

“refer to Mary Magdalen’s life of vanity before turning to Christ.”

In the foreground of *Allegory of Faith* are representations of the original sin: a partially eaten apple and a snake crushed by a fallen corner-

stone (symbolizing Christ). Also in the foreground, just beyond the drawn-back curtain, is an empty chair—a seat for the viewer, Hedquist says, who is being invited to join in celebrating the Mass.

## *Ellison and the Wright Stuff*

“The Birth of the Critic: The Literary Friendship of Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright” by Lawrence P. Jackson, in *American Literature* (June 2000), Box 90020, Duke Univ., Durham, N.C. 27708-0020.

Sixteen years before he published *Invisible Man* (1952), a young Ralph Ellison left his music studies at Alabama’s Tuskegee Institute and plunged into the unfamiliar world of art and radical politics in New York. Within a year, he had found a mentor—Richard Wright (1908-60), who would go on, like Ellison himself, to become one of the century’s leading black writers. “Their friendship blossomed,” writes Jackson, an English professor at Howard University. But over time, the two black writers would come to have very different visions of art and American life.

Wright was working for the Harlem branch of the Communist *Daily Worker*, and Ellison admired his zeal for exposing racial injustice and his “almost religious devotion to the craft of writing,” says Jackson. As a fledgling literary critic, Ellison “fell under the sway of Wright’s commanding Marxist examination of history and culture.” Wright, whose award-winning collection of short stories, *Uncle Tom’s Children*, appeared in 1938, “used his party clout” to get Ellison a job with the Federal Writers’ Project in New York, and also introduced him to the editors of the Communist literary journal *New Masses*.

Wright’s best-selling *Native Son* (1940) made him a celebrated author. In the novel, a black Chicagoan named Bigger Thomas accidentally kills a white girl, takes flight, and is captured, tried, and, defiant to the end, executed. *Native Son* was the first black “protest novel.”

Ellison, meanwhile, was developing his own artistic vision, one that went beyond Wright’s social realism. In a 1941 essay, he lauded *Native Son* but contended that future black writers could do even better if they gained more technical expertise from “advanced white writers” and brought “the

imaginative depiction of Negro life into the broad stream of American literature.” Ellison’s critique soon encompassed more than aesthetics: he came to see black writers’ social realism as dishonest, an extension of the “Communists’ manipulation of the black rights movement,” Jackson says.

While Wright, who grew up in poverty, felt rejected by the black bourgeoisie and alienated from the unlettered black working class, says Jackson, Ellison was comfortable in both worlds. Steered to Henry James and Feodor Dostoyevsky by Wright, Ellison not only came to speak “with growing confidence about high art” but also “reached deep” into black folk culture. Wright, who considered blacks oppressed by their impoverished environment, found little of value in their folk culture. In a review of Wright’s 1945 autobiography, *Black Boy*, Ellison defended Wright’s assertion of the “essential bleakness of black life.” But he also argued that the black folk art of the blues had enabled blacks to face and triumph over adversity. Privately, Jackson says, Ellison deemed *Black Boy* “a deliberate regression in artistic form and near propaganda.”

The gulf between the two writers widened, especially after Wright permanently moved to Paris in 1947. In 1952, Ellison’s *Invisible Man* appeared, a modernistic novel whose unnamed hero, a southern black who moves north, gives a dreamlike account of his journey toward disillusion and of his alienated and “invisible” condition. The novel was immediately acclaimed a classic. Ellison became “something of an American patriot,” Jackson says. By the time he saw his former mentor for the last time, in 1956, Wright “felt betrayed” by him, according to Jackson, while Ellison saw Wright as someone caught in an ideological trap.