

The Sentimental Eloquence of the Black American Scholar:

Ellison's *Invisible* "Man Thinking" and Feeling

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Abstract

Grief is one of the most powerful sentiments depicted in literary works throughout human history. In the cultural history of the U.S., the open expression of grief by means of public mourning mostly stands in the African American tradition. One of the most outstanding African American literary figures of the twentieth century is Ralph Ellison. His *Invisible Man* (1952) represents an epitome of modern sentimentalism when it comes to the political project of mourning America. Despite the wide attention dedicated to the work, critics have paid scarce attention to Ellison's close ties to nineteenth-century sentimentalism. This especially applies to the author's ambivalent relation to Ralph Waldo Emerson and his vision of the "American Scholar." The present article analyzes the complex employment of Emersonian thought "revised à la Ellison" (Lee 336) in a contextual reading which regards *Invisible Man* and its sentimental function within the larger network of literary, social, and political discourse. It argues that Ellison's *Invisible Man* reflects Emerson's American Scholar as "*Man Thinking*" and feeling. The mourning of a free and equal America thus turns out to be a powerful element of the sentimental mode. The close-reading analysis shows in how far both authors can be read to be writing in the sentimental tradition which, in contrast to many critics' opinions, has not lost its appeal but continues to echo in the language of contemporary political figures such as Obama.

Keywords

Invisible Man, American Scholar, sentimentalist mode, democracy, mourning, eloquence, oratory, Emersonianism, Obama

The reception of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* is overshadowed by either dazzling light or infinite darkness due to the contrasting critical voices it provoked. Soon after its publication in 1952, critics acknowledged that Ellison had created more than a 'typical' African American novel on protest and separatist sentiment (Graham and Mack 34). Instead he challenged his audience with a multi-layered literary puzzle that did not aim to achieve less than depicting American identity and its relation to race in an age of tumultuous societal transition (Jackson 198). Even more outstanding than the vast thematic range of the novel is its encyclopedic incorporation of historical literary figures (Lee, "Ellison's Racial Variations" 421). The man who, as he once stated, had "read everything" (Ellison, *Shadow* 16) sought to blend his knowledge of the literary canon into an artistic masterpiece that would soon be granted a spot in the pantheon of American fiction writing. Ellison thus rejected restricting himself to the authorial agency of Ellison. Like the true "Genius" that "borrows nobly" (Emerson, "Quotation" 191), he perfected the art of quoting "by necessity, by proclivity and by delight" (178). His narrative voice thus contains traces of Melville, Joyce,¹ and Eliot (Bloom, *Guides* 17; Parrish 18). This often ambivalent yet highly transformative borrowing of words from his literary forefathers also gained him the status of an "African American Thoreau" (Parrish 5).

This link to nineteenth-century literature draws attention to one of the most prominent literary counterparts of Thoreau, namely Ellison's namesake Ralph Waldo Emerson. The literary heritage of the man Ellison's father had chosen as his son's eponym would become a primary source for the African American novelist (Busby 128). *Invisible Man*² thus reads like an anthology of appropriated and extended Emersonian philosophy. Yet, as critics have extensively argued, this close entanglement between the two authors is highly controversial, particularly when it comes to the question of race. The charge of Emerson's alleged "xenophobic Saxonism" runs like a red thread through the secondary literature (Lee, "Ellison's *Invisible Man*" 334). Emerson's famous model of "The American Scholar" as "Man Thinking" expressed in his 1837 address is therefore commonly interpreted as the vision of the *white* "Man Thinking" (Emerson, "American Scholar"³ 54). This perception stands in stark contrast to Ellison's abundant

¹ It was Joyce's work which provided Ellison with the inspiration for the title "Invisible Man." Based on Joyce's concept of invisibility, Ellison sought to create a fundamental consciousness of race ("Lawrence Jackson" 55).

² All further references to the same edition are abbreviated by *IM*. Whenever the nameless protagonist is meant, the abbreviation is IM (without italics).

³ All further references to the same edition are abbreviated by "AS."

integration of Emersonian thought in *IM*. Expressed in the vocabulary of jazz music, some critics see Emerson as a “duet partner” of Ellison in his quest to promote self-reliance (Hanlon 79). Others interpret *IM* as a parody and thus mocking of Emerson (Lee, “Ellison’s *Invisible Man*” 331; Hanlon 78).

Much work by literary critics has been invested into lamenting this “interpretive crux” caused by the two authors (Grusin 404). The following investigation does not want to add to this seemingly insoluble quest. Instead it seeks to analyze the complex employment of Emersonian thought “revised à la Ellison” from a formerly neglected perspective, namely: sentimentalism (Lee, “Ellison’s *Invisible Man*” 336). Based on a contextual reading of Ellison’s *IM* and its function within the larger framework of historical, social, and political discourse, the article investigates the formative elements of Emerson’s American Scholar in the context of literary sentimentalism. It argues that the mourning of democracy in Ellison and Emerson takes place along sentimentalist tropes which continue to resonate in cultural and political discourse up to the present. Eventually, the article suggests a redefinition of sentimentalism as decisive textual mode which needs to be granted proper attention within current American and Cultural Studies.

(Re-)Defining Sentimental Eloquence

Categorizing both the twentieth-century author Ellison and the nineteenth-century transcendentalist Emerson as sentimental writers seems to be far from the imaginable in postmodern times. When thoroughly tracing the origin and elements of sentimentalism from a novel and less normative perspective, however, it turns out that the task is not that daunting at all. A thorough dissection of sentimentalism and its formative characteristics therefore suggests that the concept is by far more complex than the conventional understanding of love, family, and domesticity suggests.

The origin of sentimentalism in the history of American Literature dates back to the nineteenth century. The period that later became known as the era of separate spheres was also the time when women’s novels and poetry started to flourish (Levander 2; Dillon 505). As Glenn Hendler in his study *Public Sentiments* suggests, the nineteenth-century novel served as a “public instrument designed to play a sentimental key” (1). American authors, mostly female, thus took up the tradition of British sentimentalism of the 18th century with *Charlotte Temple* by Susanna

Rowson as the forerunner (Fluck 17; Ellis 2). The plot of the sentimental novel was mostly concerned with the depiction of intense emotion, family life, moral seduction and the struggle between reason and feeling (Fluck 18). Especially this overly emotional style of writing gave way to the image of nineteenth-century sentimentalism as ruled by a “mob of scribbling women” (Dillon 495; Dobson 263). The *Dictionary of Literary Terms* reflects this negative view by offering the following definition of the sentimental novel: “For the most part a pejorative term to describe false or superficial emotion, assumed feeling, self-regarding postures of grief and pain.” In addition, sentimental writing “denotes overmuch use of pathetic effects and attempts to arouse feeling by ‘pathetic’ indulgence” (Cuddon 809).

One of the major consequences of these “dismissive evaluations” is the neglect of sentimentalism in critical studies (Dobson 264; Ellis 3). When exploring the reasons for this lack of interest, one finds that the aesthetics of sentimental literature itself are only partly responsible for the negative reception. Another reason can be located in the changing self-concept of literary scholarship and its self-set goals. As Winfried Fluck in his highly illuminating and concise essay “Sentimentality and the Changing Functions of Fiction” (1991) remarks, the derogatory notion of sentimentalism as “inauthentic writing” only circulated in the age of modernist criticism (15). Until then, the “fate and function of sentimentality” had not caused any irritation up to the point where literary criticism developed its expectation of realistic representation and a focus on reason as key determinants of valuable writing (Fluck 18). This triggered “blanket condemnations” of sentimentalism as the depiction of “false sentiment” reign (Dobson 279).

While a wide number of texts deals with the depreciation of sentimentalism in American Studies, there is considerably less work on the question of what “sentimentalism” actually means. Obviously, sentimentalism is mostly associated with intense emotions in the plot which in turn steer intense emotions on the part of the audience. As a refined look at sentimentalist texts demonstrates, this equation of ‘emotion equals sentimentalism’ is too simplified. The dictionary definition of the adjective ‘sentimental’ reads “marked or governed by feeling, sensibility, or emotional idealism” (def. 1a) and “resulting from feeling rather than reason or thought” (def. 1b). The etymology of the word underlines this definition of sentiment as private in opposition to public feeling (Hendler 2). This dominance of emotion as major component of sentimentalism also requires a detailed exploration of the concept of emotions. Eric Watts King in his rhetorical analysis of the aesthetics and politics of the New Negro Movement provides the following definition: “Emotion is qualified intensity, the conventional, consensual point of insertion of intensity into semantically and semiotically formed progression, into narrativizable action-

reaction circuits, into function and meaning” (14). As he furthermore points out, it is essential to differentiate between emotion and affect. While emotions are decisive for an “affective theory” since they determine the “functionality and rationality of speech” (Watts 15), “affective stylistics” are more effects-oriented in the context of reader response theory (Cuddon).⁴

This clarification of the key terms allows one to arrive at a reformed understanding of sentimentalism and ultimately sentimental eloquence. Emotions in sentimentalism play a role as plot elements and themes. More specifically than labeling these emotions as love, hate and grief, Fluck identifies the following dominant emotional pattern as driving emotional themes and conflicts: (a) “a painful separation from an object of affection and thus from an experience of union and wholeness” (18), (b) a “cycle of gains and losses” (33), (c) “seduction or deception” (16). Especially the latter element of seduction must be read in the context of the dualism between head and heart reigning sentimental literature. Seduction here represents the weakness of human character whereby the heart wins over the rational mind. This deception can only be countered by the formation of individual character and personal growth in the fight between “moral triumph” or “seduction” (Fluck 25). The issue of morality also calls attention to another important function of emotions in sentimental literature which exceeds their importance as mere themes but as effects. Fluck introduces this “theory of effect” which stands in opposition to sentimentalism as aesthetic⁵ mode (12). According to this approach, the function of the sentimental novel is to allow “access to moral order” (Fluck 23) by means of “emotional activation” (Fluck 30). A changing concept of the function of literature also changes the analytical framework applied by literary scholars. This happened, for example, with the changing view of sentimentalism to derogatory in the modern era (Fluck 16).

It is the acknowledgement of this function-oriented framework which not only requires one to devote to sentimental literature of the nineteenth century its proper analytical attention (Dobson 265). This conception moves away from the sentimental text and its artistic elements as major object of analysis but instead emphasizes the position of the subject and its social networks. As Dobson describes, sentimentalism “envisions the self-in-relation” based on a mostly “affectional connection” (267). This dynamic and inclusive approach also gives way to a

⁴ The differentiation between emotion and affect also highlights in how far the increasing importance of affect in current interdisciplinary literary studies cannot be equated with a rediscovery of sentimentalism at large. Despite definitorial differences, studies following the affective turn mostly investigate material representations related to the public expression of personal affect, such as the manifestation of public grief at national memorials (Doss 13).

⁵ Sentimentalism until the cultural turn was mostly used as an aesthetic category. The first major publication which investigated sentimentalism within a broader network of culture was Samuel’s *The Culture of Sentiment* (1992). Here, the author explores the modes of nineteenth-century sentimentalism with a focus on gender and race (Dillon 496).

redefinition of sentimentalism which is not merely rooted in a historical period but based on characteristic plot elements as well as on the observation of cultural effects achieved via sentimental texts. Such a more comprehensive definition of sentimentalism is provided by Elizabeth Dillon:

The excessive nature of sentimentalism might be seen to lie in the way in which emotion is placed in the service of other ends. While emotion is produced subjectively and thus generates within the individual a sense of subjective autonomy, it is nonetheless then connected to a higher moral and political end in sentimental discourse. Sentimentalism thus concerns both an affective immediacy (subjective autonomy) and a formal heteronomy—the connection of emotion to political and cultural ideals and aims.” (515).

While Dobson refers to nineteenth-century literature in her *Sentimental Aesthetics*, this definition sets the groundwork to escaping the notion of sentimentalism as literary phenomenon of the past but to instead regard it as cultural mode which has continued through modernism up to the present (Fluck 16). This “sentimental mode” (Dobson 268) rests on the above-mentioned emotional themes which are transmitted via “sentimental language” (Dobson 269). The most important characteristic of this language is its transparency, simplicity and “thematic richness” in the displaying of affect (Dobson 279). This language in turn is able to create cultural and political meaning based on “sincere emotion” (Dobson 269) in the realm of “sentimental discourse” or, as Fluck puts it, in a “cultural system of sentimentality” (Fluck 19).

This embracing of sentimentalism as literary mode also shifts one’s attention away from the nineteenth-century novel as primary sentimental medium. Sentimental tropes can therefore also be detected in other cultural formats, such as films and other visual material (Fluck 31). This finding expands the focus from literary studies toward narrative and rhetorical studies. The text from this perspective turns into a “rhetorical act” and is not considered an object (Phelan and Rabinowitz 3). The three most important analytical elements of this conception are its multi-dimensionality including affective responses in the audience but also in various “internal audiences” of the respective works (Phelan and Rabinowitz (3-4). This stresses the importance of sentimental eloquence as analytical unit with eloquence being defined as “discourse marked by force and persuasiveness” (def. 1). Eventually, this expanded rhetorical approach to sentimentalism as eloquence, not merely as literary mode, includes non-written forms of

expression, such as public speech. Here, sentimentalism takes the shape of a “structure of experience” being shared with a particular audience or with the public in general (Hendler 10).⁶

Sentimentalism as eloquence with a function-oriented focus in cultural discourse sets the basis for a challenging task. It allows one to trace the path of sentimentalism throughout the literary and cultural history of the U.S. from the early roots of sentimentalism in the 1800s up to the present. This task begins with exploring the origins of the American Scholar in Renaissance literature and his struggle between emotion and rationality.

The (Black) American Scholar

In light of the prevalent notion surrounding the persona of Emerson as blatant racist (Lee, “Ellison’s *Invisible Man*” 333-34), the idea of the American Scholar as *Black* Scholar appears rather absurd at first. Above all, Emerson’s vision of the American Scholar is commonly regarded to reflect the incarnation of a self-reliant male Anglo-Saxon “hero” figure endowed with all the preliminaries to lead the nation to the “promised land” (Whicher 16). A closer look at the formative elements characterizing the American Scholar, however, reveals that Emerson’s actual characterization of the ideal American Scholar is not limited to any skin color.⁷

“The office of the scholar is to cheer, to raise and to guide men by showing them facts amidst appearances,” Emerson states in his famous essay “The American Scholar” (63). In order to do so, the scholar has to undergo several stages in his education. Counter to the conventional understanding of scholarship, Emerson’s idea of education does not depend on a scientific curriculum. In the vein of nineteenth-century transcendentalism, “Man Thinking” is to be equipped with the power of nature working through the individual to gain scholarly insight (“AS” 55). Whereas science is the result of acquired skills and the product of “laborious reading” (“AS” 59), scholarship connotes an innate kind of knowledge which manifests itself in the ability to see “absolute truth” (“AS” 57). This influence of nature and the importance of sensual experience in order to gain deeper, that is scholarly, insight, already indicates that scholarship to Emerson can only exist if rationality and sensibility work in unison. Presupposing this notion of scholarship, it

⁶ This also points to the seeming “oxymoron” separating sentiment as private from the public realm (Hendler 2). Hendler’s definition of sentiments as “structures of *experience*” is in line with the notion of sentimental eloquence chosen as *modus operandi* in the present study (10). Most importantly, this definition allows for the investigation of sentimentalism as open-ended “process” in different forms of cultural expression (Hendler 11).

⁷ This focus on race in the context of the discussion around IM as black American Scholar neither rejects nor affirms that other identity characteristics, e.g. gender and class, are relevant to Emerson’s conception of Man Thinking.

can be inferred that Man Thinking at the same time but without explicit enunciation includes Man Feeling. Nature, however, is not the only influence leading to true scholarship.

Next to the influence of nature, Emerson emphasizes the impact of history. As he writes: “The scholar is that man who must take up into himself all the ability of the time, all the contributions of the past, all the hopes of the future” (“AS” 70). History as comprehensive nourishment of the scholar’s potential also leads one to the aspect of race. Emerson delivered his oration “The American Scholar” when the Abolitionist Movement was just emerging. Emerson himself was sceptical of the success of emancipation which gained him the reputation as “mild racist,” as Cornell West once called him (qtd. in Magee 97). Yet, “[t]here is Emerson and there is Emerson,” Magee ironically sketches Emerson’s stance on the question of race (96). Emerson’s stressing of the importance of history for the scholar actually runs counter to the argument of racism. The past of America is inherently intertwined with the history of slavery in the New World. Any American Scholar therefore, either black or white, incorporates this legacy. In other words, the American Scholar will always combine the ambiguity reflected in his black past, just as the black American Scholar embodies the white legacy presiding over his past and present faith. Maryemma Graham and Jeffery Mack summarize this multi-colored American identity by stating: “[W]hatever it means to be an American, it means to be ‘somehow black’ . . .” (52).⁸

These formative elements of scholarship as result of experience, not academic drill, the innate ability to arrive at insights beyond mere cognition through nature, as well as the influence of history challenge the notion of the American Scholar merely as white scholar. In how far a black scholar can combine all these characteristics is demonstrated by Ellison’s nameless protagonist IM. His narrative constitutes an alternative bildungsroman in the way that it displays not only personal growth in general but his path to American Scholarship. At the beginning of the story, IM is a college student with the vision of becoming a scholar in the traditional sense, namely a professor in academia, like the role models at the Southern University he attends. Blindly following the doctrine of Booker T. Washington (Kostelanetz 284), he sees this as the ultimate means to “uplifting the race” (*IM* 140). In the course of the events, he is gradually forced to distance himself from this idea. The initial moment of his separation from the school as a

⁸ Ellison was frequently attacked for his lacking sense of protest. In response, he published the essay “The World and the Jug,” in which he lays out his differentiated understanding of African American identity as linked to American history. He virulently rejects demands to define himself primarily through his racial identity. “While I am without doubt a Negro, and a writer,” Ellison states, “I am also an American writer . . .” (*Shadow* 125). To him, this did not run counter to his work as active political resistance: “The protest is there, not because I was helpless before my racial condition, but because I *put* it there” (*Shadow* 137).

scientific institution thus marks his first step to becoming a true scholar in the Emersonian sense. But this does not mean that the concept of science leaves him. After losing his first job at a paint factory, he again comes in touch with a presumably scientific organization; the so-called Brotherhood. The interracial activist group seeks to cure social ills on the basis of a communist agenda. “We are the champions of a scientific approach to society,” Brother Jack, the front man of the Brotherhood lets the young student know and underlines how easily the concept of science can be appropriated in different contexts (*IM* 350).

This characterization of IM as seeking academic scholarship and finally turning toward alternative modes of knowledge gain signals the parallels between Emerson’s American Scholar and IM. The latter’s personal development as a result of his learning experiences actually commences as soon as he turns away from purely rational science in the academy. Yet, it is not only learning based on personal experience which gives way to his path to true scholarship in the Emersonian sense. The impact of history complements this process. When IM gets expelled from college after taking the white trustee Mr. Norton⁹ to a black bar, his enforced departure from the South turns into an escape on a more abstract level. Above all, the young narrator wants to get away from the shame and degradation he experiences after supposedly having “dragged the entire race into the slime,” as college president Bledsoe scolds (*IM* 141). More than anything, however, IM tries to flee his Southern past which is still ingrained in the memories of the black population on the college campus and its surroundings (Kostelanetz 296). The increasing geographical distance he gains from the campus, however, does not help IM achieve absolute distance between himself and his black American past.

The narrator when coming to the North gets even further caught up in History.¹⁰ The long arm of America’s slavery past reaches out to the social and political context in which he finds himself. Although initially resistant to accept the force of History acting upon him, he later starts embracing the rightfulness and value of black life in Harlem. An almost trivial event signifies IM’s changing attitude toward the legacy of the past and its personal impact. When he buys pieces of sweet yam at a street vendor, something that intensely enlivens his Southern childhood memories, IM slowly comes to accept his Southern history. “They’re [yam] my birthmark,” he explains to the vendor, “I yam what I am,” he then adds (*IM* 266). In the further course of events,

⁹ Critics have argued that Mr. Norton due to his intentional “misreadings of Emerson” represents a parody of the historical figure which in turn is taken as evidence for Ellison’s rejection of Emersonian thought (Hanlon 82-83).

¹⁰ History here is capitalized in order to emphasize the allusion to Emerson’s essay “History” (1841) in which he presents a detailed elaboration on the circular impact of the past on the individual (237).

IM takes over a leading role in the Brotherhood which boosts his engagement with the black American past, for history in the organization serves as a powerful rhetorical instrument. History and its active transformation become buzzwords of the Brotherhood. The members even toast “To History” (IM 310). IM at first fails to notice that the view of history represented by the Brotherhood is flawed due to its teleological underpinnings. Instead, history to him becomes another part of his scholarly education. “I’d have to catch up with this science of history business,” he admits (*IM* 311). Science in this context again is a fallacious concept standing in opposition to the historical reading of the scholar. A crucial event in the Brotherhood then makes IM realize the overarching power of history.

At the mourning scene of his late brother Tod Clifton, IM realizes that history haunts man beyond death. The narrator explains that Clifton who had claimed that “sometimes a man has to plunge outside history . . .” has not lost his historical voice (*IM* 377). The death of Clifton on the contrary is the incident that comes to shape all subsequent events unlike any action committed by the living. The act of plunging out of history therefore paradoxically becomes the means to shaping the course of historical events through the distance created thereby—a pattern that ultimately relates to Emerson’s notion of History. This deeper understanding of the Past, though, exceeds the one of the supposedly scientific Brotherhood with the latter regarding history as something that can be “controlled by . . . science” (*IM* 382). IM after the death of his fellow Brotherhood member instantly comes to question human control over the course of history. “What if history was a gambler,” he thus asks, “instead of a force in a laboratory experiment . . . ? What if history was not a reasonable citizen, but a madman . . . ?” (*IM* 441). Besides this critical insight, IM still does not totally release the idea of somehow escaping the forces of the past by fulfilling his duty as a black leader and helping others get “outside the groove of history” (*IM* 443). Only when he descends into invisibility does he finally accept the Emersonian notion of circular history.

When reading IM’s path of life alongside Emerson’s concept of the American Scholar, the full potential of black Scholarship unfolds. Ellison reads Emerson’s distinguished understanding of scholarship in opposition to traditional science and innovatively situates it in a network of conflicting definitions. IM thus undergoes the sentimental struggle between rationality and emotion, between external control and self-determination and free will. This dominant conflict not only demonstrates *IM*’s ties to nineteenth-century writing, but it also directly points to key elements of the sentimental mode. Yet, the sketch of IM as black American Scholar who

struggles with the mandate of rationality is only one indicator of the work's literary entanglement with the sentimental tradition. The power of language marks another decisive element.

Black Scholarship in Practice

There goes in the world a notion, that the scholar should be a recluse, a valetudinarian, -- as unfit for any handiwork or public labor, as a penknife for an axe. The so-called 'practical men' sneer at speculative men, as if, because they speculate or *see*, they do nothing . . . Action is with the scholar subordinate, but is essential. ("AS" 59-60)

Quite incomprehensibly for some critics, Emerson in the above-quoted passage underlines the complementary relation between theory and practice.¹¹ Due to the high degree of abstraction in his philosophy, the question still remains what 'action' constitutes for the scholar. This puzzle can only be solved in conjunction with Emerson's elaborations on the forceful role of language. As Emerson's notion of the American Scholar as Man Thinking suggests, the task of intellectual work cannot be separated from the realm of language. Words, either written or spoken, for the scholar initiate action and thus represent acts through which Man practices progress ("AS" 59). Yet, words remain without practical impact unless they are made public. Intellectual labor therefore needs to turn into the "the perfection and publication of thought . . ." (Wilson 92).

Language as the most powerful instrument of the scholar here does not stand in isolation from the influence of history the American Scholar is subjected to. The scholar needs to be able to decipher and interpret this history for the public. As Emerson states, "history is to be read and written" ("History" 255). The American Scholar has to accept this calling and engage in writing because "[e]ach age, it is found, must write its own books; or rather, each generation for the next succeeding. The books of an older period will not fit this" ("AS" 57). In other words, the "move to know and act is inextricably linked to writing" (Field 13). Matters of history and politics, of originality and quotation, for Emerson thus cannot be thought separately from the realm of language (Graham and Singh 91). Since writing presupposes but also creates agency, the act of recording thoughts and observations must be linked to the action of the individual whose subjective experience comprises a symbolic dimension (Kostelanetz 285). The "making of self

¹¹ Harold Bloom as one of the most poignant critics of Emerson once called him the most "inescapable theorist of all subsequent American writing" (Introduction 1). As he explains, "it is something of a puzzle how he [Emerson] ever got to be regarded as anything other than a rather frightening theoretician of life or of letters" (Introduction 4).

and fiction” is thus naturally entangled with the “making of history” (Callahan, “Chaos” 132). Language therefore bridges Emerson’s somewhat abstract idealism with the realm of practical politics (Grusin 408).¹² Exactly this inseparable relation between history, politics, language and writing is reflected in IM’s narrative.

In his introduction to *Invisible Man* from 1981, Ralph Ellison testifies to the practical dimension of Emersonian philosophy. “[W]hile fiction is but a form of symbolic action,” he explains, “a mere game of ‘as if,’ therein lies its true function and its potential for effecting change. For at its most serious, just as is true of politics at its best, it is a thrust toward a human ideal” (IM xx). True to this belief in the power of language and writing as scholarship in practice, IM’s development toward Black Scholarship is inherently bound to the power of language. On the intra-textual level of the plot, the differentiation between science and mere activism as opposed to scholarship as comprehensive convolution of theory and practice is most prominent. IM in the Brotherhood is thus cautioned to “speak scientifically” but what this understanding of science really implies, he learns quickly afterwards (359). “Remember too, that theory always comes after practice. Act first, theorize later . . . ,” he is told (359). The “literary surgeon” Ellison thus dissects the concept of science to reveal its nature as a theoretically meaningless practice which only gains intellectual value after action has taken place (Forrest 280). In slight contrast to Emerson, theory and action are indeed first seen to stand in opposition to each other for they cannot take place at the same time. In the end, however, science due to its practical and manipulative underpinnings clearly stands in contrast to true scholarship. As long as IM is caught up in this network of artificial scientific activism, he is not able to complete his journey toward American Scholarship. Only at the moment when he discovers his invisibility and the drawbacks of common science is he able to move further in his transformation. This is where narration itself gains Emersonian meaning as a sentimental practice as he decides to tell his personal story.

The movement away from the conventional definition of scholarship toward scholarly practice by means of expression characterizes the plot of IM’s narrative. On a structural level of the novel, this narration turns into a scholarly act itself. IM thus follows Emerson’s roadmap to scholarship by employing language as his primary tool as he finds the courage and voice to narrate his story (Callahan, “Frequencies of Eloquence”). This notion of practical scholarship as expressed via the transparent word also reflects one of the crucial components of nineteenth-century sentimentalism. Literature due to its focus on emotions and the transparency of language

¹² In his analysis of the “American Scholar,” Rob Wilson plays on the idea of Emerson as a representative of what he calls a “literary intellectual” (91). According to Wilson, this category comprises novelists, poets, and scholars who have “discursive power and social irrelevance” (91).

circulated widely in the larger public that was highly attracted to the moving depictions found in Romantic writings. This naturally brought about a political impact because this new and expanded readership also included those who did not count as educated in any scientific way (Ellis 3). The practical American Scholar thus was the one consuming and reinventing the ideas formulated by historical precursors to make a practical impact by means of sentimental language. This also meant that the group of authors grew in size and diversity as formerly neglected groups gained a public voice. Female authors count as the most prominent representatives of the period. African Americans constitute the second group of literary actors gaining public visibility. It was at this crucial point in American literary history that sentimental literature reached a political status by means of expressing “humanitarian sentiment” on the slavery question (Ellis 50). This emancipatory process characterizes the potential of the black American Scholar in the nineteenth century and is reflected in IM’s narrative of the historical race struggles culminating in the century that followed. This close tie to the sentimental tradition especially encompasses the highly emotional tone of IM’s narrative.

The Mourning of the Black American Scholar

Hardly any emotion in life and literature is more powerful than the one of grief. According to Freud, grief is defined as “desirable and normal response to loss because it has a finite duration” (Tettenborn 104). In contrast to the constant state of melancholia,¹³ mourning therefore constitutes a process which ultimately fulfils a liberating purpose by allowing the mourner to embrace something new after letting go of a lost person or object (Tettenborn 104-5). Certainly, American literary history provides powerful evidence that mourning not only functions as a “lament for a disappeared body” but also responds to the loss of a “fictive body” by giving way to literary production (Holloway 33). This especially applies to the Romantic period. As Susan Field argues, the theme of loss is universal, yet, it is “arguably the seed of romantic philosophy generally” with “nineteenth-century sentimental mourning” as its most powerful emotional ingredient (8). It was therefore in the nineteenth century when literary depictions of mourning turned from private to public (Field 6). Personal experiences of loss were thus used as catalysts for intensive “self-re-examination” (Field 10). This consequently animated cultural

¹³ To highlight the temporal definition of grief in reference to melancholia, Tettenborn describes melancholia as “infinite mourning” (118). Since the former mostly has symbolic meaning, it is not to be equated with the clinical state of depression in psychological and ultimately pathological terms (Tettenborn 103).

critics to grieve the national political and social tragedy of the “American promise not realized”—an America unable to overcome the cleavages between different genders, races, and class segments (Field 18).

When analyzing the theme of mourning in the writings of Emerson, his philosophy serves as powerful confirmation of this ambivalent yet highly creative approach to loss as constructive emotional response. Emerson makes this explicit in his essay “Friendship” in which he copes with the death of his son Waldo: “[I]t would leave me as it found me, -- neither better nor worse.” “. . . So it is with calamity: it does not touch me I grieve the grief that can teach me nothing, nor carry me one step into real nature” (473). Despite Emerson’s image as a reclusive privatist, this often (mis-)interpreted passage provides evidence of his ability to express strong emotions (Lee, “Ellison’s *Invisible Man*” 332). The tone of the passage connotes a gloomy feeling of transience. This also applies to grief as an overarching and recurrent theme in Emerson’s writings. Mourning here does not function as the mere depiction of a temporary emotion. Instead it becomes a method, a means allowing the scholar to criticize and simultaneously theorize what might exist in the future. Just like friendship to him is defined by distance rather than by banal intimacy, grief does not primarily connote the loss of something that “falls off . . . and leaves no scar” (“Experience” 473). As Sharon Cameron in her analysis of Emerson’s concept of mourning suggests, grief fosters the “dissociation that facilitates power” (25). Bloom underlines this finding when stating that the “enigma of grief in Emerson, after all, may be the secret cause of his strength . . .” (Introduction 7). Emerson with his practice of literary mourning therefore does not conjure up an “apocalyptic ending” (Rice 7). Instead “[g]rief too will make us idealists,” Emerson infers (“Experience” 472). While locating himself “in opposition to mourning,” Emerson therefore at the same time mourns in favour of a “national rebirth” (Sánchez-Eppler 77).

In light of this ambiguous concept of mourning as feeling of loss and catalyst of creation in Emerson, the magnitude of mourning as scholarly practice also unfolds in *IM* like “opium . . . instilled into all disaster” (“Experience” 472). From the very beginning of the novel, a gloomy and depressed atmosphere opens up the narrative territory for an imaginable burial ground. IM recalls the moment when he discovered his invisibility: “One night I accidentally bumped into a man, and perhaps because of the near darkness he saw me and called me an insulting name” (4). “He was a tall blond man, and as my face came close to his he looked insolently out of his blue eyes and cursed me . . .” (4). IM reacts aggressively and starts kicking.

And in my outrage I got out my knife and prepared to slip his throat, right there beneath the lamplight in the deserted street, holding him in the collar with one hand, opening the knife with my teeth—when it occurred to me that the man had not seen me, actually; that he, as far as he knew, was in the midst of a walking nightmare! (4)

It is this key scene which turns the nameless narrator into an invisible human being, a symbol of “black invisibility” (Cheng 121). From this moment on, a sense of “mourning and melancholia” unfolds (Cheng 123). However, this mourning over the invisible state of being obviously does not represent the typical mourning over something or someone lost. Rather, grief here is rooted in the sentimental theme of separation and longing, the separation from an object previously unattained. What IM mourns therefore is not the loss of visibility. Rather, it is the fact that this visibility has not been achieved for African Americans yet. IM as black American Scholar in the Emersonian tradition thus mourns the death of the democratic ideal and the promise of equality which has died before it has really come to life. Ellison with his invisible protagonist therefore takes up and appropriates a well-known theme of American Renaissance writers of the nineteenth century.¹⁴ The double-consciousness of W.E.B. DuBois (Lee, “Ellison’s Racial Variations” 427) is presented in connection with the question of invisibility and identity taken up by Hawthorne and other Renaissance writers (Lee, “Ellison’s Racial Variations 425). The mourning of America prevalent in nineteenth-century writing as well as its appropriation and subversion by IM thus both represent strong elements of the sentimental mode of separation and loss on the meta-level of the narrative.

In addition to the figurative meaning of loss in its political dimension, mourning also plays a role in very literal elaborations on human death accompanied by the description of strong sentiments which finally point to the transformative power of grief envisioned by Emerson. A juxtaposition of these opposing yet complimentary interpretations of grief is given at one of IM’s conversations with Brother Jack. “[T]he trouble is that there is little the dead can do; otherwise they wouldn’t be the dead,” the latter states. “But on the other hand,” he continues, “it would be a great mistake to assume that the dead are absolutely powerless” (*IM* 306). These words strongly underline the infinite influence the voice of the presumably dead has. In contrast to being

¹⁴ Kun Jong Lee reads this in the Renaissance tradition of American literary nationalism which dates back to the end of the Revolution of 1812 (“Ellison’s Racial Variations” 422). According to Lee, Ellison “African Americanizes” the former nationalism of white America (421). This again highlights the way in which Ellison never only copied the voice of his literary predecessors but also transformed it by adding the African American perspective.

“powerless,” their ideational legacy haunts individuals in all ages to come. For the living, this might even be a gift, as the Brother proceeds to elaborate: “During these times of indecision when all the old answers are proven false, the people look back to the dead to give them a clue” (*IM* 306). As these lines demonstrate, IM at various stages of his psychological transformation into Man Thinking and Feeling is taught the manifold ways in which mourning the dead impacts the state of the present and shapes the trajectory of the future. What he seems to be unaware of, at least at the beginning of the narrative, is that mourning already constitutes an inherent part of his personal identity. This becomes even more apparent when read in line with the tradition of “African American Public Mourning” (Stow 681).

Tod Clifton’s one with the ages Now he’s part of history, and he has received his true freedom Now he’s in this box with the bolts tightened down. He’s in the box and we’re in there with him, and when I’ve told you this you can go. It’s dark in this box and it’s crowded And don’t be fooled, for these bones shall not rise again. You and I will still be in the box. (*IM* 458)

When Tod Clifton dies, the narrator sees it as his “personal responsibility,” as he insists, to deliver the eulogy quoted above (*IM* 463).¹⁵ Unlike any other passage in the book, these lines remarkably reflect the very antagonism between distance and relationship, between loss and creation, between freedom and obligation, which readers of Emerson are already familiar with. By saying that “[h]e’s in the box and we’re in there with him,” IM in the voice of his Antebellum ancestor points to the direct relationship the living share with the dead and to the responsibility connected with this.¹⁶ The importance of death, loss, and mourning, though, since presented in Ellison’s typically ambiguous and dialectic style, is only comprehensible through the contextualization with “romantic mourning” (Stow 682) and the intense depiction of grief in nineteenth-century sentimental literature in connection with the “black mourning tradition” which also gained particular prominence in the nineteenth century (Stow 681). Historically, grief has been an incremental part of the black experience in the New World. The lives of slaves were

¹⁵ When Ellison was asked to contribute to a publication entitled *This Is My Best*, without hesitation he chose the funeral scene of Tod Clifton as one of his most memorable examples of his writing (Rice 95).

¹⁶ The scene highlights the cultural significance of African American eulogy (Stow 682). Historically, funerals were among the few occasions which allowed slaves to express feelings of degradation and humiliation (Stow 684). In the political arena, African eulogy gained almost “pedagogical” quality with Frederick Douglass’s rising fame and his Fourth of July Oration in 1852 which practically functioned as obituary on American democracy (Stow 687).

constantly shaped by the loss of friends and family members, be it at slave auctions or as a result of inhuman treatment by slave masters (Tettenborn 110). The impact of death and the practice of mourning have thus contributed to the emergence of a “theory of loss in African American literature” (Tettenborn 103) which “accounts for the power of mourning as political empowerment” (Tettenborn 102). Consequently, this legacy of nineteenth-century black sentimentalism continues to resonate in the literature of subsequent eras up to the present (Holloway 37). As Éva Tettenborn acknowledges: “Contemporary African American literature has done the seemingly impossible by portraying resistant subjects created out of losses” (107).

The sentimental mode of mourning and the emotional depiction of loss thus form major sentimental elements in *IM* on the abstract political level as well as on the level of individual grief caused by the death of beloved comrades. Ellison intertwines this depiction with the complex understanding of grief Emerson constructed in the nineteenth century and adds to it the black response (Stow 683). In the manner of Emerson who not only mourned the things past, but also the things that have not yet existed and thus might never come to exist, Emersonian mourning as one of the essences of *IM* transcends a momentary emotional state and is transformed into a powerful political practice. Ellison confirmed the importance of grief by stating that the act of writing “requires a constant plunging back into the shadow of the past where time hovers ghostlike” (Ellison, *Shadow* xix). Mourning therefore becomes a filter through which Emerson’s American Scholar and Ellison’s *IM* interpret the world at large (Cameron 26).

When reading the mourning practice of Ellison’s *IM* alongside Emerson and other representatives of the Romantic era striking findings for the gendered notion of sentimentalism also emerge (Chapman and Hendler 4). Above all, the “Feminization of American Sentimentalism” in twentieth-century literary scholarship was strongly linked to the expression of loss and grief on the part of women writers (2). Only recently, with publications such as *Sentimental Men* by Mary Chapman and Glenn Hendler, has the binary between literary sentimentalism as female era and the political Renaissance as dominated by male writers and philosophers come to be dissolved (Chapman and Hendler 5). Emerson’s expression of grief testifies to the finding that “sentimental men” (Chapman and Hendler 9) and “masculine domesticity” (Chapman and Hendler 10) must also be regarded as cornerstones of sentimental discourse defined not merely as emotional literary genre but as “practical consciousness” expressed in various artistic formats (Chapman and Hendler 8). In the case of Emerson in

particular, this finding also corrects his overgeneralized and widespread image as “narrowly male” anti-feminist (Field 7).¹⁷

With respect to the acknowledgement of this discursive sentimental tradition found in Ellison, *IM* should not only be read as another example of a “man of feeling” (Chapman and Hendler 7). While white male writers of the nineteenth century have traditionally been excluded from the self-induced canon of sentimentalism by literary critics (Chapman and Hendler 7), black male and female abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass have played a much more explicit role in the exploration of sentimentalist culture in America (Chapman and Hendler 12; Foreman 159). The fact that the black emotional expression of grief as marker of sentimentalism seems to be less of an issue for discussion to literary and cultural critics than the one of white men and women thus points to *IM* as the embodiment of sentimentalism as product of gendered and racial reductionism (Holloway 39). The gender dimension has also shaped sentimentalism as moral framework which connects Emerson’s sentimental vision and the protagonist in *IM* when it comes to the issue of moral deceit.

Moral Seduction and Black Invisibility

The so-called “Renaissance Man” envisioned by Emerson and his contemporaries represented the vision of the American Scholar not only due to the orientation toward reason and nature but by fully exploring “human possibilities” (Lee, “Ellison’s Racial Variations” 432). This focus on the individual rather than on the social at first seems to contradict early sentimentalism’s orientation toward the social realm and moral code (Stow 682). Still, the reflection of Emerson’s American Scholar in *IM* underlines how the sentimental theme of moral seduction constantly challenges Emersonian self-reliance as scholarly quality, especially in the context of race.

In his vision of the American Scholar as mourner of political conformity, Emerson strongly underlines the necessity of the scholar to be detached from majority opinion and to loosen any ties forcing him into constrained thinking. The scholar in the state of “the delegated

¹⁷ Susan Field undertakes a remarkable project to break with the previous feminist practice which has so far taken “ownership” of Emerson by discussing him as a chauvinist prototype of the “male American Renaissance” (7). In order to alter this reductionist perspective, Field reads Emerson’s elaborations on mourning alongside Audre Lorde’s grief depictions after her cancer illness. The analysis reveals striking parallels in the practice of mourning displayed by both authors and thus illuminates how their texts produce mutual literary contexts despite previously overemphasized gender divisions.

intellect” is thus to be avoided. “In the right state, he is, *Man Thinking*. In the degenerate state, when the victim of society, he tends to become a mere thinker, or, still worse, the parrot of the men’s thinking” (“AS” 54). This principle of the independent mind not bowing to the intellectual and also material pressure acting upon him is the product of Emerson’s fundamental idea of self-reliance. The scholar as the self-dependent Thinker thus acts outside the pressure of conformity because “[w]hose would be a man must be a nonconformist” (“Self-Reliance” 261). Self-reliance to Emerson is therefore at the same time a guideline supporting the inherent reliance on others (Grusin 405). He therefore distances himself from charges of egotist individualism when in the “American Scholar” he bemoans “the new importance given to the single person” (70). Self-reliance consequently forms a relational concept. IM struggles to adopt this essential quality of the American Scholar not only due to his personal confrontation with moral seduction but also as the consequence of American society blindly following the ideal of white racial supremacy.

At the beginning of IM’s narrative, the protagonist is characterized by an obvious lack of self-reliance. As revealed in the retrospective analysis of his life, his early years were marked by manifest complicity. In school, he blindly adhered to Booker T. Washington’s ideal of racial uplift through economic and educational development (Kostelanetz 284). Due to this vision, IM made himself a servant to the black academic elite in college. His world view then gets shaken the first time when he discovers that the black career in academia is based on the philosophy of unlimited compliance. At a conversation with his treacherous role model Dr. Bledsoe, the latter reveals his true recipe for black success to the boy. “I had to act the nigger,” he bursts out (*IM* 143). “[T]he dumbest black bastard in the cotton patch knows that the only way to please a white man is to tell him a lie” (*IM* 139)!” This instance marks IM’s first encounter with the prevalence of complicity in a world which so far represented a realm of respect to him. Still, this lesson does not prevent him from becoming the victim of complicity himself.

After leaving the South and the school, IM’s escape from the Southern past also represents an attempt to flee the black complicity he observes as a common reaction to the white moral superiority defended by his college mentors. The flight, however, is only of limited success since it gives way to a vicious cycle of complicity in his new life as an ideological marionette of the Brotherhood. This “scientific organization,” like its academic counterpart, the university, stands for an inherently manipulative power. At first, similar to the excitement IM felt for his academic role models, the protagonist is not alarmed by the power the leaders of the Brotherhood exert over his individual self-determination. In the course of his thriving career as the

Brotherhood's leading orator, however, he gets suspicious of his all-inclusive subscription to the organization's ideas (Rice 8). The funeral of Clifton and his changing notion of history finally come to mark crucial turning points towards a more self-reliant life. While realizing that he and his late brother have been used in a machinery of manipulation and ideological brainwash, however, he still rejects any comprehensive responsibility for his actions. "I could only accept responsibility for the living, not for the dead," he recalls (*IM* 447). After some attempts to distance himself from the Brotherhood, he still gives in to complicity in order to beat the manipulative machine with its own weapons. "Oh, I'd yes them, but wouldn't I yes them," IM euphorically announces his strategy in the voice of his grandfather. "I'd yes them till they puked and rolled in it. All they wanted of me was one belch of affirmation and I'd bellow it out loud. Yes! Yes! YES!" (*IM* 509).

With this highly emotional and dynamic depiction of the power of ideology, the narrator takes up the sentimental struggle of seduction and puts it into the context of racial politics. Self-reliance as a weapon against deceit here reappears as a crucial quality of the American Scholar which also includes the issue of skin color. As Michael Magee in his exploration of Emerson's controversial stance toward slavery acknowledges, "Self-Reliance" and its complementary significance for Emerson's conception of the American Scholar also inherently contains the question of slavery (106). Self-reliance as individual and political non-conformity as it is depicted in *IM* therefore allows for the immediate link to nineteenth-century society in which the ideology of black inferiority reigned almost turned into a moral code of white supremacy. Read along these sentimental lines, the invisibility of the protagonist, his mourning, and his resulting narrative emphasize this quality of racism as white moral code. The depiction of complicity as moral temptation influencing the black response to invisibility in the Brotherhood subverts the mechanism of seduction. It demonstrates the lack of self-reliance as the ability to counter ideological manipulation as common human weakness, not merely as white inclination. *IM*, however, does not leave the reader with this bleak outlook and instead demonstrates how the chains of complicity can be broken.

In the midst of the Harlem riot, IM is overwhelmed by the historical events and the increasing pressure upon him. These tense emotions finally cause him to realize that he has blindly been advertising the agenda of the Brotherhood. "I had thought myself free," he expresses his relief when arriving at this important insight (*IM* 553). Rational insight and the emotional burden to accept responsibility then mark one of IM's final steps towards black scholarship. He

gives up his resistance to accept self-reliance and embraces responsibility (Nadel 122). “I knew that it was better to live out one’s own absurdity than to die for that of others,” he summarizes his experience (*IM* 559). Emerging from this acceptance of his own history, he turns towards the refuge of solitary thinking. “So after years of trying to adopt the opinions of others,” he concludes, “I finally rebelled. I am an *invisible* man” (*IM* 573).

The multi-faceted meaning of racial invisibility in the context of racism as a moral code resulting from the lack of self-reliance on the part of individuals reflects the sentimental theme of seduction in a highly complex political way. IM on his journey toward becoming an American Scholar gradually adopts self-reliance as the only weapon against deceit (Fluck 27). This process would not be possible, though, without his growing appreciation of sentimental expression.

Sentimental Oration

While Emerson gained most of his fame as a writer, he also took up his calling as a vivid orator. It is therefore little wonder that “The American Scholar” itself was a spoken text before becoming one of his most famous essays. Especially in the later days of his career, Emerson stressed the meaning of the spoken word in the form of oration (Hanlon 74). Despite writing as a practical interference of the scholar in the world, eloquence was inherently linked to Emerson’s understanding of self-reliance, improvisation and the power to persuade Americans. In “The Orator’s Speech” written in 1840, Emerson points to the “explosiveness in language” which can best be conveyed in the form of speech (Callahan, “Frequencies of Eloquence”). It is in the act of speaking rather than writing, where Emerson locates the true genius of language. “I learn immediately from any speaker how much he has already lived, through the poverty or the splendor of his speech,” he specifies the signifying function of the oratory (“AS” 62). This stance gets corroborated when he links the power of the orator with the meaning of action: “There is no orator who is not a hero . . .,” Emerson declares because “[t]he orator’s speech . . . is not to be distinguished from action. *It is the electricity of action*” (qtd. in “John F. Callahan” 54).

When looking at Emerson’s own engagement as a speaker for the cause of abolition, his true excitement about the power of the spoken word is less electric. Measured according to his expectation of scholarly activism, critics labeled him merely a “symbolic activist” (Magee 103). No matter how active he himself was in the fight against slavery, there is considerable evidence that his belief in the practical value and power of sentimental oration was a crucial means of expression for African Americans in particular. In 1841, he urged blacks to raise their voice to

represent their cause in a non-written format: “It is the vice of our public speaking that it has not abandonment. Somewhere, not only every orator but every man should let out all the length of all the reins; should find or make a frank and hearty expression of what force and meaning is in him” (qtd. in Magee 114). Clearly, this statement highlights the power of oration and the emotional impact of sentimental eloquence. In addition, it acknowledges the tradition of African American oration as efficient instrument to achieve liberation and ultimately self-reliance (Magee 115).¹⁸

In light of this still paradoxical but nevertheless pragmatic interpretation of scholarly and literary activism by means of written and spoken eloquence, Ellison’s creation of IM reflects the emphasis on eloquence of his literary forefather. Ellison was not only a “pragmatist reader of Emerson” as Timothy Parrish states, he also adopted Emerson’s definition of pragmatism by understanding “words to be acts” (Parrish 18).¹⁹ IM thus finds himself in the midst of a struggle between self-reliance and sentimental expression. It is “eloquence,” IM registers, which drives the people of Harlem to action (289). After his initial speech at an eviction site, the young narrator envisions himself as walking in the footsteps of former great orators, such as Frederick Douglass, whose portrait reigns in IM’s office as the visual depiction of his ambition to become a leader by creating “magic in spoken words” (381). This constant ambition to imitate the oratory skills of historical figures gets reiterated by the manipulative force of the Brotherhood. “You were not hired to think . . . you were hired to talk,” Brother Jack snaps at IM (469-470). Increasingly, though, complicity and the drive to imitate force IM to temporarily lose the battle against the power of self-reliance as the essential ingredient of American Scholarship.

IM follows the career of a black orator, which fosters his transformation into a practical scholar in the Emersonian sense. Eloquence thus gains “Emersonian meaning” for him, as Callahan remarks (“Frequencies of Eloquence”). IM learns to apply the traditional “call-and-response” technique of black oratory (Callahan, “Frequencies of Eloquence”; Hanlon 76). He experiences the strong emotions conveyed via the spoken word when he delivers his speeches in the Brotherhood (Hanlon 77). Similar to the ability of jazz musicians to improvise, adjust and finally persuade the audience with their play, IM plays the register of spoken eloquence (Hanlon

¹⁸ It tends to be neglected in this context that women also started to appear as public orators in the nineteenth century. In addition to writing sentimental texts, they also *spoke* them, for example on the cause of abolition. A literary document of this increasing public presence of women as political speakers is provided by James’s *Bostonians* in which protagonist Verena Tarrant is a talented speaker for the feminist struggle (Levander 7).

¹⁹ When it comes to the power of the spoken word, Ellison never considered himself a “spokesman” for black activism (Sundquist 110; Parrish 19). Nevertheless, he did give public speeches on the intersections of American literature, democracy and the “negro” and was praised as “eloquent” black speaker (Parrish 36).

76). By adopting the voice of Ellison's literary predecessors, IM turns into an "impersonator of other voices" as a public speaker (Hanlon 90). As his "acumen as public speaker" grows, so does his feeling of self-reliance and his role as an "Emersonian speaker" (Hanlon 75). As a "public orator," Christopher Hanlon thus subsumes, IM also experiences a "new birth as public intellectual"—in short: an American Scholar (93).

Yet, this new identity again is overshadowed by its subsequent loss. Oration as the "dialogue between orator and audience" becomes a competition, a burden, and a responsibility difficult to handle for IM (Hanlon 79). The dynamics of the riots start getting out of hand. IM knows that the "audience is a constant meter of the orator . . ." (qtd. in Hanlon 92). The strong emotions of plain language steer conflict and violence. The audience challenges IM's skills as an orator. At first, this challenge is a welcome motivation for IM and his newly found political agency (Cheng 135). The more resentful the audience reacts, "the more my urge to make speeches returned," he explains (qtd. in Hanlon 91). With increasing conflict and violence emerging, though, IM gives in to the pressure. He realizes that his skills as an orator are not as refined as the ones of famous black heroes. IM struggles with his voice, lacks skills of oratory performance and increasingly feels the ideological battle between self-reliance and the seduction of the Brotherhood grow. He slowly realizes that the oratory skills he acquired indeed contributed to the formation of a new identity. "I was becoming someone else," IM retrospectively confirms these dynamics (*IM* 335). Nevertheless, since the words he spoke were mere tokens of political dogma imposed on him, his career as a public orator ends.

IM's mourned death as an orator, however, does not prevent the final step of his metamorphosis into the Black American Scholar. Only when he acknowledges his career as a "failed orator," he seeks an alternative voice (Callahan, "Frequencies of Eloquence"). Again, this experience of losing one identity, the one of the orator, as well as the retrospective narration of his story liberate him to write the epilogue. He discovers the craft of writing as complementary as he "transforms the power of the spoken word" in his highly emotional language (Callahan, "Frequencies of Eloquence"). IM at this point fully embraces sentimental eloquence as a powerful means to social change. By descending into the invisibility of darkness, the former

orator shines as a narrator. Man Acting becomes Man Thinking and Feeling. It is this final act of telling his story that concludes his metamorphosis into an American Scholar.²⁰

This development of IM from an orator to a writer in the Emersonian tradition of the black American Scholar also completes the conceptual revision of sentimental eloquence. In contrast to the common definition of sentimentalism as limited to the nineteenth-century novel, the analysis shows that sentimental expression is by far not restrained to writing as primary means of expression. This reconceptualization of sentimental eloquence allows one to observe and analyze the full landscape of sentimentalism in terms of theme, mode, language and effect as it continues to resonate in the cultural and political discourse of the present.

It is this complicated intertwinement of the struggle between emotions versus rationality in the web of the spoken and written word which puts brackets around the history of sentimental eloquence. Reading Emerson alongside Ellison as examples of American Scholars of different colors from the sentimental perspective seems to be a daunting hypothesis at first. When thinking of sentimentalism merely as a historical phenomenon rooted in nineteenth-century America and only limited to the scope of the sentimental, predominantly female, novel, such a task would be impossible. If thinking of sentimentalism as a rhetorical mode and function-oriented effect of expression, this seemingly far-off task becomes possible and illuminating. Sentimental eloquence with emotion as its primary ingredient, its mourning of loss, its longing for wholeness and the need for moral orientation are recurrent and dominant themes which by far exceed the canon of the typical sentimental novel. Especially the role of oratory as sentimental mode has been neglected by literary scholars so far. It was especially the sentimental oration surrounding the abolitionist era which granted sentimentalism a political function and which was taken up by fictional and non-fictional speakers such as Ellison's IM. These writings testify to what the moral philosopher David Hume already acknowledged: "Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them" (qtd. in Ellis 13).

Following this philosophical supposition that sentiment will never outweigh reason, sentimentalism as a literary and cultural subject will never lose its meaning. The term

²⁰ This brings to mind the sentimental eulogy delivered by Callahan in honor of Ellison: "Sometimes I think we Americans are most visible underground and most invisible when we emerge" ("Frequencies of Memory" 309).

“sentiment” dominates cultural texts of our time, particularly when it comes to politics. “Racist sentiment,” “anti-gay sentiment,” “war sentiment” and other combinations are buzzwords in international headlines. Obviously, at the time when Emerson spoke on abolitionism and when Ellison wrote his *Invisible Man*, there was not the slightest hope that a black American Scholar would lead the country as “Orator in Chief” in the near future (Dyson ix). Yet, it is exactly this past which still resonates in the president’s speeches today. Just like Ellison followed Emerson in borrowing his words from the plethora of former and contemporary writers and speakers, Obama today continues to borrow from Douglass and King as well as from white oratory role models of the past (Sundquist 114; Whitaker 15).²¹ He does so not in order to prove his individual intelligence mainly. Just like sentimental literature was successful because it touched the hearts of many different people, sentimental eloquence today moves various audiences around the world.

The present-day relevance of sentimentalism in political oratory strikingly underlines the need to develop alternative approaches to study sentimentalism from novel perspectives. Yet, this also reanimates the original dilemma of sentimentalism as defined by artificial emotions. While the overemphasis of emotion expressed by women brought about sentimentalism’s negative reception in the nineteenth century, sentiment in today’s discourse also oftentimes becomes fabricated and strategically appropriated. The million dollars earned by Public Relations companies and so-called spin doctors trying to endow political events and speeches with the right means to steer the sentiment of the audience highlight this cued steering of emotions. As Whitaker puts it:

It is very rare these days to find a political leader whose words can become forces in the real world with the capacity to make people think anew and perhaps even to move them to act. In the age of spin, leaders’ words are like processed McNuggets, occasionally achieving an Award for Eloquence with a slogan punchy enough to momentarily penetrate the consciousness of voters, who are judged to have roughly the attention span of a gerbil. Every word is market-researched by polls and focus groups. (14)

²¹ Claiming that Barack Obama “spoke his way into office” is usually taken as an offense by critics because it supposedly neglects various other valuable skills of the current U.S. president (Dyson xi). Still, his rhetorical power stands in the long tradition of black oratory in which emotions continue to play a decisive role. He is known for his ability to switch between different registers of speech to reach his audiences and thus bridge racial and social divides (Alim and Smitherman 1). Emotion and the stressing of moral values by Obama thus balance “romance and realism,” the major field of tension forming the backbone of the sentimentalist mode (Fluck 23).

The question now remains if literary scholars decide to continue neglecting the cultural and political significance of sentiment by leaving the study of sentimental eloquence merely to market researchers and political analysts. Simply pretending that sentimentalism is an outdated literary phenomenon seems to be highly ignorant, especially since emotions ultimately decide over war and peace, over equality and inequality. If this skepticism of cultural critics toward sentimentalism prevails, an important facet of cultural discourse will remain unexplored. If the attitude changes and sentimentalism does get rediscovered, then there is much work ahead for scholars in American Studies. The function-oriented approach to sentimentalism suggested by Fluck and its expansion toward sentimental eloquence in the present study provide starting points to realize this task. Scholars in the field of American Studies can thus contribute extensively to the study of sentimentalism in the U.S. if they overcome their disciplinary skepticism. Emerson once warned that the canonization of literary texts into seemingly fixed categories means to “group among them dry bones of the past” (qtd. in Field 19). As Field confirms: “Reading that blindly memorializes the past is in this sense a type of melancholy brooding over American literature” (19). It is now up to literary scholars to break away from melancholy and open up new research paths toward the study of sentimental eloquence based on self-reliance and the willingness to put new ideas into Emersonian practice.

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