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Sacrifice, a Democratic Fact

PHILOSOPHER HANNAH ARENDT wrote a controversial article against school desegregation in the wake of the September 1957 struggles in Little Rock, Arkansas, and published it two years later in *Dissent* magazine. The city had exploded over whether nine African American students who had been admitted to the previously whites-only Central High would in fact attend. Arendt's article, "Reflections on Little Rock," criticized the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the parents of the Little Rock Nine for using political institutions like the courts and the public sphere generally to effect what she considered not a political program but self-interested social advancement. Much affected by the news photographs of Elizabeth being menaced by a nasty mob as she, unaccompanied, tried to enter the school, Arendt argued further that the parents, in pursuing social advancement, were exploiting their children. "The girl obviously was asked to be a hero," Arendt wrote, "[which] is, something neither her absent father nor the equally absent representatives of the NAACP felt called upon to be" (RLR 50).[1]

Arendt objected to any strategy that drew children, white or black, into a political fray, but when she accused the African American parents of a lack of heroism, she also more specifically charged the desegregation movement with a failure to rise to the level of political action. Her position depends heavily on the argument she published almost simultaneously in the *Human Condition* of 1958 that politics, properly understood, is a heroic activity; Achilles, the Greek hero of the Trojan War, is her paradigmatic political actor. In her analysis, the

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Elizabeth=Elizabeth Eckford, the first black student who attempted to attend Little Rock High.
Hazel= Hazel Bryan, a white protestor photographed cursing at Elizabeth.

parents mistook a "social issue" for a legitimate political battleground. This contention that school desegregation was not an appropriate object of political action rested on her strong distinctions among private, social, and political spheres. To the private realm she assigned intimacy and activities like marriage, love, and parenting; in the social world we secure our economic livelihood and also, importantly, discriminate against others by choosing friends who are like ourselves for ourselves and our children. Finally, in the political realm, in her account, we secure political rights, like the rights to vote and hold office, and also private rights, like the right to marry whom we please. The public sphere is also the arena for conversations with strangers and for epic action that brings glory to the actors.

Arendt's central concern in *The Human Condition* was to translate an epic approach to politics into a democratic context. Democratic political agents must construct a common world out of difference and speak to one another qua men and not qua members of society (*HC* 219). In a democracy, the ability to "fight a full-fledged political battle" (*HC* 219) consists of articulating "one's own ideas about the possibilities of democratic government under modern conditions," and of "propos[ing] a transformation of political institutions" (*HC* 216). Most important, political action in a democracy is the opposite of what we do as members of society, which is merely to "defend economic interests," ask for "due consideration of vital interests" (*MDT* 11), and function as "interest parties" (*HC* 218). In Arendt's view, only nonheroic economic and "vital" interests were at stake in Little Rock.

In short, Arendt criticizes the actions of the African Americans involved in Little Rock as failures of citizenship. Their "nonpolitical" actions in Little Rock caused a crisis that could be solved, she argued, only by converting the public to new citizenly practices of tact and restraint. If the U.S. democracy were to succeed at its new post-1957 constitution, developing enough trust and stability to preserve democracy, its citizens would heroically have to surrender their concern with social issues. Only this genteel mode of citizenship, she believed, could convert long-standing divisions into the stuff of public debate and also preserve the public sphere.

Ellison disagreed with Arendt's account of Little Rock and democratic citizenship and twice responded publicly to her article, presenting a different take on problems like distrust, and on their solution.

In an interview with Robert Penn Warren he remarked, "I believe that one of the important clues to the meaning of [American Negro] experience lies in the idea, the *ideal* of sacrifice. Hannah Arendt's failure to grasp the importance of this ideal among Southern Negroes caused her to fly way off into left field in her 'Reflections on Little Rock.'" He continues:

> [S]he has absolutely no conception of what goes on in the minds of Negro parents when they send their kids through those lines of hostile people. Yet they are aware of the overtones of a rite of initiation which such events actually constitute for the child, a confrontation of the terrors of social life with all the mysteries stripped away. And in the outlook of many of these parents (who wish the problem didn't exist), the child is expected to face the terror and contain his fear and anger *precisely* because he is a Negro American. Thus he's required to master the inner tensions created by his racial situation, and if he gets hurt—then his is one more sacrifice. (WS 343–44)[2]

Ellison had developed the concepts of ritual and sacrifice at length in his 1952 novel *Invisible Man,* and amplified his accounts of both terms in his many essays; these concepts were the foundation for a provocative account of democracy.[3] But just how are ritual and sacrifice relevant to an analysis of Little Rock, or of democratic citizenship?

Democracy puts its citizens under a strange form of psychological pressure by building them up as sovereigns and then regularly undermining each citizen's experience of sovereignty. Ellison explicated what it is like to be an individual in a democratic world of strangers, where large-scale events are supposed to arise out of one's own consent and yet never really do.[4] He recognized that every human life is full of rituals that initiate people into the symbol world, ideals, and political structure of their community. These are the link between any particular life and the larger political structure. The rituals may be as overt as the requirement that students say the Pledge of Allegiance in school every day or as little noticed as the adult habit of asking a child upon a first meeting, "What's your name and how old are you?" (*CE* 195).[5] For Ellison, that particular ritual at least partially explains the modern concern with identity. Similarly, a ritual may be as obviously political as one's first trip to the polls, or may (wrongly) seem to

be merely social, like getting drunk legally at the age of twenty-one. But since the purpose of rituals is to create, justify, and maintain particular social arrangements, they are the foundation also of political structures, and an individual comes to know intimately central aspects of the overall form of his community by living through them. Significantly, since every ritual is for Ellison also a form of initiation, or reinitiation, children are not exempt.[6]

In the moment that Hazel and Elizabeth, two teenagers, met in the public square, neither was inventing her form of behavior. Each had already been initiated into the requirements of adult life in the South. In the Battle of Little Rock, they were simply tested once more to see how well they had learned their lessons. Elizabeth knew the drill and was lucky that she did. This is the force of Ellison's argument to Warren that the parents of the Little Rock Nine understood how integral to childhood are rituals initiating the child into the symbol world and ideals of adults, and so also into adult politics. Whereas Arendt developed a political theory that might protect children from politics, by transforming politics into an epic arena for full-grown warriors only, Ellison has a more tragic vision: rituals to solidify social order inevitably involve children in politics, however much one might wish the case otherwise.

Of all the rituals relevant to democracy, sacrifice is preeminent. No democratic citizen, adult or child, escapes the necessity of losing out at some point in a public decision. "It is our fate as human beings," Ellison writes, "always to give up some good things for other good things, to throw off certain bad circumstances only to create others" (*CE* 208).[7] But sacrifice is a special sort of problem in a democracy. Democracies are supposed to rest on consent and open access to happiness for their citizens. In the dreamscape of democracy, for instance à la Rousseau, every citizen consents to every policy with glad enthusiasm. No one ever leaves the public arena at odds with the communal choice; no one must accept political loss or suffer the imposition of laws to which she has not consented. But that is a dream. An honest account of collective democratic action must begin by acknowledging that communal decisions inevitably benefit some citizens at the expense of others, even when the whole community generally benefits. Since democracy claims to secure the good of all citizens, those people who benefit less than others from particular

political decisions, but nonetheless accede to those decisions, preserve the stability of political institutions. Their sacrifice makes collective democratic action possible. Democracy is not a static end state that achieves the common good by assuring the same benefits or the same level of benefits to everyone, but rather a political practice by which the diverse negative effects of collective political action, and even of just decisions, can be distributed equally, and constantly redistributed over time, on the basis of consensual interactions.[8] The hard truth of democracy is that some citizens are always giving things up for others. Only vigorous forms of citizenship can give a polity the resources to deal with the inevitable problem of sacrifice.

As we shall see, one of the achievements of the protagonist of Ellison's novel, *Invisible Man,* is to develop criteria for distinguishing legitimate from illegitimate forms of sacrifice, and also to outline a form of citizenship that helps citizens generate trust enough among themselves to manage sacrifice. Here it is necessary rather to outline the conceptual bases of such a citizenship. Most important, recognition of the necessary fact of loss and disappointment in democratic politics vitiates any effort, such as Arendt's, to hold the social firmly separate from the political. As citizens struggle over political questions, they will necessarily come to understand how political choices affect social experience. The site of sacrifice is between the social world—of custom and of mental, physical, and economic harm from other citizens—and the political world of institutions and practices for the sake of which one wants to master that harm. Thus Ellison says to Warren of the African American parents behind the events at Little Rock, "We learned about forbearance and forgiveness in that same school, and about hope too. So today we sacrifice, as we sacrificed yesterday, *the pleasure of personal retaliation in the interest of the common good*" (WS 342; emphasis added). The initiation of citizens into public life entails pains and disappointments that, though generated in the public sphere, are experienced in the social and personal realms. No wonder, then, that Ellison, in powerful contrast to Arendt, so frequently uses the term "socio-political."

In Ellison's view, African Americans had, within the confines of a citizenship of acquiescence, developed powerful insights about democracy based on this recognition of the inevitable blending of social and political. Because African American parents had long recognized the