

134 QUOTATIONS



Ralph Ellison

(1914-1994)

Ralph Ellison is the first major black novelist who wrote *Invisible Man* (1953), voted in 1965 the most important novel published since World War II by 200 prominent literary figures. He was named after Ralph Waldo Emerson and attended Tuskegee Institute on a music scholarship. As a novelist he moved beyond the black Naturalism of Richard Wright by affirming self-reliance and transcendence through Existentialism—enlightenment and self-creation. Ellison is a Modernist, transcending race, with aesthetics and Expressionist techniques influenced in particular by T.S. Eliot, Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner. In contrast, Toni Morrison is Postmodernist in her Afrocentricity. Ellison won many prestigious literary awards including a National Medal of Arts and a Presidential Medal of Freedom, a library is named for him, and he taught at Rutgers, Yale, Bard, NYU, and the University of Chicago. In 1964 he published a collection of essays, *Shadow and Act*.

ORDER OF TOPICS: youth, family, education, writers, New York, individuation, learning to write, standards, classic American literature, Hemingway, Realism, Modernism, style, Expressionism, Richard Wright, ethnicity, art, Marxism, protest writing, invisibility, *Invisible Man*, folklore, Naturalism, Existentialism, light in the basement, America, integration, “Negro as a Symbol of Man,” transcendence, music, decadence, Postmodernism, Postmodern critics, Postmodern fiction, political parties, favorable reception, *Shadow and Act*, black President, the end.

YOUTH

Our youthful sense of life, like that of many Negro children...was very much like that of Huckleberry Finn, who is universally so praised and enjoyed for the clarity and courage of his moral vision. Like Huck we observed, we judged, we imitated and evaded as we could the dullness, corruption and blindness of “civilization.”

FAMILY

I come from...the Oklahoma of the years between World War I and the Great Depression.

My mother had canvassed for the socialists, not the communists, the year I was born.

We were Americans born into...the context of Negro-American post-Civil War history, "frontiersmen."

I am not ashamed of my grandparents for having been slaves. I am only ashamed of myself for having at one time been ashamed.

EDUCATION

The places where a rich oral literature was truly functional were the churches, the schoolyards, the barbershops, the cotton-picking camps; places where folklore and gossip thrived. The drug store where I worked was such a place, where on days of bad weather the older men would sit with their pipes and tell tall tales, hunting yarns and homely versions of the classics.

WRITERS

The library at Tuskegee was quite adequate and I used it. Soon I was reading a whole range of subjects...and this led, in turn, to...Pound and Ford Madox Ford, Sherwood Anderson and Gertrude Stein, Hemingway and Fitzgerald and...Melville.

[Richard] Wright was...a "relative"; Hemingway an "ancestor"; Langston Hughes, whose work I knew in grade school and whom I knew before I knew Wright, was a "relative"; Eliot, whom I was to meet only many years later, and Malraux and Dostoyevsky and Faulkner, were "ancestors."

NEW YORK

I managed, by keeping quiet about it, to cling to our boyish ideal during three years in Alabama, and I brought it with me to New York, where it not only gave silent support to my explorations of what was then an unknown territory, but served to mock and caution me when I became interested in the communist ideal.

INDIVIDUATION

T.S. Eliot initiated the search.

I was looking for myself and asking everyone except myself questions which I, and only I, could answer.

So after years of trying to adopt the opinions of others I finally rebelled.

What and how much had I lost by trying to do only what was expected of me instead of what I myself had wished to do?

LEARNING TO WRITE

The act of writing requires a constant plunging back into the shadow of the past where time hovers ghostlike.

The antidote to hubris, to overweening pride, is irony, that capacity to discover and systematize ideas. Or, as Emerson insisted, the development of consciousness, consciousness, consciousness.

Writing was an acting-out, symbolically, of a choice which I dared not acknowledge. Indeed, I repressed it beneath my old concern with music and my current involvement in the intense social and political activity which claimed so many of us who came of age during the thirties.

Fiction became the agency of my efforts to answer the questions: Who am I, what am I, how did I come to be? What shall I make of the life around me, what celebrate, what reject, how confront the snarl of good and evil which is inevitable?

In 1935 I discovered Eliot's "The Waste Land" which moved and intrigued me but defied my powers of analysis... Later on, in New York, I read a poem by Richard Wright... I learned a few things from Eliot, Joyce and Hemingway, but not how to adapt them. When I started writing, I knew that in both "The Waste Land" and *Ulysses* ancient myth and ritual were used to give form and significance to the material; but it took me a few years to realize that the myths and rites which we find functioning in our everyday lives could be used in the same way.

This was the Recession of 1937. I went to Dayton, Ohio, where my brother and I hunted and sold game to earn a living. At night I practiced writing and studied Joyce, Dostoyevsky, Stein, and Hemingway. Especially Hemingway. I read him to learn his sentence structure and how to organize a story. I guess many young writers were doing this....it was from Hemingway I learned to lead a bird. When he describes something in print, believe him.

STANDARDS

My standards were impossibly high.

To measure up to our own standards was the only way of affirming our notion of manhood. [echo of Hemingway]

Among [concerns] is the need to keep literary standards high, the necessity of exploring new possibilities of language which would allow it to retain that flexibility and fidelity to the common speech which has been its glory since Mark Twain. For me this meant learning to add to it the wonderful resources of Negro American speech and idiom and to bring into range as fully and eloquently as possible the complex reality of the American experience as it shaped and was shaped by the lives of my own people.

Remember, too, as William Faulkner made us so vividly aware, that the slaves often took the essence of the aristocratic ideal (as they took Christianity) with far more seriousness than their masters.

CLASSIC AMERICAN LITERATURE

Of all our nineteenth-century masters of fiction—Hawthorne, Melville, Henry James, Mark Twain and Stephen Crane—it was Crane...who was the most war-haunted...by the time of his death, at twenty-nine, he was recognized as one of the important innovators of American fictional prose and master of a powerful and original style.... Crane developed the strategy of understatement and the technique of impressionism which was to point the way for Hemingway and our fiction of the twenties.

"The Monster" reminds us that [Crane] not only anticipated many of the techniques and themes of Hemingway, but that he also stands as the link between the Twain of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* and *Huckleberry Finn* and the Faulkner of *The Sound and the Fury*. The point is not simply that in *The Sound and the Fury*, as in Crane's work, a young boy is warned against "projacking" with flowers, or that Benjy is as much a "monster" as Henry Johnson, or Henry as much an idiot as Benjy, or that their communities are more monstrous than either, or that to touch either is considered a test of courage by the small fry, or even that both suffer when young girls are frightened by them.

HEMINGWAY

We come to Hemingway, one of the two writers whose art is based most solidly upon Mark Twain's language, and one who perhaps has done most to extend Twain's technical influence upon our fiction. It was Hemingway who pointed out that all modern American writing springs from *Huckleberry Finn*. (One might add here that equally as much of it derives from Hemingway himself.)

Do you still ask why Hemingway was more important to me than Wright? Not because he was white, or more "accepted." But because he appreciated the things of this earth which I love and which Wright was too driven or deprived or inexperienced to know: weather, guns, dogs, horses, love *and* hate and impossible circumstances which to the courageous and dedicated could be turned into benefits and victories. Because he wrote with such precision about the processes and techniques of daily living that I could keep myself

and my brother alive during the 1937 Recession by following his descriptions of wing-shooting; because he knew the difference between politics and art and something of their true relationship for the writer. Because all that he wrote—and this is very important—was imbued with a spirit beyond the tragic with which I could feel at home, for it was very close to the feeling of the blues, which are, perhaps, as close as Americans can come to expressing the spirit of tragedy.... But most important because Hemingway was a greater artist than Wright.

REALISM

Good fiction is made of that which is real, and reality is difficult to come by.

There is in progress between black and white Americans a struggle over the nature of reality.

There is a value for the writer in trying to give as thorough a report of social reality as possible. Only by doing so may we grasp and convey the cost of change.

I was never more hated than when I tried to be honest. Or when, even as just now I've tried to articulate exactly what I felt to be the truth. No one was satisfied.

Twain, though guilty of the sentimentality common to humorists, does not idealize the slave. Jim is drawn in all his ignorance and superstition, with his good traits and his bad. He, like all men, is ambiguous, limited in circumstance but not in possibility. And it will be noted that when Huck makes his decision he identifies himself with Jim and accepts the judgment of his superego—that internalized representative of the community—that his action is evil.

MODERNISM

[Modernist writing] is technically brilliant and emotionally powerful.

Faulkner...has explored perhaps more successfully than anyone else, either white or black, certain forms of Negro humanity.

In Faulkner's story, "The Bear," he brings us as close to the moral implication of the Negro as Twain or Melville.

Faulkner fights out the moral problem which was repressed after the nineteenth century, and it was shocking for some to discover that for all his concern with the South, Faulkner was actually seeking out the nature of man. Thus we must turn to him for that continuity of moral purpose which made for the greatness of our classics.... Perhaps his is the example for our writers to follow, for in his work technique has been put once more to the task of creating value. What is more, he is the greatest artist the South has produced.

At the time I was under the influence of Ernest Hemingway, and his description, in *Death in the Afternoon*, of his thinking when he first went to Spain.... His statement of moral and aesthetic purpose which followed focused my own search to relate myself to American life through literature. For I found the greatest difficulty for a Negro writer was the problem of revealing what he truly felt, rather than serving up what Negroes were supposed to feel, and were encouraged to feel.

STYLE

Behind each artist there stands a traditional sense of style, a sense of the felt tension indicative of expressive completeness; a mode of humanizing reality and of evoking a feeling of being at home in the world.

If I were asked in all seriousness just what I considered to be the chief significance of *Invisible Man* as a fiction, I would reply: Its *experimental* attitude, and its attempt to return to the mood of personal moral responsibility for democracy which typified the best of our nineteenth-century fiction. [emphasis added]

EXPRESSIONISM

A thin voice with a mirror on the end of it said, "How is he?"

Everything seemed slowed down.... And I could see the cop bark a command and lunge forward, thrusting out his arm and missing, thrown off balance as suddenly Clifton spun on his toes like a dancer and swung his right arm over and around in a short, jolting arc, his torso carrying forward and to the left in a motion that sent the box strap free as his right foot traveled forward and his left arm followed through in a floating uppercut that sent the cop's cap sailing into the street and his feet flying, to drop him hard, rocking from left to right on the walk as Clifton kicked the box thudding aside and crouched, his left foot forward, his hands high, waiting. And between the flashing of cars I could see the cop propping himself on his elbows like a drunk trying to get his head up, shaking it and thrusting it forward—And somewhere between the dull roar of traffic and the subway vibrating underground I heard rapid explosions and saw each pigeon diving wildly as though blackjacked by the sound, and the cop sitting up straight now, and rising to his knees looking steadily at Clifton, and the pigeons plummeting swiftly into the trees, and Clifton still facing the cop and suddenly crumpling.

RICHARD WRIGHT

I sought out Wright because I had read Eliot, Pound, Gertrude Stein and Hemingway, and as early as 1940 Wright viewed me as a potential rival, partially, it is true, because he feared I would allow myself to be used against him by political manipulators who were not Negro and who envied and hated him.

Wright is an important writer, perhaps the most articulate Negro American, and what he has to say is highly perceptive. Imagine Bigger Thomas projecting his own life in lucid prose, guided, say, by the insights of Marx and Freud, and you have an idea of this autobiography [*Black Boy*].

No, Wright was no spiritual father of mine, certainly in no sense I recognized—nor did he pretend to be, since he felt that I had started writing too late. It was [James] Baldwin's career, not mine, that Wright proudly advanced...and it was Baldwin who found Wright a lion in his path. Being older and familiar with quite different lions in quite different paths, I simply stepped around him.

ETHNICITY

All novels are about certain minorities: the individual is a minority.

I am, after all, only a minor member, not the whole damned tribe; in fact, most Negroes have never heard of me.

The Negro novelist draws his blackness too tightly around him when he sits down to write--that's what the anti-protest critics believe--but perhaps the white reader draws his whiteness around himself when he sits down to read. He doesn't want to identify himself with Negro characters in terms of our immediate racial and social situation, though on the deeper human level identification can become compelling when the situation is revealed artistically. The white reader doesn't want to get too close, not even in an imaginary re-creation of society. Negro writers have felt this, and it has led to much of our failure.

I am a novelist, not an activist... But I think that no one who reads what I write or who listens to my lectures can doubt that I am enlisted in the freedom movement. As an individual, I am primarily responsible for the health of American literature and culture. When I write, I am trying to make sense out of chaos. To think that a writer must think about his Negroiness is to fall into a trap.

It is quite possible that much potential fiction by Negro Americans fails precisely at this point: through the writers' refusal (often through provincialism or lack of courage or opportunism) to achieve a vision of life and a resourcefulness of craft commensurate with the complexity of their actual situation. Too often they fear to leave the uneasy sanctuary of race to take their chances in the world of art.

Having inherited the language of Shakespeare and Melville, Mark Twain and Lincoln and no other, I try to do my part in keeping the American language alive and rich by using in my work the music and idiom of American Negro speech, and by insisting that the words of that language correspond with the reality of American life as seen by my own people.

ART

I wasn't, and am not, *primarily* concerned with injustice, but with art.

The understanding of art depends finally upon one's willingness to extend one's humanity and one's knowledge of human life.

There must be possible a fiction which, leaving sociology and case histories to the scientists, can arrive at the truth about the human condition, here and now, with all the bright magic of the fairy tale.

God is love, I said, but art's the possibility of forms, and shadows are the source of identity.

MARXISM

The Left brought the world-view of Marxism into the Negro community.

I didn't think too much of the so-called proletarian fiction even when I was most impressed by Marxism...

There is, I believe, a threat when industrialism is linked to a political doctrine which has as its goal the subjugation of the world.

How awful that [Richard] Wright found the facile answers of Marxism before he learned to use literature as a means for discovering the forms of American Negro humanity.

I was intrigued by Malraux, who at that time was being claimed by the Communists. I noticed, however, that whenever the heroes of *Man's Fate* regarded their condition during moments of heightened self-consciousness, their thinking was something other than Marxist.... Of course, Malraux was more of a humanist than most of the Marxist writers of the period—and also much more of an artist.

I was forced to this awareness [of "ideological expediencies"] through my struggles with the craft of fiction; yes, and by my attraction (soon rejected) of Marxist political theory, which was my response to the inferior status which society sought to impose upon me. (I did not then, now, or ever *consider* myself inferior).

PROTEST WRITING

Protest is *not* the source of the inadequacy characteristic of most novels by Negroes, but the simple failure of craft, bad writing; the desire to have protest perform the difficult tasks of art; the belief that racial suffering, social injustice or ideologies of whatever mammy-made variety, is enough. I know, also, that when the work of Negro writers has been rejected they have all too often protected their egos by blaming racial discrimination, while turning away from the fairly obvious fact that good art—and Negro musicians are ever present to demonstrate this—commands attention of itself, whatever the writer's politics or point of view. And they forget that publishers will publish almost anything.

INVISIBILITY

Poor stumblers, neither of you can see the other.

There are few things in the world as dangerous as sleepwalkers.

Irresponsibility is part of my invisibility... To whom can I be responsible, and why should I be, when you refuse to see me?

In 1950 my wife and I were staying at a vacation spot where we met some white liberals who thought the best way to be friendly was to tell us what it was like to be Negro.

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe, nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me.

It's when you feel like this that, out of resentment, you begin to bump people back. And, let me confess, you feel that way most of the time. You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world, that you're a part of all the sound and anguish, and you strike out with your fists, you curse and you swear and you swear to make them recognize you. And, alas, it's seldom successful.

For the racial situation has become like an irrational sea in which Americans flounder like convoyed ships in a gale. The phrase rotates like a gyroscope of irony of which the Negro maintains a hazardous stability as the sea-tossed ship of his emotions whirls him willy-nilly along.

Invisible Man (1953)

Let me say right now that my book is not an autobiographical work.

The major flaw in the hero's character is his unquestioning willingness to do what is required of him by others as a way to success, and this was the specific form of his "innocence."

The three parts represent the narrator's movement from, using Kenneth Burke's terms, purpose to passion to perception. These three major sections are built up of smaller units of three which mark the course of the action.... [*Invisible Man* is] about innocence and human error, a struggle through illusion to reality. Each section begins with a sheet of paper; each piece of paper is exchanged for another and contains a definition of his identity, or the social role he is to play as defined for him by others. But all say essentially the same thing: "Keep this nigger boy running." Once he recognizes the hole of darkness into which these papers put him, he has to burn them.

[In] The Prologue... I wanted to throw the reader off balance--make him accept certain non-naturalistic effects. [Expressionism].... In the South, where he was trying to fit into a traditional pattern and where his sense of certainty had not yet been challenged, I felt a more naturalistic treatment was adequate.... As the hero passes from the South to the North, from the relatively stable to the swiftly changing, his sense of certainty is lost and the style becomes expressionistic. Later on during his fall from grace in the Brotherhood it becomes somewhat surrealistic. The styles try to express both his state of consciousness and the state of society.

The book is a series of reversals. It is the portrait of the artist as a rabble-rouser, thus the various mediums of expression. In the Epilogue the hero discovers what he had not discovered throughout the book: you have to make your own decisions; you have to think for yourself. The hero comes up from underground because the act of writing and thinking necessitated it. He could not stay down there.

The hero's invisibility is not a matter of being seen, but a refusal to run the risk of his own humanity, which involves guilt. This is not an attack upon white society! It is what the hero refuses to do in each section which leads to further action. He must assert and achieve his own humanity; he cannot run with the pack and do this--this is the reason for all the reversals.

Later I learned that [Rinehart] was a call used by Harvard students when they prepared to riot, a call to chaos. Which is very interesting, because it is not long after Rinehart appears in my novel that the riot breaks out in Harlem. Rinehart is my name for the personification of chaos. He is also intended to represent America and change. He has lived so long with chaos that he knows how to manipulate it. It is the old theme of *The Confidence Man*. He is in a country with no solid past or stable class lines; therefore he is able to move about easily from one to the other.

The symbols and their connections were known to me. I began it with a chart of the three-part division. It was a conceptual frame with most of the ideas and some incidents indicated. The three parts represent the narrator's movement from, using Kenneth Burke's terms, purpose to passion to perception. These three major sections are built up of smaller units of three which mark the course of the action...

It's not an important novel. I failed of eloquence and many of the immediate issues are rapidly fading away. If it does last, it will be simply because there are things going on in its depth that are of more permanent interest than on its surface.

FOLKLORE

Negro folklore, evolving within a larger culture which regarded it as inferior, was an especially courageous expression. It announced the Negro's willingness to trust his own experience, his own sensibilities as to the definition of reality, rather than allow his masters to define these crucial matters for him.

There are certain themes, symbols, and images which are based on folk material [in *Invisible Man*]. For example, there is the old saying among Negroes: If you're black, stay back; if you're brown, stick around; if you're white, you're right. And there is the joke Negroes tell on themselves about their being so black they can't be seen in the dark. In my book this sort of thing was merged with the meanings which blackness and light have long had in Western mythology: evil and goodness, ignorance and knowledge, and so on.

In my novel the narrator's development is one through blackness to light; that is, from ignorance to enlightenment: invisibility to visibility. He leaves the South and goes North; this, as you will notice in reading Negro folk tales, is always the road to freedom--the movement upward. You have the same thing again when he leaves his underground cave for the open.

NATURALISM

The naturalists stick to case histories and sociology and are willing to compete with the camera and the tape recorder.

Thus to see America with an awareness of its rich diversity and its almost magical fluidity and freedom, I was forced to conceive of a novel unburdened by the narrow naturalism which has led, after so many triumphs, to the final and unrelieved despair which marks so much of our current fiction.

A mockingbird trilled a note from where it perched upon the hand of the moonlit Founder, flipping its moon-mad tail above the head of the eternally kneeling slave.... The street lamps glowed brilliant in the moonlit dream of the campus, each light serene in its cage of shadows.

I had discovered unrecognized compulsions of my being—even though I could not answer “yes” to their promptings.

“But it was out of my control, sir,” I said.

“You have studied Emerson, haven't you?”...

“We haven't come to him yet.”

Keep this nigger boy running.

EXISTENTIALISM

You could actually make yourself anew.

When I discover who I am, I'll be free.

The world is a possibility if only you'll discover it.

All life seen from the hole of invisibility is absurd.

I knew that it was better to live out one's absurdity than to die for that of others.

Father and mother substitutes also have a role to play in aiding the child to help create himself.

Some people are your relatives but others are your ancestors, and you choose the ones you want to have as ancestors. You create yourself out of those values.

The world is just as concrete, ornery, vile, and sublimely wonderful as before, only now I better understand my relation to it and it to me.

LIGHT IN THE BASEMENT

The truth is the light and light is the truth.

We were projecting archetypes.

[The] unwillingness to resolve the conflict in keeping with his democratic ideals has compelled the white American, figuratively, to force the Negro down into the deeper level of his consciousness, into the inner world, where reason and madness mingle with hope and memory and endlessly give birth to nightmare and to dream; down into the province of the psychiatrist and the artist; from whence spring the lunatic's fancy and the work of art.

Dr. Frederick Wertham, Director of the Lafargue Clinic...fought for a psychiatric center in which Negroes could receive treatment.... The results were *electric*.... These physicians...like some Southern Negroes who consider that part of themselves best which they hide beneath their servility, they consider their most important work that which is carried out in a Harlem *basement*. [emphasis added]

In my hole in the basement there are exactly 1,369 lights. I've wired the entire ceiling, every inch of it.

My hole is warm and full of light.

AMERICA

America is woven of many strands. I would recognize them and let it so remain.... Our fate is to become one, and yet many.

We are fortunate as American writers in that with our variety of racial and national traditions, idioms and manners, we are yet one. [the "melting pot"]

At best Americans give but a limited attention to history. Too much happens too rapidly, and before we can evaluate it, or exhaust its meaning or pleasure, there is something new to concern us. Ours is the tempo of the motion picture, not that of the still camera, and we waste experience as we wasted the forest.

I feel the need to reaffirm all of it, the whole unhappy territory and all the things loved and unlovable in it, for it is all part of me.

INTEGRATION

I'm not a separatist. The imagination is integrative. That's how you make the new—by putting something else with what you've got. And I'm unashamedly an American integrationist.

I remember that I'm invisible and walk softly so as not to awaken the sleeping ones.

Play the game, but don't believe in it.

"THE NEGRO AS A SYMBOL OF MAN"

In a sense the Negro was the gauge of the human condition as it waxed and waned in our democracy.

The Negro's emergence as a symbol of value came, I believe, with Rationalism and the rise of the romantic individual of the eighteenth century.... Even that prototype of the bourgeois, Robinson Crusoe, stopped to speculate as to his slave's humanity.

In the United States the Negro and his status have always stood for...moral concern. He symbolizes among other things the human and social possibility of equality. This is the moral question raised in our two great nineteenth-century novels, *Moby-Dick* and *Huckleberry Finn*.

Jim, therefore, is not simply a slave, he is a symbol of humanity, and in freeing Jim, Huck makes a bid to free himself of the conventionalized evil taken for civilization by the town.

This conception of the Negro as a symbol of Man—the reversal of what he represents in most contemporary thought—was organic to nineteenth-century literature. It occurs not only in Twain but in Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman and Melville (whose symbol of evil, incidentally was white), all of whom were men publicly involved in various forms of deeply personal rebellion.

TRANSCENDENCE

Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?

Education is all a matter of building bridges.

We look too much to museums. The sun coming up in the morning is enough. [echo of Emerson]

MUSIC

Eclecticism is the word. Like a jazz musician who creates his own style out of the styles around him, I play by ear.

The jazzmen were less torn and damaged by the moral compromises and insincerities which have so sickened the life of our country.

The blues is an art of ambiguity, an assertion of the irrepressibly human over all circumstance whether created by others or by one's own human failings. They are the only consistent art in the United States which constantly remind us of our limitations while encouraging us to see how far we can actually go.

The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-com lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically.

Let us close with one final word about the blues: The attraction lies in this, that they at once express both the agony of life and the possibility of conquering it through sheer toughness of spirit.

Too much living and aspiration have gone into [our spirituals], so that drained of its elements of defensiveness and alienation it will become even more precious to us, for we will see it ever clearer as a transcendent value.

DECADENCE

Commercial rock 'n' roll music is a brutalization of the stream of contemporary Negro church music...an obscene looting of a cultural expression.

POSTMODERNISM

Life is to be lived, not controlled.

For me this was not a city of realities, but of dreams. [echo of Eliot's "Unreal City"]

If the word has the potency to revive and make us free, it has also the power to blind, imprison, and destroy.

POSTMODERN CRITICS

Why is it that sociology-oriented critics seem to rate literature so far below politics and ideology that they would rather kill a novel than modify their presumptions concerning a given reality which it seeks in its own terms to project?

POSTMODERN FICTION

Just as trends toward technique for the sake of technique and production for the sake of the market lead to the neglect of the human need out of which they spring, so do they lead in literature to a marvelous technical virtuosity won at the expense of a gross insensitivity to fraternal values.

POLITICAL PARTIES

The only sincerity to be expected of political parties is that flexible variety whereby they are enabled to put their own programs into effect. Regardless of their long-range intentions, on the practical level they are guided not by humanism so much as by expediencies of power.

FAVORABLE RECEPTION

By and large, the critics and readers gave me an affirmed sense of my identity as a writer. You might know this within yourself, but to have it affirmed by others is of utmost importance.

Shadow and Act (1964)

They [his essays] are concerned with three general themes: with literature and folklore, with Negro musical expression—especially jazz and the blues—and with the complex relationship between the Negro American subculture and North American culture as a whole.

One might say that with these essays for wings I was launched full flight into the dark.

BLACK PRESIDENT

I would like to see a qualified Negro as President of the United States. But I suspect that even if this were today possible, the necessities of the office would shape his actions far more than his racial identity.

THE END

The end is my beginning and lies far ahead.

Some of these quotations are excerpted from
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