

INTRODUCTION



Ralph Ellison

(1914-1994)

Ralph Ellison achieved high literary stature and many honors for one novel: *Invisible Man* (1952) is important because it is: (1) a complex Modernist novel in a class with Joyce, Mann and Faulkner; (2) one of only about 10 American novels containing multiple coinciding allegories—the invisible man as an individual, as a representative of his race, and as our common humanity in the modern world; (3) the only American novel to equal Faulkner in Expressionistic style—until Cormac McCarthy; (4) the major novel by a black American; (5) an insightful historical rendering of black life on the verge of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s; (6) a liberation of black consciousness from deterministic Naturalism through Existentialism to psychological wholeness and transcendent consciousness in the tradition of Ralph Waldo Emerson; (7) the most musical American novel, with techniques and styles influenced by jazz and the blues. Ellison studied the great Modernists, rejected the limitations of black protest fiction, aspired to the highest standards and integrated his novel with the major traditions of American literature, influenced in particular by Melville, Poe, Emerson, T. S. Eliot, Hemingway, and Faulkner.

“In the United States,” Ellison wrote, “the Negro and his status have always stood for...moral concern. He symbolizes among other things the human and social possibility of equality. This is the moral question raised in our two great nineteenth-century novels, *Moby-Dick* and *Huckleberry Finn*....This conception of the Negro as a symbol of Man—the reversal of what he represents in most contemporary thought—was organic to nineteenth-century literature. It occurs not only in Twain but in Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman and Melville...all of whom were men publicly involved in various forms of deeply personal rebellion.”

BIOGRAPHY

Ralph Waldo Ellison was named appropriately after an Idealist, the major American philosopher. His mother was politically inclined. “My mother had canvassed for the socialists, not the Communists, the year I was born.” His father was a businessman and construction foreman who died from stomach ulcers when Ralph was only 3. He said growing up in Oklahoma City between the Great Depression and World War II was like being on the frontier. He compared himself to Huck Finn. As a boy he developed an interest in electronics and audio technology, taking apart and rebuilding radios. Later, as an adult, he built elaborate customized hi-fi stereo systems. “I am not ashamed of my grandparents for having been slaves,” he said. “I am only ashamed of myself for having at one time been ashamed.”

EDUCATION

In grade school Ellison began reading the poetry of Langston Hughes, but early on like Huck he was mostly educated by life. “The place where a rich oral literature was truly functional were the churches, the

schoolyards, the barbershops, the cotton-picking camps; places where folklore and gossip thrived. The drug store where I worked was such a place, where on days of bad weather the older men would sit with their pipes and tell tale tales, hunting yarns and homely versions of the classics.” In that way his boyhood resembled that of Faulkner, who grew up among blacks. “I was looking for myself and asking everyone except myself questions which I, and only I, could answer.”

He played jazz trumpet throughout his life and in 1933 he hopped a freight to Alabama and enrolled at Tuskegee Institute on a music scholarship. “The library at Tuskegee was quite adequate and I used it. Soon I was reading a whole range of subjects...and this led, in turn, to...Pound and Ford Madox Ford, Sherwood Anderson and Gertrude Stein, Hemingway and Fitzgerald and...Melville....In 1935 I discovered Eliot’s ‘The Waste Land’ which moved and intrigued me but defied my powers of analysis.” His subsequent literary criticism is in the objective tradition of New Criticism established by Eliot. Although he left Tuskegee after three years without a degree, Ellison went on to become a better scholar and teacher of American fiction than most professors with doctorates in the field today: For example, “‘The Monster’ reminds us that [Stephen Crane] not only anticipated many of the techniques and themes of Hemingway, but that he also stands as the link between the Twain of *Pudd’nhead Wilson* and *Huckleberry Finn* and the Faulkner of *The Sound and the Fury*.”

NEW YORK

His experiences at Tuskegee later informed the first part of *Invisible Man*. “So after years of trying to adopt the opinions of others I finally rebelled.” Like the invisible man he moved up north to New York City, where he studied sculpture and photography, exhibiting further versatility. He met Langston Hughes and became a friend of Richard Wright, who at that time was a Communist. “The Left brought the world-view of Marxism into the Negro community.” Ellison began editing for Communist periodicals. “I was forced to this awareness through my struggles with the craft of fiction; yes, and by my attraction (soon rejected) of Marxist political theory, which was my response to the inferior status which society sought to impose upon me.” From 1937 to 1944 he published stories, articles and over 20 book reviews in magazines such as *New Challenge* and *New Masses*.

For awhile in 1937, the middle of the Great Depression, he lived in Dayton, Ohio, “where my brother and I hunted and sold game to earn a living. At night I practiced writing and studied Joyce, Dostoyevsky, Stein, and Hemingway. Especially Hemingway. I read him to learn his sentence structure and how to organize a story...It was from Hemingway I learned to lead a bird.”

WRITING

He found Modernist writing “technically brilliant and emotionally powerful....When I started writing, I knew that in both ‘The Waste Land’ and *Ulysses* ancient myth and ritual were used to give form and significance to the material, but it took me a few years to realize that the myths and rites which we find functioning in our everyday lives could be used in the same way....Faulkner...has explored perhaps more successfully than anyone else, either white or black, certain forms of Negro humanity....Writing was an acting-out, symbolically, of a choice which I dared not acknowledge. Indeed, I repressed it beneath my old concern with music and my current involvement in the intense social and political activity which claimed so many of us who came of age during the thirties....Fiction became the agency of my efforts to answer the questions: Who am I, what am I, how did I come to be? What shall I make of the life around me?”

WORLD WAR II

Ellison did not want to serve in a segregated military and avoided the draft by joining the merchant marine, like Saul Bellow. During the war both he and Richard Wright were bitterly disillusioned with the Communist Party, feeling it had betrayed black people. This deep feeling of betrayal provoked him to write *Invisible Man*, in which the white leaders of the Communist Party use and abandon the people of Harlem. Furthermore, Ellison was an intellectual rather than an ideologue: “I didn’t think too much of the so-called proletarian fiction even when I was most impressed by Marxism....How awful that Wright found the facile answers of Marxism before he learned to use literature as a means for discovering the forms of American Negro humanity.”

In 1946 he married Fanny McConnell, his second wife. She supported him as a photographer and edited and typed his handwritten manuscripts, while he made a little money writing book reviews and worked on his novel. "In 1950 my wife and I were staying at vacation spot where we met some white liberals who thought the best way to be friendly was to tell us what it was like to be a Negro."

Invisible Man (1952)

In the traditions of world literature *Invisible Man* is a novel of education, as the hero develops through experience from innocence to enlightenment, moving from the archetypal Garden (college in the South) to the City (reality in the North). This upward movement symbolizes the individuation process toward psychological wholeness and transcendence that he finally attains. In the end, the circular structure of the novel—"The end is in the beginning and lies far ahead"—transcends vertical consciousness. Literally, the geographical movement upward corresponds to the Great Migration of blacks from the rural South to the urban North after the Civil War, as they sought to move up in the world: "This, as you will notice in reading Negro folk tales, is always the road to freedom—the movement upward. You have the same thing again when he leaves his underground cave for the open." In American tradition the hero is the American Adam who falls into Wilderness of this world—in his case the "jungle" of Harlem. Like T. S. Eliot and like Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby* Ellison criticizes the materialism and selfishness prevailing in the modern world. Whereas to many blacks those values are "white," Ellison affirms our common humanity, concluding: "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?"

"Thus to see America with an awareness of its rich diversity and its almost magical fluidity and freedom, I was forced to conceive of a novel unburdened by the narrow naturalism which has led, after so many triumphs, to the final and unrelieved despair which marks so much of our current fiction"; "If I were asked in all seriousness just what I considered to be the chief significance of *Invisible Man* as a fiction, I would reply: Its experimental attitude, and its attempt to return to the mood of personal moral responsibility for democracy which typified the best of our nineteenth-century fiction"; "The book is a series of reversals. It is the portrait of the artist as a rabble-rouser"; "As the hero passes from the South to the North, from the relatively stable to the swiftly changing, his sense of certainty is lost and the style becomes expressionistic. Later on during his fall from grace in the Brotherhood it becomes somewhat surrealistic. The styles try to express both his state of consciousness and the state of society"; "Like a jazz musician who creates his own style out of the styles around him, I play by ear"; "The three parts represent the narrator's movement from...purpose to passion to perception. These three major sections are built up of smaller units of three which mark the course of the action."

CRITICS

Invisible Man won the National Book Award in 1953. White critics hailed *Invisible Man* with great enthusiasm, as Saul Bellow did in his review, both because it is such a distinguished novel and because it confirmed their faith in equality. A black man had written a novel intellectually and aesthetically in a class with the best that white men and women had written. "By and large, the critics and readers gave me an affirmed sense of my identity as a writer. You might know this within yourself, but to have it affirmed by others is of utmost importance." On the other hand, to the dismay of white critics, black critics castigated Ellison for not being black enough. He betrayed them by integrating with the white literary mainstream. Their standards were ethnic and political rather than literary.

In the 20th century "political correctness" began with the Marxist critics of the 1930s, then proceeded with black critics beginning in the 1950s and with Feminists in and after the 1960s. Ellison felt so hurt by accusations of betrayal from black critics that he lost his confidence and was never able to finish another novel: "I was never so hated than when I tried to be honest." Our best black novelist got silenced by black critics. "I am a novelist, not an activist...Why is it," he asked, "that sociology-oriented critics seem to rate literature so far below politics and ideology that they would rather kill a novel than modify their presumptions concerning a given reality which it seeks in its own terms to project?"

1960s

For the rest of his life Ellison endured the frustration and embarrassment of failing to produce another novel. Teaching at universities, he turned his attention mainly to criticism, publishing *Shadow and Act* in 1964, a collection of essays: “They are concerned with three general themes: with literature and folklore, with Negro musical expression—especially jazz and the blues—and with the complex relationship between the Negro subculture and North American culture as a whole.” The next year a survey of 200 literary figures declared *Invisible Man* to be the most important novel since World War II. That might have encouraged him, but in 1967 a fire at his home in Plainfield, Massachusetts burned over 300 manuscript pages of his second novel. Struggling to overcome despair, he started over.

HONORS

In 1969 he was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, in 1970 he was made a Chevalier de l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres by France and also became the Albert Schweitzer Professor of Humanities at NYU, where he taught from 1970 to 1980. He also taught at Yale, Bard College, Rutgers, and the University of Chicago. In 1975 he was elected to The American Academy of Arts and Letters and his hometown of Oklahoma City named a library after him. He was awarded the Langston Hughes Medal in 1984 and the National Medal of Arts in 1985. The Modern Language Association published *Approaches to Teaching Ellison’s Invisible Man* in 1989, one of only 10 American novels it has so honored.

DEATH

Ellison died in 1994 of pancreatic cancer and is buried in the Washington Heights neighborhood in New York City. Five years later his unfinished second novel *Juneteenth*—in progress for 40 years--was published with speculative editing that condensed over 2,000 pages to 368. Most reviewers thought it should have been left unpublished. Modern Library published a version of the incomplete manuscripts in 2010 entitled *Three Days Before the Shooting*.

Michael Hollister (2013)

ONLY ONE NOVEL

“Almost thirty years after *Invisible Man*, Ellison’s difficulties with his second novel have entered myth. Speculation whether Ellison can write more is really beside the point. *Invisible Man* as an achievement needs no second act; it established its author, entered into mainstream American fiction, and remains a touchstone of the 1950s. Condescension toward Ellison for his inability to produce another novel runs up against an essential fact: he wrote one. Many American novelists would have done well to stick by their first book and go no further.

Ellison published several short fictions which derive from his work in progress, and these excerpts suggest some of the reasons for the difficulty. In an interview with John Hersey, he spoke of his new novel as fitting into an ‘underground’ experience, with images of coffins, of being buried, of attempts to transcend, all associated with black life. The key image is of resurrection: ‘In my mind all of this is tied up in some way with the significance of being a Negro in America and at the same time with the problem of our democratic faith as a whole.’ He perceives his vision as a big sponge, or ‘a waterbed, with a lot of needles sticking in it.’ Ellison says his difficulty has been in trying to ‘tie those threads together,’ without letting ‘whatever lies in the center leak out.’...

[His later short stories] taken together suggest a clash of styles...The language shifts, as if uncertainty of conception has extended into the prose. Further, what made Ellison’s work in *Invisible Man* so corrosive was irony, itself a vision or patterning. Little or none of that is apparent in the stories. It is as if Ellison had turned his back on the sophistication of his novel in order to return to earlier, more simplistic modes; as if he had been touched so deeply by the attacks made on him by black critics for not being black enough that he was responding with more direct folksy material. And, as he must recognize, it is reductive....

In his reply to Irving Howe's essay on Richard Wright and protest literature, Ellison asserted that one may be loyal to the aspirations of black people without being Richard Wright; loyalty is measured, instead, in the steadiness and intensity of one's private vision. Yet despite Ellison's disclaimer, certain modes of thought seem continuous with Wright, and that is the kind of experience caught in Wright's 'The Man Who Lived Underground' (1941, 1944) and elsewhere in his work. For Wright has, as early as *Native Son*, touched upon a traditional American theme of the outcast, with special reference to the black outcast: the man on the run from the police who eventually, because of some passive strain in his nature, embraces the police for his own destruction. Ellison's physical 'refuge' in *Invisible Man* probably owes more to Wright's underground than to Dostoyevsky's. And just as Ellison's narrator lines his walls with bulbs, so Wright's Daniels lines his with bills. That papered wall, full of money he has no desire to spend, is his form of 'light'; exactly as Ellison's lights are forms of spending, of enjoying something unearned, a black man's revenge....Wright thought in mythical modes which his practice did not allow him to exploit fully; in effect, the underground novel he suggests would become, not his, but Ellison's *Invisible Man*."

Frederick R. Karl
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