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# The Visible Man

## Darryl Pinckney

June 14, 2007 issue

**Reviewed:**

**Ralph Ellison: A Biography**
by Arnold Rampersad
Knopf, 657 pp., $35.00

**This Issue**
**June 14, 2007**

*Invisible Man* has never been out of print. Acclaimed when it appeared in 1952, the novel's reputation has only risen since. For a long time black audiences could admire this indisputably great work, but were unable to embrace Ralph Ellison, because he seemed so determined to be unavailable to them. In 1953, Ellison received the National Book Award, which gave him one of the worst cases of Negro Firsterism in postwar US history. His time coincided with that of fellow stars of integration, Jackie Robinson and Ralph Bunche and Thurgood Marshall and the astonishing Leontyne Price. Yet Ellison was splendid as a brilliant, boldly pro-American Negro writer who declined to believe that another black person could write or had written a novel as deserving as his of a place in the front rank of modern American literature. He became something of a grand old man early on, while still in his fifties, so hoisted up was he by his literary achievement. He was beautifully dressed, elegant in manner, but a man's man; someone welcomed in the highest academic circles and sought out by presidents. However, his desire to stand apart from, if not above, other black writers meant that he had to pretend he wasn't worried some African-American was going to come along and top his performance before he had had the chance to outdo himself.

In *Ralph Ellison: A Biography*, Arnold Rampersad refers to an article published in Ellison's lifetime in which he is grouped with Henry Roth and Harper Lee as writers who did not publish a second novel after the tremendous success of their first. But Ellison didn't decide to give up fiction; his eventual problem was that he couldn't stop working on his second

novel: he kept adding and adding and not letting go. *Juneteenth*, published posthumously in 1999—Ellison died in 1994—and edited by his able literary executor, John Callahan, is only a portion of the manuscript he left behind. For decades, his second novel was known only through the few chapters that appeared in anthologies or small literary quarterlies. In the interviews that he gave, Ellison himself raised expectations, making his unfinished novel something of a topic, a scandal, on the order of Harold Brodkey's *A Party of Animals*. Though his mask was generally flawless, Ellison could be defensive about the work as the years went by, Rampersad reports, and his friends learned not to ask. A certain defensiveness on his behalf seeps into Rampersad's tone as well after a while, though the aim of his biography is to reconcile Ellison, the cultural conservative, with the black America that came of age in the Sixties, the period he was so out of touch with.

Zora Neale Hurston would have adored knowing his white folks. Rampersad makes it clear that Ellison was very much in step with the white America of the 1960s that asked him to sit on the boards of the Ford Foundation and Colonial Williamsburg. After all, it was he who wanted the country to realize that in essential aspects of life—friendships, language, music, literature—segregation had never been as victorious as everyone else for some reason had said it was. Ellison, a donor to the NAACP Legal Defense Fund most of his adult life, admired Lyndon Johnson as a champion of civil rights, the enforcer of *Brown* v. *Board of Education*, and he was in favor of the Vietnam War and some form of mandatory national service.

In other words, Ellison held views common to most middle-class black veterans of World War II at that time, though he certainly did not associate with the black middle class. He was a guest at the White House; he went to Truman Capote's Black and White Ball. He flourished during the years of Johnson's Great Society, not only because he was a black intellectual who did not bite white people's heads off, but also because in sharing the values of the white majority, he went so far as to give what he called the Negro American character credit for the strength of what he described as the nation's respect for individualism, and he held this ground against all comers. "Our fate is to become one, and yet many."

Rampersad writes as though the nation has at last caught up with Ellison's rugged pluralism and now admires the man who stood up against black militants and was vilified for his positions that ran contrary to their anti-establishment, anti-integration mood. Never mind that such confrontations might have been welcome, that the hurt of being misunderstood was also the pain of election. What Ellison was most out of touch with was the freedom of the generation of black writers who emerged as Black Power waned, the generation of Ann Allen Shockley, Toni Morrison, Ishmael Reed, and Charles Johnson, writers who, while opposed to the dogma of the Black Aesthetic—the argument that art by blacks was inherently revolutionary, that it needed to be de-Americanized, was not addressed to whites, and therefore could not be evaluated by white critics—were still more influenced by the rediscovery of a black cultural nationalism that Ellison had no sympathy for. By asserting that their work is all somehow descended from *Invisible Man*, Rampersad seeks to reconcile Ellison to the black novelists he showed little interest in when they were at the beginning of their writing lives in the 1970s. Meanwhile, although his book was always at the top of lists of the best American novels, not just novels by black writers, the moments in Rampersad's biography when Ellison feels competitive with a white writer are tellingly few. He once introduced himself as one of Faulkner's children to Faulkner.

It's hard to avoid clichés of race psychology when looking back at Ellison, his pride now seems so transparent. The mask was in place so that no one would see that he had suffered; the discipline of his mask was the sign of his triumph over his early suffering. His father died when he was three and embodied for him forever afterward the uncompromising spirit of the black veterans of the Spanish-American War. In his essays, Ellison offers an idealized version of his childhood, stressing the cultural richness of Oklahoma City, where he was born in 1913. He speaks of the social fluidity of his upbringing on a frontier, and of the wide range of music and literature he was exposed to out there in the territory. Unlike Richard Wright, Ellison would not make his poverty a subject, although it was as severe as what Wright had known in Mississippi. According to Rampersad, his mother later told him that his father's body had begun to rot in the heat before she could find the money to bury him. She went into service, working as a maid or janitor for the rest of her life. She

remarried three times. To help out his mother, Ellison took his first job, as a shoeshine boy, at age twelve.

In 1931, after he'd graduated from high school, Ellison hitchhiked forty miles to try to enroll in Langston University, a black school. Langston's president had been a friend of his father's, but because Ellison's family had opposed Bill "Alfalfa" Murray, the racist governor responsible for appointing Langston's president, he refused to help. Ellison's desire to be in college was so overwhelming that in 1933 he jumped freight trains to get to the Tuskegee Institute. It was dangerous for young black men to ride the rails in the Depression. In 1931, the nine black youths known as the Scottsboro Boys had been arrested and nearly lynched in Alabama, falsely accused of raping two white girls. But also in 1931, the Philadelphia Orchestra had toured the country, performing William Grant Still's *Afro-American Symphony*, and Ellison's ambition to be a great black composer made him master his fear.

Ellison praised Tuskegee in his essays, but privately he was bitter about his college experience. Rampersad reveals that a dean of students exploited Ellison's financial desperation and coerced him into sexual acts. Moreover, William Levi Dawson, whom he had come to Tuskegee to study music with and whose "Negro Folk Symphony" Stokowski would conduct in 1934, proved remote as a teacher. Ellison's money problems never ceased; often he couldn't afford the extra costs of the music program. He got a job in the library where the young librarian was sympathetic and let him read the copy of *Ulysses* that Tuskegee kept locked up. He came under the sway of an inspired English teacher and soon placed his hopes in literature. Hard pressed by the Depression, Tuskegee's administration made plans to cut its music program. In 1936, Ellison left the South for New York, where he would give up music for sculpture before putting both aside for writing. He never returned to Tuskegee to take a degree.

Around the same time, Ellison's mother was leaving her last husband and Oklahoma for good, settling with Ellison's younger brother in Dayton, Ohio. The letters between Ellison and his mother that Rampersad quotes from make for sad reading. He held her responsible for the state of his clothes and never showed that he understood what a sacrifice it was for her to send the small sums she did. He was cold to her,

perhaps because he couldn't help her. He forgot her fiftieth birthday; he talked continually about himself. Rampersad says that Ellison loved his mother, but he refused to read between the lines of her brave letters. He arrived in Ohio the day before she died in 1937. "This is the end of childhood for us," he wrote about himself and his brother. In the winter following her death, they slept for a while in a friend's Ford and survived on doughnuts and milk that they got on credit. Ellison coped by throwing himself into his work on a novella and short stories.

Back in New York, Ellison found a job with the Federal Writers' Project and a measure of security. He contributed high-flown Marxist reviews and more relaxed reportage to *New Masses*, worked in the *Daily Worker* offices, attended Communist-dominated writers' conferences. He was being groomed by *New Masses* to take the place of Richard Wright as the leading black contributor, since Wright was becoming more alienated from the Party the more he found himself as a writer. Ellison stayed loyal, through the Moscow trials, the expulsion of Trotsky, the Hitler–Stalin Pact. "Ralph would remain something of a Stalinist for years to come," Rampersad writes, and he speculates that Ellison was a Party member. The Party and the Writers' Project were a continuation of his education, and also provided him with outlets for his writing, even while he, like Wright, continued to read widely and freely.

When Germany invaded the Soviet Union, he didn't make the switch to the new pro-war line. Because Moscow was more interested in getting the US into the war than it was in battling the race problem in America, *New Masses* had less use for Ellison and gradually he withdrew from Party activities. Where Wright's break with the Party was international news, because of his fame, Ellison was scarcely known outside Party circles. His involvement with the Federal Writers' Project also came to an end. He joined the merchant marine in 1943, but for medical reasons was reclassified as ineligible for service and spent much of the rest of the war haunted by depression.

Ellison said the idea for *Invisible Man* took him by surprise in 1945, in the middle of a prison camp novel he was then trying to write. His short first marriage had ended by this time and he met his devoted Fanny McConnell. Rampersad writes:

> In August 1945 the world was new again—*he* was new again—and the time had come for a rebirth of American culture, which he, as an artist and an intellectual who had known poverty, despair, radicalism, and now a transcendent wisdom, would endeavor to shape. "I think our destiny," he ventured (echoing James Joyce on Ireland), "is to become the conscience of the United States."

*Invisible Man* is a coming-of-age story told through the surrealism of the blues. Ellison's unnamed first-person narrator goes from a Tuskegee-like black college in the South to New York, where he gets involved in Harlem's radical politics. He does what others tell him, follows where he is led, but all along he has been meeting folk characters in the city who warn him that the quest for the authentic self cannot unfold by formula. Rampersad acknowledges the force of "Ralph's ambition, greater perhaps than that of all black writers of fiction before him (because few were as concerned with mastering experimental techniques as he was)." Yet the seven or eight years of labor Ellison gave to *Invisible Man* go by quickly in his account. Rampersad has his insights and he goes out of his way to mention a scholar who has detected for the first time in Ellison's novel traces of Miguel de Unamuno's language.[1] However, the story of *Invisible Man* and its genesis is better told in Lawrence Jackson's impressive *Ralph Ellison: Emergence of Genius*.[2]

Jackson's lengthy biography ends in 1953, with Ellison's National Book Award acceptance speech, in which he declared naturalism obsolete. The speech comes a third of the way into Rampersad's biography, leaving him forty years of Ellison's second act. Jackson therefore can go into something like Ellison's early influences in more depth than Rampersad, starting with his teachers in Oklahoma City and Tuskegee, whom he discusses in relation to the history of black education. Ellison as a striving writer, we learn, changed the punctuation in Henry James's preface to *The Princess Casamassima* in order to make James's prose more clear to him. Where, for instance, Rampersad in writing on Ellison as managing editor of *The Negro Quarterly* between 1942 and 1944 emphasizes his exasperation at having to work with the financially dishonest activist Angelo Herndon, Jackson attributes Ellison's frustration to the poor quality of the submissions he was getting from black writers and his own attempts to move away from Communist ideology in literary

matters. Similarly, Jackson gives a fuller picture than Rampersad of the intellectual currents that Ellison paid strict attention to, such as the literary theories of Kenneth Burke. Ellison was anxious that he was not a natural fiction writer and he studied those writers and critics he believed would show him how he could approach the material he wanted to work with.

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Jackson also discusses cuts that changed the book. Ellison did away with a subplot in which the narrator falls in love with a white woman. To get away from her is one of the original reasons he goes underground at the end. He also dropped material about the narrator's Harlem rooming house and his fellow boarders. The most significant character left out was a dead merchant marine, Leroy, whom the narrator only knows about through Leroy's journal. It is one of the narrator's prized possessions, which he consults as a spiritual guide. Leroy was meant to be a more thoughtful black nationalist than another character, Ras the Destroyer. Jackson tells us that in his journal Leroy ruminates over matters such as European domination and global world prejudice and his regret that Frederick Douglass had not been an advocate of armed resistance like Nat Turner. Ellison's plan had been to have the narrator burn all the contents of his briefcase when he escapes into the sewer, except for Leroy's journal.

Jackson cites a letter from Harry Ford, a Knopf editor who dealt mostly with poets and one of Ellison's three trusted readers, recommending that the "prolix" journal be dropped. Some of Leroy's aphorisms found their way into the epilogue of the novel, but, Jackson observes, including the journal would have made the hero less naive politically. In the uncut version of the novel, the narrator joins the Brotherhood—the Communist Party–like organization into which he had been recruited—to learn the best method of fighting colonialism. Jackson maintains that Ellison was mindful of James Baldwin's attack on Wright and the protest tradition. Furthermore, as war threatened between the US and China over Korea, and more blacks supported the Truman Doctrine, Ellison agreed with Ford that the politics were best muted and that the Marxism of the journal's anticolonialist rhetoric was old-fashioned. As Jackson says, Ellison was interested in a redefinition of American identity, not a repudiation of it.

Rampersad is critical of what he considers *Invisible Man*'s weak final part, when the Brotherhood abandons its political activities in Harlem for "no plausible reason." "A crisis of spirit and technique haunts this last section," in Rampersad's view. Having realized the cynicism of the Brotherhood and the insanity of Ras the Destroyer, the narrator has nowhere to go other than into his manhole, his hiding place. Rampersad contends that the novel's symbols, such as what the narrator keeps in his briefcase, are worn out by this point, adding that Ellison recognized the need for an epilogue, in order to impose final control over his epic. The question is whether the epilogue also achieves the transcendence he sought:

> We were to affirm the principle on which the country was built and not the men, or at least not the men who did the violence.... Or did he mean that we had to take the responsibility for all of it, for the men as well as the principle...because no other fitted our needs?

In the end, Ellison's allegory doesn't accuse anyone or indict society, as the phrase used to be, and it is this restraint that can make it seem as though his novel's politically ambiguous ending reflects the caution of a former Party member writing during the cold war.

It is amazing how different *Invisible Man* is from the works that came from most black writers in the years immediately following World War II, whether hard-bitten novels of urban violence or sensitive novels of adolescent introspection. One important difference has to do with what Ellison's dreamscape leaves out. Wright, Chester Himes, and Ann Petry show in their work that in describing the black ghetto, naturalistic detail almost automatically makes for a critical tone. By transcendent, Ellison also meant his quest to go beyond realism. But the major difference was in his approach to language, to what he makes of the literary possibilities of the black vernacular as an eloquent American folk idiom. Contemporary novelists such as Gayl Jones and Wesley Brown who explore in their work the blues aesthetic are, indeed, Ellison's heirs. He was the first black writer since Jean Toomer to transfer to prose some of the tasks of poetry.

Ellison followed the Montgomery bus boycott in Alabama in 1955 from the American Academy in Rome. As impressed as he was by the student lunch-counter sit-ins in North Carolina

in 1960, he was distant from the civil rights movement, but then so were most black people up North. What James Baldwin did was unusual. His going South was what he chose to do with his freedom and prestige. Ellison could easily have gotten journalism assignments to go South, but he did not see that kind of reportage as part of his purpose as a writer. He insisted that as an artist his contribution to the freedom struggle was to do his best as a novelist. Consequently, even before Black Power, Ellison, like Baldwin, came under attack from black writers who considered his attitude elitist.[3]

An animus against Baldwin runs through Rampersad's biography—as though, having defused the notion that Wright and Ellison were bitter rivals, Rampersad still needed another black writer to stand for the propaganda side of things. Baldwin and Ellison went in opposite directions, with Baldwin ending up the engaged black writer that Ellison had accepted black writers to be when he was just starting out. Baldwin, Rampersad suggests, "seemed to donate, not merely to lend, his prestige to the civil rights cause, and in the process distended it." Baldwin attacked white liberals, he claims, while Ellison wanted to give them access to those parts of American culture that came from black people. Rampersad then goes on to insist that *Shadow and Act*, Ellison's 1964 collection of essays, "would outlive virtually all of the books of essays by James Baldwin." This is untrue, but *Notes of a Native Son* and *Shadow and Act* are so different that there is no reason to pit Baldwin against Ellison and every reason to be glad of both. Baldwin may not have been the intellectual that Wright and Ellison were, but he was the most literary of the three.

Ellison had been close at one time to John Cheever and Saul Bellow. In his essays, he liked to remind his literary peers that his place at the table of writers who contemplated "the morality of the American experience" had been prepared for him by their spiritual betters such as the Transcendentalists, New Englanders like Emerson and Hawthorne. This is the side of Ellison that Mailer took aim at in *Advertisements for Myself*, writing that "he is essentially a hateful writer," and that "tuned to the pitch of a major novelist's madness"; his mind "is not always adequate to mastering the forms of rage, horror, and disgust which his eyes have presented to his experiences and so he is forever tumbling from the heights of pure satire into tunnels of a murderously depressed clown."

To be pro-war and a friend of convention came at a cost when one was dealing with the lovers of hip.

Rampersad portrays another side of Ellison, the club insider who did not go out of his way to bring in other black writers. Meanwhile, Ellison labored over his essays and some of his lectures, and the years went by. Rampersad implies that toward the end of his life Ellison was inflating the number of manuscript pages of his second novel that he lost in a fire that destroyed his summer house in Plainfield, Massachusetts, in 1967. Until a scholarly edition of what Ellison left is published, it will be hard to say what his problems with *Juneteenth* might have been. John Callahan in his introduction to the version he published says that Ellison was worried about finding a way to pull together the contents of several notebooks.[4]

"Juneteenth" was a day celebrated in Ellison's home state of Oklahoma as the anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, because, though issued in January of 1863, news of it didn't reach isolated parts of the West until much later. Ellison's *Juneteenth* is mostly voice, or voices, some of them eloquently down-home, "in the beloved idiom," especially those of the white senator Adam Sunraider, called Bliss in his childhood, and the black preacher Daddy Hickman, who taught Sunraider when a boy how to hold a crowd. When the novel opens, sometime in the late 1950s, Hickman has come to Washington with members of his congregation to warn Sunraider of an assassination attempt; they don't reach him in time and Sunraider is shot in the Senate while giving one of his notorious speeches full of jokes about coons and Cadillacs. The hospital reunion between Hickman and Sunraider after a separation of many years sets off the memories that account for most of the novel's action.

In and out of consciousness, Senator Sunraider remembers his days as Bliss, the boy evangelist on the black Baptist revival circuit with Hickman before World War I. He had been reared as a light-skinned black child. He doesn't know the circumstances of his birth. His thoughts about his past also focus on his life as a young white man making motion pictures that were little more than ephemeral sideshow entertainments in the South and Southwest. Sometimes the senator can hear Hickman by his bedside and as the novel progresses Hickman's memories of Bliss, his version of the senator's childhood, will alternate with the senator's reminiscences,

making for the "antiphonal structure," the call and response, which, according to Ellison's design, are supposed to amount to a dialogue about the nation's character, a sermon on America.

Both men retell their hot dusty nights. They goad each other to remember sermons or they rehearse sermons together. Hickman recalls the music and the choirs, the workers in white uniforms and the yellow cases of soda, the vast quantities of catfish and ham, coleslaw, and chocolate cake at church revivals. Clearly much importance rests on the fact that as a preacher Hickman is also a veteran of the fast life in Kansas City, Joplin, and "St. Joe." A man in a pulpit is as much of a performer, a musician, or healer as a man on stage with his instrument. His sermons are a continuation of the blues by other means. Maybe in his showmanship Hickman is also meant to be a Trickster figure of the kind Zora Neale Hurston wrote about, the folkloric hero who outsmarts the white man. After all, he exploits Bliss. Hickman is redeemed by the eloquence of his sermons more than he is by his having chosen to make a child live on the road with him just so he can mold him eventually into a white man who is black on the inside. But after Bliss leaves him Hickman seems to lose his power.

Hickman has followed Bliss's movements over the years through his network of chauffeurs and train porters, but his life seems to have been suspended until set in motion by the urgent need to warn the senator about rumors of revenge against him for his race-baiting in Congress. Bliss, on the other hand, child preacher, flim-flam movie man, and national politician, seems much more in the tradition of a Trickster hero, always on the move, changing. The story of Moses comes to mind in Hickman's patient wait all those years for Sunraider to remember his own origins, and champion the cause of black people.

*Juneteenth* is fable, far above the guilt and remorse usually associated with novels about passing as social betrayal. Ellison shows Bliss accepted by other black children as a very light-skinned black child; but the fact that he is a boy preacher who has standing among adults, especially women, already sets him apart. It isn't clear how Bliss got away and crossed the color line or why, as a young man, he is afraid of being recognized by people who haven't seen him since he was a

boy. As for the senator, Ellison doesn't make him panic with the fear of being exposed. He himself seems to have been always a foundling in his own mind.

The tone of Sinclair Lewis's *Kingsblood Royal* (1951)—the story of a white World War II veteran in a small Minnesota town who discovers that he had a black ancestor and decides to make it public, only to encounter racist hatred as a result—seems impossible now. Toni Morrison has suggested that perhaps Ellison was unable to finish his novel because "passing" was such an outdated subject. However, in *The Human Stain* (2000), an irresistible, thrilling work, Philip Roth reinvigorates the genre. Then, too, the scale of Ellison's ambition was inhibiting. He conceived of himself as dealing with unrecorded history, and he makes his cultural point that there is much blackness to whiteness; but *Juneteenth* never overcomes the abstraction in its premise, or adequately makes up for the simplified picture of black social and political life that Ellison's symbolic reading of American history up to the 1950s implies. What remains are the isolated pleasures of his text, the expressions of black spirit, Ellison's famous riffs of language.[5]

Ellison often claimed that mastery of technique was life-affirming, and his writings about the jazz greats he heard play in his youth in Oklahoma give these musicians credit for expressing something about the optimism of blacks as a group that found no expression elsewhere. It was why he could never forgive Charlie Parker his self-destructiveness. Art is what black people had instead of freedom, Ellison once said. Rampersad says Ellison complained that what made it hard to write was that events were too confusing, that time would not stand still long enough for him to figure out what was going on. Events defied consciousness and form, he said, but what was going on was not what he was writing about.

He won the day in his famous exchange of essays with Irving Howe over the freedom of black writers to choose their own subjects. But Howe wasn't entirely wrong about the futility of Ellison trying to subdue reality with language. Gin, jazz, and dreams were not enough. Books were not enough. Baldwin told his biographer, James Campbell, that he ran into Ellison at the Newport Jazz Festival sometime in the 1960s, and he thought, "Ralph Ellison is so angry he can't live."

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