Ralph Ellison’s Terministic Screen: Consciousness–Conscience and Purpose–Passion–Perception

David Dennen
2024 (last revised 18 October 2024)[1]

Our nomenclatures, Kenneth Burke has argued, serve to direct or channel our attention in the world. In one famous essay (*Language* 44–62) he refers to nomenclatures or terminologies as *terministic screens* in order to emphasize this attention-directing feature of language: the words we use serve to screen or filter our perceptual field. Terministic screens serve as verbal orientations, as “bundles of judgments,” which explain our pasts, guide our actions in the present, and anticipate our futures (see Burke, *Permanence* 14).

Ralph Ellison was a close acquaintance of Burke, and it is probably no accident that he was extremely careful in choosing key terms for guiding his writing and for interpreting literature, history, and society. A number of technical terms recur in Ellison’s work: aside from the terms to which I give special attention here, astute readers and researchers will notice the recurrence of terms such as *catharsis*, *chaos*, *hierarchy*, *quest*, *scapegoat*, *tragicomic*, the terms of Kenneth Burke’s dramatistic pentad/hexad (*attitude*, *act*, *scene*, *agent*, *agency*, *purpose*; see Burke, *Grammar*), and Greek ritualist terms such as *agon* and *peripeteia*. I return to some of these below. But it seems to me that the most dominating elements of Ellison’s terministic screen are what I shall abbreviate as the two Cs and the three Ps: *consciousness* and *conscience*; and *purpose*, *passion*, and *perception*.

These two sets of terms are not unknown to critics. Following the publication of Ellison’s *Shadow and Act* (1964), which contains an interview in which Ellison invokes “Kenneth Burke’s

[1] This essay is a counterpart to my “The Dream of the Iron Groom: The Construction and Function of a Symbol in Ralph Ellison’s Unfinished Novel.” I’m grateful to Steve Pinkerton for comments which have improved this draft; flaws remain my own.

terms, purpose to passion to perception" (*Collected* 218), much lip service has been paid to the three Ps in Ellison criticism (for early examples, see Lee 22; Haupt 8). But, curiously, not much actual critical use has been made of them. Leon Forrest's essay on *Invisible Man* (Forrest 126–45), which takes seriously Ellison's hint about the relation of the three Ps to the organization of the novel, is an important exception. But even Burke's own essay-letter on that novel ("Ralph Ellison's") does not invoke the three Ps; and surely part of the reason for this is that, contrary to what many critics have believed, the terms are not strictly speaking Burke's own.

One reason for the lack of substantive discussion of the three Ps may be the fact that Ellison has not often used them in published writings. Purpose, passion, and perception are explicitly linked together only a few times in the entirety of his *Collected Essays*. Yet study of Ellison's unpublished notes (available principally in the Library of Congress) reveals that the three Ps were almost obsessively on his mind while he was composing his novels and at least some of his essays. The three Ps were not just a convenient device for organizing *Invisible Man*, as per Ellison's claim in an interview; they were a framework on which he consistently relied to guide his writing long after that novel.

Ellison used the two Cs—*consciousness* and *conscience*—much more regularly in his published writings, principally in his essays. The terms have also been mentioned in the critical literature, with a number of scholars studying aspects of Ellison's conception of consciousness or conscience (see Lyne; Albrecht; Foley; Turner, Taylor). But I am not aware of critics addressing the background of these terms, nor the precise relation between the two terms, nor the relation between them and the three Ps.

I argue that there is much to be gained by looking into the provenance and employment of Ellison's terministic screen. First, there is the matter of influence. Ellison's public statements

can be as misleading about his influences as they are revealing, and his statements about the two Cs and three Ps are good instances of misdirection. As already mentioned, he linked the three Ps to Burke, and he occasionally linked the two Cs with Ralph Waldo Emerson. Neither of these references quite stands up to critical scrutiny. Burke and Emerson undeniably influenced Ellison. But the three Ps, while based on Burke's ideas, do not come directly from Burke. Acknowledging their actual origin, and looking at how Ellison related the three Ps to other theories of drama and narrative, gives us a broader picture of his intellectual and aesthetic influences. Similarly, while both Burke and Emerson made use of the concepts of consciousness and conscience, given the timeline of Ellison's own use, it is likely he picked up the terms from other sources. (And, in fact, Ellison has a rather non-Emersonian view of consciousness and conscience.) Taking Ellison's own attributions with a degree of skepticism will allow us a richer perspective on the myriad influences working on Ellison as a young writer.

Second, there is the matter of usage or function. It seems to me not sufficiently recognized that Ellison's key terms are *both* literary-critical terms *and* social-critical terms. They guided him not only in the creation and interpretation of literature, but in the interpretation of society and even of his own and others' actual lives. Consciousness and conscience are, we might say, the master terms: for Ellison it is our "sacred" duty as Americans to pursue a progressively clearer consciousness of our ideals and thus a progressively more refined conscientiousness in our actions. It is the function of great fiction to aid us in this pursuit, and Ellison's own literary analyses often homed in on those points at which consciousness and conscience are attained or evaded. From this perspective, the three Ps appear as subsidiary to the two Cs. They help us to understand and recognize, in a more fine-grained way, *how* revolutions in consciousness and transformations of conscience occur.

Consciousness and conscience are large-scale ideals and appear most conspicuously in his essays and letters addressing issues of race and equality. They give meaning to Ellison's craft. Purpose, passion, and perception are more practical and appear most conspicuously in his compositional notes. They give specific direction and organization to his craft. I will begin my exploration of the provenance and use of Ellison's terministic screen with the two Cs.

Consciousness and Conscience

Ellison's earliest discussion of consciousness and conscience, in those specific terms, comes, as far as I can determine, from 1945 (see *Collected* 149)—though a similar idea is expressed even earlier, in some of his first publications. Ellison's use of these terms continued through the 1980s. Most commonly, Ellison uses the two Cs in his analyses of American history and society. Occasionally, he uses them to analyze works of literature. Rarely does he apply them to his own work. Yet, at the same time, since the terms structure his understanding of the *function* of art, they often seem implicit in his own literary practice.

Ellison's clearest definitions of these terms come from a commencement address given in 1972. There Ellison opines that, "With their words and deeds" the American founders "laid upon all of us an obligation to *consciousness and conscience*. By which I mean *an obligation to be consciously aware* of the ideals to which they had committed us, and *conscientiously concerned* with making their ideas manifest in the quality of this nation's life" (*Collected* 412–13; emphasis added). Ellison doggedly insisted on the "obligation" or "burden" of "consciousness and conscience" that was imposed on us as Americans: "Consciousness and conscience are burdens imposed upon us by the American experiment. They are the American's agony, but when he tries to live up to their stern demands they become his justification" (*Collected* 59).

But Ellison was especially concerned with our *failure* to live up to this obligation. There is much that we would prefer to repress from consciousness and conscience. In particular, white Americans have tended to place black Americans beyond consciousness and conscience, and so evade their own moral obligation to strive for the perfection of democracy (cf. *Collected* 586). Insofar as black Americans are repressed from consciousness and conscience, they are "caught up associatively" with much else which the "white folk mind" would repress: "it is almost impossible for many whites to consider questions of sex, women, economic opportunity, the national identity, historical change, social justice—even the 'criminality' implicit in the broadening of freedom itself—without summoning malignant images of black men into consciousness" (*Collected* 102).

How did Ellison come to this terminology which, though not unique in itself, is used by Ellison in a distinctive manner? The direct source of the phrase *consciousness and conscience* was likely the writings of the English critic Christopher Caudwell. But we will see that these terms were also important for a number of other writers who influenced Ellison in the 1930s and 1940s. Particularly worth mentioning are Richard Wright, Mikhail Lifshitz, James Joyce, André Malraux, T. S. Eliot, and, less directly, Matthew Arnold.

Influences Actual and Possible

When Ralph Ellison arrived in New York in the summer of 1936, he stepped almost immediately into the leftist radicalism of the 1930s (see Foley 27–67; Jackson 161–236; Rampersad 81–113). On his second day in New York he met Langston Hughes who was soon lending him books by leftist writers like André Malraux, Cecil Day Lewis, and John Strachey. He would later share a house in Harlem with Hughes's friend Louise Thompson, then a member of the Communist

Party USA. In 1937 he would meet Richard Wright, also then a Communist, and meet and be introduced to the work of Kenneth Burke, a Communist sympathizer. Ellison's first wife, whom he married in 1938, would be a Communist. Ellison's first professional work as a writer would be for leftist magazines such as *New Masses*. It is apparently unknown whether Ellison himself ever actually joined the Party, but his world was certainly perfused with Communist discourse.

Marxism is, of course, centrally concerned with consciousness—class consciousness, false consciousness. But the Marxism that Ellison encountered in the late 1930s and early 1940s was often not a *pure* Marxism. It was a Marxism that had had its view of behavior and consciousness tempered by psychoanalysis. This was true of the Marxists or Communists that would most influence Ellison at the time: Richard Wright, Kenneth Burke, Christopher Caudwell. While consciousness in classic Marxism often seems epiphenomenal—a mere "reflection of being" (Lenin 377)[2]—the Marxist-Freudians held a more active view of consciousness. This more active view is the one taken up by Ellison.

The term *consciousness* pervades Ellison's earliest writings. The most striking example of this is his long article in a 1941 issue of *New Masses* titled "Recent Negro Fiction." In this article he writes of a "new Negro consciousness" which "must of necessity go beyond the highest point of bourgeois consciousness and work toward the creation of conditions in which it might integrate and stabilize itself; it demands new institutions, a new society" (24). It is, Ellison writes, "the task of fiction" to aid Negroes in "possess[ing] the conscious meaning of their lives" and thus "become conditioned in working class methods of organized struggle" (26). Here

---

[2] This quotation is from a text owned by Ellison. Also cf. Dirlik (186): "The economistic interpretation of Marxism renders consciousness epiphenomenal by definition. Therefore, it denies the significant role of consciousness in social change and revolution." This explicit mirror-theory of consciousness often seems to have been in tension with an implied active view of consciousness, such as is found in Lenin's *What Is to Be Done?* (1902; published in English in 1929). For more on Ellison and Leninism, see Flatley.

consciousness is not a mere reflection of social reality but, as clarified by "honest Negro writing," an instrument of social change (26).

This is one of a few early articles in which Ellison suggests the causal efficacy of changes in consciousness. In a 1940 review of Langston Hughes's autobiography, he asserted that "in the South" the attainment of "a heightened consciousness … is in itself a revolutionary act." Moreover: "It will be the spread of this consciousness, added to the passion and sensitivity of the Negro people, that will help create a new way of life in the United States" ("Stormy" 21). In another book review from that year, he writes of people "fighting against … the Harlan mine operators, the Associated Farmers, and the Bourbons … with high consciousness and heroism" ("Argosy" 24)—the final phrase bringing to mind *consciousness and conscience*.

Richard Wright's *Native Son* also appeared at this time (it is discussed in Ellison's "Recent Negro Literature") and was centrally concerned with the avoidance and attainment of consciousness—with the dialectic of blindness and awareness.[3] Wright's early writing would influence Ellison heavily and is worth discussing in some detail.

The antihero of *Native Son*, Bigger Thomas, is early in the book constantly seen evading consciousness and thus conscience. We see him trying to avoid consciousness of the condition of his family—"the shame and misery of their lives"—as well as the meaning of his own life. If he allowed himself to become fully conscious of these he would be swept away by "fear and despair," "he would either kill himself or someone else" (Wright 22). Later, when he spoils his own plans of robbery, we see Bigger evading clear consciousness of his own motivations in order to avoid showing fear: "he kept this knowledge of his fear thrust firmly down in him; his courage to live depended upon how successfully his fear was hidden from his consciousness" (56–57).

[3] This dialectic is a major element of most of Wright's novels as well as of the autobiographical *Black Boy*.

Things change after he accidentally kills a white girl. Bigger begins to become conscious in a way that others are not, in a way that produces what we might call an *outlaw* or *outcast conscience*—an ethic opposed to the dominant ethic of society. Bigger would see where others were "blind," and would act out his desires in the face of their blindness:

> Things were becoming clear; he would know how to act from now on. … All one had to do was be bold, do something nobody thought of. … [T]here was in everyone a great hunger to believe that made him blind, and if he could see while others blind, then he could get what he wanted and never be caught at it. (124–25)

Bigger becomes conscious of social rules, yet knowingly acts contrary to them.

Wright is not merely pointing to the existence of consciously anti-moral individuals like Bigger. He is pointing to a social blindness, a social lapse of consciousness that engenders such individuals. This social blindness is symbolized by the literal blindness of Mrs. Dalton, the mother of the family that had employed Bigger. Mrs. Dalton had unknowingly been present when her daughter was suffocated by Bigger. As Bigger's lawyer tells her during the trial scene, "Your philanthropy was as tragically blind as your sightless eyes!" (424). Indeed, the function of Bigger's lawyer, Max, is to bring Bigger and the circumstances that created him to social consciousness—to drag them "out of the night of fear into the light of reason" (415)—and thus to resuscitate social conscience. Max wants the court to "see and know! And our seeing and knowing will comprise a consciousness of how inescapably this one man's life will confront us ten million fold in the days to come" (432). In his attempt to raise Bigger's life to consciousness, Max thrusts a "deep burden of responsibility" (415) upon the judge. The judge, however, is not

brought to consciousness and conscience in the way Max hopes. And the only consciousness Bigger seems to attain is that he did what he had to do according to his social conditioning.

While Ellison came to have qualms about Wright's portrayal of Bigger, initially he was enthusiastic. In a 1940 letter to Wright he defended the novel, in a manner both telling and misguided, against Marxist critics:

> They refuse to see the revolutionary significance of Bigger …. They fail to see that what's <u>bad</u> in Bigger from the point of view of bourgeois society is <u>good</u> from our point of view. He, Bigger, has what Hegel called the "indignant consciousness" and because of this he is more human than those who sent him to his death; for it was they, not he who fostered the dehumanizing conditions which shaped his personality. When the "indignant consciousness" becomes the "theoretical consciousness," indignant man is aware of his historical destiny and fights to achieve it. Would that <u>all</u> Negroes were psychologically free as Bigger and as capable of positive action! (*Selected* 131)

This explanation of Bigger does not seem entirely coherent or in keeping with the spirit of Wright's text; it is perhaps an apter description of Ellison's later invisible man character. It is not at all clear that Bigger is "psychologically free … and capable of positive action." Nevertheless, the quotation does point to yet another factor in Ellison's interpretation of consciousness: Marxism's debt to Hegel.

It does not appear that Ellison read Hegel directly at this time. Later in the letter just quoted, Ellison asks Wright, "What do you know of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind*? I've been running across references to it recently and I'm trying to get my hands on a copy. Let me know if

you're familiar with it" (*Selected* 133). Rather, Ellison appears to have been struck by certain passages in Mikhail Lifshitz's *The Philosophy of Art of Karl Marx* (published in English in 1938), which are echoed in the quotation from Ellison's letter. Lifshitz praises Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind* because of its "high evaluation of the 'base', 'disgraceful', 'disintegrated' consciousness" which appears among groups "represent[ing] the negative side of social progress." "These groups," Lifshitz continues, "are marked by poverty, disintegration of family life, contempt for the moral rules of 'good' people. However, by virtue of the dialectics of the historical process, these 'bad' and 'base' people—as 'enlightened' society designates them—turn out to be truly good and noble" (70). Certainly this provides an appealing framework for interpreting *Native Son*. As Ellison wrote, "what's bad in Bigger from the point of view of bourgeois society is good from our point of view."

Furthermore, Lifshitz writes, "according to Hegel the 'disintegrated' consciousness becomes its own opposite in so far as it recognizes itself to be a product of the decomposition of the old world order. It perceives the hypocrisy and falsity of all social relations and becomes the 'indignant consciousness'" (72). Lifshitz sees this indignant consciousness as belonging to the proletariat; as in Ellison's letter, it is also linked to *theoretical consciousness*. Lifshitz quotes from Marx and Engels's *The Holy Family* in which they argue that

> in the conditions of existence of the proletariat all the conditions of existence of present-day society are converged to their most inhuman focus; there man has lost his identity, but at the same time he has not only acquired the *theoretical consciousness* of this loss, he has been driven, out of distress no longer to be *evaded*, no longer to be ameliorated, utterly imperious—as the practical expression of necessity—to *revolt*

> *against this inhumanity*: therefore the proletariat can and must free itself. (qtd. in Lifshitz 72; emphasis added)

This movement of indignant consciousness to theoretical consciousness to revolt against inhumanity similarly finds its echo in Ellison's letter to Richard Wright. Lifshitz's discussion of Hegel and Marx may also have been a source of inspiration for the invisible man's consciousness of his loss of identity and indignant revolt against inhumanity.[4]

A further Marxist influence during this time was André Malraux. In 1936 Ellison had been loaned Malraux's *Man's Fate* and *Days of Wrath* by Langson Hughes, and he eagerly read *Man's Hope* when it was published in English in 1938. Ellison commented on this latter novel in a 1939 letter to a friend from Tuskegee: "Malraux in his *Man's Hope* has a character who has been put the question 'how can one best make the best of one's life' answer: 'By converting as wide a range of experience as possible into conscious thought'" (*Selected* 106; see Malraux 396). Building on this quotation Ellison ties together thought and action: "Conscious thought has a way of leading to action. In fact the action is the consciousness—unless one is a fool or a knave, or both." Indeed, the conversion of experience into conscious thought allows for *creative* thought: "one should be able to pick apart every experience, examine it and relate it to his whole worldview. In short a man should possess his experiences and not be possessed by them. Such thought becomes creative." Put more colorfully, "One sucks experience through the body into the

---

[4] Jack Taylor has written a fascinating article purporting to show the influence of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (a.k.a. *Phenomenology of Mind*) on Ellison's *Invisible Man*. As the article demonstrates, there are interesting parallels between the two works. In my view, however, Ellison likely had not read Hegel before the publication of *Invisible Man* and probably read little afterward. Any influence likely came through the mediation of critics like Lifshitz. Hegel, indeed, goes almost unmentioned in the entirety of Ellison's available writings. It may be worth noting that Ellison's library as maintained at the Library of Congress contains a couple of volumes by or about Hegel—but these all have publication dates later than *Invisible Man* (Zimmerman and Ables 45, 80). I suggest that it was primarily within the context of Marxism, rather than Hegelianism as such, that Ellison developed his concept of consciousness.

mind and there makes something of it to change, improve the realities from which the experience came" (*Selected* 107). One ought to be led from consciously examined experience to conscientious and creative (reality-improving) action.

One final Marxist source bears mentioning at this point, one which may in fact be the origin of Ellison's phrase *consciousness and conscience*. This is the British intellectual Christopher Caudwell, a Marxist for the last few years of his short life. Caudwell was well known in Ellison's circle. The critic Stanley Edgar Hyman, whom Ellison met in 1942, recommended Ellison read Caudwell (Foley 369n28), and Richard Wright also owned a few of his books (Fabre 26).

In Caudwell's view, as expressed in *Illusion and Reality*, consciousness "is the product of association … for economic production" (171). The "conjoint action[s] of men," their "active struggle … with Nature" (171, 172), organize reality into a "common perceptual world" and "common affective ego," the commonness of which are largely sustained through language. "It is language which makes us consciously see the sun, the stars, the rain and the sea—objects which merely elicit *responses* from animals" (171). Science and art, in Caudwell's view, are the means whereby the common perceptual and affective worlds are expanded, developed, revised. The social consciousness is uniquely instantiated in the genetically unique individual, who then may in turn alter that social consciousness through his or her scientific or artistic labor.

Illusion and Reality, apparently written over a summer when Caudwell was just 27, is rather unsystematic. Largely about the development of the common perceptual and affective worlds—respectively the domains of science and art, with their ideals of truth and beauty—the book also contains hints of a common ethical world, with its ideal of the good. This common ethical world is instantiated in the individual as the *conscience*. In one place Caudwell writes that

"consciousness and conscience have … a close connection" because "conscience—the imprinted summary of the ethical laws of society—is a special integration of the individual consciousness" (172).

Caudwell—and he seems to have been influenced in this by the critic I. A. Richards—makes a rather stark distinction between science and art, as well as (though it is rarely addressed) ethics. Each of these are functional in the creation of separate domains or "integrations" of consciousness; the connections among them, however, remain unclear. Ellison seems to have been attracted to Caudwell's functional theory of art, but he did not retain the Richardsonian affective theory. For Ellison, art functions to "expand and develop" our perceptual world just as much as our world of affect; and this transformation in how we *experience*, in our *consciousness*, entails a change in ethics, in *conscience*. Therefore, though the phrase "consciousness and conscience" may specifically derive from Caudwell, Ellison's interpretation of this phrase bears the imprint of others.

A few other early, non-Marxist influences on Ellison should be briefly noted. Although the left at this time laid particular emphasis on consciousness, as well as on a kind of class responsibility that might be described as conscience, these terms were by no means the sole property of Marxists. First, it should be acknowledged that Ellison at least once associated the two Cs with Emerson: The antidote to hubris, he wrote in a 1974 address, is "as Emerson insisted, the development of consciousness, consciousness, and *consciousness*. And with consciousness, a more refined conscientiousness" (*Collected* 429). While there is much to discuss regarding the relationship between Ellison and Emerson (see Albrecht), the line of influence should not be too heavily drawn. It is doubtful if Ellison had read very much of

Emerson by 1945,[5] and in any case Emerson does not use the terms *consciousness* and *conscience* very consistently as key words in his writings. Admittedly, there is a certain *structural* similarity between Emerson's progression of states of the soul—its "law of moral and mental gain"—in and under the direction of the universal Over-soul (see Emerson's "The Over-Soul," especially 266–70) and Ellison's development of consciousness and conscience in the direction of democratic ideals. But the differences of intention and tone are so great that it is hard to believe Ellison was much influenced by Emerson in this respect.

James Joyce is another story. Ellison seems to have begun reading Joyce in the 1930s at Tuskegee. The Malrauvian thoughts expressed above—on converting experience into consciousness and thence into conscientious action—resonate with the famous last lines of Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Increasingly alienated from the social institutions of his country, Joyce's Stephen Dedalus prepares himself for exile, writing in his diary: "Welcome, O life! I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race" (213). Here, in a sentence, Joyce brings together consciousness of "the reality of experience" with the creation ("forging") of "conscience."

For Ellison there were parallels between Dedalus's experience and the experiences of black Americans, and he would make use of Joyce's words in his writings of 1944–45. Ellison's review of Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma*, written in 1944 but not published until later, concludes with a quotation of Joyce. "Negroes," Ellison writes, must take what is of value in their culture "and create of it 'the uncreated consciousness of their race'" (*Collected* 340; though note the use of the word "consciousness" rather than "conscience"). The phrase recurs in his

---

[5] Ellison denied having read much Emerson when young (*Collected* 197), and the copies of Emerson's writings in his library bear dates from the 1950s and 1960s (Zimmerman and Ables 23, 33, 54).

letters to Richard Wright. In a letter of 1945 he wrote, apparently with respect to the American Communist Party, “the only force capable of awakening a conscience within them, and the only force politically capable of keeping them in line until that happens, are the Negroes. It is our job as Joyce put it, ‘to create the uncreated conscience’ of the Negroes” (*Selected* 194). Later in the same letter he adds, “But I think our destiny is something more than that; it is to become the conscience of the United States” (195). Likewise in a 1945 letter to Ida Guggenheimer: “Join us by all means in being the conscience of the Negroes; I think that they (we) are the only hope of discovering the conscience of America” (200). The “uncreated conscience” passage from Joyce would be alluded to yet again in *Invisible Man* (354), and the theme would reappear in many of Ellison’s subsequent essays.[6]

A last major contributor to Ellison’s use of conscience and consciousness may have been T. S. Eliot. Ellison discovered Eliot’s poetry while a student at Tuskegee and remained a devoted reader of Eliot’s poetry and prose throughout his life. In 1944 Eliot gave an address titled “What Is a Classic?” This was published in 1945. We cannot be sure about whether Ellison read the address at the time, but it does contain an important discussion of consciousness and conscience. In the address Eliot discusses Virgil’s *Aeneid* as a “classic,” stating that it “testif[ies] to civilised consciousness and conscience” (21). What Eliot means by “civilised consciousness” is “historical consciousness,” awareness of one’s “place in history” (19).[7] Likewise with “civilised conscience,” which for Eliot denotes a non-tribal or non-provincial “code of manners” (20, 21). The whole phrase “civilised consciousness and conscience” is synonymous with “maturity of

---

[6] From a 1976 essay: “As a symbol of guilt and redemption, the Negro entered the deepest recesses of the American psyche and became crucially involved in its consciousness, subconsciousness and conscience. He became keeper of the nation’s sense of democratic achievement, and the human scale by which would be measured its painfully slow advance toward true equality” (*Collected* 782).

[7] This “historical consciousness,” or “historical sense,” was also a theme of Eliot’s earlier essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (first published in 1919). Ellison certainly knew this essay, though when he first may have read it is unknown.

mind and manners" (14). Ellison, of course, was concerned not with *civilized* consciousness and conscience per se but with *American* or *democratic* consciousness and conscience. Yet Eliot's view that literature reflects, embodies, or anticipates developments in a people's consciousness and conscience is close to Ellison's own.

There is one further predecessor worth considering: Matthew Arnold. None of Ellison's published work mentions Arnold, though he at least became familiar with the critic later in his life. Nevertheless, Arnold would surely have influenced Eliot and Joyce, and perhaps Caudwell. Arnold made use of the terms consciousness and conscience in a manner rather similar to—though with important differences from—Ellison. This usage occurs in his famous book *Culture and Anarchy* (1869).[8]

The terms consciousness and conscience come into *Culture and Anarchy* in the context of Arnold's wide-ranging distinction between Hebraism and Hellenism, which he saw as two countervailing tendencies in the life of Western nations: "Hebraism and Hellenism,—between these two points of influence moves our world" (96). And what do these signify for Arnold? "The uppermost idea with Hellenism is to see things as they really are; the uppermost idea with Hebraism is conduct and obedience." In other words, "The governing idea of Hellenism is *spontaneity of consciousness*; that of Hebraism, *strictness of conscience*" (97). Yet more simply, Hellenism emphasizes *knowing*, while Hebraism emphasizes *doing*. Arnold sees peoples as swinging out of balance between "these two points of influence," overemphasizing spontaneity of consciousness (knowing) at one time, overemphasizing strictness of conscience (doing) at another.

[8] It is worth mentioning that Lionel Trilling's study *Matthew Arnold*, which could have been known to Ellison, was published in 1939. In the Ralph Ellison Collection at the Library of Congress (see Zimmerman and Ables) is to be found Arnold's *Essays in Criticism* though not *Culture and Anarchy*. There are two books by Trilling though not the volume on Arnold. Obviously, the collection does not represent every text Ellison read or was familiar with over the course of his life, only what happened to be in his personal library at the time of his death.

Though he relies on similar definitions, Ellison's use of the terms partakes of nothing of this sense of imbalance between consciousness and conscience that Arnold finds among different nations. Ellison himself occasionally emphasizes one or the other, but his central concern is developing both of them together as much as possible in an American context.

There may not have been any single source of inspiration for Ellison's use of the terms consciousness and conscience. The biggest factor seems to have been the Marxist and Marxist-Freudian discourse he encountered in New York in the 1930s and 1940s. Indeed, the phrase "consciousness and conscience" may have been borrowed directly from the Marxist-Freudian Christopher Caudwell. Nevertheless, one should not underestimate the influence on Ellison of non-Marxists such as Eliot and Joyce. Ellison at all stages of career was a fusion of diverse intellectual and aesthetic traditions. Be this as it may, the provenance of the two Cs is only part of the story we have to tell. The other, arguably more important, aspect to consider is how Ellison actually deployed the concepts in his writing.

Ellison's Use of the Two Cs

Let's look in more detail at how Ellison actually used the two Cs. They generally come into his work in two contexts: social criticism and literary criticism. As features of his social criticism, they name what many white Americans would prefer to eschew in order to maintain their sense of moral and social superiority. Yet they are also what Americans must pursue in order to perfect democracy.

Several paragraphs from a 1945 *New Republic* article essentially provide an abstract of this theme of conscience and consciousness that would be elaborated in later essays. Here, he accuses the United States of being "a nation of ethical schizophrenics":

> since 1876 the race issue has been like a stave driven into the American system of values, a stave so deeply imbedded in the American *ethos* as to render America a nation of ethical schizophrenics. Believing truly in democracy on one side of their minds, they act on the other in violation of its most sacred principles; holding that all men are created equal, they treat thirteen million Americans as though they were not. (*Collected* 148)

One function of "our popular culture" has been to justify this state of affairs and "to drown out the persistent voice of outraged conscience" (149)—in other words, to evade consciousness of social reality and the demands of conscience.

Ellison writes that black Americans do not entirely disappear from the consciousness of white Americans but are pushed down into a "deeper level" of consciousness where they become associated with other submerged hopes and fears: "it seems that the Negro has become identified with those unpleasant aspects of conscience and consciousness which it is part of the American's character to avoid." Thus "imprisoned in the deepest drives in human society, it is practically impossible for the white American to think of sex, of economics, his children or womenfolk, or of sweeping socio-political changes, without summoning into consciousness fear-flecked images of black men" (149).

This will-to-unconsciousness has a neutering effect on art, Ellison argues, because those deeply embedded images which artists endeavor to evade are "the stuff of tragic art" (149). Because of their avoidance of "racial matters," artists produce "offspring without hearts, without brains, viscera or vision, and some even without genitalia" (150).

Which brings us to literary criticism. If developments in consciousness and conscience affect the production of literature, literature also affects the development of consciousness and conscience. It is in the essay “Society, Morality, and the Novel” that Ellison gives us his fullest account of what a novel should be. Ellison’s discussion of the novel is sometimes explicitly and often implicitly grounded in the two aspects of consciousness and conscience.

The potential consciousness-raising aspect of the novel is often discussed in ocular metaphors: “by its nature the novel seeks to communicate a vision of experience” (700); the novel “brings into full vision the processes of [our] current social forms” (702). More elaborately, “It is by appealing to our sense of experience and playing on our shared assumptions that the novelist is able to reveal to us that which we do not know—that is, the unfamiliar within the familiar—and affirm that which we assume to be truth, and to reveal to us his own hard-won vision of truth” (701). Through “reducing” (another word favored by Ellison) their experience of social reality to literary form, novelists make us conscious of what was previously unknown or known only implicitly:

> Thus the novel seeks to take the surface “facts” of experience and arrange them in such ways that for a magic moment reality comes into sharp and significant focus. I believe that the primary social function of the novel (the function from which it takes its form and which brought it into being) is that of seizing from the flux and flow of our daily lives those abiding patterns of experience which, through their repetition and consequences in our affairs, help to form our sense of reality, and from which emerge our sense of humanity and our conception of human value. (702)

Given that novels "help to form our sense of reality" and "our conception of human value" within that reality, they are also, as Ellison says, "moral instruments": "the novel is a moral instrument possessing for us an integrative function" (718).[9] In a later introduction to *Invisible Man* he explains that the novel as "integrative" is

> that fictional *vision* of an ideal democracy in which the actual combines with the ideal and gives us representations of a state of things in which the highly placed and the lowly, the black and the white, the Northerner and the Southerner, the native-born and the immigrant combine to tell us of transcendent truths and possibilities such as those discovered when Mark Twain set Huck and Jim afloat on the raft. (*Collected* 486–87)

The novel, he continues, can be "a raft of hope" helping us to maintain our moral orientation, our conscience, as we "negotiate the snags and whirlpools that mark our nation's vacillating course toward and away from the democratic ideal" (487).

In his discussions of particular novels, Ellison very much liked to point out those moments when consciousness and conscience are attained. In a 1949 discussion of William Faulkner's *Intruder in the Dust*, Ellison remarks that "Chick, in aiding Lucas, achieves that *view of truth* on which his own *conscience* depends" (*Collected* 309; emphasis added). In an essay mostly written in 1946 but published in 1953, Ellison makes much the same judgment regarding Mark Twain's Huck and Jim, though without the specific terms consciousness and conscience: Through their adventures, Huck comes to "recognize" (becomes conscious of) Jim's humanity

[9] Cf. Caudwell (239): "Science and art are nothing if they do not give to each of us an immediate guide to our personal lives in all their aspects—both a morality and an understanding, an impulsion and an instrument which is not merely general but guides each of us in every one of our concrete relations, which is a compass to every act whereby we change nature and ourselves."

and is unable to return him into slavery. That is, Huck's change in *consciousness* entails a transformation or redetermination of *conscience*, and he accepts himself now as "evil" from the perspective of conventional morality (*Collected* 86–88). Additionally, in his 1960 discussion of Stephen Crane, Ellison notes that "the cost of perception" for *The Red Badge of Courage*'s Henry (for Ellison, *perception* is often a synonym for *consciousness*; see below) is "moral discomfort" over his past "crimes," such as allowing "the voice of conscience" (the Tattered Soldier) "to wander off and die" (122). Conscience for Ellison would seem to supervene on consciousness—"with consciousness, a more refined conscientiousness" (429)—and he was especially attracted to literature that afforded a view of how a transformation in consciousness entailed a transformation of conscience.

But how do these transformations of consciousness come about? This was an important question for Ellison both socially and artistically, and to answer it he relied on the second set of terms I wish to consider here: purpose, passion, and perception.

Purpose, Passion, and Perception

The terms *purpose*, *passion*, and *perception*—the three Ps—appear, in explicit form at least, far less often than the two Cs in Ellison's published writings. Nevertheless, they pervade his personal notes. Ellison's apparent use of the concepts to structure *Invisible Man* (which falls into three sections) has been much discussed (see especially Forrest 126–45). For a time, the key source for this discussion was an explanation Ellison gave in a 1955 interview, republished in his *Shadow and Act* in 1964. There Ellison says that he began *Invisible Man*

> 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 and which depend for their development upon what I hoped was a *consistent and developing motivation*. However, you'll note that the *maximum insight* on the hero's part isn't reached until the final section. (*Collected* 218–19; emphasis added)

As Ellison conceived it, the narrator moves in a cycle from purpose to passion to perception. Through passion (i.e., struggling through resistance) he gains "insight" (perception) which develops his "motivation" (purpose).

This retrospective explanation has since been supported by Ellison's working notes from the period of composition. In a published selection of "Working Notes for *Invisible Man,*" Ellison wrote that the narrator is ultimately "defeated in his original *purpose*" of understanding urban black "personality and experience"; nevertheless, he "has achieved some *perception* of the nature of his life" (*Collected* 349; emphasis added).

It has been common, following Ellison's own words, to interpret Burke's influence on Ellison in this way: "The Burkean formula for the hero's progress of 'purpose to passion to perception' was seminal to Ellison's conception of *Invisible Man*" (Conner 2015: 216). The story is slightly more complicated, however.

Burke did indeed propose a three-term model of what he called "tragic grammar." This appeared in 1945, in his book *A Grammar of Motives*. "The initial requirement for a tragedy," Burke writes, "is an *action*." This he labels with the Greek word *poiema*. "The act," he

continues, "organizes the opposition (brings to the fore whatever factors resist or modify the act)." Consequently, "the agent … 'suffers' this opposition," a suffering which Burke labels as *pathema*. Then, as the agent "learns to take the oppositional motives into account, widening his terminology accordingly, he has arrived at a higher order of understanding"—labeled by Burke as *mathema*. Altering a Greek proverb, Burke presents us with the tragic formula *poiemata, pathemata, mathemata*—the *suffered* as a consequence of having *acted* is the *learned* (39–40).

This "tragic grammar" was shortly thereafter adapted by the critic Francis Fergusson in his highly influential *The Idea of a Theater* (1949). Discussing Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, Fergusson writes that the play

> starts with the reasoned *purpose* of finding Laius' slayer. But this aim meets unforeseen difficulties, evidences which do not fit, and therefore shake the purpose as it was first understood; and so the characters *suffer* the piteous and terrible sense of the mystery of the human situation. From this suffering or *passion*, with its shifting visions, a new *perception* of the situation emerges; and on that basis *the purpose of the action is redefined*, and a new movement starts. This movement, or *tragic rhythm of action*, constitutes the shape of the play as a whole; it is also the shape of each episode, each discussion between principals with the chorus following. (18; some emphasis added)

Fergusson notes that Burke has designated the three moments of "the tragic rhythm" as "*Poiema, Pathema, Mathema*." But, "They may also be called, for convenience, Purpose, Passion (or Suffering) and Perception. It is this tragic rhythm of action which is the substance or spiritual content of the play, and the clue to its extraordinarily comprehensive form" (18).

As it happens, Ellison knew both Burke's *Grammar* and Fergusson's *Idea*, though which he knew first or better is hard to determine. In any case, it was certainly Fergusson's formulation that stuck. Burke, for his part, consistently related the terms *action* and *passion* in the *Grammar*, rather than *purpose* and *passion*; and he tended to speak of *understanding* rather than *perception*. Consider, for example, Burke's statement that "the agent's *action* involves a corresponding *passion*, and from the sufferance of the passion there arises an *understanding* of the act, an understanding that transcends the act" (*Grammar* 38; emphasis added). Fergusson retained this three-term outline of tragedy but gave it an alliteratively euphonious label that would stick with Ellison over the decades.

If the two Cs tended to govern Ellison's large-scale view of fiction as a "moral instrument," the three Ps were among the key terms governing his day-to-day practice as a writer. The three Ps gave him a narrative strategy for bringing about changes in consciousness and hence conscience.

The two sets of terms—the two Cs and three Ps—seem closely related. Perception is obviously similar in meaning to the term consciousness, and Ellison tended to use the two terms, along with ocular metaphors like *vision*, interchangeably. Conscience, on the other hand, would seem to bear some relation to purpose. The "new perception" that Fergusson says is indicative of the tragic rhythm is a change in consciousness. The redefinition of purpose that follows would seem to fall out from the resultant change in conscience. In *Huckleberry Finn* Huck's purpose of returning Jim falls out from his temporary acceptance of the dictates of a socially conditioned conscience. But then he undergoes a change in perception or consciousness, which leads to his acceptance of an outlaw ("evil") conscience, and from this there follows a change in purpose. Such an interpretation is, if not explicit in Ellison's writings, heavily implied.

As I've said, the three Ps appear to have often guided Ellison's own composition, fictional as well as essayistic. There is much evidence for this in his notes (maintained principally at the Library of Congress).[10] Others have noted how "Ralph scribbled throughout his manuscript drafts [of *Invisible Man*], as a kind of inspirational mantra, the Burkean formula: 'Purpose to Passion to Perception'" (Rampersad 206). Here I'll focus on his work for his second novel, parts of which were published posthumously as *Juneteenth* and *Three Days Before the Shooting …*.

Before looking at specifics, it is worth mentioning that these notes also reveal Ellison's occasional attempts to reconcile the three Ps with other formal or interpretational strategies. I won't discuss these in detail here other than to note that Ellison tried to relate the three Ps to Kenneth Burke's dramatistic pentad of *act*, *scene*, *agent*, *agency*, *purpose* (with Ellison sometimes adding Burke's later sixth term *attitude*) (see, e.g., REP 139/5), classical A-B-A sonata form (JFCLA 52/14), John Howard Lawson's theory of the dramatic cycle of action (see JFCLA 52/29; Lawson 233), and the *agon* (conflict), *pathos* (defeat), *sparagmos* (separation), *anagnorisis* (discovery), and *peripeteia* (reversal) of ancient Greek ritual and tragedy (REP 139/6).[11] Of these, the Burkean and Greek ritualist concepts are especially common in Ellison's notes. But despite his exploration of alternatives, the three Ps appear to have remained Ellison's most consistently applied narrative device.

---

[10] A second archive used here is the John F. Callahan Literary Archive held at Lewis and Clark College in Portland, Oregon. Aside from containing Callahan's own work on Ellison and other topics, this archive duplicates parts of the Ralph Ellison Papers from the Library of Congress and contains some original manuscripts and notes by Ellison. Materials found at the Library of Congress are cited as "REP box/folder"; materials which were found at the Callahan archive are cited as "JFCLA box/folder."

[11] These terms were perhaps picked up from Jane Ellen Harrison's *Themis* (with an influential "excursus" by Gilbert Murray), Fergusson's *Idea of a Theater*, or even Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*. The influence of Cambridge Ritualists such as Harrison and Murray on Ellison has been much discussed by other scholars (e.g., Foley 69–107; Crable).

The Three Ps in the Hickman Novel Notes

For convenience I'll call Ellison's unfinished second novel "the Hickman novel," as it is sometimes referred to in his archives (Hickman being a major character who appears throughout the manuscripts). The Hickman novel centers on the assassination of a United States Senator. The project of the novel is to show why the Senator was shot by following the lives of four main characters: the white-appearing Senator himself, called Adam Sunraider but known as a child as Bliss; a southern black preacher named Alonzo Hickman; a northern white reporter named Welborn McIntyre; and the Senator's son, the mixed-race Severen. A variety of secondary characters come into the plot as well. In various notes Ellison casts each of the main characters' narratives, and some of the secondary characters' narratives, in terms of the three Ps.

For example, one note considers the *purpose* of each of his main characters: Severen's purpose is "To learn identity of [his] father." Hickman's purpose is "To warn Senator that he's in danger." The Senator's is "To escape those who would remind [him] of his past." And McIntyre's is "To report the 'facts' of American experience" (JFCLA 53/20).

Another note that considers the novel as a whole divvies up the three Ps among the characters of Hickman, Sunraider, and McIntyre:

> Purpose belongs to Hickman and his group. … They lead to their own passion, which consists of a struggle to see the Senator which is linked to their ignorance of how relationships operate in D.C. They also share in the larger passion—which is <u>National</u>.
>
> Passion belongs to Bliss-Sunraider, who has run away and become a manipulator of his and other identities in the name of power.

> Perception belongs to McIntyre[.] (JFCLA 52/33)

In this note, each character's narrative is seen to emphasize one phase of the tragic rhythm.

Most notes, however, focus on one or another of the major or secondary characters. Especially numerous are notes dealing with the characters of Severen and Hickman who are, in terms of motivation, arguably the most complex characters in the novel.

Let's take Hickman as an example. Hickman is central to the plot of the novel. It is he who adopts and raises Bliss—Bliss who will run away, grow up and father Severen, abandon Severen and his mother, and then become Senator Sunraider. Hickman's primary motivation in the novel is saving Sunraider—whom he recognizes as deeply flawed but loves nonetheless—after getting hints of a possible assassination attempt.

Ellison's notes make explicit some of Hickman's purposes in the novel. According to one note, the overriding purpose is "To save life of Senator" (REP 139/5). As for passion, Hickman, sometimes alone and sometimes with his parishioners, undergoes various difficulties and surprises: in dealing with Sunraider's secretary, in finding the brother of one of his parishioners, in chancing upon the scene of a burning Cadillac, in dealing with the white reporter McIntyre. And perception?

> Perception: Hickman and group <u>lead</u> Severin to Bliss. Thus he [Severen] must be aware of <u>them</u> if not they of him. In trying to save one they love [i.e., Bliss/Sunaider] they unwittingly aid in his death. *Perception must be Hickman's, who recognizes what has*

> *happened*. Hickman knows about Severen and who his father is. (REP 139/5; italics added)

This contrasts with the note above stating that “Perception belongs to McIntyre.” Indeed, at an early stage of the novel’s construction, McIntyre was to investigate and discover the truths about Severen and Sunraider. As the novel evolved, however, this function tended to be transferred more and more to Hickman. And because Hickman is able to gain the greatest degree of perception in the novel, but is unable to act on this perception in such a way as to save his adopted son, he ultimately becomes a tragic character. One note describes this as a failure of perception: “He has failed of perception[,] has been foolish” (JFCLA 41/34).

Another note presents the Hickman narrative slightly differently:

> Hickman’s *purpose* has been to have conversation with Senator and he gets a run around. There is a reversal[,] for when he does see the Senator it is during an assasination [sic] attempt and he gets to see him in hospital where he is forced (like B[r]er Rabbit in the briar patch) to go—all this constituting a *passion*; for here he strives to keep the Senator alive so that he can learn what happened to Bliss, and how his own plans went wrong. *Perception* must come at end of book which will be Hickman with his recapitulation of the tragic incident which set off entire complex action. (JFCLA 53/20; emphasis added)

The “tragic incident” is the lynching of Hickman’s brother, which results in the young Hickman being given the baby whom he calls Bliss. Here Ellison suggests that this episode (which exists in various manuscript forms, one of which was published in *Three Days*), would come at the end

of the novel. And still another note points out the interplay of purpose, passion, and perception in the Hickman narrative, indicating

> the tension implicit in the unsuccessful quest as it builds from home to frustration through its cycles of purpose, passion, through partial perception to a realignment of purpose leading to other degrees of passion to different orders of perception-frustration. (REP 140/2; Ellison, *Three Days* 974)

Other notes found in the archives show that Ellison framed subsidiary episodes of the Hickman narrative in terms of the three Ps: Hickman's visit to Love New in Oklahoma, his attempt to meet with the brother of one of his parishioners at Jessie Rockmore's house, his encounter with the strange Leroy who mistakes him for someone else, and so on. And the three Ps are used to guide episodes involving other characters. A number of notes, for example, deal with the LeeWillie Minifees car-burning episode (published in *Three Days* 35–46, 216–30, 1085–97) in terms of purpose, passion, and perception.

But here let us move out of novelistic territory and into one further area in which Ellison applied the three Ps—the realm of history or biography. It is also in this context that he makes clearest, in individual and social terms, the interrelation of the three Ps and the broad ideals or obligations of consciousness and conscience.

Bringing Together the Two Cs and the Three Ps: Two Brief Examples

Two essays from 1964 apply the three Ps in interpreting biography. One of these, "Hidden Name and Complex Fate," is autobiographical. In this essay Ellison weaves together the three Ps with

his broader concepts of consciousness and conscience in order to make sense of his development as a writer in the wider context of American history. It all began, he says, with the "discovery of a sense of *purpose*, which is that of becoming a writer." This purpose led to "involvement in the *passionate struggle* required to master a bit of technique." But this struggle in turn led to a perception: "the disconcerting discovery that it is *technique* which transforms the individual before he is able in turn to transform it." And this perception entails a transformation of conscience: the writer also "discovers that he has taken on certain *obligations*, that he must not embarrass his chosen form." This leads to a new purpose: the writer "must develop taste." Along with this the writer comes to perceive "that he is involved with values which turn in their *own* way … upon the central issues affecting his nation and his time." He "learns that the American novel" is essentially about "the meaning of the American experience," that it seeks "to define the nature of that experience." To take up the novel as his chosen form is to partake "of that burden of conscience and consciousness which Americans inherit as one of the results of the revolutionary circumstances of our national beginnings" (*Collected* 205–6; some emphasis added). In sum, the purpose-laden writer must, through passionate struggle, learn to consciously perceive the nature and meaning of the American experience, and conscientiously express this meaning though purposefully and passionately acquired technique and aesthetic sensitivity.

Ellison did not just apply his interpretive framework to his own life; he also applied it to the lives of others. A second essay from 1964, "If the Twain Shall Meet," reviews Howard Zinn's *The Southern Mystique*. This essay is much concerned with Zinn's attainments and failures of perception. In Ellison's view, *The Southern Mystique* is in a small way the recounting of a hero quest and in a large way its product: "*The Southern Mystique* relates a journey into the unknown, involving an *agon* of dangerous action, a reversal of purpose leading to a 'revolution

in perception,' and a return to the North with what Mr. Zinn offers as a life-preserving message—i.e., his book" (*Collected* 570; on the "revolution in perception," see Zinn 103). Note already the use of the terms *purpose* and *perception*, as well as the ritualistic terms likely borrowed from Gilbert Murray: *agon* and *reversal* (*peripeteia*) (see Harrison 341–63). Here these terms are wrapped in a Joseph Campbell-style hero's "journey into the unknown" (cf. Campbell 76: "The adventure is always and everywhere a passage beyond the veil of the known into the unknown").

Zinn moved to the South (Atlanta, Georgia) as a young professor to take a position at Spelman College. Ellison writes that "From his base in the Negro community … Mr. Zinn was to *discover* 'those tiny circles of shadow out of sight, where people of several colors meet and touch as human beings …'" (*Collected* 571; emphasis added). Based on his experiences Zinn "believes that he has *discovered the reality* underlying the Southern mystique" (571; emphasis added). Zinn was led to a "redefinition of purpose": "In the 'womb' of the Negro community, Mr. Zinn was moved to the *passionate purpose* of dispelling the mystique which he found cloaking the human realities of the South" (571; emphasis added).

Zinn goes on a hero's journey into the unknown (purpose), undergoes various dangers (passion), and discovers new realities (perception). This leads to a redefinition of purpose, resulting in the book. Ellison, however, is not without misgivings: "I must say that his perception (and he is conscious of this) has by no means been completely purified" (571); "here Mr. Zinn's own urgency blurs his perception" (577); "He is perceptive … but …" (578); "In concentrating on the mystery of race, Mr. Zinn overlooks the more intriguing mystery of culture" (578). Nevertheless, Ellison praises Zinn's general advances in consciousness and conscience: his "efforts to see clearly and act effectively" (572), "to see freshly and act constructively" (577).

"His is an act," Ellison states, "of intellectual responsibility." And he concludes with an appeal to the reader's conscientiousness: "once we read him—and we must read him with our best attention—we can no longer be careless in our thinking about the Negro revolution, for he makes it clear that it involves us all" (580).

The Zinn essay and "Hidden Name and Complex Fate" are the most compact and accessible examples of how Ellison interrelated the two Cs and three Ps. While these two essays focus on individual lives, his sprawling second novel uses this terministic screen to explore the life of American society in its struggles toward, and retreats away from, its ideals. A fuller analysis of this will, however, need to await a future occasion.

Conclusion

This examination of Ellison's terministic screen has covered both the complex background of his chosen terms and some of the ways in which they guided his perceptions and judgments of life and literature as well as his writerly craft. His use of the two Cs—consciousness and conscience—likely derived from the rich intellectual milieu he found at Tuskegee in the 1930s and in New York in the 1930s and 1940s. At Tuskegee he discovered T. S. Eliot and James Joyce, who each made use of the concepts of consciousness and conscience. In New York he discovered Marxist and Marxist-Freudian writers like Richard Wright, Mikhail Lifshitz, André Malraux, and Christopher Caudwell. While all influenced his interpretation of consciousness, Caudwell seems especially important in that, like Eliot, he explicitly linked together the terms *consciousness* and *conscience*.

It was also in New York at this time that he discovered Kenneth Burke, Francis Fergusson, and the Cambridge Ritualists (such as Harrison and Murray), who would so influence

his sense of narrative progression. It was Fergusson, of course, who gave this progression its memorable designation of *purpose, passion, and perception*.

We have seen Ellison deploy the two Cs and three Ps in a variety of contexts: in social and literary analysis; in treating (auto)biography; and in organizing his own writing practice. Ellison persistently attended to those processes in society and those techniques in literature which impeded or expanded consciousness and deflected conscience from or directed it toward democratic ideals. Within this broader framework, Ellison often conceived of individuals—both literary and actual—as cycling through phases of purpose, passion, and perception.

As noted in the introduction, there are other elements in Ellison's terministic screen; each of these deserves its own analysis. What remains an especially compelling project for the future is to use this complex of terms to elucidate the massive, decades-long undertaking that was Ellison's second novel.

Works Cited

Albrecht, James M. "Saying Yes and Saying No: Individualist Ethics in Ellison, Burke, and Emerson." *PMLA*, vol. 114, no. 1, 1999, pp. 46–63.

Arnold, Matthew. *Culture and Anarchy*. Edited by Jane Garnett, Oxford UP, 2006.

Burke, Kenneth. *A Grammar of Motives*. Prentice-Hall, 1945.

———. *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method*. U of California P, 1966.

———. *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose*. 2nd ed., Bobbs-Merril, 1965.

———. "Ralph Ellison's Trueblooded Bildungsroman." *Speaking for You: The Vision of Ralph Ellison*, edited by Kimberly W. Benston, Howard UP, 1990, pp. 349–359.

Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Princeton UP, 2004.

Caudwell, Christopher. *Illusion and Reality: A Study of the Sources of Poetry*. International Publishers, 1937.

Conner, Marc C. Review of *Ralph Ellison and Kenneth Burke: At the Roots of the Racial Divide* by Bryan Crable. *Callaloo*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2015, pp. 216–219. doi:10.1353/cal.2015.0027.

Crable, Bryan. "Ellison's Appropriation of Jane Ellen Harrison's *Themis*: From Sacrifice to Sacrament." *Global Ralph Ellison: Aesthetics and Politics Beyond US Border*, edited by Tessa Roynon and Marc C. Conner, Peter Lang, 2021, pp. 55–86.

Dennen, David. "The Dream of the Iron Groom: The Construction and Function of a Symbol in Ralph Ellison's Unfinished Novel." *The Wenshan Review of Literature and Culture*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2024, pp. 1–40. doi: 10.30395/WSR.202406_17(2).0003

Dirlik, Arif. "The Predicament of Marxist Revolutionary Consciousness: Mao Zedong, Antonio Gramsci, and the Reformulation of Marxist Revolutionary Theory." *Modern China*, vol. 9, no. 2, 1983, pp. 182–211.

Eliot, T. S. *What Is a Classic?* Faber & Faber, 1945.

Ellison, Ralph. "Argosy Across the USA." *New Masses*, vol. XXXVII, no. 10 (26 November 1940), p. 24.

———. *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*. Rev. ed., edited by John F. Callahan, The Modern Library, 2003.

———. *Invisible Man*. Vintage, 1980.

———. "Recent Negro Fiction." *New Masses*, vol. XL, no. 6 (5 August 1941), pp. 22–26.

———. *The Selected Letters of Ralph Ellison*. Edited by John F. Callahan and Marc C. Conner. Random House, 2019.

———. “Stormy Weather.” *New Masses*, vol. XXXVII, no. 1 (24 September 1940), pp. 20–21.

———. *Three Days Before the Shooting …*. Edited by John F. Callahan and Adam Bradley, The Modern Library, 2010.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *The Complete Essays and Other Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Edited by Brooks Atkinson, The Modern Library, 1940.

Fabre, Michel. *Richard Wright: Books and Writers*. UP of Mississippi, 1990.

Flatley, Jonathan. “What is a Revolutionary Setting?” *Modernism/modernity Print Plus*, vol. 3, cycle 1. https://modernismmodernity.org/forums/posts/revolutionary-setting. doi:10.26597/mod.0043.

Foley, Barbara. *Wrestling with the Left: The Making of Ralph Ellison's "Invisible Man."* Duke UP, 2010.

Forrest, Leon. *The Furious Voice for Freedom*. Asphodel Press, 1994.

Harrison, Jane Ellen. *Themis: A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion*. Cambridge UP, 1912.

Haupt, Garry. “The Tragi-Comedy of the Unreal in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.” *Interpretations*, vol. 4, no. 1, 1972, pp. 1–12.

Jackson, Lawrence. *Ralph Ellison: Emergence of Genius*. John Wiley & Sons, 2002.

John F. Callahan Literary Archive, 1950–2020. Special Collections and Archives, Aubrey R. Watzek Library, Lewis & Clark College.

Joyce, James. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Edited by Jeri Johnson. Oxford UP, 2000.

Lawson, John Howard. *Theory and Technique of Playwriting*. Hill and Wang, 1960.

Lee, A. Robert. “Sight and Mask: Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*.” *Negro American Literature Forum*, vol. 4, no. 1, 1970, pp. 22–33.

Lenin, V. I. *Selected Works, Volume XI: The Theoretical Principles of Marxism*. International Publishers, 1938.

———. *What Is to Be Done? Burning Questions of Our Movement.* International Publishers, 1929.

Lifshitz, Mikhail. *The Philosophy of Art of Karl Marx*. Translated by Ralph B. Winn. Critics Group, 1938.

Lyne, William. "The Signifying Modernist: Ralph Ellison and the Limits of the Double Consciousness." *PMLA*, vol. 107, no. 2, 1992, pp. 318–330.

Malraux, André. *Man's Hope*. Translated by Stuart Gilbert and Alastair Macdonald. Random House, 1938.

Ralph Ellison Papers. Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

Rampersad, Arnold. *Ralph Ellison: A Biography*. Vintage Books, 2008.

Taylor, Jack. "Ralph Ellison as a Reader of Hegel: Ellison's *Invisible Man* as Literary Phenomenology." *Intertexts*, vol. 19, nos. 1–2, 2015, pp. 135–154. doi:10.1353/itx.2015.0008.

Turner, Jack. "Awakening to Race: Ralph Ellison and Democratic Individuality." *Political Theory*, vol. 36, no. 5, 2008, pp. 655–682. doi:10.1177/0090591708321031.

Wright, Richard. *Native Son*. Harper & Brothers, 1940.

Zimmerman, Amanda, and Amber Ables. *The Ralph Ellison Collection, (1937-2010): A Finding Aid to the Collection in the Library of Congress*. Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Library of Congress, 2016. https://hdl.loc.gov/loc.rbc/eadrbc.rb016001.3.

Zinn, Howard. *The Southern Mystique*. South End Press, 2002.