

Identity and Language

The social whole, which we here attempt to anatomize, defies simple definition, but is there before—that is ahead of—us when we ask what it is. We describe it, the social whole, from the far side of it, from this side of it, as though it was, as in fact it is, there ahead of us. That temporal priority of the societal whole is, we might say, our chief societal identifying mark. I am given my identity, you might say, by the social whole that happens to have formed around me, that forms me right now, as I talk about it. Here enters the realm of the given, the definition of me that I simply had no chance to choose. Here enters my identity, my unshakeable, what defines and makes me, gives me identity. An old classic, that sees this issue around the themes of Existentialism, is Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man* (1952). That work springs from a turbulent greening America in which the search for identity was a primary social driver.

OK, you find me where I was made, right inside of what I was made, language inside a body. I can't touch that language, can't extirpate it, though I can direct it, choose as carefully as possible from among the choices it represents to me. I can send you away or invite you in with my language. When I employ that language it is all around me, though I cannot actually touch it. Language is perhaps the most salient part of the language over which I have no power. If anything defines me as its, it will be my language, German or Italian or Swedish. I may change citizenship but not my language. I may learn to speak French better than my native English, but whichever language it is, it is still just my language.