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Stephen RACHMAN

ELLISON AND DOSTOEVSKY: A CRITICAL REASSESSMENT OF THE  
AESTHETICS AND POLITICS\*

**Abstract:** After an overview of the well-known aspects of Ralph Ellison's interest in and connections to the works and literary ideas of the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky, this paper reveals the hitherto unknown depths of Ellison's research into and usage of the works and aesthetic theories of the Russian writer as he applied them to American and African American literary and social contexts. Making use of archival materials (including Ellison's correspondence, draft of his unfinished novel *Three Days Before the Shooting...*, highlighting and marginalia in the books from his personal library, which includes numerous works by and about Dostoevsky), this reassessment addresses the role of the Russian classics, and in particular, of Dostoevsky, in Ellison's intellectual formation, the role that Dostoevsky played in Ellison's literary relationship with Richard Wright; the ways that Ellison's interests in the blues, jazz and other folk and vernacular forms of African American culture were filtered through his analysis of nineteenth-century Russian culture; and the Dostoevskyan origins of a number of fictional scenarios that would find their way into *Three Days before the Shooting* .... The essay concludes with a discussion of the correspondence between Ellison and Joseph Frank, Dostoevsky's biographer.

**Keywords:** Ralph Ellison, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Literary Pluralism, *Invisible Man*, *Three Days Before the Shooting...*, Richard Wright, Joseph Frank, Jazz, Charlie Parker.

**Information about the author:** Stephen Rachman, PhD, Associate Professor, Director of the American Studies Program and Co-Director of the Digital Humanities and Literary Cognition Laboratory, Michigan State University, 426 Auditorium Road, East Lansing, MI 48824, Michigan, USA. ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1579-4723>. E-mail: [rachman@msu.edu](mailto:rachman@msu.edu).

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Стивен РЭКМАН

РАЛЬФ ЭЛЛИСОН И Ф.М. ДОСТОЕВСКИЙ: КРИТИЧЕСКОЕ  
ПЕРЕОСМЫСЛЕНИЕ ЭСТЕТИКИ И ПОЛИТИКИ\*

**Аннотация:** Интерес Ральфа Эллисона к творчеству и идеям русского классика Ф.М. Достоевского, влияние Достоевского на американского прозаика — хорошо известный факт, и изначальной целью статьи было собрать воедино и дать проблемный аналитический обзор материалов по теме. Однако в ходе работы открылись до сих пор не исследованные глубинные аспекты знакомства Эллисона с сочинениями русского писателя, его мировидением и эстетическими взглядами, которые Эллисон стремился осмыслить и интерпретировать применительно к американскому и афроамериканскому социальному и литературному контексту. Обращение к архивным документам (в том числе переписке, писательским черновикам, пометам и записям на полях книжных изданий из личной библиотеки Эллисона, которая включает многочисленные книги Достоевского и о Достоевском) позволило конкретизировать, расширить и переоценить значение русской классической литературы, и в особенности Достоевского, в становлении Эллисона как писателя и интеллектуала, роль Достоевского в истории дружеских и литературных отношений Эллисона с Ричардом Райтом, показать как интересы Эллисона, связанные с блюзом, джазом и другими фольклорными формами афроамериканской культуры, осмыслились им в тесной связи с его занятиями русской культурой XIX в., а также проанализировать истоки ряда сюжетов, вошедших в неоконченный роман «За три дня до расстрела...» и восходящих к Достоевскому. В завершение статьи рассматривается переписка Эллисона и Джозефа Фрэнка, крупного американского исследователя и биографа Ф.М. Достоевского.

**Ключевые слова:** Ральф Эллисон, «Невидимка», «За три дня до расстрела...», Ф.М. Достоевский, литературный плюрализм, Ричард Райт, Джозеф Фрэнк, джаз, Чарли Паркер.

**Сведения об авторе:** Стивен Рэкман, PhD, ассоциированный профессор, директор программы американских исследований, директор Лаборатории цифровой гуманитаристики и когнитивного литературоведения, Мичиганский государственный университет, 426 Auditorium Road, 48824 г. Ист-Лэнсинг, штат Мичиган, США. ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1579-4723>. E-mail: [rachman@msu.edu](mailto:rachman@msu.edu).

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## Introduction

To the best of my knowledge, Ralph Ellison first encountered the works of Fyodor Dostoyevsky in the winter quarter of 1936 at the Tuskegee Institute, when he took a course in English from Morteza Drexel Sprague.<sup>1</sup> The novel was *Crime and Punishment* and it reportedly made a deep impression on him, though not as deep at the time as, perhaps, Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*. But whereas the Hardy novel struck Ellison with visceral force in that moment, Dostoevsky would penetrate deeply into Ellison's creative and critical activity. It would be Dostoevsky that Ellison, in "The World and the Jug", would choose as one of his literary "ancestors" (185) — the only nineteenth-century author he would claim; it would be the Russian novelist's works that would provide the literary templates, the cultural, aesthetic and theoretical tools that he would return to time and again as he sought to apply Dostoevskyan literary models to questions of race, nationality and culture in American contexts.<sup>2</sup>

In the extant literary criticism, while Dostoevsky's influence on Ralph Ellison has become commonplace, discussions very rarely involve specificity or substantial detail. This essay provides a critical reassessment of the complex and multi-faceted question of "Ellison and Dostoevsky" in light of the wealth of posthumous materials left behind by Ellison (including *Three Days Before the Shooting...* (2010)) and in light of insufficiently-consulted archival materials, such as the Library of Congress catalogue of Ellison's personal library (which includes numerous works not only by Dostoevsky but also about him). The results of that reassessment are striking in three particular ways that are addressed here: first, the role of the Russian classics, and in particular, of Dostoevsky, in Ellison's intellectual formation and political/aesthetic credos are much deeper and more sustained than has been previously known, such that it requires a reevaluation of the scope and nature of the pluralistic literary traditions to which he was committed; and second, in light of the intensity of Ellison's investment in Dostoevsky, the role that the Russian writer played in Ellison's literary relationship with Richard Wright, who also had a literary stake in Dostoevsky, indicate that Ellison's interests in the blues, jazz, and other folk and vernacular forms of African-American culture were filtered through his analysis of nineteenth-century Russian culture. Thirdly, a survey of his marginalia left behind in his personal library reveals the origins of a number of fictional scenarios that would find their way into

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<sup>1</sup> Arnold Rampersad, *Ralph Ellison: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 76.

<sup>2</sup> Ralph Ellison, "The World and the Jug", in John F. Callahan, ed., *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison* (New York: The Modern Library, 1995), 185.

*Three Days Before the Shooting*.... In addition, materials that did not make it into the final drafts of the unfinished magnum opus derive directly from in his intense studies of Dostoevsky.

Ellison's 1936 encounter with *Crime and Punishment* would be the beginning of a life-long study, an aesthetic, political and cultural preoccupation with Russian literature. As Kenneth Warren has noted, Ellison has been viewed through opposing guises — as transracial social theorist and “a race man”, as seemingly sympathetic to Black Nationalism and opposed to it, as a high literary theorist and vernacular folk artist — and a great deal of criticism has striven to understand the multi-faceted and at times contradictory potentials of his work in terms of the vicissitudes of American democracy and racial politics.<sup>3</sup> What remains more obscure is the degree to which Ellison's racial-political-literary positions are connected with his investment in Dostoevsky as much more than a white, European, canonical authority, but rather as an aesthetic model and a model of how literature might catalyze ideological and social change. As Ellison deepened his study of Dostoevsky through the crucial germinative years of his literary apprenticeship, the Russian novelist would become a touchstone in Ellison's literary conversations with crucial figures in his development, notably Richard Wright and Kenneth Burke. This literary connection would have a crucial impact on *Invisible Man* (1952) but even more deeply on Ellison's long and elusive career in the wake of his landmark novel. Through his study, teaching, critical commentary, and the long works-in-progress that would posthumously appear as *Juneteenth* (1999) and *Three Days Before the Shooting ...* (2010), Ellison never stopped turning to Dostoevsky as both a roadmap and a test of his literary and cultural ideas.

Most of the literature touching upon this Russo-African American literary nexus deals with the development of *Invisible Man*, and rightly so. Dostoevsky enters the “standard” list of Ellison's literary “relatives” and “ancestors” together with Hemingway, Malraux, Joyce, Eliot, Melville, Wright, Henry James — and one comes across this list in almost every critical study on Ellison. The seminal studies that pay special attention to the connection for the most part concentrate on obvious or suggested parallels in ideas, imagery, characters, clear or vague reminiscences and allusions. These include: R. Bone's *The Negro Novel in America* (1958), William Goede's “On Lower Frequencies: The Buried Man in Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison” (*MFS*, winter 1969–1970), Earl A. Cash's “The Narrators in *Invisible Man* and *Notes from the Underground*: Brothers in Spirit” (*CLAJ*, June 1973) and, Joseph Frank's “Ralph Ellison and a Literary ‘Ancestor’: Dostoevsky” (1987). A set of canonical citations from a handful of Ellison's non-fictional texts — interviews, essays (“The World and the

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<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Warren, *So Black and Blue: Ralph Ellison and the Occasion of Criticism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 18–20.

Jug”, “The Art of Fiction”, “The Black Mask of Humanity”) and reviews in which he refers to Dostoevsky — tend to comprise the basis for these parallels. Furthermore, in the studies devoted to Ellison-Wright and Ellison-Sartre/Camus connections, a Dostoevskyan context has also been established — for example, in Esther M. Jackson’s “The American Negro and the Image of the Absurd” (*Phylon*, winter 1962).

### **I. “After Dostoyevsky you don’t need Kafka”: Literary Ancestry, Alienation, and Literary Pluralism**

The parallels between Dostoevsky’s underground man and Ellison’s invisible man have been striking and apparent to readers and critics alike since the novel’s first publication. Wright Morris, writing for the *New York Times Book Review* in 1952, admired the protagonist’s basement hole with its precisely astonishing 1,369 bare, burning filament light bulbs with power filched from the “Monopolated Light & Power” company’s grid. “A fine Dostoevskyan touch”, Morris observed, adding that, “In his *Notes from the Underground* Dostoevsky says: ‘We are discussing things seriously: but if you won’t deign to give me your attention, I will drop your acquaintance. I can retreat into my underground hole.’”<sup>4</sup> In this early review, Morris points out not only the patent spatial similarity between the underground of the Russian novel with that in Ellison’s Harlem, but also the attitudinal dialectic between author and reader implied by the underground man which Ellison also adapted for his own purposes. Dostoevsky’s underground man understands that his implied reader holds a position of cultural superiority and must “deign” or condescend to give his words attention, but he still retains an alienated majesty in the face of such condescension: he can “drop” the acquaintance of any such readers who refuse to take him seriously.

In the preface to the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition of *Invisible Man*, Ellison reflected upon the connection between his narrator and Dostoevsky’s. As his narrator-protagonist evolved in his imagination, Ellison made a series of strategic recognitions that would inform the aesthetics, politics, and social dynamics of the novel.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Wright Morris, “The World Below: *Invisible Man*, by Ralph Ellison. 439 pp. New York: Random House. \$3.50”. *New York Times*, 13 April 1952, 1.

<sup>5</sup> Ellison’s retrospective account of the development of *Invisible Man* is admittedly streamlined. He mentions that the process was “far more disjointed than I make it sound”, see, Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition (New York: Random House, 1982), xvii. Scholars such as Arnold Rampersad (2007) and Barbara Foley (2011) have demonstrated ways in which Ellison’s aesthetic disposition often covered over his connections with the Left, both the Communist Party and the aesthetic debates surrounding leftist fiction. The role that Dostoevsky plays in this element of Ellison’s literary-political thought will be addressed in the second section of this essay.

It now appeared that this voice of invisibility issued from deep within our complex American underground. So how crazy-logical that I should finally locate its owner living — and oh, so garrulously — in an abandoned cellar... I was already having enough difficulty trying to avoid writing what might turn out to be nothing more than another novel of racial protest instead of the dramatic study in comparative humanity which I felt any worthwhile novel should be, and the voice appeared to be leading me precisely in that direction.<sup>6</sup>

The first recognition was that this voice that would guide his novel emanated from a speaker who, while socially invisible, derives from “our complex American underground” — Ellison’s figuration of African American communities reflected through an imaginative lens — “the inner-outer, subjective-objective process... its pied rind and surreal heart”, as he would evocatively add.<sup>7</sup> This created a tension in his conception of the novel. Given the history of racial oppression in the United States in the years from the end of Reconstruction to the beginnings of the Civil Rights era, that is to say, the period that Ellison took to be the background for his novel, it is inevitable that such a voice issuing from a socially invisible character might naturally express itself in terms of racial protest. After all, the condition of social invisibility and the everyday content of the experience of African Americans would naturally contain a great deal in it that one might protest. Nevertheless, Ellison felt that the literary expression of racial protest was aesthetically insufficient. The literary ambition to avoid writing a mere protest novel, to avoid the fictionalization of sociological verities was part and parcel of Ellison’s design. Indeed, with thirty years of hindsight, Ellison’s descriptor for the social landscape — underground — as opposed to underclass, or other possible terms for the landscape of Jim Crow or de facto segregation in late-nineteenth and twentieth-century America, encoded within it a more capacious cultural and rhetorical fluidity open to the “study of comparative humanity” that Ellison desired for his novel and to which he felt all novels worth their salt should aspire.

For Ellison, the consequences of this socio-literary choice between the novel of racial protest and the novel about race that dramatizes humanity in all its comparative complexity would be immense, pointing toward his break with leftist politics, the resistance his writing would encounter in the 1960s, and most saliently here, a commitment to pluralistic literary and cultural models, of which Dostoevsky is the key representative. The voice he opted for was one that suggested a “blues-toned laughter-at-wounds” that “managed to emerge less angry than ironic” that refused to exclude itself from

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<sup>6</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man* 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition, xvii.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

its indictment of the human condition.<sup>8</sup> This ironic texture of the voice of the Invisible Man allowed Ellison to recognize his incipient creation as a “‘character’... in the dual meaning of the term”.<sup>9</sup> Ellison

associated him, ever so distantly, with the narrator of Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground*, and with that *I* began to structure the movement of my plot, while *he* began to merge with my more specialized concerns with fictional form and with certain problems arising out of the pluralistic literary tradition from which I spring.<sup>10</sup>

Ellison’s italicization of “*I*” and “*he*” signifies — even in his retrospective assessment of the novel’s creation — the importance that the distant association of Dostoevsky’s underground man conferred upon his own craft. The italics dramatize a necessary aesthetic distance Dostoevsky provided for the plotting of *Invisible Man*, a curious division of labor in which Ellison’s authorial self distributes the tasks of novel-writing. In a gesture that betokens a kind of mild psychosis familiar to many writers, Ellison’s self — the *I* in his formulation — controlled the structure of the novel (its tripartite organization), while *he* — the narrator dealt with the multicultural content of the novel, the high and low registers, the philosophical and the pool-room, the tragic and the comic. The ironic voice of his narrator, which in Dostoevsky’s terms can drop those who do not deign to take him seriously and in Ellison’s terms could see the tragic and the comic simultaneously — could depict the violent conditions of race in the United States, “those ongoing conflicts, tragic and comic, that had claimed my group’s energies since the abandonment of the Reconstruction” at the same time — in the service of a pluralistic global literature.<sup>11</sup>

Dostoevsky allowed Ellison to envision an indigenous African American literature in global literary terms, a culturally plural novel of ideas in which a socially invisible body of color gives full-throated voice to an American alienation born of racial prejudice. As we can see from Ellison’s own account of his creative activity, the main conduit of connection is literary. It was characterological with stylistic and formal properties and related to the shared aesthetic sensibility we have come to recognize as alienation, but with Ellison all forms of alienation are not interchangeable. Ellison’s literary pluralism was bound up in Dostoevskyan alienation, not Kafkaesque alienation, not the alienation of

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., xvii-xviii.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., xviii.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

Richard Wright, but a specific form which was simultaneously literary and sociological in a way that corresponded to the American political and racial scene. For Ellison, this pluralism was fundamental to his social vision and his art and yet it retained a number of cultural tensions. The primary one had to do with what anthropologists have called the phonemic/phonetic divide, the importation of non-indigenous language and forms into cultural analysis.

For Ellison, underlying the example and problem of Dostoevsky lay the fundamental question of how a nineteenth-century Russian novelist whose critique was directed at Russian cultural problems could describe a literary and social model that was utterly relevant to the situation of the African American in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century? Joseph Frank, Dostoevsky's most authoritative English-language biographer, friend and one-time colleague of Ellison's at Rutgers in the 1960s, answered the question in ideological terms. Rather than the underground imagery, Frank argued that, "Ellison's profound grasp of the dominating ideological implications of Dostoevsky's work" was central to "his perception of its relevance to his own creative purposes; his perception, that is, of how he could use Dostoevsky's relation to the Russian culture of his time to express his own position ...in relation to the dominating white culture".<sup>12</sup>

What then did the complex American underground of Ellison's world share with Dostoevsky's underground? The first element consisted of a cultural homology. Dostoevsky's underground man labors under the domination of Western European influences, the utopian-inflected enlightened rationalism that he dissects. While wholly conversant with these Western influences, as he has been acculturated in St. Petersburg's Europeanized climate, he expresses his alienation through an abiding sense that his own identity has been imposed upon him, and that these categorical impositions have made his human existence perverse, incompatible, and, at times, impossible.

Where the underground man asserts a willful perversity in the face of such cultural impositions, Ellison's invisible man discovers through a series of disillusioning experiences (the humiliating battle royal, the duplicitous letter of recommendation from Dr. Bledsoe, and so on), that the ideologies of racism and white supremacy that impose various definitions on his identity implicitly or explicitly contravene his humanity. Just as the underground man shows the pitfalls and traps of the European ideologies that were attractive to the Russian intelligentsia of the mid-nineteenth century, the invisible

<sup>12</sup> Joseph Frank, MS "On Ralph Ellison and a 'Literary Ancestor': Dostoevsky", Box I:48, fol. 2, p. 7, Ralph Ellison Papers, Library of Congress. Frank published a version of this essay in *The New Criterion* but I have chosen to quote from the fuller manuscript that he sent to Ellison, and that is part of Ellison's papers in the Library of Congress.



man exposes the ways in which his education as part of if not exactly an intelligentsia, then an African American cultural elite, has been corrupted and denatured by the white supremacist ideology it seeks to countermand. Where Dostoevsky takes on the quasi-utopian socialism exemplified by Nikolay Gavrilovich Chernyshevsky's *What is to be Done?* (1863) and the materialism and utilitarian strains of political and social thought that had filtered into Russia during the 1840s, Ellison targets a strain of hypocritical assimilationist rhetoric found in the manicured precincts of the traditional black college as he experienced it and reported on it in the 1930s. As his protagonist explores other potentially liberating movements, he discovers more contradictions and tensions between ideology and his sense of his own identity. The race-hatred underlying the Africanist rhetoric of Ras the Exhorter and the stoking of racial violence in the name of radical leftist politics of "the Brotherhood" end up contributing to, with staggering irony, the further social invisibility of Ellison's protagonist.

The cultural homology between nineteenth-century Russian elite prejudices and white supremacist elitism in the United States provided Ellison with another important literary framework to reposition and trans-valuate African American culture. Dostoevsky recognized how elite Russian culture had rendered the Russian peasantry and its folk cultures effectively invisible. In his *The House of the Dead* (1862), a text that Ellison repeatedly mined, Dostoevsky admonishes his educated readership: "You may be your whole life in daily relations with the peasant, forty years you may do business with him regularly as the day comes... well, you'll never know what is at the bottom of the man's mind or heart. You may think you know something about him, but it is all optical illusion, nothing more. My readers will charge me with exaggeration, but I am convinced I am quite right. I don't go on theory or book-reading in this; in my case the realities of life have given me only too ample time and opportunity for reviewing and correcting my theoretic convictions, which, as to this, are now fixed".<sup>13</sup>

An inability of elites to recognize the cultural integrity and complexity of Russian peasant culture underlies Dostoevsky's point, and this type of Dostoevskyan insight into the ways in which one stratum of society might be wholly ignorant of another despite apparent proximity became more than a motif in *Invisible Man*. For Ellison, it became an article of social faith and a talking point as he tried to persuade others to rethink American culture and its problems. In Ellison's thinking, the way a genuine pluralism was obscured by ideological blindness was one of the problems of American life. For example, a 1963 speech on the challenges of U.S. education, especially for young African American

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<sup>13</sup> Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The House of the Dead; or, Prison Life in Siberia*, 307, Project Gutenberg (1911), <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/37536/37536-h/37536-h.htm>, accessed 15 April 2020.

students, expresses the tension between competing visions of America, one pluralistic, the other monolithic.

The American scene is a diversified one, and the society which gives it its character is a pluralistic society — or at least it is supposed to be. Ideally it is, but we seem to insist, on the other hand, that this society is *not* pluralistic. We have been speaking as though it were *not* made up of diversified cultures but was in fact one monolithic culture. And one which is perfect, the best of all possible cultures, with the best of all people affirming its perfection.

Well, if this were true there would be no point in our being here. But we are here, and since we are, let us try to see American society in all of its diversity.<sup>14</sup>

In this lecture, Ellison adapts Dostoevsky's point in a generalized way: belief in American exceptionalism and utopian tendencies to believe the nation had attained an ideal society obscures the reality of American cultural diversity; *pluribus* obscured by *unum*.

Working from a sense that American educational strategies privileged elite white forms of cultural values in a way that ignored the diverse cultural realities of African Americans (an argument that would anticipate by several decades the controversies over cultural biases in standardized testing), Ellison posits that, "There is no such thing as a culturally deprived kid".<sup>15</sup> Rather, Ellison argued, educational authorities persist in mistakenly ignoring what constitutes culture. He invokes culinary, musical, and examples from the black communities (chitterlings, jazz, verbal wordplay), to demonstrate the indigenous vibrancy of the culture, reserving a special place for imaginative language. Tailoring one of his favorite dicta from Kenneth Burke for the occasion, Ellison urged his audience to think sociologically, asserting that, "Language is equipment for living".<sup>16</sup> As Bryan Crable observes, "Burke's contention is that human beings symbolically equip themselves to engage their social and natural environment".<sup>17</sup> Ellison follows this approach suggesting that, "One uses the language which helps to preserve one's life" and the pressure of survival in the United States has produced a rich

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<sup>14</sup> Ralph Ellison, "What These Children Are Like", in John F. Callahan, ed., *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison* (New York: The Modern Library, 1995), 542.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 543.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* See, Kenneth Burke, "Literature as Equipment for Living", in Stanley Edgar Hyman, ed., *Perspectives by Incongruity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964), 100. Burke actually specified that "literature", not language, should be thought of as equipment for living. However, Ellison wished to talk about the indigenous verbal wordplay that emerges in young African Americans and so strategically, broadened the point to language itself.

<sup>17</sup> Bryan Crable, *Ralph Ellison and Kenneth Burke: At the Roots of the Racial Divide* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 93.

vernacular tradition in African American communities that would be the envy of experimental and modern poets. Not dictionary knowledge, “but within the bounds of their familiar environment and within the bounds of their rich oral culture”, black youth “possess a great virtuosity with the music and poetry of words”.<sup>18</sup>

As Dostoevsky sought in the 1860s to persuade his audience of the legitimacy of a folk and peasant culture that they could not readily perceive, Ellison sought to persuade his audience in the 1960s that black youth culture was vibrant and artful — the playful use of language was a reflection of its durability, its slang an expression of how utterly alive it was to its own social realities. “The great body of Negro slang—that unorthodox language—exists precisely because Negroes need words which will communicate, which will designate the objects, processes, manners and subtleties of their urban experience with the least amount of distortion from the outside”.<sup>19</sup> What it lacked, in Ellison’s eyes, was a mainstream culture to acknowledge its validity, and much like Dostoevsky, he was also skeptical that the educational establishment he was addressing would be responsive in a constructive way, so he closed his argument with a warning straight out of *Notes from Underground*: “I don’t know what intelligence is. But this I do know, both from life and from literature: whenever you reduce human life to two plus two equals four, the human element within the human animal says, ‘I don’t give a damn’”.<sup>20</sup> The alienation of the American student was similar to that of his invisible man via the underground man, a reaction to a system — in this case educational — that neither acknowledged one’s culture nor the realities to which it was most responsive. In expressing “what these children are like”, Ellison suggested that they are very much like Dostoevsky’s underground man. Furthermore, he expressed this as a fundamental principal of what constitutes humanity and as an article of faith (“this I do know, both from life and literature”). We can presume that by life he meant what he had gathered from his own experience and we can now assume with confidence precisely what literature he had in mind, Dostoevsky.

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<sup>18</sup> Ellison, “What These Children Are Like”, 544.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 551.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* In *Notes from Underground*, Dostoevsky has an extended and recurrent riff on the concept of “two times two equals four”. The phrase appears twelve times in the text. In “What These Children Are Like”, Ellison varies it with the expression “two plus two”, but the point is wholly in keeping with the attitude of the underground man. In the translation cited in this essay, a relevant instance reads, “after all, two times two equals four is no longer life, gentlemen, but the beginning of death”. See, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Boris Jakim, trans., *Notes from Underground* (Grand Rapids, Michigan and Cambridge, United Kingdom: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 31. In this way, Ellison interpolates the attitude of the underground man into the roots of disaffection in the African American student.

As Dostoevsky argued that peasant life was fundamental to Russian experience, Ellison argued (in this lecture and in many other places) that “Black” life and experience was fundamental to American experience (especially in his 1970 essay, “What America Would be Like Without Blacks”). Indigenous vernacular speech, spirituals, jazz, the blues, soul food, and many others were all on Ellison’s radar as artistic and cultural forms that were underappreciated by the larger society, indeed, not even recognized as “culture”, by many African Americans themselves. Only on a trip to France did he realize “the obvious fact” that what he had just thought of as mere “peasant food” was “part of a high low-class cuisine”.<sup>21</sup> Through all of his examples runs a concern that American society and educational biases tend to blind its citizens to what counts as actually being culturally valuable and significant. As Ellison made himself a student of African American, and more generally, American folk and popular culture, he collected all he knew from his own experience and digested the works of popular cultural historians, such as Constance Rourke and Stanley Edgar Hyman. In a profound sense, the interests in indigenous folk arts, cultural valuation, and American pluralism coalesced in a figuration that blended high and low and complemented that of the complex American underground: jazz. The pluralism of the United States lay in this territory for Ellison and informed his insistence that the culture and language were fundamentally “all jazz-shaped”, in the “sudden turns, shocks and swift changes of pace that mark its style.” Almost paraphrasing Duke Ellington, Ellison asserts that “the real secret of the game is to make life swing”.<sup>22</sup>

A robust critical literature has explored Ellison’s thinking and politics about music — jazz in particular — especially concerned with charting the way it circulates around debates about Afrocentrist separatism or integrationist pluralism. With *Invisible Man*’s magisterial phonographic hearing of Louis Armstrong’s “(What Did I Do to be So) Black and Blue” and its reefer-induced meditation on the blues and sorrow songs, sermons on the blackness of blackness, invisibility, sound and silence, while the blood-red sloe gin glistens over the vanilla-white ice cream, Ellison has inspired many critics to theorize the problems of race, performance, and music.<sup>23</sup> In Ellison’s figuration of Armstrong, Fred Moten has observed, “there is an instantiation of a kind of dialog between knowledge of in/visibility and the absence of that knowledge, between improvement and the vernacular”.<sup>24</sup> Following this line,

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<sup>21</sup> Ellison, “What These Children Are Like”, 544.

<sup>22</sup> Ralph Ellison, “What America Would Be Like Without Blacks”, in John F. Callahan, ed., *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison* (New York: The Modern Library, 1995), 582.

<sup>23</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Random House, 1952), 8–14.

<sup>24</sup> Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 70.

Walton M. Muyumba argues that Ellison shaped “his literary aesthetic out of the jazz aesthetic”.<sup>25</sup> Ellison’s literary portraits of major jazz figures such as Armstrong, Charlie Christian, Jimmy Rushing, and Charlie Parker have become occasions for complex social theorizing and a means to assess “Ellison’s stated commitments to individuality through masterful self-invention”, in the words of Paul Allen Anderson, “and ... his idealizations of the ‘marvel of social organization.’”<sup>26</sup>

Here, too, however we also find Dostoevsky as a guide, not so much to the content of jazz, but to how it circulated in American culture. For example, in Ellison’s skeptical portrait of Charlie Parker and the welter of legend and mythologization that materialized around the alto saxophonist in the post-war bebop era, he meditates on the contradictions in the character of “Bird”.

He was given to extremes of sadism and masochism, capable of the most staggering excesses and the most exacting physical discipline and assertion of will. Indeed, one gets the image of such a character as Stavrogin in Dostoevsky’s *The Possessed*, who while many things to many people seemed essentially devoid of a human center — except, and an important exception indeed, Parker was an artist who found his moments of sustained and meaningful integration through the reed and keys of the alto saxophone.<sup>27</sup>

Perhaps it is our habit of viewing indigenous art-forms in native terms that has blinded us to the ways that Ellison continually turned to Dostoevsky for cultural analogs for the American artifacts that he held up for scrutiny. Bird-as-Stavrogin-with-an-artform was Ellison’s way of triangulating the paradoxes of Parker, who had come to be a darling of the beatnik and “white hipster” culture of the 1950s, capturing “something of the discordancies, the yearning, romance and cunning of the age.”<sup>28</sup>

A marginal note in Ellison’s personal copy of Mikhail M. Bakhtin’s *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (1973), affords us a glimpse into the chain of cultural and mental associations that connect Ellison’s assessment of Charlie Parker, jazz’s functions in American society, and Dostoevsky. In the relevant passage, Bakhtin analyzed Leonid Grossman’s commentary on Dostoevsky’s use of the elements of the adventure novel, especially those melodramatic ones in which social mixing occurs

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<sup>25</sup> Walton Muyumba, *The Shadow and the Act: Black Intellectual Practice, Jazz Improvisation, and Philosophical Pragmatism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 151.

<sup>26</sup> Paul Allen Anderson, “Ralph Ellison’s Music Lessons”, in Ross Posnock, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Ellison* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 83.

<sup>27</sup> Ralph Ellison, “On Bird, Bird-Watching and Jazz”, in John F. Callahan, ed., *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison* (New York: The Modern Library, 1995), 263–4.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 264.

(Stavrogin, Prince Valkosky, Prince Sokolsky, and Prince Myshkin). In the margin Ellison scrawled a note in pencil, “Jazz experiences [or experiments] broke down social hierarchy which was separate to an extent [B]ut not religious”.<sup>29</sup> While it is far from clear what Ellison’s specific point was, it is striking how the social mixing points toward the contradictions of Parker and how constantly he turned his critical study of Dostoevsky in terms of plot and situation to think through the materials of his own American experience. Of course, Ellison had written the piece on Parker at least ten years prior to reading the Bakhtin, but what is salient is the way he used the Russian materials to confirm his own cultural hypotheses. What was jazz-shaped about American could be dramatized through Russian literary strategies.

In a study that Ellison read, re-read and in which he left numerous marginal comments, *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky: An Essay in the Old Criticism* (1959), George Steiner observes that “the underground man is necessary to his betters. He is reminder of mortality in moments of *hubris*, a buffoon who speaks the truth, and a confidant who saps illusion”.<sup>30</sup> Ellison underscored this passage as confirmation of his own sense of the socio-literary purposes Dostoevsky’s invention serves. Ellison’s social vision insisted that there must be comic as well as tragic elements to the American experience of people of color and the mode through which the alienated voice could express both of those elements could be found in the character of the underground man. An underscored passage in Ellison’s copy of Mikhail M. Bakhtin’s *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* sums up the underlying nexus of ideology and voice that the underground and invisible men share. “His thought is developed and constructed as the *thought of a person personally insulted by the world order, personally debased by its blind inevitability*”.<sup>31</sup>

Dostoevsky would enable Ellison’s art and criticism in many ways, but the conjunction of ideology and voice in the way that Bakhtin expresses it provides us with a clearer sense of *Invisible Man*’s aesthetics of alienation and why Ellison would prefer this brand of alienation to Kafka’s, as the epigraph to this essay has it, or any other literary models available to him. In a 1968 interview in which Ellison fielded a question about whether or not in the creation of *Invisible Man* he “had borrowed at all from the Kafka idea of the alienation of the Jew in Europe?” Ellison flatly rejected this

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<sup>29</sup> M.M. Bakhtin, and R. W Rotsel, trans., *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1973), 84. Ralph Ellison personal copy, The Ralph Ellison Collection, Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Library of Congress.

<sup>30</sup> George Steiner, *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky: An Essay in the Old Criticism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1959), 217. Ralph Ellison personal copy, The Ralph Ellison Collection, Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Library of Congress.

<sup>31</sup> M.M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 198. Original Italics.

proposition. “No, I had enough alienation of my own to draw on... The most direct treatment of alienation which I knew, and which in the very rhythm of the epilogue [to *Invisible Man*], was Dostoyevsky’s *Notes from the Underground* (sic)... after Dostoyevsky you don’t need Kafka”.<sup>32</sup> In rejecting the notion of Kafka’s influence, Ellison reminds us that not all brands of alienation are interchangeable. Note also that he foregrounds his own direct experience of alienation, the cultural texture and verbal specificity of its grievances that give shape to its ideological expression and its vocal register. It would be Dostoevsky’s expression of mid-nineteenth-century Russian alienation — a world in which an intellectual elite de-valued its indigenous folk and popular culture that seemed to align itself most closely with Ellison’s experience of being black in America. Of this, he was certain. Several years before he would encounter Bakhtin, Ellison had arrived at the same insight. His own experience of alienation meshed with Dostoevsky’s — not Kafka’s — and it would be Dostoevsky’s models of discourse to which he would turn time and again for confirmation and authorization of his own literary practice in the forty-odd years following the publication and triumph of *Invisible Man*.

## **II. Ellison’s Blues: Revisiting “Richard Wright’s Blues” in the context of *The House of the Dead***

Many commentators have focused on how Ellison, in selecting his literary “ancestors” in his rebuttal to Irving Howe in “The World and the Jug”, distanced himself from an Afrocentric or Afro-American-centric literary lineage as well as the Marxist/leftist politics of his formative years as a writer.<sup>33</sup> While these are important extrapolations, in choosing his ancestors, Ellison’s primary objective was to *not* choose Richard Wright, whom Howe had lumped him with, and from whom he felt a strong need to set himself apart. “I respected Wright’s work and I knew him”, Ellison declared, “but this is not to say that he ‘influenced’ me as significantly as you assume”.<sup>34</sup> For this reason, Ellison suggested that Wright was a literary “relative”, not a writer who he would choose to align himself with as an aesthetic influence but one he was connected with through experience and circumstance. Ellison insisted that what had brought him together with Wright in the first place was not their “common racial identity” but rather, their shared interest in modernist literature, and, most saliently here, their shared interest in the writings of Dostoevsky and other contemporary writers such as Ernest Hemingway,

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<sup>32</sup> Maryemma Graham, and Amritjit Singh, eds., *Conversations with Ralph Ellison* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), 137–8.

<sup>33</sup> Rampersad, *Ralph Ellison*, 121. Barbara Foley, *Wrestling with the Left: The Making of Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 69–70.

<sup>34</sup> Ellison, “The World and the Jug”, 185.

André Malraux, and James Joyce.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, Ellison was always touchy about matters of priority and influence. He felt that Wright had always underestimated his own learning, philosophical depth, and intellectual sophistication. “It was important to Ralph”, Ellison’s biographer, Arnold Rampersad, noted, “to point out that he had read Dostoyevsky before meeting Wright: ‘He assumed that I hadn’t read any of ... Dostoyevsky... I was somewhat chagrined by his apparent condescension’”.<sup>36</sup> It was not merely indignation at Wright’s presumption of ignorance that made Ellison bristle. They had both been reading and exploring Dostoevsky and the modern writers since they first met in the 1930s. Ellison felt that he had a more profound grasp than Wright did of the models of cultural critique that Dostoevsky provided a writer attempting to translate his African American experience into the modern novel.

Looking back on his relationship, Ellison suggested that Wright’s presumptive condescension limited the free exchange of literary ideas between the two writers. Ellison said that Wright’s “underestimation made for a certain irony in our relationship; because sometimes, thanks to my own reading and quite different experience, I was in position to have suggestions for solving problems from which he might have benefitted”.<sup>37</sup> Ellison certainly, as Rampersad and Foley have demonstrated, concealed, minimized, and “white-washed” his involvement with Communist Party and leftist activities during the period of his friendship with Wright, and, therefore, we must speculate with care about anything he may have read back into that period. Nonetheless, while Ellison does not specify what problems he might have helped Wright solve, I think we may reasonably propose that some of those suggestions concern his reading of Dostoevsky and Ellison’s developing theories of literature and culture. When discussing his involvement with the left and Wright in the 1960s, Ellison, in a fairly candid moment, remarked:

I never wrote the official type of fiction. I wrote what might be called propaganda having to do with the Negro struggle — but my fiction was always trying to be something else; something different even from Wright’s fiction. I never accepted the ideology which the *New Masses* attempted to impose on writers. They hated Dostoyevsky, but I was studying Dostoyevsky.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> For a recent study of Ellison’s relationship to modernist authors, see, Marc Conner, “Father Abraham: Ellison’s Agon with the Fathers in *Three Days Before the Shooting ...*”. *The New Territory: Ralph Ellison and the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Marc C. Conner and Lucas E. Morel (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2016), 167–93.

<sup>36</sup> Rampersad, *Ralph Ellison*, 121.

<sup>37</sup> Maryemma Graham, and Amritjit Singh, eds., *Conversations with Ralph Ellison*, 323.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.



Ellison's non-fiction of these years might be seen as propaganda, even by his own estimation, but his fiction, with its different embrace of folk-art culture, high and low, tragic and comic, philosophical and commonplace, and its Dostoevskyan models separated his ideological critique from that found in the *New Masses* and from the fiction of Wright. If we recall that in the creation of *Invisible Man*, Ellison felt that Dostoevsky allowed him to address "more specialized concerns with fictional form and [deal] with certain problems arising out of the pluralistic literary tradition from which I spring", and that it was precisely these ideas that he began developing in the mid-1940s, it becomes clearer how Dostoevsky shaped the way Ellison read Wright and assessed Wright's literary, political, and social positions.<sup>39</sup>

Hiding in plain sight is the evidence of Ellison's 1945 *Antioch Review* essay on Wright's memoir, *Black Boy*, entitled "Richard Wright's Blues". Bryan Crable has pointed out the influences of Kenneth Burke on Ellison's defence of Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, and as we saw in our discussion of Ellison's lecture on education, where Burke is invoked Dostoevsky also appears.<sup>40</sup> Among its crucial recognitions, Ellison's essay proposes that *Black Boy*, "as a psychological document of life under oppressive conditions...recalls *The House of the Dead*, Dostoevsky's profound study of the humanity of Russian criminals".<sup>41</sup> As noted above, *The House of the Dead* was a crucial text for *Invisible Man* and Ellison's growing cultural theories of literature.<sup>42</sup> As Ellison would use *The House of the Dead* in *Invisible Man* to shape the lineaments of the complex African American underground and the conditions of cultural blindness that would render it invisible for the Caucasian-American establishment, in "Richard Wright's Blues" he gave his Dostoevskyan ideas their first full utterance.

The most suggestive and telling moment arrives toward the end of the essay where Ellison, drawing on the African American literary critic and composer Edward Bland, describes the psychological qualities of the "pre-individualistic black community" depicted in *Black Boy*.<sup>43</sup> With Wright's journey from the deep South to the urban North in mind, Ellison discusses the psychosocial consequences of asserting one's individuality in the South in African American communities. The costs of such individualistic assertions — a virtual necessity for literary artists such as Wright or

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<sup>39</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man* 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition, xviii.

<sup>40</sup> Crable, *Ralph Ellison and Kenneth Burke: At the Roots of the Racial Divide*, 55–8. Crable shows how Ellison's defence of the aesthetic value of *Black Boy* relies on Burke's "pentad of dramatism" from *A Grammar of Motives* (1945).

<sup>41</sup> Ralph Ellison, "Richard Wright's Blues", in John F. Callahan, ed., *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison* (New York: The Modern Library, 1995), 129.

<sup>42</sup> Barbara Foley has shown how this Dostoevsky text figured in Ellison's early fiction, especially in connection with Wright. See, Foley, *Wrestling With the Left*, 138-9, for her discussion of "The Initiation".

<sup>43</sup> Ellison, "Richard Wright's Blues", 140.

Ellison — were often brutal, and typically enforced by the black family as a form of “behavior control”, experience having taught them “that the whole group is punished for the actions of the single member”.<sup>44</sup> Explaining the source of Wright’s alienation not as a distortion of the Black South but as a natural consequence of his temperament under these social conditions, Ellison describes how deeply the suppression of the individual through physical and psychological discipline had penetrated African American life, even as an expression of parental concern and love.

Even parental love is given a qualitative balance akin to “sadism”, and the extent of beatings and psychological maimings meted out by Southern Negro parents rivals *those described by the nineteenth-century Russian writers as characteristic of peasant life under the Czars* (my emphasis).<sup>45</sup>

In an essay studded with thick ethnographic descriptions of the conditions in the American South and the urban North, this is the only moment in which the cultural comparison reaches for a Western cultural analogue far beyond its place and time. Notably, it is a reference to Czarist Russia and the Russian writers who describe peasant life with its beatings within the brutal bonds of filial love.<sup>46</sup> While Ellison doubtless had a number of Russian writers in mind, the descriptions of specific whippings and the general culture of beatings in *The House of the Dead* must have served as a guide. The merciless beatings of a peasant daughter, Akoulka Koudimovna,<sup>47</sup> would have made a strong impression on Ellison, or the case of Alexander Petrovich, a prisoner who Dostoevsky relates had survived a punishment of 4,000 lashings. Petrovich explains his incredible durability this way:

“I only laughed at them. Why? Because, when I was a youngster, I had grown up under the whip. Well, I am well, and alive now; but I have been beaten in the course of my life”, he repeated, with a passive air, as he brought his story to an end.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 134, contains one brief allusion to the regression and degradation experienced by the “cultured inmates of Nazi prisons”, but that is undoubtedly related more to the revelations of current events in 1945 than to Ellison’s research.

<sup>47</sup> Dostoevsky, *The Houses of the Dead*, 253–4.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 216.

In this way, Dostoevsky served Ellison as a measuring stick by which to explain the roots of Wright's negative reactions to African American family life. Whereas, the other literary figures invoked in the essay are used to point out how *Black Boy* functions in terms of the role of art in general (André Malraux) or to distinguish its focus from other modernist classics (James Joyce's *Stephen Hero*), Dostoevsky is invoked as a figure who informs the social conditions upon which Wright's "sensibility was nourished".<sup>49</sup> While Joyce is invoked as an aesthetic model for Wright, and Nehru is invoked as a political example articulating a way towards freedom, Dostoevsky is invoked as a social model and a cultural parallel.

As with *The House of the Dead*, "Richard Wright's Blues" takes up the problem of cultural blindness. Ellison's ultimate defense of *Black Boy* suggests that the book does not depict a distortion of African American life in the South but that a general cultural and ideological blindness to its essential cruelty and the zeal with which it crushes the individual that would have the temerity to break away. "Why then have Southern whites, who claim to 'know' the Negro", Ellison asks, "missed all this? Simply because they, too, are armored against the horror and the cruelty. Either they deny the Negro's humanity and feel no cause to measure his actions against civilized norms; or they protect themselves from their guilt...and from their fear".<sup>50</sup> For Ellison, *Black Boy* becomes an occasion to begin to articulate the confrontation with invisibility and the ideological armor that creates it for both blacks and whites alike. The younger author's essay discusses folk life in the South on much the same terms as *The House of the Dead* does Russian peasant life. Just as the Russian elite does not see beneath its own stereotyped vision of the peasantry, the white southern world misses much of what that it needs to know about black culture even as it claims to know it. Indeed, Ellison offers even more detail than Dostoevsky could offer about the psychology of social blindness, of why these phenomena cannot be seen.

"Richard Wright's Blues" concludes with an invocation of the complex American underground that would become Ellison's great literary project. Ellison comes to the verdict that Wright's "most important achievement" was that he "converted" the African American "impulse toward self-annihilation and 'going under-ground' into a will to confront the world".<sup>51</sup> Through the terrain of Dostoevsky (which he to an extent shared with Wright in this period), Ellison had found a way to

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<sup>49</sup> Ellison, "Richard Wright's Blues", 133.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

articulate his own literary project by way of a defence of Wright: to use the space of the underground to confront the world.

By conceiving of Wright's work as the conversion of impulses into a cohesive literary expression that confronts what the culture has concealed or denied, Ellison began indicate the terms on which he would convert the ideological currents and social realities of his world into the cultural-symbolic literary system of *Invisible Man*. The usage of the term "impulse" in this formulation is crucial. In defining *Black Boy* as an impulse converted into a statement, Ellison forges an analogue to the blues themselves, which he had defined as "an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness...and to transcend it...by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism".<sup>52</sup> Ellison selected privileged cultural geographies (the Territory, the Underground) and forms, typically drawn from African American popular culture, through which to communicate the literary pluralism at the heart of his work. In *Invisible Man*, the jazz of Louis Armstrong traveling over the lower frequencies of the American airwaves created the terms on which what could not be seen might be heard and might, consequently, speak for you. In "Richard Wright's Blues", the blues themselves are the privileged cultural "folk-art form".<sup>53</sup> In *The House of the Dead*, Dostoevsky described the prison songs and the comic and tragic songs found in the peasant culture of Siberia. At a certain moment after hearing a convict orchestra he came to understand, "perfectly, and for the first time, the remarkable boldness, the striking abandonment, which are expressed in our popular dance tunes, and our village songs".<sup>54</sup> Much as Dostoevsky did with his own moment of listening, Ellison would stage for his readers similar moments, as in his famous use of Armstrong in *Invisible Man* and in his essay on *Black Boy* in which he asserts a fundamental sense of the blues as an aesthetic form that emerges out of a direct kind of human experience. Through all the blindness and ambiguities with which the reception of a folk-art form might be fraught, these cultural forms contain within in them, as Emily J. Lordi suggests in a related context, "the unrealized promise of a pluralistic democracy".<sup>55</sup> The tension that the blues expresses in a folk form, in this way parallels Ellison's sense of what the modern literary memoir can or should do.

In their correspondence, Wright dismissed Ellison's analysis of the blues pertaining to his own work. In a July 25, 1945 letter to Ellison he explained:

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Dostoevsky, *The Houses of the Dead*, 181-2.

<sup>55</sup> Emily J. Lordi, *Black Resonance: Iconic Women Singers and African American Literature* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2013), 66.

I think I mentioned over the phone that I did not see the blues concept; I do see it, but only very slightly. And surely not enough to play such an important role [role] as you assigned it. I'm not trying to carp over the fact that it was a Negro expression form. I simply did not see it. The relationship is too slight. Your psychoanalytic concepts, on the other hand, were damn well used. But the blues concept is not on their level, not at all.<sup>56</sup>

Wright's reaction indicates that he simply did not see the blues as fundamental to his own modes of expression or symbolic matrix. Rather, it was Ellison's imposition on his work. The former undergraduate musician had offered a musical motif as a form of critique and a sign that he viewed Wright's work and its potentials for symbolic cultural critique in a different way.

Ellison's reaction to Wright's rejection of the blues was equally telling. On August 11, 1945, he replied:

I didn't expect you to agree with them at all. About the blues I have a lot more to say, much of which I could not go into in the article, because it would have defeated my purpose in the main body of the article. Briefly, *Black Boy* (*sic*) is positive politically because it faced a tough situation honestly[.] But in a formal artistic sense it is regressive.... I see it as being at once more basic (in that it is concerned only with fundamentals without illusions which is the essence of the blues attitude) than your previous work, and less broad, because you have inverted your idealism and put your humanism in storage for more stable times. When Richard Wright exhibits the blues attitude that is a profound criticism of the present political atmosphere and of his own previous writings — even though an incomplete one.<sup>57</sup>

In this reply, we see the fuller meaning of what Ellison hinted at in the published essay. The “blues attitude” expresses a narrowing of the social canvas, a retreat from the “Marxist optimism, humanism of *Native Son* and *Twelve Million Black Voices*”.<sup>58</sup> In Ellison's estimation, the inadequacy of Wright's position represents a literary-political retreat and it would require the literary machinery of *Invisible Man* to position the blues within a cultural matrix of other folk-art forms and political positions. As Paul Allen Anderson has suggested, the figure of Pete Wheatstraw with his upset apple

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<sup>56</sup> Richard Wright, Letter to Ralph Ellison, 25 July 1945, Box I:76, fol. 2, Ralph Ellison Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

<sup>57</sup> Ralph Ellison, Letter to Richard Wright, 11 August 1945, Box I:76, fol. 2, Ralph Ellison Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

<sup>58</sup> Ralph Ellison, Draft Letter to Richard Wright, 11 August 1945, Box I:76, fol. 2, Ralph Ellison Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

cart symbolically represented this critique.<sup>59</sup> Ellison's formulation of the blues, its cultural significance, and what roles it might play in modern literature are connected to his growing convictions about the power of Dostoevsky's models, and he sought to operationalize the blues and other related forms in terms of Dostoevsky's poetics. This perspective was coming into view for him in 1945 and would find its expression in *Invisible Man*. It would also find expression most of the writing he would do both critically and fictionally from that point on.

### **III. Ellison's Marginalia: Cultural Comparativism, The Dostoevskyan genesis of *Three Days*, and "Clifus and the Russian Novel"**

The Library of Congress holdings of Ralph Ellison's personal library contain thirty-eight English-language volumes pertaining to Dostoevsky. Of these, twenty are primary sources and eighteen are secondary, either critical or biographical. The earliest of the primary materials are the Constance Garnett translations from the 1920s and the latest being a deluxe illustrated Franklin Library edition of Jessie Coulson's translation of *Crime and Punishment* from 1982. The earliest inscriptions in Ellison's hand date to 1942, *The Insulted and the Injured* and *The Gambler and Other Stories*, both Garnett translations. The earliest of the secondary materials is Boris Brasol's *The Mighty Three: Poushkin, Gogol, Dostoevsky. A Critical Trilogy* (1936) and the latest is a personally inscribed copy of his friend Joseph Frank's *Dostoevsky: The Seeds of Revolt, 1821–1849* (1976). Many of the volumes have been annotated, underscored in pen and pencil, marked with yellow and orange highlighter, and peppered with marginalia that point to Ellison's scholarly, critical, pedagogical and fictive activities before and after the publication of *Invisible Man*. As a whole they indicate much more than literary ancestry, but rather a lifelong pursuit and touchstone for all of Ellison's career.

Reading over Ellison's shoulder — in his studies of Dostoevsky — affords a fascinating view of how he used Dostoevsky to filter a host of modern literary figures and concerns welding together the nineteenth century with the twentieth. Through the scene of Ellison's reading of Dostoevsky, we can approach the scene of writing. Here, we see Ellison as critic and literary artist, suturing the two activities together in a web of literary connection crucial to his art. For example, Ellison scholarship has long been aware of André Malraux's influence, especially *Man's Fate (La Condition Humaine)* and *The Psychology of Art*, and in connection with these works the function of art in the grandest terms and in revolutionary times has been the points of emphasis.<sup>60</sup> In a passage in Donald Fanger's

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<sup>59</sup> Anderson, "Ralph Ellison's Music Lessons", 89–90.

<sup>60</sup> Rampersad, *Ralph Ellison*, 119–20. Anderson, "Ralph Ellison's Music Lessons", 84.

*Dostoevsky and romantic realism: a study of Dostoevsky in relation to Balzac, Dickens, and Gogol* (1965) — which Ellison owned — we encounter a passage dealing with Dostoevsky's *A Raw Youth* (*The Adolescent*) and the concept of character. This passage is strikingly reminiscent of Ellison's discussion of character in the introduction to the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition of *Invisible Man*. Fanger discusses how Dostoevsky's characters do not delineate change per se but rather oscillate with escalating intensity between polar extremes. Fanger concludes, "He does not so much develop as progressively express this self-division and so advance to meet his tragic fate". Ellison underscored this passage in pencil and noted in the margin "Malraux's too".<sup>61</sup> If our scholarship has tended to compartmentalize Ellison's influences, obtaining this concept from that author perhaps too neatly, then in his ongoing studies of Dostoevsky we see him synthesizing a series of literary connections and insights. From *Invisible Man* to Alonzo Hickman to Bliss/Severin we encounter Ellison creating precisely this kind of character, not one of clear change but rather one oscillating between poles, advancing toward a fate, as in *Three Days before the Shooting...*

Similar connections can be made to the work of Ernest Hemingway, another author who is always mentioned as part of Ellison's pantheon but seldom in explicit connection with Dostoevsky. In Ellison's copy of Steiner's *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky*, there is an extended commentary on *The Idiot* in which Steiner details Dostoevsky handling of the masochistic psychology of abjection and the way pride finds its "most refined pleasures in self-damnation". In a pivotal scene in which Nastasya Filippovna taunts Prince Myshkin: "...You thought I should accept this good child's invitation to ruin him, did you? That's Totski's way, not mine. He's fond of children". Steiner admires the intuitive qualities to the scene and Ellison underscored the observation that, "in the rage of action the characters experience moments of total insight. Language itself is pouring out its secrets". Ellison wrote in the margin by the dialogue from *The Idiot*: "Brett in The Sun Also Rises".<sup>62</sup> In the American novelist's copy of Bakhtin's *Problems in Dostoevsky's Poetics*, a discussion of *The Gambler* is highlighted in which Bakhtin analyzes how the "Russians abroad" depicted constitute a "carnival collective which considers itself to be a certain degree outside the norms and order of ordinary life ...in an atmosphere of scandal".<sup>63</sup> Once again in the margin appears: "The Sun Also Rises". A few pages later, on the margins of Bakhtin's commentary on carnivalization in *The Idiot*, a discussion of Prince Myshkin's

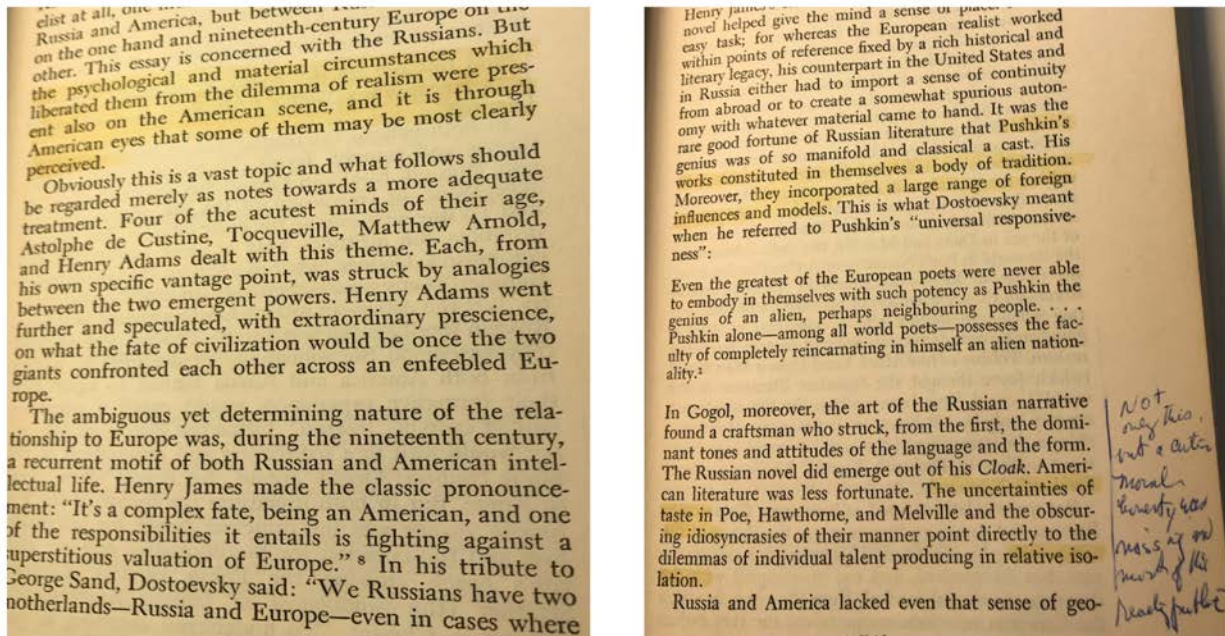
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<sup>61</sup> Donald Fanger, *Dostoevsky and Romantic Realism: A Study of Dostoevsky in Relation to Balzac, Dickens, and Gogol* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), 220. Ralph Ellison personal copy, The Ralph Ellison Collection, Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Library of Congress.

<sup>62</sup> Steiner, *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky*, 165–6. Ralph Ellison personal copy.

<sup>63</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems in Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 143. Ralph Ellison personal copy.

inability to occupy a specific position in life and his ability to penetrate the lives others by remaining tangential to his own existence, Ellison wrote “Jake Barnes is somewhat akin to Myshkin”.<sup>64</sup> It is beyond the scope of this essay to demonstrate the specific ways that Ellison utilized this connection between *The Sun Also Rises* and Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot* and *The Gambler*, but his ongoing reading and thinking through Dostoevsky begins to reveal how Ellison was mapping and re-mapping the terrain of modern literature.



**Figure 1.** Samples of Ellison’s highlighting and marginalia from his personal copy of George Steiner *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky: An Essay in the Old Criticism* (1959): 31, 33. The use of the fluorescent yellow highlighter indicates that those passages were marked in the 1970s or 1980s. The passages are explicitly about comparing the nineteenth-century American literary scene to its Russian counterpart. Ellison’s marginal note responds to Steiner’s point about the obscure or idiosyncratic style and taste of classic American literature as the result of being produced in relative isolation. Ellison’s note reads: “Not only this but a certain moral honesty was missing in most of the reading public.”

Source: The Ralph Ellison Collection, Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Library of Congress. Images courtesy of Stephen Rachman

Perhaps the most important discovery revealed through Ellison’s annotations of Dostoevsky concerns the fundamental problem of the relationship between the nineteenth-century Russia depicted in Dostoevsky’s works and the African American scene that Ellison wished to mine for his material. Ellison’s literary pluralism depended on an ongoing comparatist approach and Steiner’s study was particularly valuable to him in this area. Dozens of passages comparing American literature and culture

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.



to that of Russia are marked or highlighted in Ellison's personal copy. Pages 31 and 33 show two examples, one of Ellison's highlighting on page 31 (The use of the fluorescent yellow highlighter indicates that those passages were marked in the 1970s or 1980s.) and marginal commentary in pen on page 33 (fig. 1). Steiner's contention (following Harry Levin) that "the psychological and material circumstances" that led to the developments in Russian literature "were present also on the American scene, and it is through American eyes that some of them may be most clearly perceived" was precisely the kind of critical move that operationalized Ellison's study of American literature and experience by way of Dostoevsky.<sup>65</sup> The marginal note on the page 33 reveals more than recognition but Ellison's germinative critique. Where Steiner suggests that "the uncertainties of taste" and style found in the authors of the American renaissance might attributable to their having produced their works in "relative isolation", Ellison adds to it: "Not only this but a certain moral honesty was missing in most of the reading public".<sup>66</sup> In this pithy comment we see the seeds of the moral argumentation for the novel Ellison would promote in his critical essays, notably in *Going to the Territory* where he explores the moral capacities and blindness of both the artist and the audience as they collaborate in creating a shared social vision.

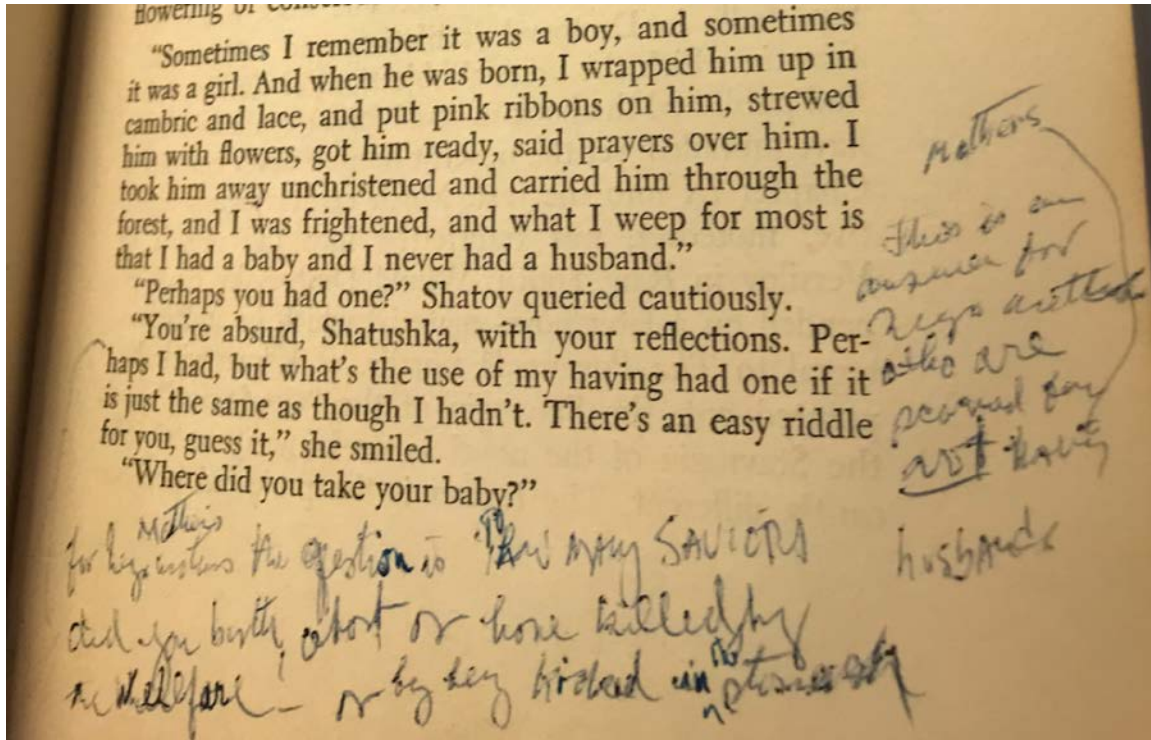
Ellison's annotations in his copy of Steiner's monograph reveal a remarkable intensification of homologies between Russian situations found in Dostoevsky's novels and American conditions. Another example of marginal commentary in pen on page 309 reveals Ellison working through Steiner's analysis of a quasi-hallucinatory scene in *The Possessed* (or *The Demons*) in which Marya Timofeyevna describes her single motherhood and its conclusion in infanticide ("What I weep for most is that I had a baby and I never had a husband".) This prompts Ellison's marginal ruminations on African American mothers: "For negro mothers the question is: "how many saviors, did you birth, abort, or have killed by the welfare or by being kicked in the stomach. Mothers----→This is an answer for Negro mothers[?] who are scorned for not having husbands"<sup>67</sup> (fig. 2). Dostoevsky's text becomes the point of departure for his working up a series of concerns touching on the complex of violence and shaming that African American single mothers might have faced. Even more remarkable still, this appears to be the origin of Maud's dream in Book II of *Three Days Before the Shooting...*

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<sup>65</sup> Steiner, *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky*, 31.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 309.



**Figure 2.** Ellison’s marginalia from his personal copy of George Steiner *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky: An Essay in the Old Criticism* (1959): 309. Ellison’s note reads (in the footer): “For negro mothers the question is: “how many saviors, did you birth, abort, or have killed by the welfare— or by being kicked in the stomach. (On the side margin) Mothers → This is an answer for Negro authors[?] a[l]tho scarred for not having husbands.”  
Source: The Ralph Ellison Collection, Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Library of Congress. Image courtesy of Stephen Rachman

Among Jessie Rockmore’s lodgers, readers will recall Maud’s impassioned recollection to Alonzo Hickman and Deacon Wilhite of her dream about having given birth to three children only to be dispossessed of them:

Was I wrong ... I mean when my own folks scorned me and called me a bitch ... was I wrong when I said to those women who I thought were my good friends and had them turn against me: “All right, all right now”, I said, “How many little saviors have y’all thrown into the garbage can or flushed down the toilet? How many of you women who’re out here calling *me* a bitch had a little savior to die because of your just wanting to live free off the Welfare? And how many of you have lost your chance to raise up a little black savior by being kicked in the belly by your evil boyfriends or no-good husbands?”<sup>68</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Three Days Before the Shooting...*, John. F. Callahan and Adam Bradley (eds) (New York: The Modern Library, 2010), 453.

In his re-staging of the scene from Dostoevsky's *The Possessed*, Ellison carefully structures the impact of Maud's monologue, which is an Americanized version of *skaz* (the Russian term for a narrative technique related to the spoken word in contradistinction to more literary or written styles of narration), so that the impact of the speech is registered dramatically. Moved and troubled by Maud's story, Hickman is forced to move beyond his stock repertoire of replies to find a way to answer her with some measure of honesty. He recognizes the ways in which Maud has exposed his own racial identity, calling it "strong medicine" that makes "everybody recall their own dreams and frustrations and guilt".<sup>69</sup> In a book that was crafted episodically it seems that the connections and resonances between characters and narrative elements are achieved through instances of recognition and misrecognition. Dostoevsky appears to have served Ellison as the theoretical binding agent connecting these moments together.

This is by no means the only instance of Ellison using his critical investigations of Dostoevsky as material for the lifelong project that would become his unfinished novel. While reading Bakhtin's discussion of carnivalization of the nether world in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Ellison wrote the following marginal note on page 110: "Bert Williams 'Take Away Those Pearly Gates'"<sup>70</sup> (fig. 3). In the relevant passage, Bakhtin discusses the social leveling and reversals that takes place underground and the underworld itself. "In the representation of the nether world the carnival logic of 'the world upside down' was often applied. In the nether world the emperor becomes slave, the slave — emperor, etc".<sup>71</sup> The direct reference is to "O Death Where Is Thy Sting?" a 1918 recording by the pioneering African American Vaudevillean and comedian, Bert Williams. In the song, a parson's Sunday sermon describes a fiery hell filled with booze and sinful women and a parishioner objects with the following rebuttal:

If what you say is the positive truth, O Death, where is thy sting?  
I don't care now 'bout the pearly gates, or to hear those angels sing  
With booze and women down below  
Mister devil and I will put on a show  
If what you say is the positive truth, O Death, where is thy sting?<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 452.

<sup>70</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems in Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 110. Ralph Ellison personal copy.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 109–110.

<sup>72</sup> Bert Williams, "O Death Where Is Thy Sting?", music and lyrics by Clarence Stout (New York: Columbia, 1918), from Library of Congress, The National Jukebox, audio recording, <https://www.loc.gov/item/jukebox-659750>, accessed 15 April 2020.

This association turns up in *Three Days Before the Shooting...* In a scene, narrated by Jessie Blackmore's faithful retainer McMillan, in which Blackmore, on the threshold of death, engages a white prostitute, Cordelia Duval.

So Mister Jessie just looked at her awhile. Then he said, "And have you been practicing your present profession long?"

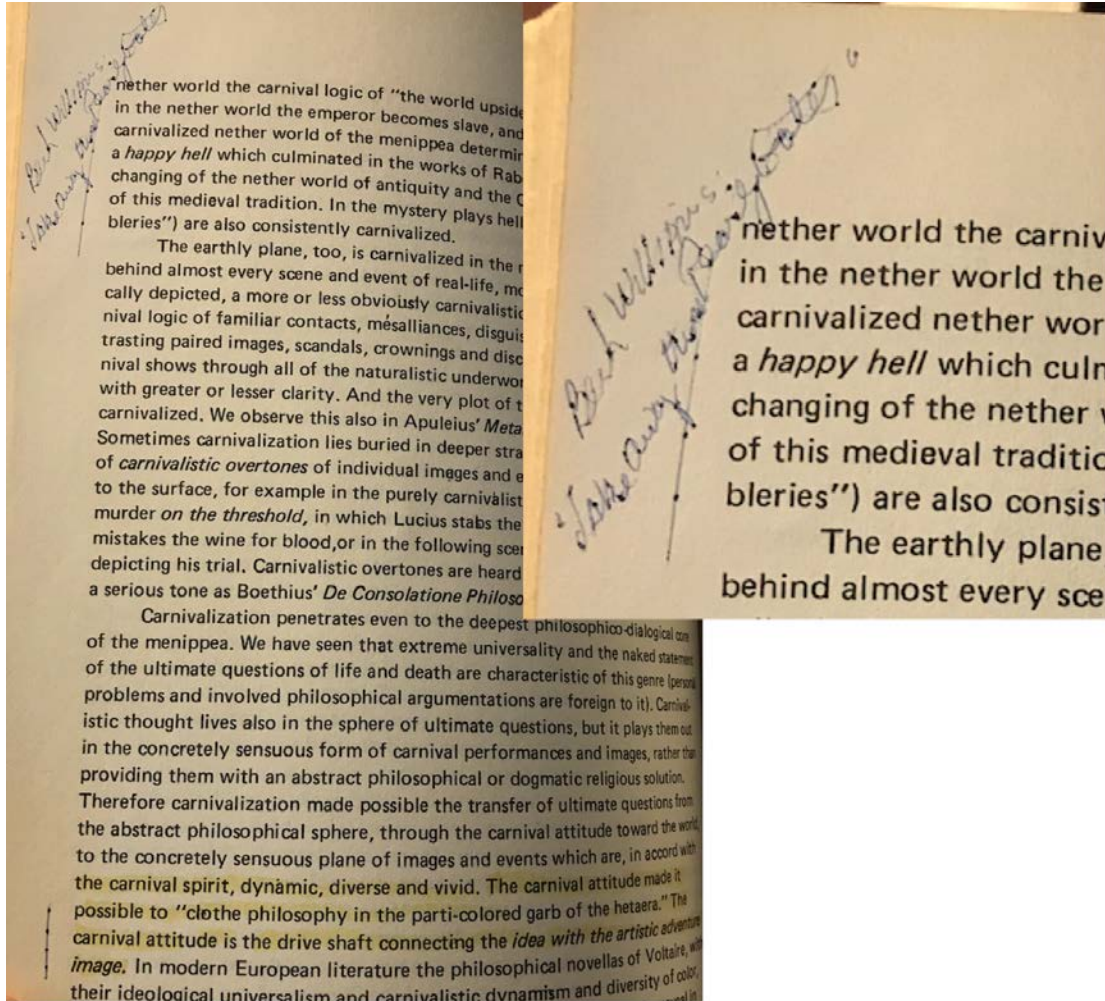
And the lady said, "Long enough to know all the tricks, Dad. You know any new ones? I think you're trying to insult me, Dad. I was in the Follies and I knew Flo Ziegfeld and Will Rogers and I knew that spook boy Bert Williams too. He was great performer and real cute when took off his greasepaint. And wasn't he a riot when he walked around pecking in his rooster costume! 'Ah ain't never done nothing to *nobody*', he used to sing, and 'Take Away Those Pearly Gates' was another. We were all friends together and they were all sweet to me!"<sup>73</sup>

The prudent, abstemious Blackmore, sensing his end, has contrived a night of revelry while seated in his coffin, a night involving a case of whiskey and the prostitute. Duval's scene culminates in a drunken dance in a garment of expired American currency. Just as a stranger enters unexpectedly, Rockmore dies upright in his coffin.

In this telescoping concatenated narrative in which blackness and whiteness oscillate (a black narrator addressing a white reporter describes the vernacular voices of his boss and a white female prostitute describing the songs a black entertainer who performed in greasepaint), Ellison contrives from another Dostoevskyan gambit a scene in which a proliferation of Bakhtinian carnivalesque reversals ensues. The prostitute becomes queen, hell becomes heaven, an African American performer takes off his greasepaint and appears white, the white prostitute performs a dance in the manner of Josephine Baker, and the earthiest lowdown debauchery becomes the most elevated moment of humanity. As the scene plays out in the second version of it in Book II, the pearly gates of Bert Williams song become the White House Gates where Jessie Blackmore places himself in proper relationship to the president of the United States. The alienation and pluralism that had informed Ellison's cultural perspective from the gestation of *Invisible Man* find their expression in a carnival of reversal.

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<sup>73</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Three Days Before the Shooting...*, 158–9.



**Figure 3.** Ellison’s marginalia from his personal copy (inscribed 1977) of Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (1973): 110. Ellison’s note reads: Bert Williams “Take Away Those Pearly Gates.”  
Source: The Ralph Ellison Collection, Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Library of Congress. Image courtesy of Stephen Rachman

The final example I would like to address comes from the manuscripts in the Ellison papers in the Library of Congress. A folder of drafts (with a provisional title, “Clifus and the Russian Novel”) that did not make it into *Three Days Before The Shooting...* that date roughly to 1982 contain a story narrated by Clifus, a character who appears in the “Hickman in Georgia & Oklahoma” section of *Three Days Before The Shooting...* Clifus was raised together with Severin by Janey Glover and is gifted with extraordinary improvisational narrative powers; he is described by Ellison as a “teller of tales”, “word-drunk” and in the published text he regales Hickman. In the episode, Clifus describes his experience reading a “Russian novel”. As with much of this late writing, it is framed in multiple ways as something that has been related to McIntyre, but the core of it is essentially retold in the more colloquial register of Clifus’s voice. Without mentioning the title of the work, it is made clear that

Cliofus is reading *The Brothers Karamazov* and attempting to make that novel correlate to his own community in a very direct set of correspondences.

It was a story about some brothers who are disgusted with their father for being such a dog-butted Russian-style woman-chaser and money-waster. At first it was kind of confusing because it took place back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and because I didn't know too much about Russians — but I got the chippy-chasing and money-wasting part right away. The one who was doing it was the boy's father who had been cashing in on some property which the sons had been left by their mothers — who were different women — and he'd been throwing it away on his whores. He was also a liquor-head and a kind of Bugs Bunny type liked to put everybody down and was notorious for chasing anything wearing skirts.... But what got things heated up was his trying to take a girl away from one of his own sons.<sup>74</sup>

In the various drafts of the episode describes Cliofus — either in a dreaming or waking state — carrying out the central task of matching up scenes in the Dostoevsky with those in his Oklahoma community.

So by looking at those Russians in light of folks I knew, and by asking myself who among us had done something similar to what those Russians were doing I realized there was nothing really new about families fighting over property, or about an old man chasing a chippy.<sup>75</sup>

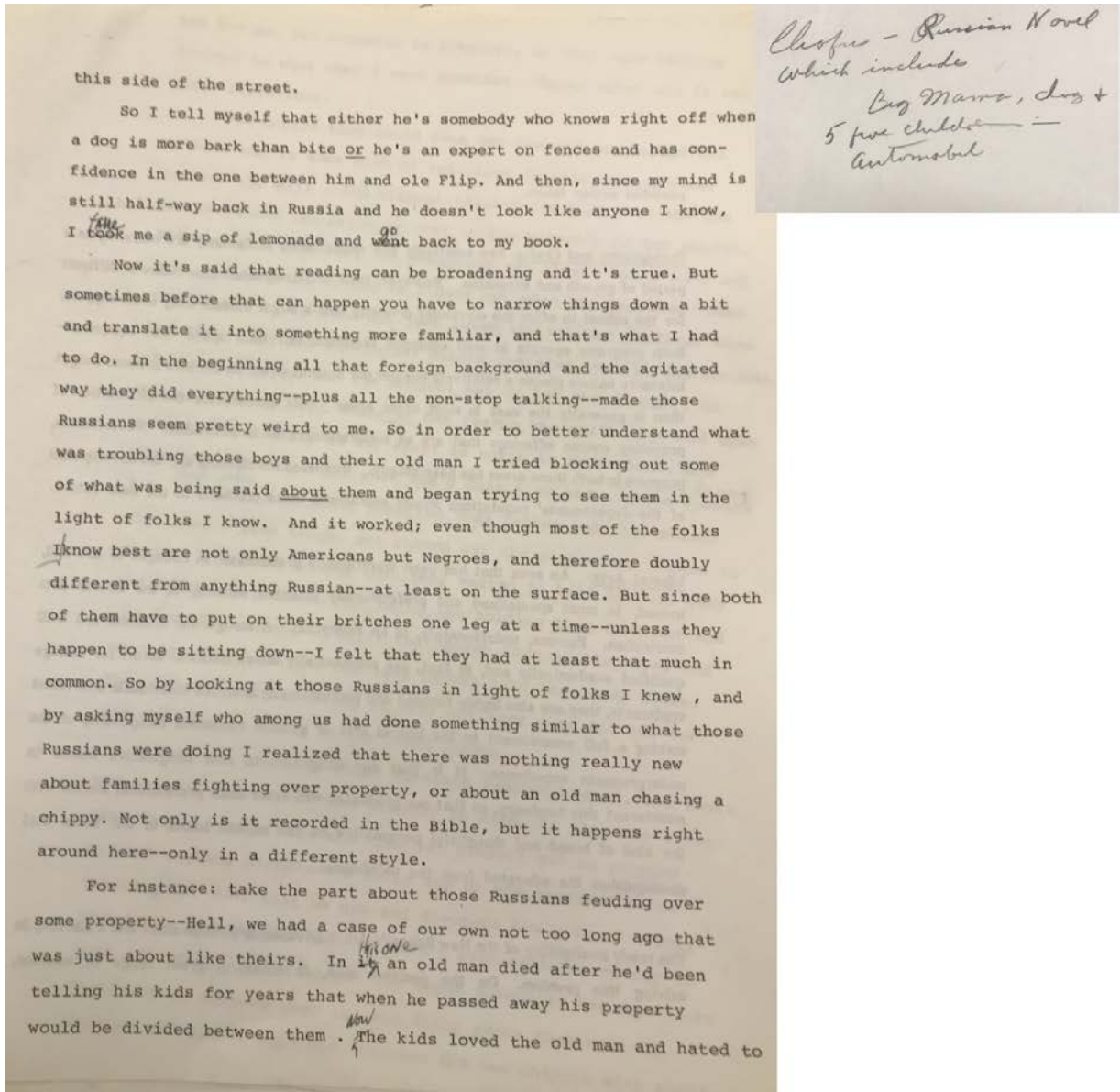
As with all that Ellison writes, a complex narrative layering surrounds this central task as Cliofus's ruminations on matching up African American locals with their Russian counterparts is intercut with another plot about a local shooting (connecting it to the main plot of *Three Days Before The Shooting...*) The cultural work of the episode, indeed the dreamwork of it, as part of this correlation takes place in a dream, is to imagine in vernacular terms the basis for Ellison's literary pluralism. It arises from the act of reading Dostoevsky and then processing that act in terms of one's own locality and experience and out of that attempt arises a commentary on cultural parallels.

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<sup>74</sup> Ralph Ellison, Draft MS Cliofus and the Russian Novel, Box I:117, fol. 2, Ralph Ellison Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.





**Figure 4.** Sample page from Ellison draft of episode Cliofus — Russian Novel.

Source: Ralph Ellison Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. Images courtesy of Stephen Rachman

In this way we return to that fundamental issue for Ellison that was addressed earlier in this essay: the phonemic and phonetic distinction that fundamentally alters our perspective on Ellison's literary pluralism in just such a way that global literary study has promised. With this episode of Cliofus's attempt to assimilate *The Brothers Karamazov* into "The Territory", so to speak, we see an example of the routes by which literary pluralism might arrive and instantiate themselves in a vernacular culture. Ellison attempted to dramatize how one culture might serve as an analogue for another, no matter how very different the place and time might seemingly be. As with all of his engagement with Dostoevsky, Ellison posits a strong homological connection between the Russian

peasant experience of the nineteenth century and the African American experience in the twentieth century. It appears that while he arrived at this homology very early on in his literary career, Ellison never stopped attempting to verify, confirm, and corroborate it. Indeed, it is not too much to say that Dostoevsky's work and the critical tradition it has engendered formed for Ellison a complex literary underground which we are only beginning to uncover.

#### **IV. Shadows and Acts: The Ellison-Frank Letters**

On the edge of a typed note to Ralph Ellison that dates from the end of April 1965, his friend and academic colleague, Joseph Frank appended the following handwritten postscript: "Dostoevsky goes slowly. How's the novel?"<sup>76</sup> Frank was referring to what would become the work for which he would be best known, a five-volume study of the Russian novelist, which is, to date, the most authoritative English-language critical biography.<sup>77</sup> At the time he wrote this note, the publication of the first volume of Frank's painstaking labors were more than a decade in the offing. His correspondent, Ellison was more than a decade beyond *Invisible Man*, his signal literary achievement, and deep into the weeds of his ongoing, never-to-be-completed, second novel. Ellison had recently published *Shadow and Act*, a vigorous collection of essays and lectures that cemented his reputation as an important cultural observer and American literary critic.

In fact, Frank's difficulties placing a review of *Shadow and Act* was the main topic of this particular piece of correspondence and the letters between the two friends during the fall of 1964 through the following spring. Frank had "reserved" his review of *Shadow and Act* with *Partisan Review* in late 1964 while the essay collection was still in galleys, and Frank, who was living in Paris at the time, wrote Ellison to let him know.<sup>78</sup> In a letter dated 11 November 1964, Frank informed Ellison that he had indeed drafted a review, as the journal wanted it by the middle of the month, and he shared a copy of this draft with Ellison under the title, "Negro, American, Modern."<sup>79</sup> The editorial

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<sup>76</sup> Joseph Frank, Letter to Ralph Ellison, 29 April 1965, Box I:48, fol. 2, Ralph Ellison Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

<sup>77</sup> The first volume of Frank's study, *Dostoevsky: The Seeds of Revolt, 1821–1849* first appeared in 1976. The final volume, *Dostoevsky: The Mantle of the Prophet, 1871–1881* first appeared in 2002. The complete study ran to over 2,500 pages and in 2009, a one-volume abridgment of the study appeared under the title *Dostoevsky: A Writer in His Time*.

<sup>78</sup> Joseph Frank, Letter to Ralph Ellison, 11 November 1964, Box I:48, fol. 2, Ralph Ellison Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.* A typed draft of this manuscript with minor edits in Frank's hand is included in this file. Given Ellison's reply to this letter which contains his positive reaction to the draft review, we can infer that it was



board at *Partisan Review*, however, had concerns about the review and by April 1965, Frank wrote again to Ellison, this time with some consternation, explaining that they had turned it down. Frank even shared with Ellison the rejection letter from William Phillips, the editor at *Partisan Review*.<sup>80</sup>

“Since you wrote the review [back in November],” Phillips explained in his letter, “all kinds of things have happened and questions have arisen about the Negro, the Negro writer, and the so-called Negro revolution. And it would certainly seem strange that PR, which is expected to be up to, if not ahead of these questions, should be acting as if they didn’t exist. Obviously, I don’t have to spell this out for you. But I might say just one thing; that Ralph’s views, and views associated with him, are questioned by a number of people, and your review is bound to look as though you and we were avoiding these questions.”<sup>81</sup>

Looking back on this moment, given such an elusive reply, one wishes Phillips had indeed spelled things out. It is hard to say exactly what the editorial board had in mind, but the draft of Frank’s review, retained in Ellison’s papers, provides some clues, and given that Ellison was pleased with Frank’s review, it offers insight into their shared socio-literary values and, tacitly, their mutual investments in Dostoyevsky.

Perhaps Phillips desired a more critical review than Frank provided. He may have wanted Frank’s review to situate Ellison’s arguments more forcefully than it did amid the controversies that surrounded the politics of the African-American writer in the mid-1960s, to triangulate Ellison’s positions with respect to other prominent figures of the day, particularly Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka), and non-African-American liberal critics such as Irving Howe, whom Ellison challenged in “The World and the Jug,” and to weigh in on Ellison’s position on “the protest novel” as an art form and the role of the African-American artist in contemporary society. These were common features of other reviews of *Shadow and Act* and round-up articles that surveyed this literary and cultural landscape.

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included with his 11 November 1964 letter. See, Ralph Ellison to Joseph Frank, 23 November 1964, Box I:48, fol. 2, Ralph Ellison Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

<sup>80</sup> William Phillips, Letter to Joseph Frank, 8 April 1965, Box I:48, fol. 2, Ralph Ellison Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. The editors of *The Selected Letters of Ralph Ellison* say that Frank’s review was rejected “for some reason.” See, John F. Callahan and Marc C. Connor, eds., *The Selected Letters of Ralph Ellison* (New York: Random House, 2019): 643. Phillips letter indicates that the reason was that, in the eyes of the *Partisan Review*, Frank’s assessment of *Shadow and Act* avoided the issues that had made Ellison’s work appear controversial or perhaps dated in that tumultuous year of the Civil Rights Movement.

Ellison defiantly assures Irving Howe in the conclusion of “The World and the Jug” that, “no Negroes are beating down my door, putting pressure on me to join the Negro Freedom Movement, for the simple reason that they realize I am enlisted for the duration. Such pressure is coming only from a few disinterested ‘military advisers,’ since Negroes want no more fairly articulate would-be Negro leaders cluttering up the airways. For, you see, my Negro friends recognize a certain division of labor among the members of the tribe.”<sup>82</sup> But as Rampersad’s biographical research has demonstrated, Ellison’s assurances about the extent to which his private reluctance to speak out publicly as racial protest roiled the nation was happily recognized and accepted by other African-American intellectuals were less than candid. Ellison was glossing over, as Hilton Als has noted, “the alienation from most of his black intellectual peers” that this position actually entailed.<sup>83</sup> Roger Sale’s contemporaneous review of *Shadow and Act* wryly notes that, “things might not be so cheery” as Ellison suggests, and points to the Black Arts Movement advocate, Hoyt W. Fuller’s coverage in *Ebony* of a fraught writer’s conference convened in California in the summer of 1964 at which Ellison was slated to appear but, as was increasingly his habit, did not show.<sup>84</sup> Frank’s review, by avoiding these issues, may have appeared to the board of *Partisan Review* as a dodge.

As it happens, while Frank’s draft does not entirely ignore these issues, it does not highlight the controversies that surrounded Ellison’s views. For example, Frank does touch upon “The World and the Jug,” but no particulars are discussed and no names mentioned. Baldwin’s writing surfaces in the review, as well, but only as a means to express Frank’s preference for Ellison’s “more subtle and searching” analysis over and against the “flaming protests” of the author of *The Fire Next Time*.<sup>85</sup> Rather, Frank seems intent on approvingly laying out Ellison’s perspective. He emphasizes the literary-historical conceptions that Ellison views as fundamental to his social and aesthetic theory. As Frank was a professor of comparative literature, the review comes at Ellison from a comparative literary angle. *Invisible Man* is characterized by Frank as a “Negro American Candide,” making Ellison into a self-styled African-American Voltaire and with the publication of *Shadow and Act*, “one of our foremost critics and commentators on the American scene.”<sup>86</sup>

<sup>82</sup> Ralph Ellison, “The World and the Jug”. in John F. Callahan, ed., *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison* (New York: The Modern Library, 1995), 187–88.

<sup>83</sup> Hilton Als, “In the Territory,” *The New Yorker*, 7 May 2007.

<sup>84</sup> Roger Sale, “The Career of Ralph Ellison,” *The Hudson Review*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (Spring 1965), 125. Hoyt W. Fuller, “The Negro Writer in the United States,” *Ebony*, Nov 1964, Vol. 20 Issue 1, 126–134.

<sup>85</sup> Joseph Frank, “American, Negro, Modern,” box I:48, fol. 2, pp. 2–3, Ralph Ellison Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress..

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, fol. 2, p. 1.

For Frank, Ellison's "Twentieth Century American Fiction and The Black Mask of Humanity," first published in 1953 and revised for *Shadow and Act*, will "take its place among the classics of American cultural self-scrutiny."<sup>87</sup> That cultural self-scrutiny that Ellison focused on and Frank championed was fundamentally mediated and representational, rooted in an assessment of key figures in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century American literary canon. The narrative through-line in classic American literature from the American Renaissance through to Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, incorporated into its national project an authorial "responsibility for truth." But from the end of Reconstruction through to the Great Depression, American literary culture reflected a moral evasiveness that was equally present in American life: "a general debilitation in the moral tone of the whole culture" "an ethical schizophrenia" and "falsity at the heart of American life" arising from a failure to apply the principles of the Constitution to African-Americans.<sup>88</sup> In his review, Frank essentially paraphrases Ellison's indictment of Ernest Hemingway in this essay in which he acknowledges the way Hemingway modernized the language of American literature but finds in his authorial posture a moral retreat along with its technical advance.<sup>89</sup> Thus, while Frank's review celebrates Ellison's cogent indictment of the racism inherent in American culture by way of its canonical literary expression, he avoids both the extra-literary aspects of that cultural struggle as well as the left-leaning criticisms being leveled at the liberal literary traditions implicitly valorized by Ellison's critique. In other words, Frank defends Ellison's aesthetic politics, and his focus on "the 'shadows' that have been produced by American culture to compensate emotionally for the great 'act' of injustice committed against the Negro."<sup>90</sup> Frank argues that, Mr. Ellison does not spend his time protesting against the iniquities of this 'act'; he takes for granted that it does not have to be demonstrated."<sup>91</sup>

Frank connected the social critique found in *Invisible Man* with the mode of analysis found in *Shadow and Act*, but he was careful to distinguish Ellison's essays from his fiction writing, and Ellison appreciated the connections and the distinctions. "Your review did a great deal to dispel the suspicion," Ellison wrote to Frank in November 1964, "that I was incapable of communicating with the critics."<sup>92</sup> He noted that, while almost all reviews had been favorable, most contained some

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., pp. 5–6.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ralph Ellison, Letter to Joseph Frank, 23 November 1964, Box I:48, fol. 2, Ralph Ellison Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

fundamental misperception. He took particular exception with those critics who presumed that *Shadow and Act* was a mere extension of *Invisible Man* and “those who have sought to treat the book as a work of art, which all but amazes me.”<sup>93</sup>

This division within in Ellison’s own output, that his critical work, however brilliant, was decidedly *not* the practice of his literary art at its highest level, indicated the degree to which the structural properties of his fiction had taken on an intensified charge. Roger Sale suggested that “the motto” of *Shadow and Act* is “I am a writer.”<sup>94</sup> We might modify this formulation slightly by suggesting that motto of Ellison’s career was “I am a novelist.” The novel alone would be the ultimate proving ground of his cultural value. The consequences of this would color his view of not only his own work but his judgment of the work of his peers.

In this November 1964 letter to Frank, Ellison’s concerns about *Shadow and Act*’s reception, his work as a novelist, the proper role of the African-American artist, and Dostoevsky converge. Frank was living in Paris at the time and he had mentioned to Ellison that he had missed a lecture by Langston Hughes sponsored by *Présence Africaine*. Ellison acidly commented that Frank had not “missed anything by not hearing that lecture. He probably had to tell the French, under the guise of discussing the problems of Negro writers, how difficult it is for Negro writers to be served hamburgers in Mississippi.”<sup>95</sup> Arnold Rampersad views this disparagement of Hughes as part of a pattern in Ellison’s behavior, an unwillingness to support fellow African-American artists of all stripes who did not meet his standards and, in this case, a once-admired artist who had become a “shallow sentimentalist.”<sup>96</sup> This tendency merged with Ellison’s growing impatience with the conflation of the political struggle for civil rights with the individual struggle to create significant contributions to literature. In the rest of his comment on Hughes, he laments that perhaps after the turmoil of Mississippi burning, “then maybe Negro writers can turn their attention to the problems of craft and culture and get on with the work of contributing something of real literary value to American culture.”<sup>97</sup> In this way, Ellison’s sense of being misconstrued by the critics is of a piece with his sense of the shortcomings of his black intellectual peers, all the while expressing the internal pressure of his own need for new fictional outputs.

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Sale, 125.

<sup>95</sup> Ralph Ellison, Letter to Joseph Frank, 23 November 1964.

<sup>96</sup> Rampersad, 404.

<sup>97</sup> Ralph Ellison, Letter to Joseph Frank, 23 November 1964.

Sandwiched between his comments on the shortcomings of the critics of *Shadow and Act* and those on the shortcomings of Langston Hughes circa 1964, Ellison mentioned a new essay collection by R.P. Blackmur that included several on Dostoevsky, offering to have the publishers send along a copy. He looked forward to Frank's study, "For as you know I am very, very eager to study Dostoevsky."<sup>98</sup> As we have seen, Ellison's critical investigations into Dostoevsky had been ongoing for decades, but this signaled a deepening of that endeavor. As Ellison's commitment to an intellectually sophisticated fictional expression grew more adamant, his interest in Dostoevsky, who had provided such powerful models for *Invisible Man*, accelerated. He seemed to be searching for critical and meta-critical frameworks to tie together the sprawling but essentially episodic narrative he had been drafting since the publication of *Invisible Man* and, often as not, Dostoevsky served as a literary and cultural guide.

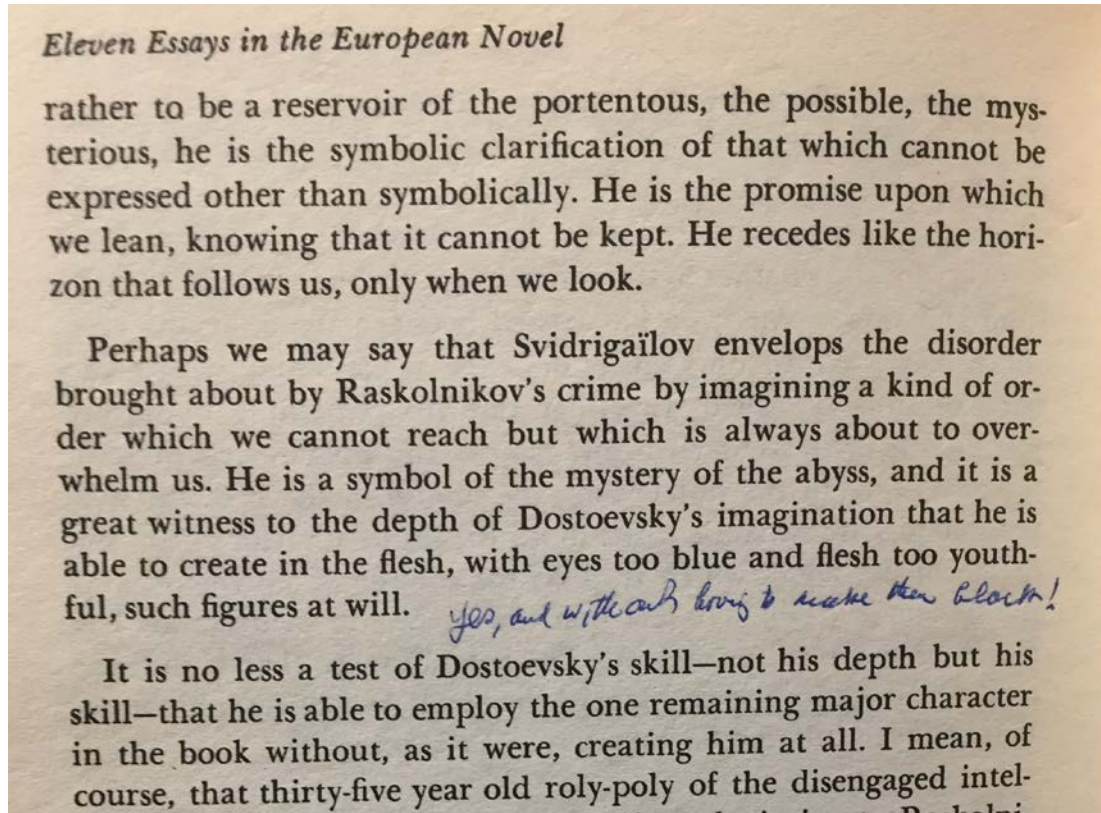
The annotations in Ellison's personal copy of Blackmur's essays reveal a similar close attention that we have seen in his use of Bakhtin and Steiner. Passages marked in blue ink, pencil, and yellow highlighter indicate is multiple consultations of this text over several decades. As in other texts, Ellison indicates a keen interest in the figure of Stavrogin from *The Possessed*, the character whom, in his "Bird-Watching" essay (reprinted in *Shadow and Act*) he had likened Charlie Parker. In one passage, Blackmur comments on the pains which Dostoevsky takes in laying the backstory of Stavrogin's first appearance and the reputation he had acquired as "savagely, reckless, brutal, and callous; a debauched bully, fresh from living deliberately in rags in the dregs of Petersburg." In his copy, Ellison has underscored this final clause, and in the right-hand margin written, "Hippy [*sic*]."<sup>99</sup> In his 1962 essay on Parker, Ellison discussed the legendary jazz saxophonist as one who had, "made himself notorious, and in the end became unsure whether his fans came to enjoy his art or to be entertained by the 'world's greatest junky,' 'the supreme hipster.'"<sup>100</sup> In perusing Blackmur's gloss on Dostoevsky's Stavrogin, Ellison's connection about Parker returns to him anew, suggesting a novel cultural analogy, as the figure of the jazz hipster morphed, by the mid-1960s, into the youthful figure rejecting conventional mores, the American hippie. In this way, we see Ellison continually applying and reapplying Dostoevsky's characters to the ever-changing American scene.

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> R.P. Blackmur, *Eleven Essays on the European Novel* (New York, Harcourt, Brace World, 1964), 177. Ralph Ellison personal copy, The Ralph Ellison Collection, Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Library of Congress.

<sup>100</sup> Ellison, "On Bird, Bird-Watching and Jazz", 261.



**Figure 5.** Ellison's marginalia from his personal copy of R.P. Blackmur, *Eleven Essays on the European Novel* (New York, Harcourt, Brace World, 1964), 138. Ralph Ellison personal copy, The Ralph Ellison Collection, Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Library of Congress. Ellison's note reads: "Yes, and without having to make them black!"

Source: The Ralph Ellison Collection, Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Library of Congress. Image courtesy of Stephen Rachman

Perhaps the wryest and most telling marginal comment that Ellison left in this book appears in Blackmur's essay on *Crime and Punishment*. In a passage in which Blackmur assessed the symbolic value of the ambiguous, depraved, desperately cynical, and ultimately suicidal character of Svidrigailov, he pauses to admire how Dostoevsky chose to embody those dark elements in a personage endowed with fair hair and light eyes, phenotypic traits often prized in Russian culture and typically associated by Dostoevsky with beauty. "He is a symbol of the mystery of the abyss," Blackmur writes, "and it is a great witness to the depth of Dostoevsky's imagination that he is able to create in the flesh, with eyes too blue and flesh too youthful, such figures at will." Ellison's concurred in the margin, writing, "Yes, and without having to make them black!"<sup>101</sup> (fig. 5). Ellison's comment speaks volumes to the manifold ways in which he continually measured his own powers of imagination and characterization against Dostoevsky's. The moral abyss need not be racialized, need

<sup>101</sup> R.P. Blackmur, *Eleven Essays on the European Novel*.

not be tethered to darkness, blackness, and the metaphoric of the shadow. This signified for Ellison a kind of moral and intellectual independence, the weight of which only grew in the racially polarized climate in which he continued to labor.

Delving into Dostoevsky and the critical tradition growing around his work, allowed Ellison to guide his ongoing novelistic endeavors without returning directly to *Invisible Man* while still taking energy and inspiration from the structural and conceptual ideas that animated his first novel. In preparing his review of *Shadow and Act*, Frank actually re-read *Invisible Man* with great pleasure and admiration. He was especially moved by the celebrated exchange between Ras the Destroyer and Tod Clifton, but he did offer some criticisms. “I felt you tipped your hand a little too soon,” Frank queried, “in the marvellous [*sic*] mad-saloon scene at the start (I mean with the speech of the Negro doctor.) Yes? No? How do you feel?”<sup>102</sup> In his response, Ellison ruefully revealed that he envied Frank’s pleasure in reading *Invisible Man*, because he found himself “absolutely incapable” of looking at the book. “Perhaps you are right,” Ellison conceded, “I tipped my hand too soon in the saloon scene. I had a problem of rhetoric and of some of the people. I was unsure of how the general reader would react to the intellectual level of the book, so I suppose I overdid it. I am pretty certain that if I were to do it now, that is to write that scene now, I would have held back more, would have been more implicit.”<sup>103</sup>

I believe the specific passage that Ellison and Frank have in mind here is part of the exchange between Mr. Norton, the white college trustee, and the African-American veteran with a medical background, who is treating his “mild shock” and wants to know how he came to “possess the knowledge” for such an astute diagnosis. The vet explains that he picked up his medical training after World War I in France but in the process he forgot “some fundamentals....Things about life. Such things as most peasants and folk peoples almost always know through experience, though seldom through conscious thought.”<sup>104</sup> Karen Jacobs reads this embrace of folk wisdom as a linkage to Emersonian thought (to which Mr. Norton explicitly subscribes.)<sup>105</sup> But as we have seen in previous sections this theme arises precisely in terms of the “peasantry” in Dostoevsky’s *The House of the Dead*. More importantly, Ellison and Frank are actually worrying over the baldness with which the proposition is stated. “Tipping **ones** hand,” in this context meaning, revealing too openly or too

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<sup>102</sup> Joseph Frank, Letter to Ralph Ellison, 11 November 1964.

<sup>103</sup> Ralph Ellison, Letter to Joseph Frank, 23 November 1964.

<sup>104</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Random House, 1952), 91.

<sup>105</sup> Karen Jacobs, *The Eye’s Mind: Literary Modernism and Visual Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 175.

precipitously a philosophical formulation that might be more artistically presented through action or vernacular. Making it, as Ellison suggests, “more implicit.”

The pressure of invention, of shaping the intellectual content in such a way that it is at once serio-comic, surreal, trenchant and yet, at the same time implicit, these were the artistic stakes of the second, never-to-be-completed novel. As with *Invisible Man*, Dostoevsky and the critical tradition growing around his techniques became a lens through which Ellison sought to achieve this daunting literary task. *Shadow and Act* and his correspondence with Joseph Frank reveal the extent to which Ellison’s use of Dostoevsky became necessary precisely because he saw his essayistic expressions of his cultural analysis as secondary and aesthetically insufficient.

Ralph Ellison’s struggles to create a unifying whole for his sprawling vision that would come down to us replete with its latent Dostoevskyan motifs in the posthumous publications, first *Juneteenth* and then *Three Days Before the Shooting...* Joseph Frank’s labors would produce his sprawling five-volume study of Dostoevsky published over a span of twenty-six years, with a one-volume version of his masterwork appearing in 2010, three years prior to his death. These achievements testify to the powers of expatriation that Dostoevsky might exert upon writers seeking to plumb his depths or mine his veins for new literary ore. Dostoevsky was a lifelong bond between the two. In the spring of 1994, as Frank was drafting the preface to the fourth volume of his study, a volume which he dedicated to R.P. Blackmur, he learned of Ellison’s death. “I should like to record here,” Frank wrote in that preface,

how grateful I have always been to him over the years for our conversations about Dostoevsky just as I was on the point of launching out on a book (!) about him. The enthusiastic support he offered to such an idea was greatly heartening, and I still have the volume of Dostoevsky’s essays that he plucked off his bookshelf...and gave me as a gift. I never pick it up without remembering the warmth of his friendship and the brilliance of his own assimilation of Dostoevsky, both in his magnificent *Invisible Man* and in his critical essays.<sup>106</sup>

Frank’s tribute goes back to this moment of the mid-1960s, and it is now clear that the assimilations he refers to in the works of Ellison extend well beyond *Invisible Man* and *Shadow and Act* to the labyrinthine narrative threads that make up *Three Days before the Shooting...*

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<sup>106</sup> Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: The Miraculous Years, 1865–1871* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), xiii.



Dostoevsky appears as arguably the central literary figure for Ellison's visions of the novel and perhaps his visions of America.

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