Ellison’s Hemingways

And when I read the early Hemingway I seem to be in the presence of a Huckleberry Finn who, instead of identifying himself with humanity and attempting to steal Jim free, chose to write the letter which sent him back into slavery. —Ralph Ellison (1946)

Do you still ask why Hemingway was more important to me than Wright? Not because he was white, or more “accepted.” But because he appreciated the things of this earth which I love and which Wright was too driven or deprived or inexperienced to know: weather, guns, dogs, horses, love and hate and impossible circumstances which to the courageous and dedicated could be turned into benefits and victories. . . . Because all that he wrote—and this is very important—was imbued with a spirit beyond the tragic with which I could feel at home, for it was very close to the feeling of the blues, which are, perhaps, as close as Americans can come to expressing the spirit of tragedy. . . . Because he was in many ways the true father-as-artist of so many of us who came to writing during the late thirties. —Ralph Ellison (1964)

In the summer of 1935, home in Oklahoma City after his sophomore year at the Tuskegee Institute, Ralph Ellison discovered the writing of Ernest Hemingway while waiting in line for a haircut at a neighborhood barbershop. Hemingway had been composing regular essays and travelogues for the upstart men’s fashion monthly Esquire since 1934; “American Sportsman” entries like “A.D. in Africa,” “Shootism versus Sport,” “Sailfish of Mombassa,” and “Notes on a Dangerous Game” helped form the foundation of the magazine’s sophisticated image, and proved popular in barbershops and drug stores across the United States during the mid-1930s (Jackson, “Emergence” 136-37). One can imagine an impressionable young Ellison stumbling onto any of these articles while relaxing in a leather chair and flipping through a back issue of Esquire, unexpectedly finding himself captivated by Hemingway’s prose. As Ellison would later point out, the “Lost Generation” writers “had not only the comfort of being in the well-advertised advance guard; they were widely read and their characters’ way of life was imitated to the extent that several generations of young people stylized their speech and attitudes to the pattern of Fitzgerald’s and Hemingway’s fiction. . . . With Esquire carrying their work to readers in most of the barbershops throughout the country, these writers were lost in a crowd of admirers, of whom I was one” (Ellison, “Collected” 716). Ellison returned to Tuskegee the following fall and read whatever Hemingway he could get his hands on (Jackson, “Emergence” 146-47). When he found himself disheartened by the college’s humanities courses—especially the narrow “sociological” perspectives on the African American experience that they tended to offer—Hemingway’s declaration of artistic independence in the opening pages of Death in the Afternoon proved particularly stirring: “I found the greatest difficulty, aside from knowing truly what you really felt, rather than what you were supposed to feel, and had been taught to feel, was to put down what really happened in action; what the actual things were which produced the emotion that you experienced” (CE 57-58).

Ellison’s birth as a mature reader and critic of Hemingway’s work emerged out of slightly more remarkable circumstances. Two and a half years later, the future author of Invisible Man used the same Esquire essays that he encountered in the Oklahoma City barbershop to help endure an unimaginably harsh winter in Dayton, Ohio.
Homeless, grieving the recent loss of his mother, and uncertain about his newfound
commitment to becoming a professional writer, Ellison sustained himself from
October 1937 to April 1938 by tracking and hunting quail in the wilderness of the
Ohio Valley. He apparently turned to Hemingway's detailed descriptions of wing-
shooting for guidance: "I had been hunting since I was eleven, but no one had broken
down the process of wing-shooting for me, and it was from reading Hemingway
that I learned to lead a bird. When he describes something in print, believe him . . .
he's been there" (CE 211). Ellison spent several nights that winter sleeping in a car
parked in a garage (O'Meally, "Craft" 31). He wasn't exaggerating when he claimed,
in a 1971 interview, that reading Hemingway literally "meant the difference between
eating and going hungry" (Graham 210).
Ellison would recount the Dayton episode over and over again—sometimes
with fondness, sometimes with a slight tinge of irony—throughout the remainder
of his life as a public intellectual. He even took the time to save a copy of one of
the Hemingway essays that proved so instrumental to his survival. A search through
Ellison's personal "HEMINGWAY" file—an impressive collection of forty-three years
worth of Hemingway-related scraps, clippings, articles, magazine issues, and memo-
rabilia currently held in the Ralph Ellison Papers at the U. S. Library of Congress—
yields a weathered cutout of Hemingway's "Remembering Shooting-Flying," a brief
but inventive entry on bird hunting composed for Esquire in 1935. Ellison's is,
undoubtedly, an original copy (see Fig. 1); one that he may have taken home from
the barbershop in Oklahoma City and put aside for later use, or, more likely, one that
he may have come across while scouring the Dayton public library for periodicals
that would keep him plugged into the mainstream scene. What is so striking about
"Remembering Shooting-Flying" is not that it remained in Ellison's possession until
his death in 1994 (he kept extensive files on nearly every literary figure and intellectual
subject that he found interesting), but that it appears to have served less practical
purposes during those dire months than he probably would have acknowledged openly.
The copy of the essay is riddled with marginalia written in Ellison's own hand: he
busily pencils the pages with faint underlinings, abrupt bracketings, and cryptic
shorthand notes—the beginnings, it would seem, of a serious writer, reader, and critic
at work. A particularly poetic sequence, the climax of Hemingway's short narrative,
receives special attention:
And did you ever see the quick, smooth-lifting, reaching flight the lesser bustard has,
or make a double on them, right and left, or shoot at flying sand grousse coming to water
early in the morning and see the great variety of shots they give and hear the cackling sound
they make when flighting, a little like the noise of prairie chickens on the plains when they
go off, fast beat of wings and soar, fast beat of wings and soar stiff-winged, and see a coyote
watching you a long way out of range and see an antelope turn and stare and lift his head
when he hears the shotgun thud? Sand grousse, of course, fly nothing like a prairie chicken.
They have a cutting, swooping flight like pigeons but they make that grousse-like cackle, and with
the lesser bustard and the teal, there is no bird to beat them for pan, the griddle or the oven.
In the margins of the magazine Ellison appears to have scribbled the word "long"
next to Hemingway's first sentence; "short," less emphatically, next to his halting,
almost fractured second sentence; and "long," again, at the paragraph's conclusion. Ellison also pays close attention to the internal rhythms within each of the three
sentences, dividing the most intricate into four modular units: 1) "And did you ever
see the quick, smooth-lifting, reaching flight the lesser bustard has, or make a double
on them, right and left"; 2) "or shoot at flying sand grousse coming to water early
in the morning and see the great variety of shots they give and hear the cackling
sound they make when flighting"; 3) "a little like the noise of prairie chickens on
the plains when they go off, fast beat of wings and soar, fast beat of wings and soar
stiff-winged"; and, finally, 4) "and see a coyote watching you a long way out of range
and see an antelope turn and stare and lift his head when he hears the shotgun thud?"
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on that old double barrel. It kicked me against the tree and when I opened it up I found it had doubled and fired both barrels at once and my ears were ringing and my nose was bleeding. But I picked the quail up, reloaded the gun, wiped my nose and set out to find my father. I was sick of not hitting any.

"Did you get one, Ernie?"

I held it up.

"It's a cock," he said. "See his white throat? It's a beauty."

But I had a lump in my stomach that felt like a baseball from lying to him and that night I remember crying with my head under the patchwork quilt after he was asleep because I had lied to him. If he would have waked up I would have told him, I think. But he was tired and sleeping heavily. I never told him.

So I won't think any more about that but I remember now how I broke the spring in the 20 gauge. It was from snapping the hammer on an empty chamber producing a wobble in the pigeons after they wouldn't let me shoot any more. And some older boys came along the road when I was carrying the pigeons from the barn to the house and one of them said I didn't shoot those pigeons... I called him a liar and the smaller of the two whipped hell out of me.

One day as cold as this you can remember duck shooting in the blind... hearing their wings go whoo-chu-chu-chu in the dark before daylight. That is the first thing I remember of geese; the whistly, silk tearing sound the fast wingbeats make; just as what you remember first of geese is how slow they seem to go 'when they are travelling, and yet they are moving so fast that the first one you ever killed was two behind the one you shot at, and all that night you kept waking up and remembering how he folded up and fell. While the woodcock is an easy bird to hit, with a soft flight like an owl, and if you do miss him he will probably pitch down and give you another shot. But what a bird to eat flambé with armagnac cooked in his own juice and butter, a little mustard added to make a sauce, with two strips of bacon and pommes soufflé and Corton, Pommard, Beaune, or Chambertin to drink.

Now it is colder still and we found ptarmigan in the rocks on a high plain above to the left of the glacier by the haus in the Vorarlberg with its chazzard and the next day we track all day on skis and caught, a ptarmigan. We never saw the

Fig. 1: Ralph Ellison's original copy of Ernest Hemingway's *Esquire* travelogue "Remembering Shooting-Flying" (February 1935). Ellison's running margin notes—"long," "short," "long"—are scribbled along the right-hand column. (Ralph Ellison Papers, Box 187, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.)
During the bleak Dayton winter of 1937-1938—despite “ice and snow and homelessness,” as he would later put it—Ellison seems to have been interested just as much in Hemingway’s trademark syntactical cadences as in the practical uses of his literary realism (CE 4). The passage is mined for its formal experimentation, rather than for its faithful portrayal of wing-shooting practice. Serious literary concerns were just as much on Ellison’s mind as his next meal.

I dwell here on the marginalia in Ellison’s copy of “Remembering Shooting-Flying” both because it marks an unrecognized point of origin for his long history of intellectual engagement with Ernest Hemingway’s work, and because it signals the ways in which this history remains far more fraught than previous critical accounts would seem to allow. Perhaps no other novelist in the American tradition struggled with Hemingway—with his strengths, with his shortcomings, with his bequest to twentieth-century writers, white and black—more openly and insistently than Ralph Ellison. Perhaps no other novelist wrote more honestly, more courageously, and more artfully on Hemingway; at the same time, no other novelist wrote more unpredictably, and seemed to change his opinion more often. No other writer, in the end, made a more canny intervention in the existing body of critical literature on Hemingway, and no other writer altered its direction more permanently. Hemingway as technical innovator; Hemingway as literary model; Hemingway as political charlatan; Hemingway as race essentialist; Hemingway as culture hero; Hemingway as blues writer; Hemingway as “true father”: all of these complicated portraits of the artist emerge—often at odds with one another—from a survey of Ellison’s critical writings, from a retrospective look at over forty years of Hemingway “endlessly dismembered and resurrected” by Ellison’s distinctive literary genius (CE 186, 190). What remains constant amid all of this shifting terrain is, of course, Hemingway as an enduring presence in Ellison’s intellectual life—and my basic contention here is that this presence, and Ellison’s struggle with it, proved absolutely formative not only in the configuration of his artistic practice, but also in the development of his controversial vision of the cultural and political work of the American novel itself. As I will attempt to show in what follows, however, the Ellison-Hemingway connection does not neatly comport with axiomatic analytical models of literary “influence” and “ancestry”; indeed, its realities were far more troubled, and far more historically contingent. New evidence from Ellison’s “HEMINGWAY” files suggests that his seemingly discrepant, even erratic, uses and critiques of Hemingway’s work actually advanced in response to discrete historical trends in the U. S. literary-critical mainstream, and with a distinct set of aesthetic and rhetorical ends in mind. From the perspective of the archive, Ellison’s recourse to Hemingway appears more self-reflexive than anything else: “Papa” provided the ideal mirror through which Ellison could find his own narrative voice, and against which he could fashion his own viewpoint on the function of literature in a society that hadn’t yet lived up to its democratic promise. Hemingway meant so many things at so many different times because Ellison’s relationship to “technique” was constantly evolving, and the intellectual contexts shaping his understandings of “race” and “literature” were constantly shifting. “There is a moral obligation,” Ellison would assert in a 1972 interview, “for the critic to recognize
what is rich and what is viable in criticism and then apply it and play it back through his own experience, through his sense of what is important not simply about criticism, but about life" (Graham 223). An examination of Ellison’s Hemingways ultimately reveals just how closely he lived and wrote by these very words.

Ellison’s close readings of “Remembering Shooting-Flying” probably materialized out of his burgeoning friendship with the writer and political activist Richard Wright. The two had been introduced in New York by Langston Hughes during the summer before Ellison’s temporary removal to Dayton, and Wright immediately nurtured Ellison’s interest in the craft of fiction by encouraging him to study the prose styles of the modern masters. “You must read so-and-so,” Ellison later recalled Wright saying. “You have to go about learning to write consciously. People have talked about such and such a problem and have written about it. You must learn how Conrad, Joyce, Dostoevsky get their effects” (CE 73-74). Wright is also reputed to have guided Ellison to the work of Henry James, even going so far as to suggest that he re-punctuate James’s characteristically protracted sentences in pencil in order to learn how to master the rules of English grammar and write with precision (Graham 295; Jackson, “Birth” 326). Ellison, for his part, was well suited for such a “practice” regimen. As a student at the Tuskegee Institute’s music conservatory (his was a scholarship to study trumpet performance and symphonic composition) he had cut his teeth in the woodshed—tirelessly drilling scales and classical etudes by day, and memorizing Duke Ellington tunes and Louis Armstrong solos by night. Ellison would remark that his musical background actually worked to his advantage when he first started grappling with the techniques of the written word: “Having given so much attention to the techniques of music, the process of learning something of the craft and intention of modern poetry and fiction seemed quite familiar” (CE 203). “I’d been playing [trumpet] since I was eight years old,” he later clarified, “and I knew you didn’t just reach a capable performance in whatever craft without work. I’d play one set of scales over and over again. In Tuskegee I’d get up early in the morning—and this was required of brass instrument players—and I’d blow sustained tones for an hour. I knew the other students used to hate it, but this developed embouchure, breath control, and so on. And I approached writing in the same way” (Graham 293-94). Obviously, Wright’s emphasis on the importance of working “consciously” toward technical mastery was nothing new.

Ellison’s earliest plans to engage Hemingway with any seriousness seem to have emerged out of this same combination of Wright’s stern prodding and his own musically driven initiative. As we have already seen, Ellison at first explored Hemingway’s prose through the traditional techniques of close reading: in Dayton, his study routine at first involved underlining elegant and arresting turns of phrase, all the while making sure to take detailed margin notes on syntax, rhythm, and narrative structure. We might assume that this type of work came at Wright’s suggestion, since Wright was using similar approaches to reading Hemingway around the same time, particularly for his efforts on the manuscript that would eventually become Uncle Tom’s Children (Wright 17). Yet Ellison appears to have become dissatisfied with these sorts of conventional “readerly” practices almost immediately. Still in Dayton, he abandoned close reading and turned, instead, to what he would eventually call his musical “discipline of consciousness” for further inspiration (CE 55).

Mirroring the transcription assignments he would have undoubtedly completed for his music theory and ear training instructors at Tuskegee (“transcription”: writing out, note for note, musical tones or rhythms heard by ear), Ellison began copying extended passages of Hemingway’s prose, word for word, in longhand. The objective of the exercise was to internalize Hemingway’s stylistic innovations and learn how to

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organize a story more directly—“to study [his] rhythms,” as Ellison later put it, once again drawing on his musical vocabulary, “so as not just to know them but to possess them” (qtd. in O’Meally, “Rules” 249). Entire articles and short stories were arduously written out during single sittings.

Ellison probably switched this unique technical exercise to the typewriter when he returned to New York in the spring of 1938 and began making serious forays into the world of fiction and criticism. Ellison’s “HEMINGWAY” file at the U. S. Library of Congress actually contains a hitherto unexamined transcription of Hemingway’s well known short story “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber,” completed in total as late as 1943—which seems to suggest that Ellison may have found early success with the copying exercise, and stuck with it for the better part of his “apprenticeship” years leading up to the genesis of Invisible Man (REP 187). From the first few pages of the “Macomber” transcription (see Fig. 2), it is possible to deduce the general procedure Ellison most likely employed to absorb the stylistic Hemingway. First, he typed out a passage or short story in its entirety. Next, he copyedited the resulting manuscript in pencil, correcting any typographical errors. Finally, he appears to have read through the manuscript uninterrupted, making brief margin notes and even suggesting minor changes to the published original. In short, he treated Hemingway’s prose as if it were his own. The scrap paper Ellison happened to be using at the time to supply his transcription routine is, strange to say, even more suggestive. The first several pages of the “Macomber” project—including Hemingway’s notorious opening line, “It was now lunch time and they were all sitting under the double green fly of the dining tent pretending that nothing had happened”—(which Ellison seems to have transcribed incorrectly)—are in fact typewritten on the blank sides of extra handbills for the “Third Annual Cavalcade of American Folk Music,” an event held at New York City’s Town Hall in 1943 and sponsored, appropriately enough, by none other than Richard Wright. Hemingway on the surface, folk musical expression and Richard Wright underneath: to be sure, few artifacts could better embody the driving forces behind Ellison’s early critical encounters with Hemingway during the late 1930s and early 1940s. From a more comprehensive perspective, it is equally tempting to submit here that few artifacts—save, perhaps, Invisible Man itself—could better exemplify the commitment to cultural syncretism that would form the foundation for Ellison’s fictional and critical efforts in the coming years: his vision of the mutual inseparability and interdependence between the African American cultural “periphery” and the white “center”; his vision of the structural fluidities between the so-called “literary” and the so-called “vernacular”; his vision even of true democracy as a jazzlike project of open interracial discourse, both on and off the page.

Looking closer still, the back of page 7 of the “Macomber” transcription has a fragment of typewritten dialog from an early draft of “That I Had the Wings,” a short story in Ellison’s “Buster-and-Riley” series first published in a 1943 issue of Common Ground: “... Naw, naw, man. He’s the Louie Armstrong of the chickens playin Hold That Tiger... Yeah, telling that tiger not to act no fool...” (REP 187). Buster and Riley’s playful signifying obviously bears little outward resemblance to Hemingway’s hardboiled repartee (“Will you have lime juice or lemon squash,” Macomber asked. “I’ll have a gimlet,” Robert Wilson told him. “I’ll have a gimlet too. I need something,” Macomber’s wife said”), but its appearance on the back of the “Macomber” transcription suggests that Ellison was copying Hemingway and composing “That I Had the Wings” almost simultaneously. In other words, he may have been transcribing Hemingway’s prose to stimulate his writing for early installments of the “Buster-and-Riley” stories (Hemingway, “Short” 541). As Ellison later admitted, working with texts like “Macomber” put him under a distinctive sort of “spell” that enabled him to bridge the gap between such seemingly disparate fictional modes; Hemingway’s prose became, in his evocative phrasing, “like a special iris to my eyes through
It was lunch time now and they were all sitting under the double
six double greenfly of the dining tent, wondering that nothing had
happened.

"Will you have lime juice or lemon squash?" Macomber asked.
I'll have a gin and tonic," Robert Ellison told him.
"I'll have a gin and tonic too. I need something," Macomber's wife said.
"I suppose it's the thing to do," Macomber agreed. Tell him to
make three gin and tonics.

The mess boy had started them already, lifting the bottles out of
the canvas cooking bags that sweated wet in the wind that blew
through the trees that shaded the tents.

"What bed I ought to give them?" Macomber asked.
"A quid would be plenty," Ellison told him. "You don't want to spoil
them."

"Will the headman distribute it?"

"Absolutely."

Francis Macomber had, half an hour before, been carried to his tent
from the edge of the camp in triumph on the arms and shoulders of the
cook, the personal boys, the shining and the porters. The gunbearers
had taken no part in the demonstration. When the native boys put him
down at the door of his tent, he had shaken all their hands, received
their congratulations, and then gone into the tent to sit on the bed
until his wife came in.

She did not speak to him then she came in and
he left the tent at once to wash his face and hands in the portable
canvas chair in the breeze and the shade.

"You've got your lion," Robert Ellison said to him, "and a damned
fine one too."
which scenes and physical action took on a new vividness.” (qtd. in Ellison, “Flying” xvii). Transcribing Hemingway afforded Ellison a special literary way of seeing, and in the early 1940s he appears to have caught fleeting glimpses of his own narrative voice through it.

Scores of young American writers were of course attempting to appropriate Hemingway’s technical breakthroughs around this same time, but it is difficult to imagine any of them taking on the challenge with nearly as much inventiveness, direction, and rigor. In fact, what became clear for Ellison when turning to read his contemporaries—especially his African American contemporaries—after spending so much time transcribing Hemingway’s prose was that sincere, disciplined engagements with the “advanced techniques” of modern literature were being avoided altogether. Ellison’s first reviews as a staff writer for the leftist magazine *New Masses* would seek to advance this general position, reprimanding black novelists for disregarding the technical innovations of literary modernism in their faithful commitment to the political ideologies of Marx and Lenin. “Negro Fiction,” he argued over and over again in the early 1940s, had either flagrantly avoided political discourse (as with the writers of the “New Negro” renaissance who had emerged in the 1920s, Langston Hughes excepted), or devoted itself to social and racial protest without the technical proficiency necessary to universalize revolutionary political themes (as with the wave of novelists who had emerged in the 1930s, Richard Wright excepted). The most recent generation of black writers had their heads too far ahead of their fingers, so to speak, and early essays like “Richard Wright and Recent Negro Fiction” (1941) would conclude accordingly that “until there is some organized and conscious effort . . . to bring [political] theme and [literary] technique into focus, we can expect this condition to change only slowly” (12). The artistic success of Wright’s protest novel *Native Son*, in particular, underscored for Ellison that the “organized and conscious effort” in question meant working hard to incorporate the innovations of the Hemingways, Eliots, Dostoevskys, and Joyces of modern literature, despite (or perhaps because of) their supposedly “superior” racial status:

To the Negro writer [Native Son] has suggested the path which he must take to reach maturity, and it has increased his social responsibility. His is the great problem of mastering American civilization through the techniques and discipline of his art—a process which constitutes the attainment of an emotional, physiological and intellectual discipline which is usually the heritage and privilege of those who control the nation’s wealth. This is a difficult but necessary achievement if his people are to fight their battle with any sense of equality. It is no accident that the two most advanced Negro writers, [Langston] Hughes and [Richard] Wright, have been men who have enjoyed freedom of association with advanced white writers; nor is it accidental that they have had the greatest effect upon Negro life. (12)

In effect, Ellison was programmatically encouraging black writers to embark on the same rigid course of technical study that he and Wright had set forth for themselves only a few years prior.

In hindsight, on the other hand, one gets the sense that these kinds of statements were also working to sow the seeds of an ideological position that would ultimately become one of the hallmarks of Ellison’s critical thought: the idea that political and moral efficacy in literature is largely, but not exclusively, effected through the mastery and manipulation of “tradition” (in T. S. Eliot’s sense of the term), through the mastery and manipulation of “technique” (Eliot 13). Recourse to universal human values and “high art,” rather than adherence to narrow ideological programs and “sociological” agendas, represent, for Ellison, the novelist’s truest and most personal form of political engagement; yet, as he would frequently caution throughout his non-fiction, one can only achieve such lofty levels of artistic expression through study and experience. The idea owed something, once again, to Ellison’s combination of musical and literary aptitude—to his first-hand knowledge of the modernist implications of
what he would call "true jazz" (CE 267), and his formative experiences sweating over the stylistic innovations of Hemingway. "It is here," Ellison wrote in 1958,

that [the jazz musician] learns tradition, group techniques and style. For although since the twenties many jazzmen have had conservatory training and are well grounded in formal theory and instrumental technique, when we approach jazz we are entering quite a different sphere of training. Here it is more meaningful to speak not of courses of study, of grades and degrees, but of apprenticeship, ordeals, initiation ceremonies, of rebirth. For after the jazzman has learned the fundamentals of his instrument and the traditional techniques of jazz—the intonations, the mute work, manipulation of timbre, the body of traditional styles—he must then "find himself," must be reborn, must find, as it were, his soul. All this through achieving that subtle identification between his instrument and his deepest drives which will allow him to express his own unique ideas and his own unique voice. He must achieve, in short, his self-determined identity. (CE 245)

The space of the jazz jam session is, of course, Ellison's primary frame of reference here, but the passage could have just as easily been discussing—even drawing on—his transcribable practices with texts like "Macomber." "Traditional techniques," in this case, would seem to perform the function of what Kenneth Burke variously calls "ritual drama": they create a sort of democratic testing ground for artists to define themselves (and thus achieve expressive freedom and moral efficacy) both within and against an established history of discursive practice (Burke 103). Ellison would work to sharpen and extend this position throughout the late 1950s, adopting "technique" as a critical keyword and applying his musically informed (and Hemingway-informed) vision of it to the realms of literary history and literary theory. The topic receives definitive treatment in Ellison's influential 1964 essay "Hidden Name and Complex Fate":

For all his conscious concern with technique, a writer did not so much create the novel as he was created by the novel. That is, one did not make an arbitrary gesture when one sought to write. And when I say that the novelist is created by the novel, I mean to remind you that fictional techniques are not a mere set of objective tools, but something much more intimate: a way of feeling, of seeing, and of expressing one's sense of life. And the process of acquiring technique is a process of modifying one's responses, of learning to see and feel, to hear and observe, to evoke and evaluate the images of memory and of summoning up and directing the imagination, of learning to conceive of human values in the ways which have been established by the great writers who have developed and extended the art. And perhaps the writer's greatest freedom, as artist, lies precisely in his possession of technique, for it is through technique that he comes to possess and express the meaning of his life. (CE 205)

It is in no way surprising that this eloquent formulation seems to echo and expand on the comments we encountered earlier regarding the "spell" of Hemingway's prose becoming, for Ellison, "like a special iris to my eyes though which scenes and physical action took on a new vividness." The road to his intellectual position on what we might finally term here the "morality through technique," exemplified above, was rough—and it ran directly through Hemingway.

Ellison's early uses of Hemingway as a technical model of course seem to betray a massive contradiction in the large-scale theory of U. S. literary history he would attempt to advance as an essayist and critic during the late 1940s and early 1950s. Ellison had found the beginnings of his own narrative voice in Hemingway's writing, and as we have seen, his earliest review essays had earnestly campaigned in favor of the modern literary "techniques" found in The Sun Also Rises, Death in the Afternoon, and other Lost Generation texts. Over the next decade, however, Ellison's major critical statements ended up censuring the very same "Papa" Hemingway for popularizing a prose style symbolically complicit with racial violence; for promoting a
widespread culture of democratic irresponsibility; and worst of all, for lowering the standard of “moral” engagement that his nineteenth-century literary predecessors had worked so hard to build into the form of the American novel itself. “On the social level [Hemingway’s] writing performs a function similar to that of the stereotype,” Ellison wrote in 1946. “It conditions the reader to accept the less worthy values of society, and it serves to justify and absolve our sins of social irresponsibility. With unconscious irony it advises stoic acceptance of those conditions of life which it so accurately describes and which it pretends to reject” (CE 95). To make matters even more confusing, Hemingway’s own preoccupation with literary “technique” proved to be the major sticking point: “And just as the trend toward technique for the sake of technique and production for the sake of the market lead to the neglect of the human need out of which they spring, so do they lead in literature”—Hemingway’s literature—“to a marvelous technical virtuosity won at the expense of a gross insensitivity to fraternal values” (CE 91).

Exactly what caused Ellison to change his tune and arrive at such an extreme position—and exactly what rhetorical interests he could have intended such a scathing critique to serve—are matters not altogether easily explained. The shift has puzzled Ellison scholars for some time now. Lawrence P. Jackson’s excellent biographical account of Ellison’s early years as an activist literary critic, Ralph Ellison: Emergence of Genius, obliquely suggests that Ellison may have actually begun to sour on aspects of Hemingway’s work even before going to Dayton and commencing his self-prescribed course of technical study. On the evening of June 4, 1937, Ellison accompanied Richard Wright (whom he had at that point known for only a few short days) to New York City’s Carnegie Hall in order to witness Hemingway give the keynote address at the second League of American Writers’ Congress (180). One can imagine Hemingway appearing larger than life at such an event. The struggling young Ellison must have been especially thrilled to hear the opening remarks of Hemingway’s speech, which essentially reiterated the artistic doctrine that had been offered at the beginning of Death in the Afternoon five years earlier—the same artistic doctrine that had proved so inspiring at Tuskegee: “A writer’s problem does not change,” Hemingway began. “He himself changes, but his problem remains the same. It is always how to write truly and, having found what is true, to project it in such a way that it becomes a part of the experience of the person who reads it” (Hemingway, “Fascism” 193). Predictable enough. But the occasion for Hemingway’s appearance at Carnegie Hall was largely “political”; the Writers’ Congress was a highly visible public arm of the Popular Front. His speech took a jarring turn midway through, abruptly denouncing fascism as “a lie . . . condemned to literary sterility” and going on to claim—in true “socially conscious” fashion—that his old artistic philosophies had come to take on a new exigency and danger in the context of the political crises then emerging in western Europe:

I started to speak of the difficulty of trying to write well and truly, and of the inevitable reward to those who achieve it. But in a time of war—and we are now in a time of war, whether we like it or not—the rewards are all suspended. It is very dangerous to write the truth in war, and the truth is also very dangerous to come by. I do not know just which American writers have gone out to seek it . . . and when a man goes to seek the truth in war he may find death instead. But if twelve go and only two come back, the truth they bring will be the truth, and not the garbled hearsay that we pass as history. (Hemingway, “Fascism” 195)

To hard-line leftists like Ellison and Wright, the speech was a disappointment. As sympathetic to Hemingway’s general message as the two fledgling writers were, they found his ostensible commitments to “moral truth” and “social consciousness” relatively disingenuous, or at least inaccurate and unfocused. According to Jackson’s biographical work, Ellison and Wright both agreed that Hemingway’s point of view was “generally naïve,” and that he possessed “a limited understanding of the conflict”
then growing in Europe (Jackson, “Emergence” 180-81). As a political spokesman—and as a political writer—Hemingway was not to be trusted.

Although the Writer’s Congress incident would seem to embody a kind of primal scene for Ellison’s eventual (but, as we will see, somewhat temporary) disaffection from Hemingway’s work, it does little to account for the force and breadth of his critiques in the late 1940s. The shift seems to become more comprehensible if we turn our attention to the ideological bifurcations that surfaced in the critical literature on Hemingway around this same time. Ellison and Wright were by no means the only writers in the late 1930s and early 1940s who harbored serious misgivings about Hemingway’s social commitments. The publication of Hemingway’s brutally realistic To Have and Have Not in October 1937, just four months after the Writers’ Congress address, stirred up heated debates about a new Hemingway “cult of blood-consciousness and holy violence” (in the memorable words of one horrified columnist), which appeared palatable to some as social commentary but entirely unworthy of the label “high art” (DeVoto 8). By 1938, following the appearance of The Fifth Column and the First Forty-Nine Stories—which prominently featured Hemingway’s first and only attempt at agitprop theater—mainstream reviewers had essentially split over the place of politics in Hemingway’s fiction: either tending on one hand to proclaim that his new “socially conscious” aesthetic represented a final stage in his ongoing search for literary perfection, or on the other, to lament that his sudden attention to “ideology” had compromised the dispassionate mode of modernist expression that had rewritten the rules of narrative art in the first place (Stephens xxi-xxii). In order to come to terms with the intellectual forces that governed and shaped (and perhaps even necessitated) Ellison’s almost exaggeratedly contrary stance on Hemingway in the late 1940s and early 1950s, it is necessary to sketch the contours of this debate and the major players involved.

Edmund Wilson’s reviews of Hemingway during this decisive transitional period provide a representative example of the first position, which both touted and defended Hemingway’s role in what Michael Denning has termed “social modernism” (60). In “Ernest Hemingway: Gauge of Morale” (1939), Wilson argues that works like To Have and Have Not and The Fifth Column—into which Hemingway had seemingly introduced “the blast of the social issue ... roaring in the wind like a forest fire”—represent the culmination of a longstanding personal struggle with the social and moral complexities of the modern age (306). “Going back to Hemingway’s books today,” Wilson claims, “we can see clearly what an error of the politicos it was to accuse him of an indifference to society. His whole work was a criticism of society: he has responded to every pressure of the moral atmosphere of the time, as it is felt at the roots of human relations, with a sensitiveness almost unrivaled” (312). One year later Wilson marked the occasion of Hemingway’s classic For Whom the Bell Tolls (1940) with an essay written for The New Republic transparently titled “The Return of Ernest Hemingway”—the idea was to suggest that social and moral engagement had given Hemingway’s fiction new life. Several other prominent commentators assented. Howard Mumford Jones declared in the Saturday Review of Literature that the self-consciously indifferent “little Hemingway” of The Sun Also Rises, Death in the Afternoon, and Green Hills of Africa had all but disappeared from the pages of For Whom The Bell Tolls: “in his place is the sorrowful majesty of a cause in which [Hemingway] believed and which did not triumph, at least superficially ... it is the cause of Humanity itself—that vague and splendid cause in which the nineteenth-century liberal believed with a faith that we have almost lost, and which inspired some of the best pages of Victor Hugo and Charles Dickens and Dostoevsky and Tolstoy” (5). A reviewer for the widely circulated Book-of-the-Month Club News similarly compared Hemingway’s unsparing portrayals of the horrors of warfare to those of the celebrated Spanish painter Goya (Canby 2). Later on, the longtime Hemingway critic Malcolm Cowley would not only admire Robert Jordan of
For Whom the Bell Tolls as “the first of Hemingway’s heroes with a social purpose,” but insist as well, in his influential introduction to the first printing of The Viking Portable Hemingway (1944), that Hemingway’s most recent works had secured his place in a tradition of American writing alongside such venerable nineteenth-century novelists as Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Edgar Allan Poe (Cowley, “Notes” 8; Hemingway, Viking vii-xxiv).

Lionel Trilling’s work in the late 1930s—particularly his seminal Partisan Review essay “Hemingway and His Critics” (1939)—is representative of the opposing viewpoint, which held that Hemingway’s “political turn” had ultimately proved ruinous to his fictional craft. With a virtuosity that seems to presage his rise to prominence in the 1940s and 1950s, Trilling argues that unsubstantiated charges of anti-intellectualism and social apathy from the American intellectual left had pressured Hemingway to over-politicize his writing. “Upon Hemingway were turned all the fine social feelings of the now passing decade,” Trilling acerbically complains, “all the noble sentiments, all the desperate optimism, all the extreme rationalism, all the contempt of irony and indirection—all the attitudes which, in the full tide of the liberal-radical movement, became dominant in our thought about literature. There was demanded of him earnestness and pity, social consciousness, as it was called, something ‘positive’ and ‘constructive’ and literal” (62). In Trilling’s opinion, Hemingway had paid unfortunate attention to these kinds of demands, and the resulting literary product was disastrous: “One looks at To Have and Have Not and The Fifth Column, one looks at their brag, and their disconcerting forcing of the emotions, at their downright priggishness, and then one looks at the criticism which, as I conceive it, made these failures possible by demanding them and which now accepts them so gladly, and one is tempted to reverse the whole liberal-radical assumption about literature” (64). For Hemingway’s fiction to return to true form, to return to its former capacity “to get rid of the ‘feelings,’ the comfortable liberal humanitarian feelings: and to replace them with the truth,” the customary expectations of the left had to be abandoned altogether:

We can learn to stop pressing the writer with the demand for contemporaneity when we remember the simple fact that writers have always written to and about the troubles of their own time and for and about their contemporaries, some in ways to us more obvious than others but all responding inevitably to what was happening around them. We can learn too that the relation of an artist to his culture, whether that culture be national or the culture of a relatively small recusant group, is a complex and even a contradictory relation: the artist must accept his culture and be accepted by it, but also—so it seems—he must be its critic, correcting and even rejecting it according to his personal insight; his strength seems to come from the tension of this ambivalent situation and we must learn to welcome the ambivalence. Finally, and simplest of all, we learn not to expect a political, certainly not an immediately political, effect from a work of art; and in removing from art a burden of messianic responsibility which it never has discharged and cannot discharge we may leave it free to do whatever it actually can do. (65,70; italics added)

I have italicized Trilling’s final sentence here to underscore what we should by now recognize quite easily (though anachronistically) as its Ellisonian overtones. The program of artistic freedom that Trilling espouses in “Hemingway and His Critics” hauntingly seems to anticipate the Ellison of “The World and the Jug” (1963) and “Hidden Name and Complex Fate” (1964), the “anti-ideological” anti-sociological” Ellison we encountered in piecemeal earlier on. I will return to this important connection briefly in closing.

What has not yet been adequately recognized amid all of this is the extent to which Ellison’s most notorious critiques of Hemingway were both conceived and intended, at least in part, as a corrective intervention in the conversation then ongoing among Wilson, Cowley, Trilling, and others. Ellison had been keeping up, almost compulsively, with the Hemingway debates during the late 1930s and early 1940s: he literally read the reviews of Wilson and Cowley as they arrived on the New York City
newsstands—stashing them away, along with an impressive assortment of other Hemingway commentaries from The New Republic, The Saturday Review of Literature, and The New York Times Book Review (among a host of others), for later reference (REP 187). We can safely assume as well that he possessed a relative familiarity with Trilling’s argument in Partisan Review given the cultural circles he found himself in during the mid-1940s. In fact Ellison began making notes for an extended formal response to the “political turn” controversy as early as 1941. He initially sought to argue, in implicit agreement with the Wilson camp (and in keeping with the review essays he was steadily producing for New Masses around the same time), that Hemingway remained important to the left for the same reason that Richard Wright remained important to the new generation of African American novelists: he had successfully incorporated ideas into art through the cultivation and mastery of modern literary technique (Jackson, “Emergence” 260). Yet the essay project was ultimately put on hold, and left untouched for the better part of the next five years. This compositional lag seems to represent the crucial turning point in the story; in it, Ellison gradually came to realize that the Hemingway debate had more far-reaching implications, and that he had to change his position as a result. Taking a stand on Hemingway’s politics necessarily involved asking a larger, more intractable set of questions about the place and character of “moral” discourse in the American novel—a set of questions that had been largely avoided by the leftist critical mainstream, and a set of questions that Ellison, at least as an up-and-coming literary critic in 1941, may not yet have had the daring to answer. How had American literatures of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries balanced narrative expression with social engagement? In what ways had canonical American writers attempted to respond artistically, as all morally responsible writers would, to the fundamental problems and contradictions of democratic life that no doubt existed around them? More specifically—and much closer to home—in what ways had canonical American writers attempted to respond artistically to the fundamental problems and contradictions of the “color line,” as W. E. B. Du Bois had termed it (3)? Wilson, Cowley, Trilling, and others were bandying about phrases like “political commitment,” “social consciousness,” and “moral sense” with little concrete reference to the real world, with startlingly few gestures towards the material conditions and issues that Hemingway may or may not have actually intended to reflect, effect, or transform. How would our readings of Hemingway and his American literary equals change if “political commitment,” “social consciousness,” and “moral sense” referred directly to the ongoing problem of U.S. race relations? How, ultimately, had the “techniques” of American literature fared not only in attempting to represent African American humanity, but also in attempting, on a larger level, to resolve the increasingly pressing “dilemma arising between [America’s] democratic beliefs and certain antidemocratic practices, between [its] sacred democratic belief that all men are created equal and [its] treatment of every tenth man as though he were not” (CE 85)?

It should be evident that I am suggesting here that Ellison partially conceived of the landmark essay that eventually evolved out of this line of inquiry—“Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity” (1946)—as an attempt at grounding the Hemingway debates, and even the entire work of American literary criticism itself, in the material realities of race and racism. Ellison’s “Black Mask of Humanity,” as Wilson Harris has called it, thus cohered first and foremost as a historiographical intervention, as a rhetorical rejoinder targeted at a certain constellation of critics and critical presuppositions at a certain time (159). Whether politics provided the element long missing from Hemingway’s fiction; whether evidence of increasing social and moral awareness signaled the beginnings of an irrevocable rupture in Hemingway’s artistic sanctity—these concerns gradually became, for Ellison, beside the point, and were perhaps even indicative of a liberal literary critical praxis that possessed little to no capacity for identifying the
“real” social issues at hand. When Ellison considered the negligible extent of Hemingway’s narrative engagement with the “black mask” shrouding the face of American democracy—and when he weighed it against the often admirable degree to which many of his nineteenth-century literary predecessors attempted to handle the very same predicament—it became readily apparent that Hemingway hadn’t really made a genuine “political turn” in the first place.

This revelation clearly finds its way into the structure and tone of “Black Mask of Humanity.” Wilson had argued that the thrust of Hemingway’s oeuvre insinuated a sweeping “criticism of society.” Ellison counters by maintaining that it effectively sanctions the racial status quo: “Artists such as Hemingway were seeking a technical perfection rather than moral insight. (Or should we say that theirs was a morality of technique?) They desired a style stripped of inessentials, one that would appeal without resorting to what was considered worn-out rhetoric, or best of all without any rhetoric whatsoever. . . . Instead of re-creating and extending the national myth as he did this, the writer now restricted himself to elaborating his personal myth. . . . And while art was still an instrument of freedom, it was now mainly the instrument of a questionable personal freedom for the artist, which too often served to enforce the ‘unfreedom’ of the reader” (CE 93-94). Cowley, as well, had sought to establish Hemingway’s thematic kinship to nineteenth-century American writers (his argument is in fact cited directly in the text of the essay). Yet Ellison contends—with reference to Mark Twain as a literary precedent—that Hemingway had chosen to disregard the social responsibilities and necessities structurally intrinsic to the nineteenth-century American novel, and had done so chiefly in the service of artistic self-cultivation: “Hemingway’s blindness to the moral values of Huckleberry Finn despite his sensitivity to its technical aspects duplicated the one-sided vision of the twenties. Where Twain, seeking for what Melville called ‘the common continent of man,’ drew upon the rich folklore of the frontier (not omitting the Negro’s) in order to ‘Americanize’ his idiom, thus broadening his stylistic appeal, Hemingway was alert only to Twain’s technical discoveries—the flexible colloquial language, the sharp naturalism, the thematic potentialities of adolescence. Thus what for Twain was a means to a moral end became for Hemingway an end in itself” (CE 91). Trilling had claimed that the best of Hemingway’s stories possessed the uncanny ability “to get rid of the ‘feelings’ . . . and get at the truth,” Ellison brusquely pronounces them guilty of “intellectual evasion” (CE 92).

One immediately notices that these rhetorical shots at the Hemingway historiography (sometimes explicit, sometimes oblique) also turn on a far more nuanced understanding of “technique” than Ellison had demonstrated in the wake of his transcription exercises during the early 1940s, both in his New Masses essays and in the notes for his discarded first draft of the piece. Reading Hemingway within and against the history of the “the Negro” in the American literary imagination revealed the fundamental difference between technique for technique’s sake and technique for the sake of affirming universal human values: the difference between the “morality of technique” and the “morality through technique”—a subtle distinction that would figure significantly in Ellison’s later writings, as we have already seen. Whereas nineteenth-century writers like Twain had mined the latter and put “technique . . . to the task of creating value,” Hemingway had, almost narcissistically, perfected his “understated” literary style while refusing to confront both the politics of the color line and the full humanity of African American life (CE 98). “By the twentieth century,” Ellison writes, primarily with Hemingway in mind, “[t]he attitude of tragic responsibility had disappeared from our literature along with that broad conception of democracy which vitalized the work of our greatest writers. After Twain’s compelling image of black and white fraternity the Negro generally disappears from fiction as a rounded human being. . . . [B]y our day his great drama of interracial fraternity had become, for most Americans at least, an amusing boy’s
story and nothing more” (CE 89). “Modern technique,” then, in itself, could no longer serve as a panacea for the problem of universalizing narrative expression. Hemingway, in particular, provided an instance in which an investment in stylistic authenticity and technical mastery had actually coincided with (and even fostered) an indifference to “antidemocratic practice,” an ignorance of “institutionalized dehumanization,” a willful blindness to color (CE 85). In other words, both “morality” and “technique” are equally essential ingredients in the creation of the modern novel—as Ellison's closing lines in “Black Mask of Humanity” state: “While it is unlikely that American writing will ever retrace the way to the nineteenth century, it might be worthwhile to point out that for all its technical experimentation it [the American novel] is nevertheless an ethical instrument, and as such might well exercise some choice in the kind of ethic it prefers to support. The artist is no freer than the society in which he lives, and in the United States the writers who stereotype or ignore the Negro and other minorities in the final analysis stereotype and distort their own humanity” (CE 99). Hemingway’s irresponsibilities to the world of difference outside of his own artistic consciousness provided an almost ideal case in point for such a hypothesis.

When “Black Mask of Humanity” finally appeared in the pages of Confluence in December 1953 (an ugly publication dispute had left the 1946 version unprinted), Ellison added a deliberately vague prefatory note to the text of the original essay, purporting to temper some of its harshest formulations:

When I started rewriting this essay it occurred to me that its value might be somewhat increased if it remained very much as I wrote it during 1946. For in that form it is what a young member of a minority felt about much of our writing. Thus I’ve left in much of the bias and shortsightedness, for it says perhaps as much about me as a member of a minority as it does about literature. I hope you still find the essay useful, and I’d like to see an editorial note stating that this is an unpublished piece written not long after the Second World War. (CE 81)

Ellison could have only intended the phrase “bias and shortsightedness” to refer to his treatment of Hemingway—no other novelist in the essay’s cast of characters receives anything close to a controversial or unforgiving reading, and no other aspect of the essay’s line of reasoning would be revised as extensively in later writings. The inclusion of the disclaimer seems to suggest that in 1953 (after the celebrated publication of Invisible Man, notably) Ellison perceived the Hemingway of “Black Mask of Humanity” to represent more bark than bite: more the product of an exaggerated rhetorical performance than a reflection of a mature critical reality, more the trace of a past phase of intellectual development than an indication of his current sensibility. The estimation was only partially accurate. There is certainly a way in which the situation in 1946, “not long after the Second World War,” had called for aggressively inflated rhetoric. Indeed, in order to make his point about the place of race in American writing—and in order to make it to a U. S. literary mainstream that had been blind to its ramifications for so long—Ellison had to renounce his allegiances to Hemingway’s work, and he had to do so in no uncertain terms. But the attempt to write off the logic of “Black Mask of Humanity” as a product of youthful naiveté (“for in that form it is what a young member of a minority felt about much of our writing”) should be regarded as slightly misleading, even self-contradictory. The essay’s general thesis actually proved to have a long and complicated career in Ellison’s critical output after 1953. He had even made an indirect attack on Hemingway in his acceptance speech for the National Book Award earlier that same year, claiming that the conventional forms and fashions of modern literature—in particular, the “hard-boiled novel” and its characteristic uses of narrative “understatement”—were largely inadequate for apprehending what he had experienced.
to be the “extreme fluidity and openness” of “American life” (CE 151-52).
As Ellison asserted, with no small range of allusion to his own biography: “To attempt to express that American experience which has carried one back and forth and up and down the land and across, and across again the great river, from freight train to Pullman car, from contact with slavery to contact with a world of advanced scholarship, art and science, is simply to burst such neatly understated forms of the novel asunder” (CE 152). As such,

A novel whose range was both broader and deeper was needed. And in my search I found myself turning to our classical nineteenth-century novelists. I felt that except for the work of William Faulkner something vital had gone out of American prose after Mark Twain. I came to believe that the writers of that period took a much greater responsibility for the condition of democracy and, indeed, their works were imaginative projections of the conflicts within the human heart which arose when the sacred principles of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights clashed with the practical exigencies of human greed and hate and love. . . . These writers were willing to confront the broad complexities of American life, and we are the richer for their having done so. (CE 152-53)

One can detect the degree to which traces of the basic “Black Mask of Humanity” thesis both haunt and frame these words. Clearly, Ellison hadn’t quite let the issue go.

“Society, Morality, and the Novel” (1957)—the second of the three major evaluations of U. S. literary history that Ellison would produce, each roughly a decade apart, over a twenty-year span—seemingly found more lasting success in exorcising the Hemingway problem. Here, Ellison sets in motion his customary narrative of a post-nineteenth-century American literary fall from grace, but with a crucial difference: the democratic “irresponsibilities” that attend the new twentieth-century aesthetic no longer stem from Hemingway’s technical preoccupations, but from an unnamed group of American critics and imitators who had, for all of three generations, grossly misinterpreted and misappropriated their significance. Ellison ultimately submits—in a way, invoking Trilling’s 1939 argument from Partisan Review—that Hemingway’s refusal to traffic in “morality” actually represents his most “moral” literary statement of all:

By the twenties . . . the novel, which in the hands of our greatest writers had been a superb moral instrument, became morally diffident, and much of its energy was turned upon itself in the form of technical experimentation. Which is not to deny that a writer like Hemingway has profound moral seriousness, or to imply that technique is ever void of moral implications; rather it is to say that here the personal despair which gave the technique its resonance became a means of helping other Americans to avoid those aspects of reality which they no longer had the will to face. This is the tragedy implicit in Hemingway’s morality of craftsmanship: the attempt to make a highly personal morality the informing motive of an art form which by its very nature is extremely social and, despite its pose, deeply rooted in the assumption it denied. As I read Hemingway today I find that he affirms the old American values by the eloquence of his denial, makes his moral point by stating explicitly that he does not believe in morality, achieves his eloquence through denying eloquence, and is most moral when he denies the validity of a national morality which the nation has not bothered to live up to since the Civil War. . . . [T]he ideas which were said to be absent were most present and powerful. (CE 712-13)

It is difficult to speculate about what might have motivated Ellison to alter his assessment to such an extent. Perhaps, in preparation for writing the essay, he had recently reread some of the review articles that he had saved so diligently years before. Perhaps he had returned to his old transcription routine in order to solve some of the organizational problems that had already begun to surface in his new novel-in-progress. The latter is somewhat more likely. Traces of Hemingway’s prose in fact appear throughout sections of Ellison’s late fiction; he may have actually continued his Hemingway transcriptions well after Invisible Man, or at least kept his early engagements as a close reader in the back of his mind. Consider, for instance,
the opening paragraph of "Cadillac Flambé" (1973), which bears a playful resemblance to the "Remembering Shooting-Flying" original that Ellison had marked up over three decades prior:

It had been a fine spring day made even pleasanter by the lingering of the cherry blossoms and I had gone out before dawn with some married friends and their children on a bird-watching expedition. Afterwards we had sharpened our appetites for brunch with rounds of bloody marys and bullshots. And after the beef bouillon ran out, our host, an ingenious man, had improvised a drink from chicken broth and vodka which he proclaimed the 'chicken-shot.' This was all very pleasant and after a few drinks my spirits were soaring. I was pleased with my friends, the brunch was excellent and varied—chui con cane, cornbread, and oysters Rockefeller, etc.—and I was pleased with my tally of birds. I had seen a bluebird, five red-breasted grosbeaks, three painted buntings, seven goldfinches, and a rousing consort of mockingbirds. In fact, I had hated to leave. (251)

Speculations aside, one finds in "Society, Morality, and the Novel" a less distrustful, but possibly also more opportunistic, Ellison. By 1957, at the latest, he had a certain personal stake in preserving Hemingway's image. Pointing a finger at the chronic misreadings of twentieth-century critics and imitators (as Trilling had done almost twenty years beforehand) enabled him to align the "moral seriousness" of his own work with that of "Papa's"—a gesture that seems only fitting for a critic who had recently written an acclaimed novel that drew openly and comprehensively on what Robert G. O'Meally has shown to be "Hemingway-like forms and ideas" ("Rules" 246). By 1964, moreover, Ellison would go so far as to reclaim Hemingway as his "true father-as-artist," primarily in response to accusations that Invisible Man had shirked the "protest" responsibilities supposedly central to the modern African American literary tradition that Richard Wright's Native Son had worked to establish. "Consult the text!" Ellison pleads, certainly not lost on the irony that the indictment against him resembled his own charge against Hemingway in "Black Mask of Humanity." "I sought out Wright because I had read Eliot, Pound, Gertrude Stein and Hemingway, and as early as 1940 Wright viewed me as a potential rival. . . . But perhaps you will understand when I say he [Wright] did not influence me if I point out that while one can do nothing about choosing one's relatives, one can, as artist, choose one's 'ancestors.' Wright was, in this sense, a 'relative,' Hemingway an 'ancestor' " (CE 185). The general point here concerns the ways in which artistic influence and literary imagination are chosen rather than given, limitlessly fluid and colorblind rather than narrowly fixed and color-determined. Yet in the context of Ellison's complicated journey from "Remembering Shooting-Flying" to "Macomber" to "Black Mask of Humanity" to "Society, Morality, and the Novel," I am inclined to underscore the less stable, even psychoanalytic, resonances of his oft-cited recourse to the term "ancestor" here: the trajectory of his intellectual development ultimately bears witness to a Hemingway that haunts as much as he guides. When Ellison looked at Hemingway he saw, depending on his own artistic and ideological interests at the time, both self and other. That his angle of vision shifted so often demonstrates the extent to which "influences" in U. S. literature may have more complicated material histories than we have conventionally recognized—histories that exist, perhaps, at the volatile edges between race and writing.

Notes

1. Several of the Esquire essays in question have recently been collected and republished in Seán Hemingway's edited collection Hemingway on Hunting.
2. See also Graham 102, 292. All subsequent citations of The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison will appear parenthetically as CE.

4. Ellison remembered in a 1984 letter that he “walked a mile or so from the Negro section into downtown Dayton” daily in order to pick up The New York Times and “read Hemingway’s dispatches from the Spanish Civil War which [he] studied for style as well as information”; see Callahan’s introduction (Ellison, Flying xviii-xix). Ellison apparently searched for political and fashion periodicals (Daily Worker, New Masses, Esquire, and others) on these trips as well; see Jackson, “Emergence” 192.

5. O’Meally’s excellent and oft-reprinted “The Rules of Magic: Hemingway as Ellison’s ‘Ancestor’ ” still represents the best account of Hemingway’s presence in Invisible Man. I owe a great debt to it here, since it inspired me to seek out more information on the motivations behind Ellison’s shifting uses and critiques of Hemingway’s work.

6. For examinations of Ellison’s nonsystematic (even “pragmatic”) thinking see Posnock, Watts, and Warren.

7. Bloom’s classic The Anxiety of Influence remains, almost thirty-five years after its original publication in 1973, the standard account of “influence” in literary studies. Ellison frequently used the word “ancestry” to describe what Bloom would call “influence”; as mentioned previously, Robert O’Meally’s “The Rules of Magic” outlines its implications for intertextual readings of Invisible Man. As I see it, one of the overarching goals of this project is to show how we can begin to complicate this type of terminology by examining writers in their immediate intellectual and historical contexts.

8. Thanks go to Werner Sollors here—not only for informing me of Wright’s work with Hemingway during the late 1930s, but also for locating this citation with near-superhuman speed. Wright also studied Hemingway’s short stories in preparation for his work on Native Son; see Fabre 176.

9. Whether Ellison intended to save his transcription of “Macomber” for later use is doubtful. The final manuscript seems to have been stashed haphazardly among his personal Hemingway effects, and virtually no record of his other transcription projects appears to exist.

10. As Ellison asserts elsewhere, “I recognize no American culture which is not the partial creation of black people. I recognize no American style in literature, in dance, in music, even in assembly-line processes, which does not bear the mark of the American Negro”; see Graham 174. For accounts of Ellison’s deconstructions of the boundaries between the so-called “literary” and the so-called “vernacular,” see, among many others, Gates, Kent, and O’Meally’s The Craft of Ralph Ellison.

11. As I see it, one of the overarching goals of this project is to show how we can begin to complicate this type of terminology by examining writers in their immediate intellectual and historical contexts. Ellison’s vision of American culture owes as much to Burke as it does to Hemingway; see, among others, Pease.

12. Burke’s writings influenced Ellison immensely, and the two would eventually become friends and regular correspondents. Ellison’s vision of American culture owes as much to Burke as it does to Hemingway; see, among others, Pease.

13. See also Ellison, “Flying Home” 53. The dialog in the final draft of “That I Had the Wings” differs slightly from what is found on the back of the “Macomber” transcription.

14. As Ellison asserts elsewhere, “I recognize no American culture which is not the partial creation of black people. I recognize no American style in literature, in dance, in music, even in assembly-line processes, which does not bear the mark of the American Negro”; see Graham 174. For accounts of Ellison’s deconstructions of the boundaries between the so-called “literary” and the so-called “vernacular,” see, among many others, Gates, Kent, and O’Meally’s The Craft of Ralph Ellison.

15. See Busby 77; Watts 33; Warren 22.

16. Jones, an established professor at Harvard, sat on the five-person committee that gave Ellison the prestigious National Book Award in 1953. Ironically, he was the only member who did not cast his ballot for Invisible Man—which, instead, for Hemingway’s The Old Man and the Sea. See Rampersad 269.

17. Ellison clearly saved the Wilson and Cowley pieces for personal use, probably digging them out of his home archive every few years in order to brainstorm for critical essays. A partial list of other articles contained in the “HEMINGWAY” file includes Malcom Cowley’s “Hemingway: Work in Progress” and “Hemingway at Midnight”; Elliot Paul’s “Hemingway and the Critics”; Granville Hicks’s “Twenty Years of Hemingway”; and Hemingway’s own “Notes from a Novelist on His System of Work.” Later on, Ellison saved clippings from Time, Look, Life, Playboy, and Saturday Review to remember events like Hemingway’s African plane crashes, and his eventual tragic suicide. The “HEMINGWAY” file also contains a copy of the Life issue (1 Sept. 1952) in which The Old Man and the Sea first appeared in its entirety—the address sticker on the back of the magazine reads “Ralph Ellison / 749 St. Nicholas / New York 31 NY.”


19. I have relied on Jackson’s brief account of the essay here because it remains under restricted access in the Ellison papers.
20. Harris's brief and relatively experimental piece remains the only direct treatment of "Black Mask of Humanity" in existence. The essay has received curiously scant attention from American and African American literature scholars—this, despite its luminosity in Ellison's corpus, and despite its unquestionable influence (again, completely unexamined) on Toni Morrison's seminal *Playing in the Dark* and the "whiteness studies" movement in U. S. literary and cultural studies.

21. Jackson notes that "Ellison sought [in 'Black Mask of Humanity'] to emphasize the unity of American experience. But his sensitivity toward *Confluence's* readers, his new caution, his desire to write truthfully of the near-rancor he had experienced from America's most esteemed writers handling the Negro, and yet his passionate hope to escape the fate of the ranting ideologue, afforded him a very small margin for operation. Nor is it clear for what sort of 'bias' and 'shortsightedness' Ellison wanted readers to forgive him" ("Politics of Integration" 185). I find myself in disagreement with Jackson here. Ellison clearly wanted to be "forgiven" for his analysis of Hemingway's work. For one, a cursory glance at the frequent reappearances of the general "Black Mask of Humanity" thesis in Ellison's nonfiction after 1953—in “Society, Morality, and the Novel" (1957) and "The Novel as a Function of American Democracy" (1967), for instance—reveals that his favorable readings of Twain and Faulkner, the essay's two other protagonist subjects, actually changed very little over time. The assessment of Hemingway was in fact the only portion of "Black Mask of Humanity" that Ellison would ever end up working to correct.

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