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NEW BOOKS in the NEWS

Can the American Negro become equal socially and stay distinct culturally? By Norman Podhoretz. (From the New York Herald Tribune)

SHADOW AND ACT. By Ralph Ellison. Random House. 317 pp. \$5.95.

This collection of essays written over the past 20 years and dealing with "literature and folklore, with Negro musical expression—especially jazz and the blues—and with the complex relationship between the Negro American subculture and the North American culture as a whole" is Ralph Ellison's first book since *Invisible Man* appeared in 1952. At least one early reader, Professor Daniel Aaron, has found in these essays "the same eloquence and humor and wisdom that distinguish [Ellison's] fiction." As an admirer of Ellison's fiction, I wish I could agree, but I have to say that eloquence, humor, and wisdom—virtues which do indeed distinguish *Invisible Man*—seem to me precisely what *Shadow and Act* for the most part lacks. Ellison emerges from this collection as an extraordinarily principled man, a man of great seriousness, stubborn rectitude, and intellectual determination. But he does not come through as a man of humor and eloquence, perhaps because he has never quite mastered the art of the essay enough for his best qualities to find expression in it.

At any rate, the great majority of the pieces brought together here are awkwardly composed, marred by pompous locutions, clumsy transitions, and sometimes even by bad syntax. Ellison is forever announcing how deeply he believes in "artistic scrupulousness" and in the supreme value of "writing well." Yet here is an example of the kind of prose—knotted, graceless, pretentious—he so often falls into when writing essays: "Perhaps at this point it would be useful to recapitulate the route—perhaps as maze-like as that of *Finnegan's* [sic] *Wake*—which I have been trying to describe; that which leads from the writer's discovery of a sense of purpose, which is that of becoming a writer, and then the involvement in the passionate struggle required to master a bit of technique, and then, as this begins to take shape, the disconcerting discovery that it is *technique* which transforms the individual before he is able in turn to transform it."

Ellison says in his introduction that the value of these essays is that "they performed the grateful function of making it unnecessary to clutter up my fiction with half-formed or outrageously wrong-headed ideas." But it isn't, I suspect, bad ideas which were siphoned off by the essays so much as certain attitudes and impulses that would (See BOOK, page 11)

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