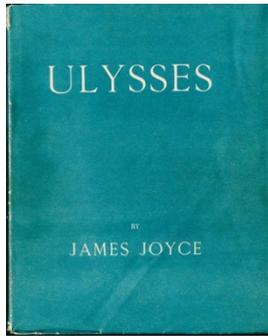




MAY–JUNE 2020

One evening in October 1988, the Chicago writer and critic Leon Forrest and his wife had been visiting friends on Riverside Drive in New York City. He had been to this home before, with its stately and organized space containing a sprawling and expansive personal



library. At one point, Mr. Forrest brought up a topic that had been touched upon on other occasions, and asked his host more directly—*what were certain influences of James Joyce's Ulysses on the novel Invisible Man?*

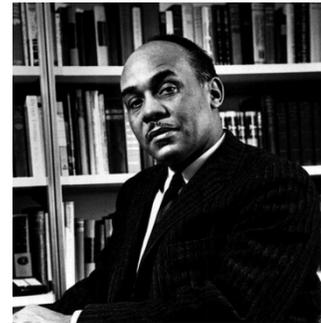
Of course, the friend was Ralph Ellison (1914–1994—pictured right), arguably one of the greatest writers in American history, and certainly one of the most influential, who had written the groundbreaking novel *Invisible Man* (1952) and *Juneteenth*, the posthumously published work named after the June 19th holiday recognizing the final declaration of emancipation in Galveston, Texas in 1865.

Leon Richard Forrest was born in 1937 and raised on the southside of Chicago, attending Hyde Park High School, and later Roosevelt University and the University of Chicago. As a young man he established himself as a news editor and began writing both non-fiction pieces for newspapers and literary fiction on the side. His career as a novelist brought him into Ellison's orbit, when the senior literary giant penned a short introductory essay to Forrest's 1973 novel *There is a Tree More Ancient than Eden*. In that essay Ellison extols Forrest as a first-class writer with the following encomium: "So I read on, bouncing between moods of tragic contemplation and bursts of hilarious laughter, between speculations upon

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the shifting relationships between the American myth of democracy and everyday reality, brooding over his evocations of those dilemmas bred of Christian faith and racial conflict, of social violence, family friction and dreams of a peaceful kingdom." It is noteworthy and profound when we read words like this, to acknowledge great thinkers whose words are boundlessly transcending time and presciently penetrating the heart of our present. Ellison's words described Forrest's novel specifically, but universally encompassed what he already knew was a perennial problem that saw little hope for a social panacea—except perhaps in literature and the arts.

Forrest wrote other novels—*The Bloodworth Orphans* (1977) and *Two Wings to Veil My Face* (1984)—but spent a long time, like Ellison did with *Juneteenth*, writing his final work *Divine Days* (1992), published just two years



before Ellison's death in 1994. *Divine Days* takes us back to Forrest's question for Ellison in 1988, his preoccupation with the epic tradition and how it might translate into an African-American literary form, and Ellison's own vision of both the Joycean model and the Homeric tradition and legacy. *Divine Days*, weighing in at over 1,100 pages, is in many ways modeled after Joyce's *Ulysses* and was described by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. as the "War and Peace of African-American Literature." In an interview published as "The Mythos of Gumbo" in the Summer 1996 issue of *Callaloo* and conducted by Madhu Dubey, now Professor of English and African-American Studies at the University of Illinois-

Chicago, Forrest explains his inspiration for *Divine Days* and his thoughts on Joyce, Homer, *Ulysses*, and *The Odyssey*.

DUBEY: *Was there an initial conception or seed in your mind from which the novel took shape?*

FORREST: *Well, sure there was. One was that it would be over a seven-day period. I had been reading and rereading in recent times Ulysses, with the great power that book has over one day, so I thought that might be intriguing to try over seven days. Also, the character of Sugar Groove was one that fascinated me throughout the course of the novel. And I would say Ford. And then I was quite fascinated later in the novel by the possibilities of the character Imani. It seems to me many major novels center on at least three major characters, so I was driven along by fascination with each of these characters, but each in a different way.*

This inspiration was not just the seed, but also something that guided Forrest in other aspects of writing; indeed, the underlying Homeric tradition was also ever present. At one point in the novel, the principal character Joubert Jones—a bartender and aspiring playwright in Chicago—recites Joyce’s work to his barber Williemain. When Dubey asks in her interview whether there is a “swirl of identities” in the combination of various “people’s voices and languages,” Forrest answers that “[it’s] certainly true with Joubert. Of course, that’s so much a part of the vision of the novel—the transformation of the self constantly, impact of other cultures, other individuals, and so on, on the individual. In that sense, the characters are hopefully a little bit like Proteus in *The Odyssey*. Certainly, Sugar Groove is that way.” Interestingly, too, the same character of Sugar Grove in *Divine Days* is discussed by Dubey and Forrest as having the “cultural ancestry of...Icarus...and even the legendary flying African.” The connection to Joyce and *Ulysses* again is that the ancient Greek myth of Icarus flying toward the sun is reflected in the Joycean character of Stephen Dedalus, whose namesake is the Greek craftsman who designed the labyrinth and fashioned the wings for his son Icarus.

Forrest was obviously deeply influenced by *Ulysses*, but also the antique tradition of Homer and the characters of ancient Greek culture. And as we know, Joyce’s *Ulysses* is structurally based on Homer’s *Odyssey*. In Forrest’s conversations with Ellison, we see the men’s considerations of this shared interest come to bear and observe a strikingly important discussion on the role of ancient epics and literary modernism with their own work and its meaning in twentieth century America. In one of his visits to see Ellison, Forrest asked the older man about great literature, and Ellison responded while pointing to the top shelf: “‘Leon, I’m not up there; but I know what you must do to get up there.’ Upon that shelf, at the highest level, were the works of James Joyce, Thomas Mann, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy.” Today, though, Ellison is on that shelf and so too should Forrest.

When we look at both *Invisible Man* and *Juneteenth*, we find the marks of Ellison’s engagement with these writers, especially Joyce and Homer, and how they fit into an ideal of inventing new language for this America in which struggle and hope have long been part of its fabric. In Ellison’s unfinished manuscript of *Juneteenth*, his literary executor John Callahan discovered in the thousands of pages of notes an “abundance of classical references.” William Cook and James Tatum write further about this in their work *African-American Writers and Classical Tradition* (published in 2010 by the University of Chicago Press). Principally, Cook and Tatum expound on “the Odyssean Voice of *Invisible Man*,” which is represented in various modes throughout Ellison’s work. They cite Aristotle’s observation that “out of the *Iliad*...one could make one tragedy, but out of the *Odyssey* [there are] many,”—tragedies that mark us every which way in our modern society. Cook, who died in 2017 and had been chair of the departments of English and African and African American Studies at Dartmouth, outlined the parallels in *Invisible Man* to *the Odyssey* in very constructive terms. Among the literary allusions, Cook notes that “Ellison’s narrator tells us it all began twenty

years ago, the same length of time Odysseus was away from Ithaca....” Cook also compares the character of *Invisible Man* to both Odysseus himself and his son Telemachus, in various episodes and predicaments, culminating with a tenuous and dangerous ending for the characters in each book. Professor Cook artfully weaves the narrative dynamic in *Invisible Man*, *Ulysses*, and *The Odyssey* to describe their fates:

...Invisible is just as callow and as much in danger from the schemes and traps of older and cleverer enemies as Telemachus, who must contend with his mother Penelope’s suitors. But Telemachus is also lucky to have guidance and protection of Athena disguised in the original role of Mentor. Invisible Man is not so lucky, since nearly every mentor he meets proves to be treacherous in the end. The difference is that Ellison’s gullible Telemachus eventually matures into an Odysseus. It is as if Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom were to meld into a single figure at the end of *Ulysses*.

We can take many things away from both the parallels outlined by Cook and Tatum, and the extensive and fascinating discussions that Forrest and Ellison had over the themes of classical antiquity in conversation with literary modernism. The outcome, though, is that we recognize there are multiple organic connections among the vast thematic expressions of our artistic world. What we may initially see as unrelated or inconsequential, may actually have deep and resonant origins and meanings that are often hidden from our general perusals.

On the surface, the pronouncements and celebration of *Bloomsday* may seem arcane, tertiary, and irrelevant, especially in times like these. In fact, upon hosting a virtual *Bloomsday* event and Zoom reading earlier this week at SMU, we discussed how books change every time we read them—the *same* book may be very

different when and where you read it; and we too change. I remember as a youngster reading Thomas Merton’s *The Seven Storey Mountain* at least twice, and each time it affected me in very different, yet profound ways. We read through our own personal experiences and internalize the meanings of what we read. In the same way, reading *Ulysses* and celebrating James Joyce’s work this week with a community of engaged readers was yet another different experience of reading. But this time I felt a deeper appreciation, as well as a concern for not just the book, but for the environment within which I was reading it and participating in its language and social impact. The revelatory bombshell of *Ulysses* as a work that shattered our tonal understanding of writing and literature in the English language has parallels in the agony and intensity of revelations in both Ellison’s and Forrest’s novels.

In our current moment, we have been living through a pandemic, and as one of our *Bloomsday* participants noted, the visions of a busy market in the 1904 Dublin of *Ulysses* is now something seen in stark contrast to the pandemic plagued Dublin of 2020. More recently, and certainly more relevant and important, we are seeing something else, something more socially profound and ethically imperative, which has come to awaken the American consciousness—if there is one still to awaken! The catalyst of George Floyd in our country has pushed us into a place where our society becomes bound to reevaluate on a wide scale much, if not all of what we do *and* who we are. Some may say: *what does that have to do with...?* Yet, with every action that has broad implications in our world, if it is as expansive and influential as to have set off a global reckoning, the result from every corner of the global village must be a time to stop, think, and reflect about the problems of this world. We cannot solve everything, but we can do what is within our own power to affect some change.

Is there then a tension between the classical tradition—of being guided by Greco-Roman literature and the legacy of the epic, or even the trappings of literary modernism—and finding one’s own voice, even battling against the detrimental aspects of “tradition?” Or, is this a false equivalent, one that Ellison and Forrest did not accept? As we read and engage with texts, what is our role as readers, authors, editors, librarians, educators, students? And then how does this play a role in our communities, whether those are the streets we live on, the churches we attend, the reading groups we talk to, or the educational institutions we are part of? Our commemoration of *Bloomsday* this year could not pass without a commemoration of *Juneteenth* in the same week—they’ve always been a few days apart, but perhaps never connected. There is an imperative that the same mental, emotional, and spiritual space of a country and world that is torn to shreds by the diseases of the body and soul—of viruses and racism—should consider relationships like these. I have intentionally used the word “commemoration” in contrast to celebrate, recognize, observe, and honor, because *commemorate* means “to bring to remembrance.” This means that these two days and what they represent are important, and that they need to be brought forward for society to recognize more widely as to why they are important—most especially Juneteenth.

Searching for materials in our own collections at SMU, my staff and I were unable to locate much in the way of Juneteenth specific materials, though there are relevant, important,

and significant items of ancillary character which are worth studying. One of which, though not in Bridwell, brought to my attention by Michelle Ried, is an advertisement in the DeGolyer Library, which depicts and promotes a Juneteenth event in 1919—its 54th anniversary to be held “June 19-20 1919 at Herman’s Park, Fort Worth, Texas.” The activity was billed as a must-see event—“Barbecue will be under the management of Mr. O.C. Crook,” “Big Bowling Alley, Free Children’s amusement and pleasure. K. of P. Brass Band will furnish music Day and Night. Matinee, Dancing that will be enjoyed by all;” and “Playground for the Children.” Additionally, a list of prominent speakers from Texas were featured, including a local African-American attorney, the Honorable W.H. Griggs.

Just as the uplifting and joyous occasion of Juneteenth was being planned and celebrated in Fort Worth, in our very own city of Dallas, W.E. King was publishing a vibrant and significant weekly newspaper *The Dallas Express*. King, who also happened to die in 1919, had successfully published the newspaper

from 1892 till his death nearly three decades later as the most important black publisher in Texas at the time. He billed his paper as “the oldest and largest negro newspaper in the south.” The significance of this paper was that it covered central topics and issues crucial to the African-American communities in North Texas that were all but ignored by the mainstream media. As the celebratory preparations of Juneteenth were declared on the pages of some newspapers, *The Dallas Express* detailed major concerns of oppression,

poverty, segregation, and violence. Fifty-four years after 1865, the paradox of a celebratory Juneteenth picnic with marching band and games in a Fort Worth park juxtaposed with intensified violence toward African-American communities around the country in what came to be known as *Red Summer* could not be a greater contrast of hope versus reality. The tensions of that time a century ago were spread across the pages of *The Dallas Express* throughout the year—some news articles offered such possible remedies as setting up another American state between Texas and Mexico that would be governed by African Americans and free of the violence from marauding whites—an idea taken up and purportedly supported later by Joseph Stalin, but in the form of a communist *country* located in the southern United States.

The Dallas Express

It is easy today to think that we are in a unique time in history. In some ways we are, yet in other ways some things have not changed. Our society continues to ache, convulse, and react, and is in a state of opaque and vague focus that is influenced by world affairs and a power structure that both privileges some and harms others. The work of Forrest and Ellison and the richly evocative and brilliant tradition of African-American literature have become the voices that reveal the truths of both our past and our present. The ancient epic tradition has been transformed by Forrest and Ellison and other skilled poets—their writings the scripture of an antique world along with a modernist voice in their vernacular bibles portraying the real heroism of their journeys, *their odysseys*.

Reflecting on both *Bloomsday* and *Juneteenth* (even as some have described Juneteenth as an “obscure June holiday”) and the present flux of world affairs, we are forced to delve into their meanings and connections. Perhaps surprising, perhaps enlightening, the whole cosmos of these moral elements makes us realize both the importance of traditions, and the need to regularly re-read and re-evaluate

those traditions. When Leon Forrest asked how *Ulysses* influenced *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison left the room briefly and returned with a small book of poetry titled *Pomes Penyeach* by Joyce. Ellison recounted how a bookseller in New York had sold him the book for \$1, admiring the young writer as a “serious student of literature.” When Ellison handed the volume to Forrest, he opened it up and saw James Joyce’s signature right there on the page and quickly realized the connection and importance to Ellison. But perhaps even more significant, we can only guess how a young Ralph Ellison responded to these short, intense, and deeply penetrating poems in this short book a decade before *Invisible Man*...

The eyes that mock me sign the way
Whereto I pass at eve of day.
Grey way whose violet signals are
The trysting and the twining star.
Ah star of evil! star of pain!
Highhearted youth comes not again
Nor old heart’s wisdom yet to know
The signs that mock me as I go.

What I would give to sit down in a room with Forrest and Ellison today and hear what they would have to say about our present world. I can only imagine.

Pax vobiscum! ~ AJE

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