

Ralph Ellison in Tivoli

Some forty years ago I came into a small legacy and with it I bought a house in Tivoli, New York. "House" is not the word for it; it was, or once had been, a Hudson River mansion. It had a Dutch cellar kitchen of flagstones and a kitchen fireplace. There was a dumb-waiter to the vanished dining room above. The first floor had a ballroom but according to my informants, Tivoli's townspeople, no one had danced in it for eighty years. Tivoli had been the birthplace of Eleanor Roosevelt. The villagers were the descendants of the servants and grounds-keepers of the Dutchess County aristocrats.

I shan't be going into the social history of the township or the county. There were great names in the vicinity—the Livingstones, the Chapmans and the Roosevelts, but I didn't know much about them. I had sunk my \$16,000 legacy into a decaying mansion. To repair the roof and to put in new plumbing I drew an advance of \$10,000 from the Viking Press to write a novel called *Henderson the Rain King*.

There was a furnace of sorts and a warm-air system that took the moisture out of your nostrils. I was too busy with *Henderson* and with my then wife to take full notice of my surroundings. The times were revolutionary—I refer to the sexual revolution. Marriages were lamentably unstable and un-serious. My wife, tired of life with me in the gloomy house, packed her bags and moved to Brooklyn.

I was naturally wretched about this. I now found the solitude (and the decay of the house) insupportable. Determined to save my \$16,000, I threw myself into the work of salvage. I painted the kitchen walls and the bedrooms, as much for therapeutic reasons as to improve the property.

Then Ralph Ellison, who was teaching at Bard College, accepted my invitation to move in. I have always believed that this was an act of charity on his part.

We had known each other in Manhattan. I had reviewed *Invisible Man* for *Commentary*. I was aware that it was an extremely important novel and that, in what he did, Ralph had no rivals. What he did no one else could do—a glorious piece of good fortune for a writer.

Both of us at one time had lived on Riverside Drive. We met often and walked together in the park, along the Hudson. There we discussed all kinds of questions and exchanged personal histories. I was greatly taken

with Ellison, struck by the strength and independence of his mind. We discussed Richard Wright, Faulker and Hemingway. Ralph, it was clear, had thought things through for himself, and his ideas had little in common with the views of the critics in the literary quarterlies. Neither he nor I could accept the categories prepared for us by literary journalists. He was an American writer who was black. I was a Jew and an American and a writer, and I believed that by being described as a "Jewish writer" I was being shunted to a siding. This taxonomy business I saw as an exclusionary device. Ellison had similar objections to classification. From his side, he saw the Negro as one of the creators of America's history and culture.

That was okay with me. We found each other sympathetic. We got along splendidly and went fishing together for striped bass in Long Island Sound.

Ralph drove into Tivoli in his huge old Chrysler. He himself serviced it, coddled it, tuned it, and it ran as smoothly as it had when it came off the assembly line. The trunk, when it was opened, gave me my first hint of Ralph's powers of organization. For hunting there were guns, there were decoy ducks, for fishing, rods, lures and a wicker-work creel; there were tools of every description. Ralph was able to repair radios and hi-fi equipment. I envied him his esoteric technical skills. Where I saw a frightening jumble of tubes, dials, condensers (I can't even name the parts), he saw order. In my trunk I carried the spare wheel, the jack, a few rusty tire irons, rags and brown paper bags from the market. His trunk with its tools and weapons announced that he was prepared for any emergency, could meet every challenge to his autonomy.

He did not come alone. He was accompanied by a young black Labrador retriever who jumped from the Chrysler, eager to play, pawing my chest. Ralph had bought the dog from John Cheever, who was then, briefly, a breeder of black Labs.

The ballroom now became Ralph's studio. It ran the entire length of the house. He set up his typewriter and his desk and we found a book case for his manuscripts. You couldn't see the Hudson from the ground floor. Instead you had the Catskills to look at.

In the ballroom Ralph kept African violets which he watered with a turkey baster. It was from him that I learned all that I know about house plants.

But the important thing was that the gloomy house was no longer empty—no longer gloomy. All day long I heard the humming of his electric typewriter. Its long rhythms made me feel that we were on a cruise ship moving through the woods—the pines and the locust trees, the huge hay fields plowed, planted and harvested by Chanler Chapman. Chanler, before I could be aware of it, became Henderson the Rain King. He drove

his tractor like a real king, knocking over fences, breaking stone walls and pulling up boundary-markers.

Ralph and I brought the house under civilized control.

He came down to get his breakfast in a striped heavy Moroccan garment. He wore slippers with a large oriental curve at the toe. He was a very handsome man. A noteworthy person, solid, symmetrical and dignified but with a taste for finery. Ralph was never anything but well-dressed, and he liked clothes of an Ivy League cut. In the days before everybody had elected to go bareheaded, he wore what used to be called a porkpie hat of very fine felt. By comparison, I was a stumble bum. He put on his carefully chosen clothes with aesthetic intent. I often amused him by my (comparative) slovenliness. He studied me, silently amused—deeply amused by my lack of consideration for my appearance. Day in day out I wore the same blue jeans and chambray shirt.

Our meals were simple. We ate in the kitchen. I learned from Ralph how to brew drip-coffee properly. He had been taught by a chemist to do it with ordinary laboratory paper filters and water at room temperature. The coffee then was heated in a *bain-marie*—a pot within a pot. Never allowed to boil.

We saw little of each other during the day. I kept a vegetable garden and at the kitchen door I planted herbs.

At cocktail time we met again in the kitchen. Ralph mixed very strong martinis, but nobody got drunk. We talked a great deal, before dinner, before the martinis took hold. Over dinner, Ralph told me the story of his life—told me about his mother, about Oklahoma City; about their years in Gary, Indiana, and later in Cleveland, where he and his brother hunted birds for the table during the Great Depression. He described to me his trip, in freight trains, to Tuskegee; and how he learned to play the trumpet; and how he had come upon certain essays by André Malraux that changed his life. Often we rambled together about Malraux, about Marxism, or painting or novel writing.

There were long discussions of American history and of nineteenth-century politics, of slavery and the Civil War and Reconstruction. Ralph was much better at history than I could ever be, but it gradually became apparent that he was not merely talking about history but telling the story of his life, and tying it into American history. His motive was in part literary—he was trying to find the perspective for an autobiography. In this respect he much resembled Robert Frost, who had made a routine, an entertainment of the principal events of his life and polished or revised them again and again when he had the right listeners. But Frost was his own hagiographer. He would tell you how Ezra Pound had received him in his London flat sitting in a hip-bath and treated him—Frost—like a

ploughboy-poet. "I was no Bobby Burns," Frost often said. He was trying to establish *his* version or picture of a significant chapter of literary history and to spray it with a fixative of his own.

Ralph's purpose was very different from Frost's. He took pleasure in returning again and again to the story of his development not in order to revise or to gild it but to recover old feelings and also to consider and reconsider how he might find a way to write his story.

He and I had our differences. I am not inclined to be sentimental about those Arcadian or Utopian days. He didn't approve of my way of running the place. I had complained also that his dog relieved himself in my herb garden. I asked, "Can't you arrange to have him do his shitting elsewhere?"

This offended Ralph greatly, and he was outraged when in a fit of nastiness I took a swipe at the dog with a broom for fouling the terrace. He complained to John Cheever that, with my upbringing, I was incapable of understanding, I had no feeling for pedigrees and breeds and that I knew only mongrels and had treated his *chien de race* like a mongrel.

Cheever was broken up by this. Well, it was very funny. Cheever never spoke of it to me. I learned of Ralph's complaint when Cheever's diary was posthumously published.

When I told Ralph that perhaps it would be a good idea to thin out the locust trees along the driveway he said, "Well, they're your trees."

Immediately I telephoned a woodsman with a power-saw. I don't recall that there was such a saw in the trunk of the Chrysler. But in my place Ralph would have cut the trees himself. Nor would he have consulted anyone about it.

But the main cause of trouble between us was the dog. Ralph believed that I had taken against the dog.

I have begun in old age to understand just how oddly we all are put together. We are so proud of our autonomy that we seldom if ever realize how generous we are to ourselves, and just how stingy with others. One of the booby traps of freedom—which is bordered on all sides by isolation—is that we think so well of ourselves. I now see that I have helped myself to the best cuts at life's banquet.

But our boiling paranoias do simmer down, and later on Ralph and I resolved our differences. His dog was after all handsome, intelligent, lively. I didn't hold it against him that he was a thoroughbred, a *chien de race*. We made peace and parted on the best of terms.

Ralph and I later agreed that our Tivoli life had been extraordinarily pleasant. It's no longer a shored-up ruin. Its new proprietor has turned it into a showplace. But Ralph and I, two literary squatters, comically spiky, apart though living together, had been very lucky in the two years we spent together in what I called the House of Usher. We did not form a great

friendship. What we had was a warm attachment. He respected me. I admired him. He had a great deal to teach me; I did my best to learn.

Since that time I have brewed my morning coffee precisely as he had taught me to brew it.

I often summon him up. He is wearing his Moorish dressing gown and the leather slippers with turned-up toes. Sometimes while pouring water from the measuring cup with one hand he rubs his nose with the other, rubs it so hard that you can hear the cartilage crack.

NORMAN MANEA

The Fifth Impossibility

Kafka did not often write about the country in which he was born. When he writes about the language—that is, the homeland—which he came to inhabit, he speaks about “impossibilities.”

In a letter to Max Brod, he lists three impossibilities for a Jew writing in German or, in fact, in any other language—which means in any fatherland. He considers these impossibilities as a matter of “the Jewish question or of despair in relation to that question.” Kafka saw himself as a product of the impossible, which he recreated continuously as poetry, that is, as life, with a magical and austere fixation.

Franz Kafka’s three impossibilities are the impossibility of not writing, of writing in German, and of writing differently.

To these he adds a fourth, comprehensive impossibility: namely, “the impossibility of writing *per se*.” Actually, the impossibility to live *per se*, the impossibility “to endure life”—as he confesses in a letter to Carl Bauer in 1913. “My whole being is directed toward literature. . . the moment I abandon it, I cease to live. Everything I am, and am not, is a result of this.” Few people have had their homeland as dramatically located in writing as the Jewish Franz Kafka writing in Prague in German—his paradoxical way of “crossing over to the side of the world” in the struggle with himself. “I am nothing but literature and can and want to be nothing else,” he often repeated.

It may seem surprising that Kafka did not mention a fifth impossibility, one which is the most Kafkaesque of all: the impossibility of exile or the impossibility of operetta, if we are to follow the Romanian exile Cioran who held that one would do better to write operettas than to write in a foreign language. And yet it would be more suggestive to call it “the snail’s impossibility”: that is, the impossibility of continuing to write in exile, even if the writer takes along his language as the snail does his house.

Such an extreme situation seems borrowed from the very premise of Kafka, and our clownish forerunner K. could not but be attracted by such a farcical hypothesis of self-destruction. For that guinea-pig of the

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