

<< with the last line of the preceding one essays a connecting thread in the more narrative "Eko", the fact that this is often so gives an uneasy feeling of following form to a fault; though in performance, this would hardly matter if it keeps the audience focused on the tale as a whole. Moreso, one also does not think it comes off well in lines such as: "his lorries hurtling down/down to valley-centre...", "from the world, the wider world that always ...", "of haggling and heckling, heckling and haggling", "matching my nomad's regress to the native's progress/

matching the native's progress to my nomad's regress" ("Giagbone"); "its due, its staggering due" ("Oxford summer"); "as we make carnival, a hearty carnival" ("June Around Us"), to cite a few.

I do not doubt what prosodic uses this strategy can serve, but it is always at the cost of sharper, crisper lines and more intense imagery, not to mention the subtlety that a greater economy of words assures. This unfortunately leads to the lingering echo of a tone, a monotone that is difficult to get rid of. GBS

The Likeness of An Incomplete Masterpiece

BY ADEREMI RAJI-OYELADE*

Memory is all: touchstone, threat and guiding star.



FIVE years after his death, the great American author comes alive, assuredly and textually immortalized in the publication of a second full-length novel entitled *Juneteenth*. "Always in progress, Ellison's work may now find pause, not cessation but pause....", so concludes John F. Callahan, Ellison's literary editor, in his incisive introduction to the author's long-awaited narrative, a work which has been in constant and peculiar progression over four decades until its appearance in the summer of 1999. The expressed notion of *pause* rather than *cessation* is a subtle admission of the phoenix-like creative energies generated in the 'completion' of the text.

The story of the dynamic and *inerasable* life of Ellison's *Juneteenth* has taken on the saga of myth. It is perhaps the most celebrated work-in-progress in American literature that would span over four decades; it is the only work of fiction by a major writer of the twentieth century that would be literally resuscitated or wrested from the fangs of fire which consumed over 360 pages of the original manuscript; and it would remain for a long time to come a ready material for literary controversy, an uncompleted narrative rehabilitated and presented in part as an organic and completed novel by the author's literary executor.

Ellison started writing the post-*Invisible Man* text in 1954 and had almost completed the narrative when on November 29 1967, his residence got burnt and with it a section of the manuscript. Between 1967 and 1977, Ellison presented excerpts from the

manuscript for publication in literary journals and magazines; these excerpts and part of the original manuscript dating back to 1960 (eight in all) were featured in *The New Yorker*, *The Noble Savage*, and *The Quarterly Review of Literature*. And for twenty-seven years after the mysterious fire incident, Ellison continued to re-imagine, reconceive, and re-write his script such that by March 1994 he had produced over two thousand pages of typescripts, part of which is now known as *Juneteenth*, the second novel, if not the sequel to the author's narratological commitment to the history, memory and dream of the black persona in American life. A prolonged and postponed composition, *Juneteenth* is the re-creation of a novelist with the soul of a musician, a writer who played the trumpet early, studied classical music, worked as a freelance photographer and became a virtuoso of jazz and the blues tradition.

The novel revolves around Reverend Alonzo "Daddy" Hickman, a Southern black Baptist minister, and Bliss, his formerly beloved spiritual child who would leave him to settle in Washington and live another life as Senator Adam Sunraider. Bliss, a white boy, was raised by the minister in a predominantly black community and church, and on the values of black cultural heritage in the hope of making him an ambassador of blackness. Sustained from the interrogative and dialogic connections of these two characters, the central story of

Ralph Ellison,
JUNETEENTH, Vintage
Books, New York,
2000, 400pp.

Juneteenth reproduces, with a certain Ellisonian freshness, the stock themes of race relations, kinship, bonding, betrayal and the overarching motif of African American identity.

The naming of the novel itself is a textual reference to the fact that it is a book of imaginative history and re-memory of the condition of the black person and community through such important phases in American history as the Reconstruction and the Civil War years. In a sense, *Juneteenth* is a titular foregrounding of the significance of June 19, 1865, perhaps the most memorable day in the life of the African American bondsman, a liberation day coinciding with the termination of the American Civil War and metaphorically, *the July Fourth of Black History* when Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 was finally announced by General Gordon Granger in Galveston, Texas. It is textually significant that it is on the night of

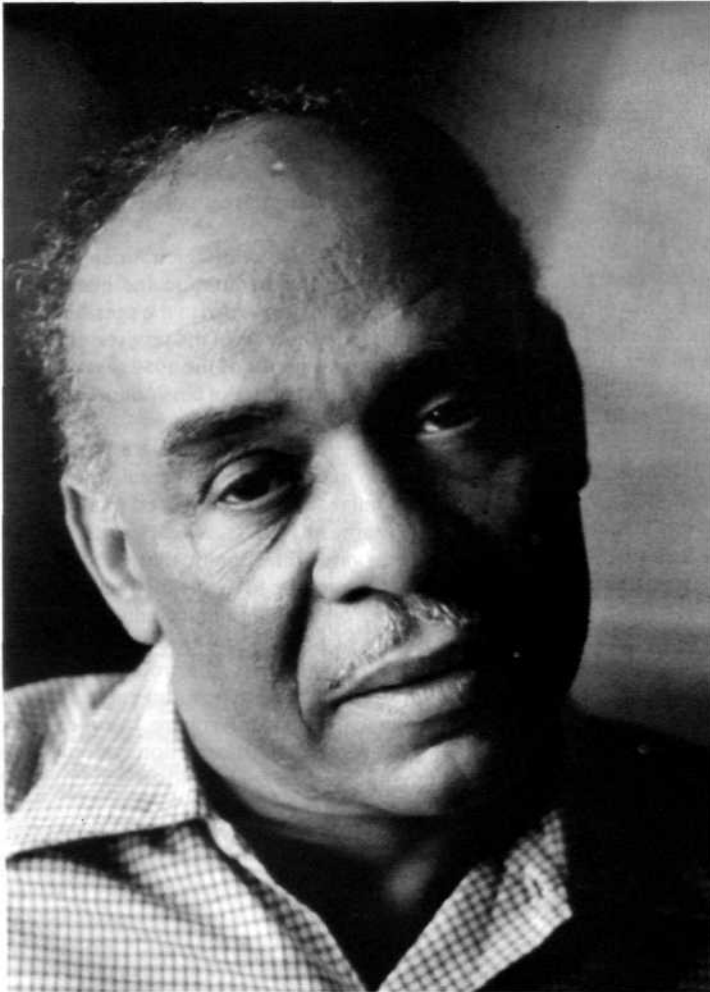
Juneteenth that Reverend Sunraider/Bliss experienced, in an epiphanic moment, the reality as well as implication of his connection/bonding to the black experience in America.

In essence, *Juneteenth* is a metanarrative of the dynamics of human relationships, survival, perseverance and the realization of the psychological lift which absolute liberation offers in a society controlled by racial considerations. In contemporary American history, *Juneteenth* is signified as "a time for assessment, self-improvement and planning for the future"; in Ellison's text, the literary executor, Callahan finds this historical symbolism of *Juneteenth* to anchor the authorial concern for reflection, self-assessment and the possibility of retracing one's past as the story of the encounter of Hickman and Bliss confirms.

When the novel opens, Reverend Hickman is involved in a frantic effort, a retinue of forty lowly Southern blacks in tow, to reach Senator Adam Sunraider in order to provide some information that would save him from a fatal attack. But having spent his formative years as a white boy under the tutelage of the black reverend, the Congressman seeks a total denial of that relationship; his Mississippian secretary notes early in the text "I've heard Senator Sunraider state that the only colored he knows is the boy who shines shoes at his golf club." On the strength of the premonition of a lurking death for the Senator, Hickman travels up North to find the prodigal child who has now transformed into 'the most vehement enemy of [black folk] in either house of Congress'. Sunraider launches into an eloquence of ambiguity, a flight of rhetorical flourish on nationhood, dream, discipline, transcendence and the use(s) of memory during which he has an ominous vision of disorder before he is felled by the bullets of an assassin. His physical deflation, which provokes an utter awareness of aloneness, forces the Senator to summon old faithful Hickman for a much-desired gesture of psychological support and spiritual collaboration. Through the lyrical and antiphonal tangibility of their dialogue, aspects of the historical and cultural dispossession of the black (African) community (eyeless, drumless, danceless...) are related with self-critical resonance.

To Bliss, Reverend Alonzo Hickman is Daddy Hickman; to the reverend, Senator Sunraider is Bliss. Apparently, the most significant force of the narrative occurs at the point of dialogic encounter between Hickman and Bliss after years of deliberate severance, transformations, vacillation and

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Ralph Ellison ©Jill Krementz

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fluctuation. From apprentice preacher, Bliss becomes a filmmaker and confidence man before finally transforming to a respectable but controversial Congressman; in his new image, Adam Sunraider is an avowed hater of black cultural values. Reverend Hickman mainly transformed from jazz musician to a minister; more than a preacher, father, or shepherd, he is a quester, the one who takes on the function of memory-man and seeks to reconcile the missing link of the past with an hypocritical present.

Juneteenth is the textual affirmation of Ellison's conception and representation of blackness as having a central determinacy for the existence and multicultural essence of American society. In contriving an interior antiphonal discourse between Hickman and Bliss/Sunraider, the text reaches skin-deep into the pastness or the blackness of Senator Sunraider's existence; and by confronting the Senator with the presence of Reverend Hickman, and his retinue of forty lowly Southern blacks, the author also confronts him with his own prejudice, his sense of dread and his genuinely hypocritical consciousness. Here is an intellectually imaginative work of fiction which interrogates history, memory and very symbolically the characters' capacities to forget and to remember. While Sunraider attempts to obliterate his past and act of betrayal by deliberate forgetfulness, Hickman persuades him into an act of retrieval whereby it becomes necessary to relive or review the pattern or course of his act of self-immolation from the umbilical cord of the black community to which he owes his formative years. The entire drift of the text following the shooting of the Senator involves an intellectual discourse of retracing and journeying back without much episodic movement in the unfolding narrative plot because the significant activity of reflection occurs at the bedside of the Senator inside the hospital. For this reason, *Juneteenth* reads in part as a static text filled with a lot of movement without motion when compared to the compellingly excellent 'plot of characterization' which gives the author's first novel – *Invisible Man* – the cap of a complete masterpiece.

Unlike *Invisible Man* in which the plot is directly and progressively kinetic, the narrative of *Juneteenth* takes on a spiral-like, shuttle-like pattern in which events and histories are reproduced with a shifting consciousness; a chronotopically complex text in which time is constantly scrambled and reinvented, and in which space becomes a subject of convenient memorization, the narration of *Juneteenth* shuttles between and

across important phases of (African) American history drawing upon the sub-texts of black vernacular/musical idioms. Of these, it is important to add that the novel as published is a microcosmic presentation of the kind of epical narrative which Ellison had imagined at the onset of his project. What would be hard to dispute is that the language of *Juneteenth* is fluently poetic in spite of a tendency to call the work a patch-and-paste text; it is marked by a commanding mastery of vernacular black speech idioms and is above all infused with a jazz-like eloquence. The important actions take place around or refer to the congress hall, the church, and the hospital, three important chronotopic sites where oratory and contemplation or a certain form of healing are entertained and are made possible. The essential Ellisonian style is foreshadowed in his reference to a deep concern for and struggle with form in order to transcend the condescension of typical white American novelists and to escape the strict naturalism of black American writers of his time. Ellison noted his preference for a narrative form which would be "flexible and swift as American change is swift, confronting the inequalities and brutalities of (our) society forthrightly, but yet thrusting forth its images of hope, human fraternity and individual self-realization" (*Shadow and Act*, P. 105).

There is a sense in which *Juneteenth* can be read as the metaphoric and intertextual sequel to *Invisible Man* in the possibilities of connecting aspects of the progression/flight of the protagonist of the 1952 text with the signified experience of Bliss/Adam Sunraider in the second novel.

Like invisible man, Bliss' transformation is both interior and intellectual. And almost in similar vein, he is involved in a physical movement, first westwards, then northwards. Essentially, that geographical shift is interpreted as the character's act of flight from a kind of knowledge to another shade of knowledge; through a series of initiation and 'trials', the protagonist aspires to reach a certain stratum in the public (social and political) sphere. In *Juneteenth*, the reversal of transformation symbolized in the shooting of the Senator, is a unique way of bringing him close to his past. Being shot implies being immobilized, being cauterized, being brought down to earth, as it were; the act of falling/fainting which comes after the gunman's attack is an obvious sign of descent rather than ascent which the protagonist originally dreams of. At the peak of his career and in search of economic, political and social bliss, Senator Sunraider encounters a

turbulent insurrection of a past which queries the present.

In the "Afterword" to the novel, John Callahan describes the "procrustean" path taken to signify on Book II of the potential 'three volumes' of Ellison's work, pruned to the story of Hickman and Adam Sunraider, as the most central and engaging of Ellison's prolonged creative motivation. He speaks of the interesting tedium of editorial silencing, re-arrangement, chapterization, restoration and excision, concluding with a promise that

"a subsequent scholar's edition will document my corrections and include sufficient manuscripts and drafts to enable scholars and readers alike to follow Ellison's some forty years of work on his novel-in-progress." Pause then, not cessation, is the immortal flare of a work of genius...still in progress. Partially liberated, *Juneteenth* has been brought to the public sphere, a work to be read and remembered as *the likeness of an incomplete masterpiece*. GBS

Running Splash of Rust and Words

By Reuben Abati

I *BADAN MESIOGO*, subtitled *A Celebration of a City, its History and People* is a most interesting book, in part, because of its impressive content presented by a broad array of talents, but even more so because of the concept that it has turned into subject and metaphor. It is the biography of a city delivered through the vehicle of poetry, history, other creative writings and the essay form. It is

an elaborate ritual performed by devotees of the city who commune with it as god, as place, as home, and who in various forms confess an indebtedness to, and an identification with the place as part of their identity and growth as citizens or writers. The contributors cover an expansive range of time: from the past when Ibadan was a mere war camp, to its evolution as a city, and an organized political entity: that is, the not-too-distant past when Ibadan played a major role in the politics of the nation and of Yorubaland. It equally reaches the present, now that the past is linked to the future in form of a continuing dialogue between the modern and the traditional, the religious and the secular, the individual and the communal. But the dialogue which contributors to this book begin does not end. What, however, endures is the image of Ibadan as a *fertilizing* spirit. Three generations meet in the book, and their reflections are animated, exciting and deep.

But still, *Ibadan Mesioگو* captures only an aspect of this mythical, evocative city of the seven hills: it draws attention to its value as material for various forms of creative expression. With their effort, the authors have managed to both demonstrate the linkage between the city and the imagination, and also depict the writer as essential molder of

the insights that the city offers. The offering from *Ibadan* is rich. Yet, Ibadan is also a major hub: a West African crossroads, a center of commerce and bureaucracy, of politics – both local and national; in a sense, it is the heartbeat of Yorubaland, meaning that explorations of its significance can only be a continuing process.

What is a city? A city is space, a locus, a spiritual center connecting man to geography. The writers in this book fasten onto these notions while probing into the entrails of Ibadan; but what does the city reveal from these encounters? How has it responded to modern fixations on development and growth? "The Two Hundred Snails" offered at the divination tray by the original founders of Ibadan have traveled in two hundred directions, but what does the city present - a confused urban sprawl, reduced by the limitations of Nigerian politics, governance, and chaotic regional planning. Or, should we be guided by the overt romanticism of the contributors to this book? After all, the artist engaging Ibadan at this day and time will not likely be as besotted with the city as those artists of the moments celebrated in the book. His/her present experience of the city is defined by poverty, chaos and the speedy disappearance of opportunities. The celebration of Ibadan compels an interrogation of meaning and essence almost inevitably.

In five different sections, classified as Parts One and Two, and a Prologue by Femi Osofisan, other Ibadan products, devotees,

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Dapo Adelugba, Remi Raji, Omowunmi Segun and Bankole Olayebi (eds.)
IBADAN MESIOGO: A CELEBRATION OF A CITY, ITS HISTORY AND PEOPLE.
Bookcraft Ltd, Ibadan, 2001, 201 pp.