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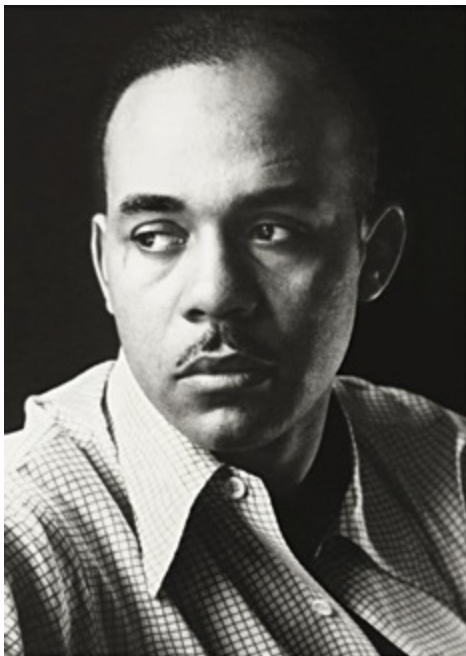
A CRITIC AT LARGE

## IN THE TERRITORY

A look at the life of Ralph Ellison.

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*Ellison in the mid-fifties. "So much of what I've become was formed in Okla[homa]," he wrote. Photograph by Gordon Parks.*

November 29, 1967, a tart, sunny day in Plainfield, Massachusetts, some thirty miles north of Smith College, in the Berkshires: the small town's most famous inhabitant that historic afternoon was not, as one would expect, a New England patrician with an ancestral foot planted firmly on Plymouth Rock. Rather, it was a fifty-four-year-old well-dressed black Oklahoman, the owner of a two-story house on Lincoln Hill Road, who had been named for another New England writer: Ralph Waldo Ellison.

Ellison's first—and only completed—novel, the 1952 surrealist epic "Invisible Man," is now regarded by many as one of the ur-texts on urban black masculinity. (From the prologue: "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 invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me.") But when it was first published its critics in the white literary establishment emphasized not the book's specificity but its broad appeal. In *Commentary*, Saul Bellow wrote, "There is a way for Negro novelists to go at their problems, just as there are Jewish or Italian ways. Mr. Ellison has not adopted a minority tone. If he had done so, he would have failed to establish a true middle-of-consciousness for everyone."

Certainly by 1967 no one would have referred to Ellison as a “minority” writer. (Except in the way that he himself used the term, in a 1955 *Paris Review* interview: “All novels are about certain minorities: the individual is a minority.”) “Invisible Man” had beat out Hemingway’s “The Old Man and the Sea” to win the 1953 National Book Award. In 1965, a group of prominent critics, writers, and publishers had voted it the “most distinguished” postwar American novel. By the time Ellison died, in 1994, the novel had inspired more than twenty book-length critical studies. Despite the accolades, though, every time Ellison received another prize for “Invisible Man” he had to face the inevitable question: where was his second novel? The move to Plainfield, in 1967, with his wife, Fanny, was supposed to provide him with an environment in which to finish the book, later titled “Juneteenth.” But, as Arnold Rampersad, the scholar and biographer of Langston Hughes and Jackie Robinson, reports in his startling, illuminating, and sad biography, “Ralph Ellison” (Knopf; \$35), although the Ellisons had bought a small estate there, Fanny had trouble prying her husband away from Manhattan. That November day in 1967 was one of the few that Ellison actually spent on the property.

According to Rampersad, two handymen showed up in the afternoon to replace some doors on the toolshed. The Ellisons left to run some errands. Returning home after the handymen had gone, they saw smoke billowing from their house. The manuscript of “Juneteenth” was destroyed in the fire. In the years that followed, Rampersad writes, Ellison and his wife “soon fell back reflexively on the fire when asked about the delay” with the second novel. At one point, Fanny even blamed the blaze on racist arsonists. On other occasions, she spoke about having to be “restrained by firemen from rushing into the burning house to rescue the manuscript, which she could see clearly, so very clearly, through a window as the flames closed in.” It is uncertain how much of the book had been written when it was lost, but the tragedy became the defining event of the latter part of Ellison’s life.

Ellison had an American penchant for complaint. Born on March 1, 1913, he was the second son of Lewis and Ida Ellison. (Their first, Alfred, had died in infancy. Ellison’s younger brother, Herbert, was born in 1916.) The couple had met in Lewis’s home town, Abbeville, South Carolina—Ida, who was born in Georgia, had gone to school there—and were married in 1910; the same year, they, like thousands of other prewar blacks, left the South to stake their claim in “the territory,” settling in Oklahoma. “Divided and united by history, Oklahoma was culturally the wild West, the Southwest, and the Old South,” Rampersad writes. “It was ancient but also brazenly new.” As an adult, Ellison, forever the proud Oklahoman, often cited his upbringing among blacks, whites, Jews, and Native Americans as the source of his integrationist view of America. In Oklahoma City, Lewis found employment as a laborer, an itinerant construction worker, and a foreman, before becoming an ice-and-coal deliveryman. In 1916, while the thirty-nine-year-old Lewis was hoisting a block of ice up the front steps of a general store, a shard of ice broke off, piercing his stomach. He died at the hospital.

Rampersad points out that the loss of Ellison’s father remained a wound in his consciousness for the rest of his life. Lewis did not leave much by way of worldly possessions for his three-year-old son, but he

had, through his choice of names, tried to initiate young Ralph Waldo into a rich tradition; like many other black Americans, Lewis had taken comfort in Emerson's transcendentalist views. His son, however, inherited little of Emerson's interest in meditative tranquillity. "Anger was a problem," Rampersad writes, "as it would be for the rest of his life, although he learned to control it. In kindergarten one day, he shocked both himself and a teacher who tried to awaken him by slapping her hand." One could argue that Ellison never learned to control his anger, which he reserved, for the most part, for the women in his life. Ida, destitute after Lewis's death, took whatever work came her way—as a maid, a cleaning woman, a babysitter—in order to support her sons. Ellison was generally ungrateful for these sacrifices. He scoffed at his mother's Christian charity, her softness. "To Ralph's bemusement and sometimes anger, she fed the hoboes, most of them white, who came to their back door looking for a handout," Rampersad writes.

In 1921, Ida and her children decamped for Gary, Indiana, where one of her brothers worked. Ellison later recalled the move as having been precipitated by his mother's feeling that "my brother and I would have a better chance of reaching manhood if we grew up in the north." But nothing went well in Gary: Ida didn't find work, and her brother lost his job. The Ellisons lived on worm-infested beans and stale bread until rescue came in the form of the Cooks, a rich black family from Oklahoma, who were passing through Indiana on their way back to the territory. The Ellisons hitched a ride. Years later, Ellison wrote to Hester Cook, the family's matriarch, "I realize now that that was one of the most important trips of my life; because Lord knows what might have happened to us had we remained in Gary. . . . So much of what I've become was formed in Okla." Also formed in Oklahoma was Ellison's intractable snobbery. As a boy, he was far more attracted to the rich families Ida worked for—and who later employed him as an errand boy—than to the life he found at home. In an interview included in "Shadow and Act," Ellison's 1964 essay collection, he recalled:

As a kid I remember working it out this way: there was a world in which you wore your everyday clothes on Sunday, and there was a world in which you wore your Sunday clothes every day—I wanted the world in which you wore your Sunday clothes every day. I wanted it because it represented something better, a more exciting and civilized and human way of living. . . . I sometimes [glimpsed this world] through the windows of great houses on Sunday afternoons when my mother took my brother and me for walks through the wealthy white sections of the city. . . . And for me none of this was hopelessly beyond the reach of my Negro world, really; because if you worked and you fought for your rights, and so on, you could finally achieve it. This involved our American Negro faith in education, of course, and the idea of self-cultivation—although I couldn't have put it that way.

It is difficult to imagine a poor black child of Ellison's era who did not suspect that his race and circumstances might in some way hold him back. But Ellison was strongly influenced by Ida's faith in her

children's ability to rise above their origins. "How often did I hear my mother insist that the future of African-Americans would depend upon our generation of young Negroes—and this at a time when things appeared (at least for me as an individual) most hopeless," Ellison once said.

After the family returned to Oklahoma, Ellison worked variously as a shoeshine boy, a busboy, a hotel waiter, and an assistant in a dentist's office. Embarking on his lifelong habit of seeking out mentors and protectors, the adolescent Ellison also fell under the sway of a neighborhood youth who aspired to be an artist. The boy's father was an amateur musician who gave Ellison free lessons on the alto saxophone and trumpet; he eventually became his school bandmaster. Meanwhile, he was reading, desperate to become a "renaissance man," skilled in all the arts. After twice applying for admission to Alabama's Tuskegee Institute, a prestigious all-black university founded by Booker T. Washington, he was finally granted a spot in 1933; the orchestra needed a trumpet player.

Ellison's "American Negro faith" in higher education was put to the test at Tuskegee. The school was as class-conscious as most white institutions, and Ellison, who'd had to hop freight trains to get to Alabama because he couldn't afford the fare, felt the pinch at once. Eager to belong to the universe of "Sunday clothes," he badgered the already overextended Ida to send him the money he needed to keep up appearances. ("You know I travel with the rich gang here, and this clothes problem is a pain," he wrote peevishly.) "For Ralph, helping him achieve his goals now seemed to be Ida's main purpose in life," Rampersad observes dryly.

In 1934, Ellison took a job as a desk clerk at the university library. There, his real education began. Roaming the stacks, Ellison consumed texts by Eugene O'Neill, Gertrude Stein, and James Joyce. The librarian, Walter Bowie Williams, who had gone to college in the North and was somewhat ill at ease in the South, was delighted to share his knowledge with his new disciple. But it was the "aesthete" English instructor Morteza Drezel Sprague who alerted Ellison and a number of other students to the possibilities of literature as a living art. (Dedicating "Shadow and Act" to Sprague, Ellison immortalized him as "A Dedicated Dreamer in a Land Most Strange.") Sprague introduced Ellison to the glamour he would always associate with the literary life, lending him copies of *Esquire*, at a time when the magazine was publishing young writers such as Ernest Hemingway and Irwin Shaw. He also turned Ellison on to Hardy's "Jude the Obscure" and Dostoevsky's "Crime and Punishment," whose brilliant, tortured anti-heroes Ellison identified with. (Fifteen years later, he would create one of his own.)

Like Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov, Ellison had the prickly nature of a high-minded moralist, intolerant of any standards other than those he imposed on himself and the rest of the world. (Rampersad peppers his book with Ellison's anti-gay remarks, including one in which the writer accuses homosexual officials of having "hounded" him out of college. Further evidence of Ellison's moral/sexual barometer can be found in his letters. Of James Baldwin, for instance, he wrote in 1953, "He doesn't know the difference between getting religion and going homo.") As every snob knows, snobbery has nothing to do with having money. Being broke and obscure at Tuskegee served a purpose for Ellison: it sharpened his

satirical lens. Standing apart from the university's air of sanctimonious Negritude enabled him to write about it. In "Invisible Man," he looks back with scorn and despair on the snivelling ethos that ruled at Tuskegee. He is also clearly torn by the allegiance he feels to his mother's belief in the possibility of a better life for her children. The tension between belief and skepticism is palpable as Ellison's narrator stands in the college chapel with a collection of students and visiting dignitaries:

Around me the students move with faces frozen in solemn masks, and I seem to hear already the voices mechanically raised in the songs the visitors loved. (Loved? Demanded. . . . Loved as the defeated come to love the symbols of their conquerors. A gesture of acceptance, of terms laid down and reluctantly approved.) . . . And I remember, too, the talks of visiting speakers, all eager to inform us of how fortunate we were to be a part of the "vast" and formal ritual. How fortunate to belong to this family sheltered from those lost in ignorance and darkness.

Here upon this stage the black rite of Horatio Alger was performed to God's own acting script, with millionaires come down to portray themselves; not merely acting out the myth of their goodness, and wealth and success and power and benevolence and authority in cardboard masks, but themselves, these virtues concretely! Not the wafer and the wine, but the flesh and the blood, vibrant and alive, and vibrant even when stooped, ancient and withered. (And who, in face of this, would not believe? Could even doubt?)

Ellison left Alabama for New York in the summer of 1936, planning to return to Tuskegee that fall, after earning a little money and pursuing a desire to become a sculptor. He did neither. Instead, the artist who had yet to find his art took a room at the Y.M.C.A. on 135th Street, in Harlem, which was still considered the culture capital of black America. (Later, he insisted, "I did *not* come to New York to live in Harlem; I was not exchanging Southern segregation for Northern segregation.") As he cast about for something to do—or, more specifically, for someone to become—luck arrived in the figure of the thirty-four-year-old poet, playwright, and columnist Langston Hughes. Ellison, spotting Hughes with a mutual acquaintance in the lobby of the Y, introduced himself. During the Depression, Hughes had been Harlem's unofficial diplomat. He was one of the nation's most famous black writers; he was also, crucially for Ellison, one of relatively few who could make a living from their pen. And he was known for being exceptionally generous to younger artists. Right off, he gave Ellison some useful advice: "Be nice to people, and let them pay for meals." He also began sending him books. (A few years later, Ellison repaid his mentor by trashing his memoir, "The Big Sea." "In the style of 'The Big Sea,' too much attention is apt to be given to the esthetic aspects of experience at the expense of its deeper meanings," Ellison wrote in *New Masses* in 1940. "To be effective the Negro writer must be explicit; thus realistic; thus dramatic.")

Through Hughes, Ellison gained entry into the Communist-leaning, black literary *élite* for whom he became, in time, the Great Black Hope—but not before displacing another mentor, Richard Wright. By 1938, Wright had made a name for himself as a fiction writer and a critic of note for papers such as *New Masses*. The grandson of slaves, he had worked his way from his home town in Mississippi to a position as the intellectual darling (some would say stooge) of the Communist Party. He was happy to nurture young men who lacked a loving paternal presence, so long as they did not contradict whatever views he held at the time. When he met Ellison, he was editing a magazine called *New Challenge* and he suggested that Ralph try his hand at a short story. “I tried to use my knowledge of riding freight trains,” Ellison recalled in 1954. “He liked the story well enough to accept it, and it got as far as the galley proofs when it was bumped from the issue because there was too much material. Just after that the magazine failed.” Wright, in fact, was not entirely supportive of Ellison’s skills as a fiction writer: reading Ellison’s early stories, he was annoyed by their borrowings from his own work. Later, Ellison wrote, “No, Wright was no spiritual father of mine, certainly in no sense I recognize. . . . I simply stepped around him.” After Wright emigrated to Paris, in 1947, Ellison kept in touch by writing letters, in which he unstintingly repeated any disparaging remarks other writers had made about the great man.

With Wright’s help, Ellison became, in 1938, a member of the New York Writers’ Project, an offshoot of the Works Progress Administration. Along with thirty other writers and researchers, he was responsible for producing a comprehensive study called “The Negro in New York.” The same year, Ellison married Rose Poindexter, a performer who had made her name in the famous “Blackbirds” revue of 1929. For Ellison, having the right wife was a necessity if he was going to be a writer of note, and Rose had an excellent professional pedigree. Rampersad writes, “Ralph was looking for a woman physically attractive and smart who would love, honor, and obey him—but not challenge his intellect. . . . Adding to her appeal, no doubt, was the fact that she had a fairly steady income.” After their marriage, for a time the couple lived in Rose’s apartment, at 312 West 122nd Street; later, when Rose’s income dwindled, they moved to 453 West 140th Street, where Ellison was given a reduced rent in exchange for working as the building’s superintendent. Naturally, he was reluctant to do the job and he let the other tenants know it. In 1941, he embarked on a brief but intense affair with Sanora Babb, a white writer seven years his senior. When it ended, Ellison confessed to Rose. In 1943, she and Ellison separated. The same year, he was certified by the U.S. Merchant Marine, and he became a second cook and baker on a Liberty Ship headed for Europe.

Unlike Wright or Baldwin or Chester Himes, Ellison never considered travel abroad as a way of living more freely as a black man. Returning to Harlem in 1945, after an aborted second tour, he set to work with renewed vigor on the twin strains of his ambition: social and literary. As he revealed to Wright, he did not consider himself a natural novelist, but he was determined to write a long work of fiction. He had come of age, after all, during the days of the Great American Novel, a time when, if you wanted to be

considered a serious male writer—in the model of Hemingway, whom Ellison called his “father-as-artist”—you wrote novels.

The opening of “Invisible Man” was one of the few sections that came easily to Ellison. One wonders, while following the story of the book’s creation in Rampersad’s biography, whether the struggle that he subsequently faced had something to do with his unwillingness to abandon literary society while he wrote it. He did not, as is commonly believed, concentrate on the book to the exclusion of everything else. Instead, he was busy enlisting the support of a rich leftist, Ida Guggenheimer, who helped him during the writing of his novel, and it’s telling that he dedicated “Invisible Man” to her, rather than to the woman he married in the same period: Fanny McConnell Buford, a Kentuckian, who worked a series of administrative jobs, paid the rent, and picked up the groceries, while keeping tabs on Ellison’s ever-increasing social prestige. “We now have the Steins, the Steegmullers, the Guggenheimers and the Binswangers taking care of our interests in every way they possibly can. Well, anything for the book,” she wrote in a letter to Ralph. Ellison was sometimes unkind to Fanny (while the couple were guests of the American Academy in Rome in the mid-fifties, he took a cruel pleasure in describing to her the affair he was carrying on with another woman—justifying his behavior with the excuse that Fanny was beyond her childbearing years), but he provided her with the kind of life she desired: Fanny was as interested in his fame as he was in being famous.

Ellison also began to cultivate relationships with white writers and academics such as Stanley Edgar Hyman and Robert Penn Warren. He sought to emulate the writers who gave him a sense of himself as an artist, not just as a black man. In one of his best essays, “The World and the Jug,” published in *The New Leader* in two parts, in 1963 and 1964, Ellison partly responds to an essay by the critic and editor Irving Howe, “Black Boys and Native Sons.” In it, Howe accused Ellison of literary racism, for having turned his back on Wright and on the burgeoning Black Power movement. “Do you still ask why Hemingway was more important to me than Wright?” Ellison writes. “Not because he was white, or more ‘accepted.’ But because he appreciated the things of this earth which I love and which Wright was too driven or deprived or inexperienced to know. . . . But most important because Hemingway was a greater artist than Wright, who although a Negro like myself, and perhaps a great man, understood little if anything of these, at least to me, important things.” In Hemingway’s work, as well as in T. S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land,” Ellison claimed to have found a language that evoked the improvisatory sound of jazz or the rhythm of the blues, which he deemed “perhaps as close as Americans can come to expressing the spirit of tragedy.”

Ellison’s emotional tone was inspired by the mournful, joyous, and sharp-witted sound he found in Louis Armstrong’s recordings. His technique, though, was almost exclusively mined from white writers, mostly notably Faulkner, for whom Ellison felt a reverence that almost did him in as a novelist in later years.

The searing radicalism of his approach in “Invisible Man,” which presaged such postmodernist black American authors as Henry Dumas, Ishmael Reed, and Adrienne Kennedy, came at a price: Ellison never believed that blackness alone—its voice, its culture, its symbols, and its myths—was *literary* enough for a novel. Rampersad, who invested years in his biography of Hughes, seems to take this rejection personally. “Ellison’s own view of many if not most African-American educators, scholars, preachers, political leaders, and artists would often be intensely critical,” he writes. “That critical instinct freed him to ascend, without inhibition, the heights of the Euro-American artistic and intellectual tradition (but it may well have been a decisive factor in his eventual decline as an artist, because it took a toll on his imagination and morale).” In the sixties, when the country was overrun with racial protest, Ellison avoided speaking publicly on segregation, or on the brutality waged against blacks by the state. At the same time, he refused to acknowledge his alienation from most of his black intellectual peers. In “The World and the Jug,” he wrote, somewhat disingenuously, “I assure you that no Negroes are beating down my door, putting pressure on me to join the Negro Freedom Movement, for the simple reason that they realize that I am enlisted for the duration. Such pressure is coming only from a few disinterested ‘military advisers,’ since Negroes want no more fairly articulate would-be Negro leaders cluttering up the airways.”

As Rampersad takes us through the writing and publication of “Invisible Man,” Ellison’s subsequent embrace by the literary establishment, his essay writing, and his periods of drunkenness, he implies that Ellison’s failure to align himself with other blacks was what prevented him from continuing his career as a novelist. After “Invisible Man” became what Rampersad calls a “monument,” its author, too, was calcified. In the mid-sixties and beyond, Ellison was still defending the credo he had laid down in his 1945 review of Bucklin Moon’s “Primer for the White Folks.” Moon’s anthology, he argued, was “valuable for something practically missing from American writing since ‘Huckleberry Finn’: a search for images of black and white fraternity.”

While Ellison did try to explore this idea in “Juneteenth,” his integrationism was, ultimately, aesthetic, not racial. Though he relished the combined effect that Eliot and Armstrong had on his consciousness, for instance, he might have been slightly less concerned with bringing them together off the page. Rampersad delineates, in the second half of his book, how little effort Ellison made to follow his own advice to bring living blacks and whites together. One need simply look at the list of his friends: among them, William and Rose Styron, Kenneth Burke, R. W. B. Lewis, Richard Wilbur, and John Cheever, whose patrician tone Ellison admired and who helped him gain entry to the Century Club. (Once elected, he closed ranks with other members to keep women out.) Ellison was often the only black in the room. (The exception on his social roster was the black novelist and critic Albert Murray, who shared some of Ellison’s aesthetic principles.) Ellison’s distaste for “ordinary” blacks was wedded to the personal: to the poverty and self-neglect, the political and economic marginalization that he had witnessed and experienced in Oklahoma and Harlem, and which he could not wait to put behind him.



He also never got over the assertion in one of his college sociology textbooks that the Negro was, “so to speak, the lady among the races.” Was he not a man? Could only white men lay claim to the world’s riches? (In an odd bit of macho identification, Ellison argued, in “The World and the Jug,” that Hemingway appreciated “the things of this earth which I love . . . : weather, guns, dogs, horses. . . . He wrote with such precision about the processes and techniques of daily living that I could keep myself and my brother alive during the 1937 Recession by following his descriptions of wing-shooting.”)

Until his death, Ellison struggled to complete “Juneteenth.” Although there are sections of oratorical brilliance, such as “Cadillac Flambé,” published by the *American Review* in 1973—which, while making the surrealism of “Invisible Man” seem almost tame, hints at the ways in which the politically charged America of the nineteen-sixties was commercially as well as racially driven—the book never became a cohesive whole. (The two-thousand-page manuscript was posthumously edited and published in incomplete form in 1999.) This failure was due partly to Ellison’s attempt to incorporate Faulkner’s vast range and scope into a single work—a task that even Faulkner never accomplished—and partly to the fact that he didn’t manage to follow his own early advice to Wright: he never quite found the explicit reality of his characters. Ellison coasted for more than forty years on the success of “Invisible Man.” He became a grand old man of letters, taking chairs at universities—and ignoring whatever young black writers came his way. (In a bit of mischief, Rampersad notes that a certain “scholar of Langston Hughes” visited Ellison once and was not offered refreshments. Later, the same scholar discovered that the visit had been written off as a twenty-five-dollar expense on Ellison’s taxes.)

Whereas Rampersad maintained a strictly reverent tone in his books on Hughes and Jackie Robinson, in his confrontations with this thorny and complex character he has taken on a new approach: an unhallowed view of his subject. He treats Ellison as a man, not as a deity, and he does so through the accumulation of historical fact, solid reporting, and detail. He repeatedly refuses to take Ellison’s word over the textual evidence. The pain that Ellison must have experienced during his long fallow period should not be underestimated, but one comes away from Rampersad’s book feeling that even that anguish was a little engineered: the longer Ellison took to write his second novel, the more serious an author he would appear to be, the less vulnerable to criticism. One feels oppressed by the emotional and intellectual knots in which Ellison bound himself at the end of his life; had he been able to conquer his own caginess and social ambition, he might have produced the work that he and the world were waiting for. And he might have come away with something of the sense of freedom that his namesake described, in the closing remarks of his 1841 lecture “Man the Reformer”: “As the farmer casts into the ground the finest ears of his grain, the time will come when we too shall hold nothing back, but shall eagerly convert more than we now possess into means and powers, when we shall be willing to sow the sun and the moon for seeds.” ♦

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