

## ***Ralph Ellison***

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In spite of all the writing I do, and for all of the lectures I give each year, there are many matters which I won't write about, nor, except with my wife and a few intimate friends, do I discuss them. Perhaps this is because they have to do with ideas, emotions, and attitudes which grow out of my situation as a Negro American, and with those undefined and uncoded aspects of our lives which require the sympathy and insight usually found only among those who have been conditioned and disciplined by our specific group experience. Today such in-group discussion is no mere luxury; it is a necessity both for ourselves, for our restless youth, and for the American intellectual community as a whole. There is no question but that my own participation in our discussions at Haverford had something of the effect of a catharsis. I was cleansed of some of my doubts and confusions, and thankfully I was stimulated not by the sound of my own all-too-familiar voice, but by your ideas and by your passion. If this is to any extent true of the other participants, I believe our enterprise was well worth the effort and should be continued on a permanent basis. Certainly it points to the necessity of our no longer working in isolation from one another, and it is clear that we have much to offer that has been missing from discussions in the larger American intellectual community. There is simply no avoiding the fact that there are many aspects of American life which can only be described, analyzed, and defined by black intellectuals, for no other group possesses an adequate perspective or so urgent a need.

In summing up what I tried to say in our discussions, I would emphasize my personal affirmation of integration without the surrender of our unique identity as a people to be a viable and, indeed, inescapable goal for black Americans. As a writer who tries to reduce the flux and flow of life to meaningful artistic forms, I am stuck with integration, because the very process of the imagination as it goes about bringing together a multiplicity of scenes, images, characters, and emotions and reducing them to significance is nothing if not integrative. Further, the object of my fictional imagination is American society and the American experience as experienced fundamentally by Negroes, and I find it impossible to deal with either in isolation, for they are intricately

united in their diversity. The judgments implied by the fictional products of my imagination might well repudiate many accepted American values and definitions of reality, but this by no means infers that the integrative role of the imagination—and of the intellect—is invalid. It does imply that the larger American ideals of freedom are the ultimate ground upon which any literary evaluations of the cost, pain, joy, and triumph of being human are tested.

The American people are united in all their regional, class, ethnic, and religious diversity by a bond of language. There are many idioms of that language, and it is partially the creation of a voice which found its origin in Africa. Indeed, the language began to be influenced by this voice long before the American nation was formed. In the beginning was the word, and our voice sounded in the language with which the word was spoken. The American language owes something of its directness, flexibility, music, imagery, mythology, and folklore to the Negro presence. It is not, therefore, a product of “white” culture as against “black” culture; rather it is the product of cultural integration. And the realities of discrimination and racism notwithstanding, it is a fact that *culturally* the melting pot has indeed melted, and that one of the strongest forces shaping the general American culture has been what I call the Negro American idiom.

I am calling attention to the cultural pluralism of American life because until the present college generation this pluralism as expressed in art, folkways, and style was an important source of Negro American optimism—just as that optimism was a support of the general faith in the workability of the American system. Our elders recognized their presence and influence in areas of American life from which they were physically barred, and while the American house was of many mansions, they knew that despite racial discrimination there was something of themselves dwelling in most of them, and not merely as servants. Sometimes they made hue and cry over the theft of their substance and their style, and sometimes they were silent no matter how confused the scene. For them the problem was not that of identifying with the scene, but of having other give public recognition to their contributions. Certainly there was no question of trying to withdraw in a pique or of surrendering their investment in the experiment.

Today that sense of having shared creatively in the common American experiment is under assault by passionate young blacks who have lost their mooring in tradition. They are romantic, earnest, and ignorant, a state for which I believe that we as intellectuals are responsible because in pursuing our specialties we have failed to interpret the past and define the present and project the future in ways that are available to the young. Far too frequently black you have been forced to depend upon intellectuals of other groups for interpretations of their relationship to the larger society. In fact other groups of intellectuals have given more time to the task than we ourselves. Often they appear so obsessively concerned with defining our lifestyles, character, traditions, and values as to reduce us to silence and pliable inaction. Frequently they seem motivated by a desire to manipulate our image for political and economic purposes of their own, and some have taken the concepts of Negro sociologists and turned them against us, creating thereby much confusion and great resentment. But whatever their motives, the fact is that they are functioning as intellectuals, and it is their legitimate task, as it is ours, to explore the wholeness of American life, and the interrelationships between the various groups which compose it.

That they have co-opted our role is a criticism of ourselves, for we have failed to address ourselves effectively to many of the broader problems of American life, and we have failed to follow up our often creative analysis of specifically Negro American problems into the broader areas where they inevitably lead. In other words, we often forget that the only way to be an effective Negro intellectual is by being a most perceptive and responsible American intellectual. I believe that the state of black youth points to our failure, and if we have failed them, then we have failed American youth generally. For all their talk of black separatism—really another version of secessionism, and old American illusion which arises whenever groups reach an explosive point of frustration—and for all their stance of alienation they are really acting out a state of despair. They are frightened by the existence of opportunities for competing with their white peers on a basis of equality which did not exist for us. They suffer traumatically from the shock of sudden opportunity. The shackles have been struck from at least of their ankles, and their skin is sensitive to the turbulent air and the illusionary possibility of unrestrained moment. Actually they are in the position of pioneers who must enter an unknown

territory armed only with the knowledge and skills which they have brought with them from the past, but instead of plunging in and testing themselves against the unknown, they choose rather to argue with the deficiencies of the past and to direct accusations against the unknown, they choose rather to argue with the deficiencies of the past and to direct accusations against their parents. They accuse us of lacking manhood and courage, and they have declared themselves a new breed—which perhaps they are. One thing is certain: they have thrown us a challenge, and I believe that we should meet them head on. I don't think that we should be put in a position of apologizing for our backgrounds, values, or goals, but I do think we must provide a forum wherein the unwritten wisdom of the group can be intellectualized and passed on to those who are sincerely seeking for answers and orientation.