Ralph Ellison’s theology made visible

Cooper Harriss aims to rescue Ellison from neglect and misinterpretation—by reading him alongside theologians.

by David M. Wilmington in the October 10, 2017 issue

In Review

Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Theology

By M. Cooper Harriss

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What a wonderful world of possibilities are unfolded for the children!" wrote novelist Ralph Ellison in 1954, in response to *Brown v. Board of Education*. He continued: "For me there is still the problem of making meaning out of the past . . . I'm writing about the evasion of identity which is another characteristically American problem which must be about to change."

One of the most valuable and sensitively presented aspects of M. Cooper Harriss's new book is its attempt to account for why Ellison, after the success of his first novel, *Invisible Man*, struggled so mightily, and ultimately failed, to finish his second novel. If we take Ellison at his word that "making meaning out of the past" and "the evasion of identity" were central to his vision for that novel, contemporary readers can commiserate. Ellison is one of the most intriguing, challenging, promising, and enigmatic elements of our past with whom we must struggle.

On the one hand, Ellison earned immediate acclaim from black and white critics (including winning the National Book Award and being given the inaugural National Medal of Arts), and *Invisible Man* became a staple of college literature courses as well as a perpetual candidate for "Best American Novel" lists. On the other hand, Ellison's challenges to both politically oriented "protest literature" (in the mode of Richard Wright, for example) and the sociological mode of interpreting black American experience place him in an uncomfortable and increasingly antagonistic relationship with American literary and political culture. At a time when cultural discourse is especially destabilized around the question of whether "essentializing" race is either a necessary tactic for survival (such that we must insist that "Black Lives Matter") or a terrible vestige of racist colonialism (in which "whiteness" is a cultural and political virus), Ellison's more fundamental, existentialist riffing on "invisibility"—and the possibilities for making visible an individual in his distinctly black American humanity—offers us a bracing but hopeful reorientation.

Harriss aims to rescue Ellison from neglect and misinterpretation by taking seriously a complex network of Ellison's literary, political, sociological, and theological interlocutors from the 1930s through the 1990s. Few literary scholars of Ellison may be familiar with the theology that underlies Harriss's fleet-footed engagements with Friedrich Schleiermacher, Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, and Nathan A. Scott. Few theologians may be conversant with Harriss's careful readings of Ellison's texts and their complex relationships to Herman Melville, Richard Wright, Alain Locke, Kenneth

Burke, Frederick Douglass, and the blues idiom. And few contemporary scholars of African American studies will come to this book familiar with the interpretations Harriss offers of reactions to the destruction of Jim Crow or *Brown v. Board of Education* by such luminaries as Ellison, Scott, Zora Neale Hurston, and Albert Murray.

For decades scholarly accounts have veered between two simplistic views of Ellison: as a stodgy accommodationist Uncle Tom not even worthy of the title “black writer” or solely as the lionized author of *Invisible Man*. Amid this bipolar reception history, Harriss argues that Ellison’s account of race is “a broadly metaphysical or religiously oriented representation,” an inherently theological form of invisibility. After tracing a shift from the Harlem Renaissance to the “corrective” and more “apocalyptic” spirit embodied by *Invisible Man*, Harriss situates Ellison theologically within the thought of Niebuhr and Tillich. Harriss demonstrates that Ellison’s crucial concept of “antagonistic cooperation” is not only rooted in a blues sensibility (even more pronounced in his friend Murray’s work) but is also “a form of Niebuhrian irony.” While this is only one of several key theses in Harriss’s argument, it is one of the most persuasive for framing Ellison’s conception of race as theological.

Drawing from published texts as well as letters and other documents in the Ellison archives, Harriss introduces and explicates the work of Nathan A. Scott (a pioneer in the study of literature in theology) and his relationship to Ellison. This relationship reveals that although Ellison and his sources and interlocutors may be a “minority report” to post-1950s political, sociological, and artistic orthodoxies, they have never ceased to be a compelling alternative.

Along with explaining varied reactions to and interpretations of *Brown v. Board of Education*, Harriss recovers the rich and passionately argued range and dynamism of thought about race in America that, while perhaps leading to Ellison’s failure to complete his second novel, allow us to hear some largely unfamiliar and underappreciated voices. Indeed, if more 21st-century artists, theologians, and critics were to consider the trajectory of post-1950 racial, sociological, and political orthodoxies (and their current progeny) alongside the intellectual pedigrees, journeys, and vision of the constellation of black American thinkers and writers surrounding Ellison and Scott, they might find it helpful and hopeful to tune into these “alternative frequencies.” In addition, Harriss’s clear explanation of *why* Ellison quickly came to seem so out-of-step with the culture paves the way for his account of the fundamentally religious dynamic within Ellison’s thought.

The book's comparative interpretations of Herman Melville—including *The Confidence Man*, as well as the expected *Moby-Dick*—and Frederick Douglass are immensely helpful. Douglass shares with Ellison the interpretive fate of suffering a frequently simplistic and narrow contemporary accounting. Without overemphasizing the connection, Harriss suggests Douglass as the prototypical "invisible man" and points to Ellison's characterization in a 1947 review of a Douglass biography as "startlingly close to the concept of invisibility that [he] had toyed with since he first wrote out the sentence 'I am an invisible man' in 1944 or 1945."

Curiously, considering the clarity and insight on display through most of the book, Harriss seems at times to fall prey to the tired modernist account of religion as, at least partly, unreasonable myth construction. When we encounter something absurd that lacks reason, Harriss asks in the introduction, "what more appropriate critical lens might we appeal to, then, than a religious one?" Similarly, his careful and capacious interpretive eye seems to fail him when he attempts to incorporate contemporary political events (such as Clint Eastwood's semi-improvised "empty chair" comic stunt at the RNC in 2012) into his account of Ellisonian invisibility.

While unconvincing in these specifics, Harriss's book is an impressive accomplishment reflecting careful thought, patient research, and well-crafted writing. It deserves a wide audience among teachers, students, and fans of Ellison, as well as others who hope for more sophisticated political discussions about history, identity, and race.