It is by now a well acknowledged fact that the body provides a central issue in literary critic discourse. It has already been studied from a range of perspectives – cultural, sexual, social, political, ethnic – and in terms of many different conflicts: between flesh and soul, private and public sphere, interior and exterior, self and other, male and female, nature and culture, etc. In particular, during the 19th and 20th century both fiction and critical work have focussed on the body, borrowing some aspects and notions from social studies and science. An increasing attention has been paid to the body as an object of narrative writing and as a cultural product. Its micropolitics, rituals, and logics have been largely explored. In particular, "modern narratives appear to produce a semioticization of the body which is matched by a somatization of story" (Brooks 1993: xiii). Moreover, the body imagery is strongly connected with sign and visibility.

From the early decades of the 19th century to the end of the 20th a new conception of (not to say an obsession with) visibility and of the representability of the visible emerged, provoking a "renaissance" in the notion of vision and subjectivity and a new kind of observer (Crary 1990: 41). These two centuries (which have seen in rapid succession the birth of daguerrotype, photography, cinema, TV, and virtual reality, as well as the invention of means of 'invisible' communication such as the telegraph and the telephone) have also developed a conception of invisibility which is set free from Gothic magic and the supernatural by new scientific dreams of power. This invisibility points to the oxymoron of the divided self (in-dividual means indivisible) and seems to mock both the typically Western conflict between body and spirit and the Victorian representation of the body as a central yet marginalized instrument of damnation and/or salvation (on the manichean distinction between "the doomed" and "the saved" see Locatelli 1996: 48). The resulting (fictional) experiments on male invisibility (on male romance and male redefinitions see Pykett 1995: 66-70) derive from the fin-de-siècle discourses on dissolution, degeneration, and devolution (caused, in turn, by post-Darwinian fears, since the implications of Darwinism itself may be perceived as "gothic" [see Hurley 1996]), as well as

Among the many and multifarious representations of the body, we shall focus in this short essay on some fictional "bodies without integrity" (Hurley 1996: 9). This kind of body is monstrous or "abhuman" (Hodgson 1912) and is characterized by morphic variability, "continually in danger of becoming not-itself, becoming other" (Hurley 1996: 3-4). Cases of fragmentation, mutilation, dissolution, reconstruction, and invisibility can be easily found in a number of novels and short stories, ranging from Poe's "The Man that was Used Up", Chesterton's *The Man who was Thursday*, and Gogol's "The Nose", to Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, Wells' *The Invisible Man*, Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Calvino's *Il visconte dimezzato* and *Il cavaliere inesistente*, Roald Dahl's "William and Mary," and McEwan's "The Dolls" and "Vanishing Cream".

Different as they are, since they belong to different nations, historical periods, and literary traditions, all of the afore-mentioned works nevertheless converge on the problematization of the male body as the visible and in(di)visible 'frame' – or 'shape' – of man, and, as such, as a controversial arena for experimenting on fragmentation and in(di)visibility, both in a literal and in a metaphorical sense. The characters in these novels act either in the excitement of scientific – or political, or personal – achievement (followed by the inescapable disillusionment caused by the discovery of their own physical vulnerability), or in a post-faustian and post-frankensteinian attempt at redefining identity through a refocussing of the integrity of the self and of the material body.

The body of Brevet Brigadier General John A.B.C. Smith, mutilated and half-destroyed by the Indians, is artificially reconstructed in the striking pre-cyber short story "The Man that was Used Up" (Poe 1840). When he is not wearing his prostheses, the protagonist is only a "bundle", a "nondescript", an "object": his body – along with identity – is unrecognizable to the point of invisibility, and in the beholder's eyes it ceases to exist when disassembled. The self, thus reduced to a bodiless despotic voice emerging from a bundle on the floor, can only be acknowledged through reassemblage. This is an operation which, quite logically within the white supremacist ideology, is meaningfully intended to reverse the dismemberment accomplished by the Indians, and is accompanied by the voice's abuse of the black servant who at the same time makes the reassemblage possible:

I cannot just now remember when or where I first made the acquaintance of that truly fine-looking fellow, Brevet Brigadier General John A.B.C. Smith. [...] There was an air distingué pervading the whole man [...] His head of hair would have done honor to a Brutus [...] The bust of the General was unquestionably the finest bust I ever saw. [...] I never heard a clearer nor stronger voice, nor beheld a finer set of teeth [...]
In(di)visible men

It was early when I called, and the General was dressing [...] As I entered the chamber, I looked about, of course, for the occupant, but did not immediately perceive him. There was a large and exceedingly odd looking bundle of something which lay close by my feet on the floor, and, as I was not in the best humor in the world, I gave it a kick out of the way. "Hem! ahem! rather civil that, I should say!" said the bundle [...] What could I say to all this – what could I? [...] "Strange you shouldn't know me though, isn't it?" presently re-squeaked the nondescript, which I now perceived was performing, upon the floor, some inexplicable evolution, very analogous to the drawing on of a stocking. There was only a single leg, however, apparent. "Strange you shouldn't know me, though, isn't it? Pompey, bring me that leg!" Here Pompey handed the bundle a very capital cork leg, already dressed, which it screwed on in trice; and then it stood upright before my eyes. [...] "[...] Pompey, I'll thank you now for that arm. [...] Now, you dog, slip on my shoulders and bosom! [...] Pompey, will you never be ready with that wig? [...] Now, you nigger, my teeth! [...] Oh yes, by the by, my eye – here, Pompey, you scamp, screw it in! [...]"

I now began very clearly to perceive that the object before me was nothing more nor less than my new acquaintance, Brevet Brigadier General John A.B.C. Smith. [...] (Poe 1840: 127-136)

The Man Who Was Thursday (Chesterton 1908), on the contrary, tells of a grotesque duel in which one of the two fighters literally disassembles himself, starting with his nose, thus revealing his disguise and consequently exposing the secret of his seeming invulnerability.

Both combatants had thrown off their coats and waistcoats and stood sword in hand. [...] Twice Syme, parrying, knocked his opponent's point far out of the fighting circle [...] Syme was as certain that he had stuck his blade into the enemy as a gardener that he has stuck his spade into the ground. Yet the Marquis sprang back from the stroke without a stagger, and Syme stood staring at his own sword-point like an idiot. There was no blood on it at all. [...] A minute and a half afterwards he felt his point enter the man's neck below the jaw. It carne out clean. Half mad, he thrust again, and made what should have been a bloody scar on the Marquis's cheek. But there was no scar.

For one moment the heaven of Syme again grew black with supernatural terrors. Surely the man had a charmed life. [...] this man was a devil – perhaps he was the Devil! [...] "Please let me speak," he said. "[...] we are fighting today, if I remember right, because you expressed a wish (which I thought irrational) to pull my nose. Would you oblige me by pulling my nose now quickly as possible? [...] Don't be selfish! Pull my nose at once, when I ask you!" [...]
Walking in a world he half understood, he took two paces forward and seized the Roman nose of this remarkable nobleman. He pulled it hard, and it came off in his hand.

He stood for some seconds with a foolish solemnity, with the pasteboard proboscis still between his fingers [...] "If anyone has any use for my left eyebrow," he said, "he can have it. Colonel Ducroix, accept my left eyebrow!" [...] and he gravely tore off one of his swarthy Assyrian brows, bringing about half his brown forehead with it [...] The mysterious Marquis [...] was a strange scarecrow, standing there in the sun with half his old face peeled off, and half another face glaring and grinning from underneath.

"Going to Jericho to throw a Jabberwock!" cried the other, tearing his hair, which came off easily [...] and tore off his scalp and half his face. [...] (Chesterton 1908: 115-121)

This novel, which seems so modern to sound even post modern, while mocking the very genre to which it belongs (that of the spy story), on a deeper level betrays an intriguing interest on the narrator's side in the representation of the body and its relations with identity, disguise, and disgregation. The Marquis' bizarre 'strip-tease' represents an unexpected anticlimax, and the pasteboard parts of his fake body hint at the fragility of such notions as identity, recognizability, and physical appearances.

A similar use of body synecdoches had already been attempted by other writers, in particular by Gogol', whose short story "The nose" (1863) tells of a nose which comes off the face to which it belongs and takes on its own personality. Noselessness might stand for castration, as some critics have argued (Guidotti 1988: 122), but it could also more generally point to any kind of impairment affecting the whole identity of man. After a century, "William and Mary" by Roald Dahl (1960) tells of a dead professor of philosophy whose brain and eye are kept alive after his death – to the satisfaction of his wife, formerly subject to his will and now free to do whatever she wants without being constantly reproached. More recently, the young protagonist of a collection of short stories by Ian McEwan daydreams that he is first disassembled by a "Bad Doll", and that later on he makes his own parents and little sister disappear thanks to a mysterious "Vanishing Cream" (The Daydreamer 1994). Going back to the first decade of the century and to the spy story, The Secret Agent (Conrad 1907) is also redundant with allusions to body fragmentation, both literal – such as Stevie's explosion/ dismemberment – and metaphorical – such as the cannibalistic descriptions of food and the several close-ups showing parts of male bodies.

The myths of dismemberment and fragmentation (the Bacchantes, Pandora's vase, Osiris) which are at the origin of many physical changes taking place in
these novels sometimes overlap with a postmodern perception of muddled bodies and a more general reflection on human condition. Horrid hybrids are created by doctor Moreau in his gloomy island (Wells 1896), and Medardo di Terralba comes across mutilated fingers and repulsive feathered corpses on his way to the battlefield before being horribly injured himself:

Tirato via il lenzuolo, il corpo del visconte apparve orrendamente mutilato. Gli mancava un braccio e una gamba, non solo, ma tutto quel che c'era di torace e d'addome tra quel braccio e quella gamba era stato portato via, polverizzato da quella cannonata presa in pieno. Del capo restavano un occhio, un orecchio, una guancia, mezzo naso, mezza bocca, mezzo mento e mezza fronte: dell'altra metà del capo c'era più solo una pappetta. A farla breve, se n'era salvato solo metà, la parte destra, che peraltro era perfettamente conservata, senza neanche una scalfittura, escluso quell'enorme squarcio che l'aveva separata dalla parte sinistra andata in briccoli.

I medici: tutti contenti. [...] Cucirono, applicarono, impastarono: chi lo sa cosa fecero. Fatto sta che l'indomani mio zio aperse l'unico occhio, la mezza bocca, dilatò la narice e respirò. [...] Adesso era vivo e dimezzato. Un mantello nero col cappuccio gli scendeva dal capo fino a terra; dalla parte destra era buttato all'indietro, scoprendo metà del viso e della persona stretta alla stampella, mentre sulla sinistra sembrava che tutto fosse nascosto e avvolto nei lembi e nelle pieghe di quell'ampio drappeggio.

[...] Il mantello di mio zio ondeggiò [...] Poi, guardando meglio, vedemmo che aderiva come a un'asta di bandiera, e quest'asta era la spalla, il braccio, il fianco, la gamba, tutto quello che di lui poggiava sulla gruccia: e il resto non c'era. [...] Ecco dunque la storia di Medardo [...] Non era vero che la palla di cannono avesse sbriciolato parte del suo corpo: egli era stato spaccato in due metà; l'una fu ritrovata dai raccoglitori di feriti dell'esercito; l'altra restò sepolta sotto una piramide di resti cristiani e turchi e non fu vista. Nel cuor della notte passarono per il campo due eremiti [...] Nella loro bizzarra pietà, quegli eremiti, trovato il corpo dimezzato di Medardo, l'avevano portato alla loro spelonca, e lì, con balsami e unguenti da loro preparati, l'avevano medicato e salvato. [...] — Meno male che la palla di cannono l'ha solo spaccato in due, — dicevano tutti, — se lo faceva in tre pezzi, chissà cosa ancora ci toccava di vedere.

(Italo Calvino 1952: 12-81)

Surrounded by the "fervore d'interezza" which pervades and blinds humanity, the viscount's "furia dimezzatrice", in its sublime cruelty, foreshadows the paradoxically solid bodilessness of Calvino's "invisible knight" Agiulfo (Calvino 1959) and of the inhabitants of Le città invisibili (Calvino 1972).
The Invisible Man (Wells 1897), Invisible Man (Ellison 1952), and Il cavaliere inesistente (Calvino 1959) focus on the phenomenon of invisibility as a metaphor for the discovery of diversity (respectively: albinism, blackness, and Agilulfo's "non esserci per nulla"), each of them making differing tensions of scientific, social, political, racial, and sexual order converge on the male body.

"You don't understand," he said, "who I am or what I am. I'll show you. By heaven! I'll show you." Then he put his open palm over his face and withdrew it. The centre of his face became a black cavity. "Here," he said. He stepped forward and handed Mrs. Hall something which she, staring at his metamorphosed face, accepted automatically. Then, when she saw what it was, she screamed loudly, dropped it, and staggered back. The nose—it was the stranger's nose! pink and shining—rolled on the floor. Then he removed his spectacles, and every one in the bar gasped. He took off his hat, and with a violent gesture tore at his whiskers and bandages. For a moment they resisted him. A flesh of horrible anticipation passed through the bar. [...] It was worse than anything. Mrs. Hall, standing open-mouthed and horror-struck, shried at what she saw, and made for the door of the house. Every one began to move. They were prepared for scars, disfigurements, tangible horrors, but nothing! [...] nothingness, no visible thing at all! [...] "I'll surrender," cried the stranger [...] It was the strangest thing in the world to hear that voice coming as if out of empty space [...] "Why!" said Huxter, suddenly, "that's not a man at all. It's just empty clothes. [...]"
He extended his hand; it seemed to meet something in mid-air, and he drew it back with a sharp exclamation. "I wish you'd keep your fingers out of my eye," said the aerial voice, in a tone of savage expostulation. "The fact is, I'm all here: head, hands, legs, and all the rest of it, but it happens I'm invisible. It's a confounded nuisance, but I am. [...]"

(H.G. Wells 1897: 25-27)

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fibre and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus side-shows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me.
Nor is my invisibility exactly a matter of bio-chemical accident to my epidermis. That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality. I am not complaining, nor am I protesting either. It is sometimes advantageous to be unseen, although it is most often rather wearing on the nerves. Then too, you’re constantly being bumped against by those of poor vision. Or again, you often doubt if you really exist. [...]

(Ralph Ellison 1952: 7)

The fact that the three novels make use of the same metaphor underlines their different meanings and aims. In Wells' novel, Griffin's invisibility is the result of a scientific experiment which, if successful, should bring him fame and power; Griffin even thinks he will be able to dominate the world in the end. However, reality turns out to be quite disappointing: the antidote is not found, and the invisible man has to face (and finally to yield to) a new and permanent 'otherness' which is much more radical than his former one – albinism – and which does not make any recognition possible.
On his side, Ellison's nameless character describes his own "invisibility" in the prologue and in the epilogue of the novel, making it clear, 1, that his is a metaphorical invisibility, matched by a solid physicalness well stressed throughout the novel (battle royal, fights, riots); 2, that his invisibility concerns the whole black race and not only himself as an individual; and 3, that invisibility has also to do with strategic mask-wearing, symbolic blindness, exile, and man's progress "from nothingness to identity" (Lieber 1972: 92).

Lastly, Calvino's nonexistent knight can speak and act thanks not so much to his own "will" — as he claims — as to the war in which he is engaged and to the very armour he wears and with which he identifies himself: " — E l'armatura non ve la togliete mai d'indosso? — Tornò a mormorare. — Non c'è un indosso. Togliere o mettere per me non ha senso" (Calvino 1959: 20). His bodilessness, far from being a handicap, is counterbalanced by high qualification, competence, and extremely upright behaviour. Nevertheless, the price he has to pay for his diversity is alienation, solitude, and, ultimately, death.

Despite these differences, all the three novels ground their strategies in the problematization of the male body and in the world of potentialities opened up by such problematization. Thanks to invisibility, the body breaks spatial rules and slips out of the universal taxonomy of being, outdoing all intermediate degrees of decomposition and division. Only a seeming upsetting of the da sein, invisibility on the one side gives the body a sort of supernatural power (Wells' invisible man can see without being seen and thus temporarily escape his chasers, though he cannot achieve his project of world domination and is finally persecuted and killed), while on the other side it stands for loneliness, alienation, not belonging, and segregation (Ellison's invisible man can neither rely on physical safety nor escape moral persecution, and Agilulfo endures solitude and is brought to self-destruction by an unjust charge despite the physical invulnerability granted him by his own bodilessness).

Only death can restore the body to his possessor in Wells' novel: "After Griffin's death his body gradually reappears. Its creeping visibility is likened to 'the slow spreading of poison'" (Draper 1987: 48). In this way identity is restored, "come se nel tornare nell'altrove si recuperasse identità (accade così anche al dr Jekyll)" (Finzi 1988: xi). Ellison's character, on the contrary, builds up his own identity through a series of ritual deaths: the more "invisible" he realizes he is, the more solid his self becomes. As for Agilulfo, who is not only invisible but — more extremely — "inesistente", he does not recover any kind of visibility when he dies. His change of condition is simply marked by the lost integrity of his armour, usually extremely tidy and now scattered in a glade:

[Rambaldo] Tratteneva il fiato. Giunse a una radura. Ai piedi d'una quercia, sparsi in terra, erano un elmo rovesciato dal cimiero color dell'iride, una corazza bianca, i cosciali i bracciali le manopole, tutti
In conclusion, all the (male) protagonists of the afore-mentioned novels and short stories in various degrees undergo a body modification which is crucial in the construction and/or redefinition of their identity. Fragmentation, mutilation, dismemberment, disguise, and – more extremely – literal invisibility represent anomalous conditions of the body which reflect, in turn, an instability of the self and an attempt at experimenting with new strategies of being, especially in the light of turn-of-the-century reshaping of gender categories and emergence of race issues. In the novels under examination the male body is perceived and experimented upon not only as a biological entity, nor as the container of a mind or 'soul', but as a multi-layered cultural product still open to many possible interpretations. Invisible or indivisible, divided or disconnected, our fictional characters enigmatically lavish half looks and half smiles, ultimately leaving their body cartography for others to decipher.

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