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Ralph Ellison and the “Complex Fate” of Being an American

Oliver Spivey

Being an American, wrote Henry James, is “a complex fate.” Few of our writers have dealt more imaginatively with the peculiar fate of being an American—moving beyond even what James had in mind—than Ralph Ellison (1913-1994). Of the major themes discernible in his fiction and cultural commentary, one in particular emerges repeatedly, donning various disguises yet always itself in essence: the incomparable complexity of American experience, the irreducibility of its art and culture, its politics and race relations, its history and heritage. Ellison faced American life with a tragicomic attitude that rejected crude ideologizing,

especially anything that smacked of social or racial determinism. We are indebted to John F. Callahan and Marc C. Conner for bringing us *The Selected Letters of Ralph Ellison*, a collection that reconfirms Ellison’s place as one of America’s greatest men of letters, despite his sparse literary output. As divided as the nation is, this volume could not be more timely or instructive.

This hefty yet handsome tome spans a sixty-year period, from Ellison’s time at Tuskegee Institute in the early 1930s—where the young man from Oklahoma City began his education—to the year just prior to his death. Several of the early letters recount Ellison’s time in Harlem, where he continued his education among the African American writers and intellectuals gathered there in what became known colloquially as the Harlem Renaissance. Langston Hughes and Richard Wright were two of his earliest influences, offering the younger man a sense of artistic and political solidarity. During these formative years, Ellison was sympathetic to Marxism and the sociopolitical uses of literature. The stirring prose and photographs in Richard Wright’s *12 Million Black Voices* (1941), for instance,

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aroused Ellison's passions: "Reading it I was torn between anger, tears and laughter, pity, indignation and joy." The book had captured for Ellison the shared tragedy of African American life under Jim Crow:

We are the ones who had no comforting amnesia of childhood, and for whom the trauma of passing from the country to the city of destruction brought no anesthesia of consciousness, but left our nerves peeled and quivering. We are not the numbed, but the seething.

Ellison never forgot the suffering his people had undergone, and he would soon channel that sorrow into his own work. But he was gradually moving away from the ideological presuppositions and prescriptions to which many of his friends continued to adhere.

By the end of the 1940s Ellison renounced the distortive *Weltanschauung* of Marxism. This renunciation led to the suspicion that Ellison had betrayed the struggle for racial equality, a suspicion which only intensified after the author won the

National Book Award for *Invisible Man* in 1952. To this day, many scholars and critics consider Ellison's espousal of modernist literary aesthetics, vital-center patriotism, and self-made-man individualism to be—what else?—"problematic."¹ True, Ellison was not out in the streets protesting or engaging in direct action during the '50s and '60s; but he saw it as his duty to continue writing about the inter-racial fusions of American culture, about the responsibilities of whites and blacks to each other, and about the common destiny of a citizenry guided by the principles of America's founding documents, in spite of the nation's sins.

In any event, numerous letters in this collection prove that in the civil-rights-era Ellison remained as committed as ever to the moral imperative of equality for African Americans. Those who doubt this can turn, among many other places, to an August 1957 missive to Albert Murray. Because certain media people had portrayed Southern segregationists as "noble characters," Ellison was outraged: "There is something so immoral and rotten in those characters that to perfume them leads to the corruption of language." Still, the

¹ For a particularly tendentious example, see Barbara Foley, *Wrestling with the Left: The Making of Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010). The unsavory implication running through the book is that Ellison should have turned *Invisible Man* into a monument of Marxist agitprop rather than a work of "bourgeois" literary art.

gains made throughout the 1960s were cause for considerable optimism. As Ellison wrote in the last year of that decade, "The greatest cause for hope lies now, as in the beginning, in the expanded legal basis for freedom that has been made possible by the broadening of constitutional rights." While the author entertained no illusions concerning the existence of white racism, he worried about "the tendency of many blacks to decry the injustices and brutalities of the past while failing to take advantage of the new opportunities for achieving themselves," and about "the parallel tendency of many whites to encourage them in this."

Ellison often insisted that black success in a post-civil-rights America was a question of initiative and responsibility. This meritocratic conception of individual achievement is best expressed in a letter of recommendation penned on behalf of Professor Nathan A. Scott, Jr., a black intellectual who wrote prolifically on modern literature, theology, and philosophy. Scott's status as a racial minority was not what mattered most to Ellison: "There is no question of his qualification either as writer or teacher. Nor should the quality of his attainments be confused by questions of his racial identity." Ellison is, in a

way, describing himself in describing Scott. For Ellison likewise

refused to be put on the defensive by present-day racists, whether white or black; perhaps because he learned long ago to see through and around the dilemma of identity on which today so many young blacks are wasting their energies. He knows that what counts in the sphere of individual self-awareness is not so much the irremediable fact of one's racial heritage as what one makes of it; of the insights into the human condition it provides or the maturity and amplification it offers one's talent. He has accepted the challenge of his pluralistic cultural heritage with grace, and as an American intellectual he asserts his humanity by striving to come into conscious possession of as much of the world's culture as he has the energy, intellect, and talent to command.

Ellison's career, like Scott's, was an endeavor to "come into conscious possession" of culture in the widest and deepest sense of the word.

The intellectually and spiritually restrictive category of race, always enforced by political zealotry, was

a dead end for Ellison's expansive imagination. The author would have no truck with the preposterous notion that art and artists should be judged by racial criteria. As Ellison wrote to John W. Callahan (one of the editors of this collection): "I had been a bookish kid, and despite the realities of racial segregation I saw nothing incongruous in identifying with artists whom I considered to be the best, no matter their color, nationality, or where they operated beyond the color line." Ellison's deep reading of Western canonical writers, his fascination with difficult musical forms (from classical to jazz), his attentiveness to literary aesthetics and style, his study of the intermingling of vernacular and formal English, his own lively encounters with diverse people at the individual level—these had instilled in him an appreciation for subtlety, ambiguity, contradictoriness, and unpredictability. Over the course of his life, Ellison was attempting something arguably more radical, and far more edifying, than anything proposed by politically radical writers and theorists.

For Ellison, the idea of cultural-artistic separatism was an absurd fantasy. The American arts tradition had long contained within itself African American forms (merging

with those derived principally from western Europe). To sever them and seek "purity," as both white and black separatists tried (and still try) to do, was to falsify a common artistic inheritance enriched by the sheer variety of idioms that it encompassed. In even the most casual of these letters, Ellison weaves together the manifold threads of American art and culture. To take but one vibrant example, here is Ellison's off-the-cuff interpretation of Melville's masterpiece—in another letter to Albert Murray—as a kind of jazz performance *avant la lettre*: "Been rereading *Moby Dick* again and appreciating for the first time what a truly good time Melville was having when he wrote it. Some of it is quite funny and all of it is pervaded by the spirit of play, like real jazz sounds when a master is manipulating it. The thing's full of riffs, man." The letters themselves display a jazz-like quality, giving us ad-libbed variations on the same literary-cultural themes apparent in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison* (1995). Like the trenchant prose pieces in that collection, Ellison's letters reveal an intellectual of the first rank, a wide-ranging thinker whom Timothy Parrish has called "a theorist of American possibility."²

2 Timothy Parrish, *Ralph Ellison and the Genius of America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), ix.

Ellison's cultural criticism is strengthened and deepened by *Invisible Man*, one of the supreme achievements in American literature.³ The novel is a profound realization of Ellison's vision, a work that takes the particularities of African American life and tells a tale at once uniquely American and universally human. The letters provide rare glimpses into the creation of this literary masterwork. Writing to a fan of the novel, Ellison describes what he was trying to do: "I wrote it in an attempt to give meaningful form to a body of experience which is much more chaotic and complex and tragically human and real than most of the solutions that are offered to deal with it." *Invisible Man*, according to Ellison, dramatizes American life in a way that "transcends (and was meant to transcend) mere racial experience. That on the broader level of its meaning it says something about the experience of being an American, and this includes all Americans, white or black." As he explains to another admiring reader, the novel is approached through "the perspective of Western culture." By presenting the character's predicament in that most

versatile of Western literary forms—which allowed Ellison to combine black spirituals, jazz, folklore, and the blues with novelistic techniques drawn from Melville, Dostoevsky, Faulkner, and Malraux—Ellison asks us "to view our experience in a much more meaningful context than that of race, or even the struggle for Civil Rights." Racial identity and conflict may provide a point of departure for the serious novelist, but the novelist's vision had better take readers beyond race if it is to speak to human beings across time.

Were Ellison alive, he would doubtlessly look upon our so-called "racial reckoning" in dismay. Can any honest reader imagine Ellison's buying the cheap melodrama of American history that so many smart people, who should know better, are currently selling? As James Seaton reminds us, "For Ellison, American history is neither a story of straightforward progress nor a narrative of power and victimization. Tragic in its structure, American history is a drama that moves slowly and crookedly toward the fulfillment of the democratic faith."⁴ So long as

3 Although many see Ellison as the author of only one enduring work of fiction, Parrish argues that *Three Days before the Shooting* (2010), Ellison's incomplete second novel, "is clearly a major work of American literature, just as Robert Musil's unfinished novel *The Man without Qualities* or Franz Kafka's *The Trial* and *The Castle* are major works of German literature" (*Ralph Ellison and the Genius of America*, x).

4 James Seaton, *Literary Criticism from Plato to Postmodernism: The Humanistic Alternative* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 165. Sadly, Professor Seaton passed away in 2017. Not only was he a great reader and admirer of Ellison, but he was also a tireless defender of literary art and the humanistic tradition. He contributed to *Academic Questions* in Winter 2000 with "Cultural Studies in the Light of

cultural critics like Ibram X. Kendi or Ta-Nehisi Coates are seen as the only acceptable interpreters of African American—or, indeed, *all* American—experience, Ellison's powerful version of our national story will remain, to use the soulless jargon, "decentered." Echoing both *Invisible Man* and Ellison's essays, the letters in this volume warn us about the threat of doctrinaire reductionism—be it racial, political, or cultural—and inspire us to embrace our complex fate as Americans.