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Going to the Territory: The American Dream And the Black Artist

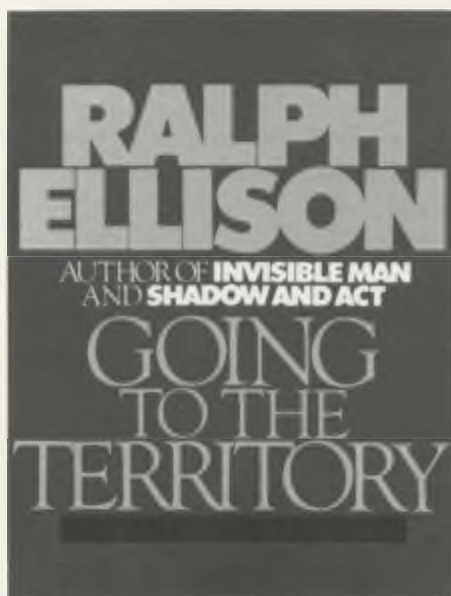
By Ralph Ellison, Random House, New York, 338 pp.

Reviewed by Jennifer Jordan

The world has waited 22 years for a book-length offering from Ralph Ellison, author of the great American novel *Invisible Man* (1952) and of a thought-provoking collection of critical essays, *Shadow and Act* (1964).

Going to the Territory is in many ways a continuation of the themes which appear and reappear like riffs in *Shadow and Act*. Again Ellison examines the nature of American democracy, the importance of cultural pluralism, and the social significance of the novel in American life with an amazing consistency, given the time span of the essays — 1957 to 1984. Ellison's more hostile critics will be tempted to charge that the writer's mind has not been disturbed by a new idea in 20 years, but I disagree. The matters being considered here are impossible to exhaust, and Ellison still possesses a skill with language that makes certain passages gems of style, erudition and wit.

The constancy of Ellison's ideas does not mean that they are without ambiguity, for he and other Blacks of his generation were caught between the murderous intentions of the segregated South and the beginning promises of racial integration typical of the late '40s. As a result, he seems especially haunted by what W.E.B. Du Bois calls the Black American's "double consciousness."



The very name of this latest work, *Going to the Territory*, evokes not only the Bessie Smith blues that Ellison cites as the source of his title (131), but also Huckleberry Finn's pronouncement at the end of the Twain classic that he was going to "light out for the Territory" to escape the hassles and hypocrisies of an America barely civilized. Both Black American folklore and the classics of 19th century American literature are fountainheads of Ellison's vision, which acknowledges the tragic flaws of America while projecting an indefatigable optimism about the potential of its pluralistic society.

America, despite its worldweariness and signs of decay, is still for Ellison the New Frontier where every citizen can create his own identity through the sometimes tense interplay of his racial and national roots and the smorgasbord of possibilities in a multi-hued, multiethnic society. In Ellison's mind this opportunity for self-creation is the essence of American democracy ("The Little Man at Chehaw Station").

But democracy for Ellison is no textbook abstraction which sprang full-blown and perfect out of the Constitution. He condemns the founding fathers for the "moral evasion" which allowed them to proclaim all

men free and equal while relegating Black people to continued enslavement ("Perspective of Literature" 333). Thus, by erecting America on a foundation of lies, the formulators of the Constitution "infuse[d]" all of America's "acts and institutions with a quality of hypocrisy" (333).

Despite America's duplicitous beginnings, Ellison feels the ideals of American democracy permit each ethnic group and individual to fight for its and his cultural and political interests. This struggle for dominance is anguish-filled and brutal; the balance achieved is, at best, "a poignant — although distrusted — sense of fraternity" and "a state of unease" ("The Little Man" 21).

According to Ellison, Black people's status in this "state of unease" induces both exquisite pain and heady promise. He is aware that the rest of America has never been serious about Black people's participation in the dream. He writes:

When we look objectively at how the dry bones of the nation were hung together, it seems obvious that some one of the many groups that compose the United States had to suffer the fate of being allowed no easy escape from experiencing the harsh realities of the human condition as they were to exist under even so fortunate a democracy as ours. ("What American Would Be Like Without Blacks" 111).

Paradoxically, Ellison feels Black people's role as sacrificial lambs is the basis for a superior strength, for he argues Blacks are the one group which, regardless of economic status, harbors no illusions about America yet is "driven by a sense of what it is possible for human life to be in this society" (112).

Ellison also argues that Black Americans, as long as they remain armed by the insights, coping skills and gifts unique to their experience, can have the best of all worlds in a democratic society. He remains awed by the ease with which Blacks in the

30 segregated and economically deprived world of his youth claimed and captured what he perceives as the best of Western civilization. Naturally, for Ellison, the writer and former music student at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, these conquests are aesthetic. He celebrates his discovery of T.S. Eliot in the library of a Black southern college long before Eliot became an established part of literary curriculum ("Remembering Richard Wright" 214) and urges us to share his delight at unearthing a basement full of opera aficionados, tending the furnace of a Harlem tenement during the Depression and debating the merits of two sopranos at the Met ("Little Man at Chehaw" 32-38).

Unfortunately, Ellison does not seem to recognize the irony of one of his examples of cultural integration — a seven-foot-tall, "light-skinned, blue-eyed, Afro-American-featured individual" dressed in English jodhpurs, an African dashiki, and a Homberg who has evidently been driven to a mad obsession with his own polyphyletic image. Oblivious to the world, this "homeboy" has been reduced to talking to himself. He first positions himself with a series of "sharp movie director's commands" and proceeds to take countless self-portraits with an expensive camera. Ellison recognizes a certain nightmarish quality about this demented brother who "made a scene to haunt one's midnight dreams" (23) but ultimately proclaims him "an American joker" who represents an "essential 'Americanness,'" — the ability to defy old symbols of "status, property and authority" and define "new possibilities of perfection" (24).

Ellison is willing to risk a few lost Black souls in the quest for cultural pluralism because, even as he speaks with love of his roots in the segregated environs of Oklahoma during the '30s (see "Portrait of Inman Page" and "Going to the Territory"), he sees Black people as forfeiting the

ultimate experience by rejecting the rewards of an integrated world. He also responds to the voluntary nationalism of Blacks during the '60s with something akin to dread. The emergence of ethnic particularity and the call to roots initiated by Black Americans is to Ellison a prelude to "cultural and aesthetic chaos" ("Little Man" 22). He also sees the aggressive racial stance of young Blacks as "leading to brutal racial assaults" (21) and, still traumatized by the racist violence of his youth, envisions Blacks as the primary victims of any racial polarization.

The images of brutalized Blacks in the autobiographical stories of *Going to the Territory* surface with eidetic clarity, and, even when the tales are rendered in the ironic and comic tones of folklore, the terror they distill is palpable. Lynching becomes a remembered threat, not a historical curiosity. Ellison writes of fleeing for his life in Decatur, Alabama, after railroad detectives caught him riding the rails to Tuskegee to begin his college career. Death for the crime of Blackness was real in Decatur where the Scottsboro boys were then fighting for their lives after being accused of raping a white girl on a freight train ("Perspective of Literature" 324-25).

There are other bad memories, some even told as Kafkaesque jokes. Ellison immortalizes my now banal hometown, Phenix City, Alabama, already made notorious by a grade B movie about its bygone days as a vice town where soldiers from Fort Benning were bilked and crusading politicians murdered. For Ellison, Phenix City was the racist gauntlet that Tuskegee men had to run to get to the colored joys of neighboring Columbus, Georgia, and the legendary site where a dark-skinned Tuskegee youth, unluckily named Whyte, was beaten into unconsciousness by redneck policemen who were offended by his surname ("An Extravagance of Laughter" 168-71).

On some levels, Ellison's reaction to the political and cultural rebelliousness of Black youths in the late '60s springs not from fear of white retaliation but from the intolerance and defensiveness of approaching old age. He seems resentful that the European culture that he coveted, mastered against the odds of racism and poverty, and merged with the treasures of his own cultural roots to create great art was rejected as dross by a newer generation. His automatic and negative reactions during the '60s prevent him from approaching the new Black art with the cosmopolitan and scholarly curiosity typical of his nature and style. If he had stopped to notice, he would have seen that the European techniques and traditions that Black artists claimed to have repudiated during the '60s were merely expanded and transformed by the mysteries and vitality of African and Eastern cultures far older than Europe's. He would have been happy to learn that Ed Love's sculpture is no less the product of a questing for perfection and transcendence than the art of Romare Bearden and of Duke Ellington (See "The Art of Romare Bearden" and "Homage to Duke Ellington"). But Ellison does not bother to inquire.

Perhaps Ellison can be excused because young Black people during the '60s were guilty of a similar intolerance and ignorance. They accused him of being "white" when *Invisible Man* and most of his essays are very much about accepting and cherishing one's race. They failed to comprehend how much more Ellison understands and loves "the people" than some of the activists of the '60s who made no effort to conceal the contempt they felt for the "dead Negroes" that constitute 99 percent of Black people in the United States. Consequently, a great deal of the hostility between Ellison and younger artists was, and is, based on mutual misunderstandings, for Amiri Baraka and Ralph Ellison have much in common — their love of pop culture,

their fondness for the folk, their passion for jazz and blues, their penchant for signifying and weaving tall tales, and their all-consuming appetites for the music and literature of the world.

It is too bad that Ellison does not emulate Sterling Brown, an elder statesman at whose feet younger writers and musicians come to learn about history and about art. Both Ellison and the young could benefit from such an encounter. For one thing, there are important matters that Ralph Ellison once knew but has now forgotten. The young people whose lives were disrupted by the Vietnam War could have refreshed his memory. In a 1957 essay, "Society, Morality, and the Novel," included in *Going to the Territory*, Ellison informs America of the "relevance" of world events (258) and the impossibility of "closed societies" at a time when "all the outsiders are demanding in" (272). The ideas are ones which hark back to his youth, for Ellison came of age at a time when young intellectuals were fervently concerned about America's role in the world. But somewhere along the line he forgot, and the result was his reduction of the political universe to the racial drama of American democracy.

Ellison forgets when he, on one hand, condemns the modern novel for helping Americans ignore unpleasant realities (255) and, on the other, excoriates Robert Lowell for refusing to attend President Lyndon Johnson's Festival of the Arts as a protest against the Vietnam War. Ellison argues that the festival was not "a political occasion" and that Lowell had no right to "tell the President how to run the government" ("A Very Stern Discipline" 292). But what is democracy all about if not the right of the individual to tell "the President how to run the government"?

Ellison's insistence that Lowell's poetry was the only concern of Johnson's festival is either disingenuous or naive. Does Ellison expect one to believe that Johnson ap-

pointed him to the National Council on the Arts and invited him to the White House because the President was fascinated by the symbolic resonance of *Invisible Man*? And what could have been a more political act than the essay Ellison wrote to defend Johnson? In his essay, "The Myth of the Flawed White Southerner," Ellison contends that Johnson's role in Vietnam was insignificant compared to his contributions to the arts, the poor and Black people. The young could have reminded Ellison that on this ever-shrinking globe such comparisons can not be made.

Ellison's forgetfulness reaches unforgiveable levels when he speaks at West Point Military Academy on March 26, 1969 — two weeks after James Earl Ray was sentenced for Martin Luther King's murder and a month before the Tet offensive in Vietnam. A year earlier, Black people all over the country tried to burn America down in response to Martin Luther King's assassination, but Ellison ignores the young cadets' questions about racial conflict and about the issue of real power. Instead, he offers abstractions on the human condition and the social power inherent in the writing of one's memoirs ("On Initiation Rites and Power" 59).

During his lecture Ellison also mentions that his high school principal had attended West Point where he had learned the value of an "erect military bearing" but had "somehow" failed to graduate (55). What Ellison neglects to tell the West Pointers but reveals to an audience at Brown University eight years later is that the principal never graduated because white cadets "tied him to his cot and notched his ear." The resulting disfigurement prevented him from meeting the West Point demand that all graduates "be physically perfect" ("Going

to the Territory" 133). One can only hope that sometime during his visit to West Point, Ellison shared the principal's story with the cadets, who needed it far more than the liberals of Brown. If he did not, he is guilty of the same historical amnesia that he condemns as a central impediment to real democracy in America.

In the long run, however, one must allow Ralph Ellison his human failings and treasure his great gifts. The quantitative-minded and the one-minute managers among us will want to know if *Going to the Territory* is worth the long wait.

It is, if one values some insight into the life and mind of one of America's greatest writers.

It is, if one cherishes literature, history, art and music in general and Black literature, history, art and music in particular.

It is, if one appreciates a voice which insists on the ideals of democracy during a time when, according to a recent poll, frightening numbers of Americans not only failed to recognize the Bill of Rights but also considered many of those rights un-American. □

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