentators, Leonard Malone was apparently unaware of Torsten Blomkvist's Swedish translation from 1953.

14. *Berlingske Aftenavis* incorrectly stated that Ellison was at work on a new book entitled "The Nobel Savage [sic]," a chapter of which had been published in *The American Literary Quarterly*.

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