

Second Novel No End: An Open Letter to Ralph Ellison

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Skirvin Hotel
Oklahoma City

Dear Ralph,

I've arrived in Oklahoma City for the first time. I'm recalling how you and I talked about Oklahoma City the first time I visited you and Fanny at your Harlem apartment. I was twenty-six and a graduate student at Yale. I wrote you a letter during the fall of 1976. I received your reply just before Christmas—a long eloquent letter—a special Christmas gift indeed. The letter, which I still treasure, has evidence of your characteristic style and wit: “once I shocked a white man whose shoes I was shining by revealing that I was familiar with Freud’s theory of dreams, but neither of us was prepared to communicate on that level, for it would have placed too great a strain on the arrangements of social hierarchy—and on the two of us!”² You suggested that I come to see you. On Friday, February 17, 1977, I visited you and Fanny. I’ve already written about that special day.³ Suffice it to say on this occasion that it was an unforgettable and inspiring afternoon.

Now thirty-seven years later, I’m standing here in Oklahoma City’s Skirvin Hotel, where you worked as a teenager. I’m reading this open letter to you at a conference and symposium dedicated to your work. We’re also celebrating your

hundredth birthday. It's quite a party. Many professors of American and African American literature are here—an unprecedented gathering of literary experts and beautiful minds. Given the array of talent in the room, I've been struggling to avoid redundancy and find a worthy subject. I'll make a brief suggestion that we move beyond our adoration of *Invisible Man* and focus at least as much on your essays, speeches, and reviews. We should think about your overall contribution as a cultural critic and man of letters. I'll also urge my colleagues to reconsider the rhetoric of failure that usually accompanies discussions of your second novel.

Your essays alone are an impressive body of work.⁴ Several essays are devoted to the aesthetic concerns of major American novelists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—Mark Twain, Stephen Crane, Herman Melville, Edgar Allan Poe, William Faulkner and Richard Wright. You've written essays on the early years of blues and jazz—providing vivid portraits of your first music teacher, Mrs. Zelia Breaux; blues women such as Ida Cox and Ma Rainey; and jazzmen including Louis Armstrong, Charlie Christian, Jimmy Rushing, Lester Young, Duke Ellington, and Charlie Parker. You discuss artists and politicians like Mahalia Jackson, Romare Bearden, and Lyndon Johnson. In several essays, you describe the ethnic and cultural diversity of your Oklahoma childhood—especially the complex intermingling of Negroes and Indians.⁵

Furthermore, your essays display your profound understanding of the dynamic nature of the cultural DNA of the United States. You illustrate ways in which African American culture represents a definitive strand. You describe the unity in the diversity of American culture, including the “blending of identities” and “deceptive metamorphoses” we often see. Stanley Crouch has said that you were attuned to “a score written in the sky and in the mud, where the tales of heartbreak and hope . . . tell us all of the cosmopolitan bloodlines that make us all Americans.”⁶ However, *Invisible Man*, given its “bright magic” and canonical status, has cast a regrettable cloud over your eloquent essays. But new books, taking into account your posthumous works, are providing revisionary analyses of your writing and complex portraits of you.

A novelist with your penetrating intelligence and clairvoyant vision would've known that critics and biographers would research, discover, and disclose unknown details about you as a talented writer and a flawed man. To your own and Fanny's credit, you were both gracious archivists—leaving the Library of Congress your papers—including everything appropriate and indeed some things rather awkward for us to ponder. I applaud you both for deciding against a campaign of concealment. The documents are a treasure trove for which we'll always remain grateful.

The letters, photographs, and manuscripts you left behind—including the many drafts of your long-awaited second novel—will help us revise the rhetoric of failure and literary infamy that surrounds the novel. In *Jazz Country: Ralph Ellison in America* (2001), I accept the paradigm of failure, without fully perceiving its critical limitations, and proceed to mount a defense on your behalf. Now, I believe there is at least one reasonable alternative to thinking of your

second novel merely in terms of success and failure. To be sure, even though I corresponded with you and visited from time to time, I can't provide any compelling literary evidence. If you don't recall the one time I pumped up my courage and asked how your novel was coming along, I certainly do. Fanny was sitting in the room. You both remained silent for several seconds.

"Well, I don't like to talk about it. But I'm at the computer every day. Ask her," you said looking over at Fanny. We moved on.

When I wrote *Jazz Country*, I felt compelled to respond to several critics, especially Norman Podhoretz, one of your spirited antagonists. In "What Happened to Ralph Ellison," he praises you in the end as "a magnificent intellectual and political exemplar." But he expresses a different point of view when discussing your second novel:

Other parts of the 2000 page manuscript he left behind may prove me wrong, but for now my speculation is that Ellison . . . knew that Faulkner had invaded and taken him over and that this was why he could never finish the book. I can imagine him struggling for 40 years to get Faulkner's sound out of his head; I can imagine him searching desperately for the lost voice he had created in *Invisible Man*; . . . and I can imagine him being reduced to despair at this literary enslavement into which some incorrigible defect in his nature sold him—and to a southern master, at that.⁷

Of course, you had enormous respect for Faulkner's novels. In your Riverside Drive apartment, you displayed a photograph of the two of you standing together. But Podhoretz hadn't read your comments on Faulkner written to Albert Murray forty-three years before Podhoretz published his assessment. You bluntly call Faulkner "Nuts!" and say: "He thinks that Negroes exist simply to give ironic overtone to the viciousness of white folks, when he should know very well that we're trying hard as hell to free ourselves; thoroughly and completely . . ."⁸

Thanks to the work of John Callahan, your literary executor, and his coeditor, Adam Bradley, we can all read *Juneteenth* and *Three Days Before the Shooting* . . .—a rare and unprecedented documentation of your enduring struggle, your wrestling with the better angels and nameless demons of your muse.⁹ Given the new material with which to work—including two major biographies by Lawrence P. Jackson and Arnold Rampersad—future critics and writers will move toward the vindication of your status as one of twentieth century America's most influential novelists and cultural critics.¹⁰ Referring to writers as diverse as Ishmael Reed, Alice Walker, Charles Johnson, Stanley Crouch and Shelby Steele, Arnold Rampersad points us in the right direction:

But in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Ralph could argue that many, if not most, of the best young writers were in a sense his artistic progeny. In some ways, he was perhaps the cold fearsome father, or the absent but haunting father, that some of them knew only too well. Many were Ralph's offspring all the same in their common belief in the importance of literary craft and in their experiments with form . . .¹¹

In the future, “What Happened to Ralph Ellison?” will not bring along with it a dark cloud suggesting failure.

Like other pioneering African Americans—Jackie Robinson, Thurgood Marshall, Edmund Brooke, Leontyne Price, Althea Gibson, Fannie Lou Hamer, Martin Luther King, Jr.—you were one of the great integrationists. But even in their distinguished company, you stood apart and alone. You couldn’t hit baseballs like Robinson or tennis balls like Gibson. The political and legal professions—whether as a U. S. Senator like Brooke or a Supreme Court Justice like Marshall—were out of the question. You couldn’t rouse a political crowd like Fannie Lou Hamer, nor thrill an audience like Leontyne Price singing “O Patria Mia” at the Met. And yet all of what they did and more was always on your mind. Your artistic challenge was to show what they stood for as compelling evidence of the Negro’s pride and inescapable presence in American culture and life. You had to include the athlete and the artist; the firebrand and the preacher man who, like Dr. King, would inspire all Americans to keep democratic hope alive “until justice rolls down like the waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.” To you, the American Negro, even when invisible, was always there. In *Invisible Man*, we see Lucius Brockway, a Negro custodian, deep down in the basement of the Liberty Paints factory. Brockway says: “Everybody knows I been here ever since there’s been a here—even helped dig the first foundation” (*IM*, 159).¹²

In *Three Days Before the Shooting . . .*, you use similar symbolism and vernacular speech. You take us to Washington, D. C. We witness an assassination attempt in the U. S. Senate Chamber. Apparently, a young man has gotten fed up with Senator Adam Sunraider’s thinly disguised racist harangues on the Senate floor. As you show us what leads to the shooting, the complex backstory, you create a captivating cast of characters: Rev. A. Z. Hickman, a charismatic Negro preacher, formerly a jazzman; Bliss, a boy preacher who was raised and mentored by Reverend Hickman. Bliss, light-complexioned, disappears and eventually reemerges as the racist Senator Sunraider. There’s McIntyre, a white reporter, who investigates the “metaphysical” story of LeeWillie Minifees. Like Hickman, Minifees is also a jazzman, a bass player, who sets his white Cadillac ablaze on Senator Sunraider’s lawn. The white Cadillac erupts in a “stunning roar” of blue flames. Minifees delivers a long speech. And before he is arrested, he sings “God Bless America.”¹³

Given such extraordinary characters and such tragicomic and arresting scenes, I don’t believe you were enslaved to anybody, let alone another novelist, whether Faulkner, Dostoevsky, Joyce, or your beloved Hemingway. But Podhoretz is onto something. “Enslavement” is the wrong idea. You clearly understood that your situation was partly of your own making. Your peculiar and self-willed literary isolation more appropriately describe your bewildering circumstances. I believe that after so many years of communing with your own heart and toiling away, you had burrowed so deeply into your own psyche and memory, written so much about the Negro, and talked so long to yourself and your characters that you balked at making a final decision about publication.

An aspiring young novelist might profitably view your career, at least in terms of quantity, as a literary object lesson. However, I've come to see matters differently. You believed your second novel was your own singular assignment and unique opportunity. Why? You looked around and saw no other novelist who would write it your way: not Richard Wright or James Baldwin; not Norman Mailer or your old roommate Saul Bellow; not even Toni Morrison, with her prodigious talent and rhapsodic phrasing. No, none of them could rise to the occasion of your celestial aims and spell out the true complexity of African American experience—"the marvelous and the terrible" inextricably linked. You saw your arduous task as getting it all in. Your comments describing your friend, the artist Romare Bearden, also apply to you: ". . . it is of the true artist's nature and mode of action to dominate all the world and time through technique and vision."¹⁴

To you, the so-called "Negro problem" was not so much a problem as it was "the drama of democracy" unfolding in unprecedented American scenes. You wanted to capture its essence by writing a grand narrative hologram of American life. Tear it apart scene by scene and you'd see the Negro somehow inescapably there. You were striving to create a big, original book, a tragicomic and imaginary encyclopedia of American types and dreams. To you, the novel was the grandest stage of all and the 17th, 18th, 19th, and 20th American centuries had conspired to choose *you* as the one to get it right—to show the Negro, body and soul, at the center of the country's existential drama.

But why did you choose an all or nothing approach? Why didn't you consult the best editors in New York and release one novel or indeed a trilogy? After all, you were a member of the Century Club and the American Academy of Arts and Letters. You knew everybody who was anybody. For years, you also had Albert Erskine, your proven editor and friend, to help you usher your new novel into print. Didn't he warn you, like Maxwell Perkins told Fitzgerald and Thomas Wolfe, that sometimes "genius is not enough"? During the fifties or sixties, I wish he had persuaded you to publish your own version of *Juneteenth* or *Three Days Before the Shooting* With the sophomore jinx behind you, you probably would've moved on to other novels. I'm sure he didn't remain silent. And yet you decided that, however long it took and by whatever means necessary, you would continue in your own solitary way. Perhaps, after so many years, you reminded yourself that the reputations of some of the best American novelists were bolstered by a single novel: *The Scarlet Letter*, *Moby Dick*, *The Great Gatsby*.

Remember our exchange about *The Great Gatsby*? Fitzgerald paid a high price for his early success. It led to his "crack-up." Fitzgerald says: "I had plenty of the usual horses shot from under me—I remember some of their names—Punctured Pride, Thwarted Expectation, Faithless, Show-off, Hard Hit, Never Again. And after awhile I wasn't twenty-five, then not even thirty-five and things were never as good."¹⁵ You were thirty-nine when *Invisible Man* came out. Yours was still a first novel and a stunning success. Surely, it must've come to you, as the gestation period for your second novel extended itself, that you weren't

thirty-nine any more, not even fifty-nine. And your book kept growing in your consciousness and sprawling out among the various drafts you dutifully kept.¹⁶

Arna Bontemps provides an early and compelling assessment of the nature of your literary ambition. In a letter to Langston Hughes (written in 1950), Bontemps says:

The difference between your [Hughes'] situation and Ralph's is that Ralph is evidently making this one novel his life's work. That's one way to follow a literary career, but it requires a special kind of mentality. When one is producing such a book, the idea is not to finish it till one is tired of living. You, on the other hand, have formed the habit of finishing projects and that is what keeps you going.¹⁷

Bontemps' comments, coming before the publication of *Invisible Man*, before your literary fame, are prophetic. What does he mean by "a special kind of mentality"? Bontemps perceived even before you completed *Invisible Man* that becoming a prolific novelist was hardly your top priority.

In March of 1994, a few days after you turned eighty-one and several weeks before you died, you told me about the birthday party hosted in your honor by Random House. You were amused that Albert Murray, your old friend going back to your college days at Tuskegee, surprised you by reading a poem you had written over sixty years before. You joked about the birthday boy having drunk too much red wine. Your spirits were soaring or appeared to be. You gave no hint that you may have been aware, at least on some level, that you'd savored your last slice of birthday cake. And you certainly didn't suggest that you could see, even with your binoculars, the grim reaper beginning his benignly indifferent stroll up Riverside Drive.

I don't recall what prompted it, but we somehow turned to the publication of books. You said: "I've never been interested in publishing a lot of books, just to see my name on the covers." You quickly added: "Of course, my name is *in* a lot of books." Your comment about your "name on covers," coupled with Bontemps' letter written forty-four years earlier, confirms several things. Frankly, I believe you'd resigned yourself to your complex fate and your own decision *not* to publish a second novel. After all, you had numerous chances. It is unlikely that Random House or other publishers would have refused to publish several novels culled (even if heavily edited) from the voluminous material included in *Three Days Before the Shooting* And having labored for decades on the book, you also clearly chose not to leave explicit instructions about the long, complicated manuscript's disposition and publication. Why? Were you, given your grand vision, simply telling us, like Melville's *Bartleby*, that you would "prefer not to"?¹⁸

You were acutely aware of the circumstances I've described. Perhaps, during the fifties and sixties, you decided you'd publish the novel—no matter what. During the seventies, you began wondering whether or not you could publish a novel that would suit your own democratic vistas and visions. Finally, after so many years of studied reflection and so many drafts dedicated to the same, maybe you concluded that it was simply impossible to write a grand novel surpassing

Invisible Man. Thereafter, you privately decided that you wouldn't let it go; that your imaginative journey, fully documented in your published and unpublished body of work, would have to speak for itself.

When I visited you in 1991, you caught me off guard by joking about your creative struggle. I was speculating about writing a novel based on the life of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. When I said I wasn't sure I'd ever be capable of writing a novel worthy of publication, you quipped: "I'm not sure I can write one either." We both laughed.

A serious and more philosophical clue surfaces in *Invisible Man*. It dovetails with Bontemps' comments to Hughes about you. When the protagonist confronts Ras during the Harlem riot, he looks at Ras and believes that Ras held him responsible "for all that which I was incapable of controlling." But the protagonist finally affirms that "it was better to live out one's own absurdity than die for that of others . . ." ¹⁹ Living out your "own absurdity" meant refusing to publish a second novel—baffling all of our reasonable expectations while affirming your own defiant authority—and allowing your demonstrable effort over so many years to testify in its own unique way. We know you were still writing—hard at work a few months before you died. No surprise. You kept doing what you'd always done. You didn't retire.

Well, Ralph, even at 100, you're still a bright star. We're all gathered here in the Skirvin today. Trust me. We've been at it all day, giving you a third literary degree. But this evening, I'm hoping to salute you by eating red velvet cake and raising a glass of sparkling champagne. You're also being honored elsewhere. A public library in Oklahoma City that bears your name is still thriving. I was given a personal tour by Michael Owens, the library's director. I gazed a long time at David Phelps' "The Invisible Royalty," a gigantic steel sculpture displayed in your honor at the library's entrance. It consists of oversized replicas of your books in different colors—though all titles are lettered in gold. *Invisible Man* is black; *Shadow and Act*, blue; *Going to the Territory*, maroon. The oversized volumes are dwarfed by a black Royal typewriter, a manual, executed with apparent mechanical perfection. A manuscript page from *Invisible Man* rises up out of it, including a holograph of a young man, perhaps you, embedded in the page and peeking out as one walks around the giant typewriter.

I also saw the portrait of you by Oklahoma artist Tracey Harris that was recently unveiled at the Oklahoma State Capitol. It hangs in the fourth floor rotunda. You're standing—holding a copy of *Invisible Man* and sporting a double-breasted navy blazer and a blue-and-white rep tie. You're looking out at us with cool and observant poise. There are playbills from the Aldridge Theatre in the background—featuring images of Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Charlie Christian, Jimmy Rushing and the Blue Devils.

And you'd be pleased to know that a commemorative postage stamp was recently released in your honor. It is an oil-on-panel painting by Kadir Nelson—based on the Gordon Parks jacket photograph for the first edition of *Invisible Man*. I'm sure you'd be proud of the stamp. It is a special, first-class, ninety-



David Phelps, *The Invisible Royalty* (2012). Used by permission of the artist and the Ralph Ellison Branch of the Oklahoma City Metropolitan Library System. Photo by Brett Deering.

one cent stamp. You'll be pleased because it affirms many things you believe in—splendid photography, masterful painting, the transcendent power of letters. The stamp, now zig-zagging across all fifty states, is a powerful symbol of your shining patriotism.

All of this was on my mind when I visited your old summer house in Plainfield, Massachusetts. My wife Carla came along with me. On the drive there—climbing higher and higher in the Berkshires—we saw breathtaking scenes of natural beauty. We soon turned off the highway onto a country road surrounded by tall trees on both sides. It was the kind of rural route where any GPS system is likely to remain silent. Fortunately, we had arranged to meet Hugh Hawkins, your old neighbor and my former Amherst professor. He graciously agreed to take us to your former home. After a few twists and turns and quick honks of his car horn—to warn anything or anyone in our path—he drove us right up to your old doorstep. Nobody was home.

I got out and gazed at the surroundings. I thought of your apartment on Riverside Drive. This house on Lincoln Hill was definitely a place far away from Manhattan. I tried to imagine what it must have been like for you—almost fifty years ago—to live sequestered in this forest right out of Hawthorne's pages. You were not alone. Fanny was at your side. But why, I wondered, did the two of you choose such steep isolation? Did the place inspire you? Perhaps you could commune and converse there with Reverend Hickman and Senator Sunraider in a special way. There had to be mornings when words and scenes came out like the unfolding of a splendid dream—giving you an enormous sense of personal pride and artistic affirmation. You didn't need any editors or publishers to approve anything. Whether writing or bird-watching, you felt free. And with your binoculars in hand, you could see—bluebirds, rose-breasted grosbeaks, and scarlet tanagers. I looked at your old house surrounded by trees with their autumn leaves aglow. Everything seemed bathed in divine sunlight.

As ever,
Horace

Notes

1. First, I thank my colleague, Professor Lena Hill, who invited me to participate on a panel she organized for the conference. I am also grateful to my former Stanford colleague, Professor Arnold Rampersad, who graciously yielded the podium to me during the waning minutes of the symposium. This letter is a revised and extended version of the sections I read in Oklahoma City.

2. John F. Callahan, ed., "“American Culture is of a Whole”": From the Letters of Ralph Ellison," *The New Republic* 220, no. 9, issue 4,389 (March 1, 1999), 43-44.

3. Horace Porter, *The Making of a Black Scholar: From Georgia to the Ivy League* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2003), 94-97.

4. Horace Porter, *Jazz Country: Ralph Ellison in America* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2001), 1-16.

5. Ralph Ellison, *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: Random House, 1995), 201-202; hereafter cited as *CE*.

6. *CE*, 580. Stanley Crouch, "Homage to Ralph Ellison," delivered at the public memorial for Ralph Ellison held at the American of Academy of Arts and Letters, May 26, 1994.

7. Norman Podhoretz, "What Happened to Ralph Ellison," *Commentary* 108, no.1 (July-August 1999), 56.

8. Albert Murray and John F. Callahan, eds. *Trading Twelves: The Selected Letters of Ralph Ellison and Albert Murray* (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 177.

9. Ralph Ellison, *Juneteenth*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: Random House, 1999). See John F. Callahan's "Introduction," xi-xxiii; Ralph Ellison, *Three Days Before the Shooting . . .*, eds. John F. Callahan and Adam Bradley (New York: Modern Library, 2010); hereafter cited as *Three Days*.

10. Lawrence P. Jackson, *Ralph Ellison: Emergence of Genius* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2002); Arnold Rampersad, *Ralph Ellison* (New York: Knopf, 2007).

11. Rampersad, 548.

12. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Random House, 1952), 159.

13. Ellison, *Three Days*, 1094.

14. Ellison, *CE*, 685-686.

15. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Crack-Up*, ed. Edmund Wilson (New York: New Directions Books, 2009), 77.

16. In the "General Introduction to *Three Days Before the Shooting . . .*," Callahan and Bradley describe Ellison's filing system: "A given file may include a host of drafts, both fragmentary and complete, of a particular scene, filed together irrespective of date. Some are dozens of pages in length, others, a single page or even a single paragraph. Many of the drafts are unnumbered, or if numbered, done so with no clear relation to what comes before or after the scene" (*Three Days*, xxiv).

17. Horace Porter, "Spreading the Word: Arna Bontemps-Langston Hughes Letters, 1925-1967," *The American Scholar*, 50, no. 2 (spring 1981), 284-285.

18. See John F. Callahan's and Adam Bradley's "General Introduction to *Three Days Before the Shooting . . .*": "When Ralph Ellison died, on April 16, 1994, he left behind no explicit instructions for what should be done with the multiple drafts of his unfinished, untitled second novel. What he left instead was an expansive archive of handwritten notes, typewritten pages, and computer files that he had been at work on since the early 1950s." *Three Days*, xv.

19. Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 422.