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Critical history

First responses: James Baldwin

The next generation of African-American writers drew great strength from *Native Son*. The commercial success of the novel alone meant much to those hoping to follow in Wright's footsteps. *Native Son's* nomination by the popular Book-of-the-Month Club came at some cost, as the writer Hazel Rowley's essay 'The Shadow of the White Woman' will show us (see Critical readings, pp. 88-97), it led to some very regrettable changes being made to Wright's original manuscript. But it also meant that the book secured an astonishingly wide readership, finding favour among ordinary Americans as well as among the country's literary intelligentsia. In the same way, few could fail to be impressed by talk of a film adaptation of the book and even after it had transpired that the film was appalling and best forgotten, the precedent thus set remained indisputably welcome.

These warm feelings about *Native Son* grew warmer with Wright's many acts of generosity. Himself an autodidact, almost entirely without schooling, he used his new-found literary influence to offer new and young writers the support that he had lacked. Collaring some publishers and whispering in the ears of others, he lent support to many among the talented African-American generation of the 1950s, creating opportunities for the novelist and poet Margaret Walker, the former prisoner Chester Himes, and the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) activist Gwendolyn Brooks, who would go on to become the first African-American to win the Pulitzer Prize.

Behind the widespread appreciation of Wright's achievements, however, lurked deeper feelings of ambivalence. As Rowley puts it:

Black critics were mostly positive. The poet and Howard University professor Sterling Brown thought *Native Son* would stir the national conscience if any book could. Ralph Ellison chimed bells in the *New Masses* . . . Wright was the first best-selling black writer in American literary history. Nobody wanted to appear sour-faced. At first, it was only in private conversations that the deep ambivalence about the book surface. . . . Some thought the novel an admirable portrayal of conditions in black ghettos; others dreaded the conclusions white

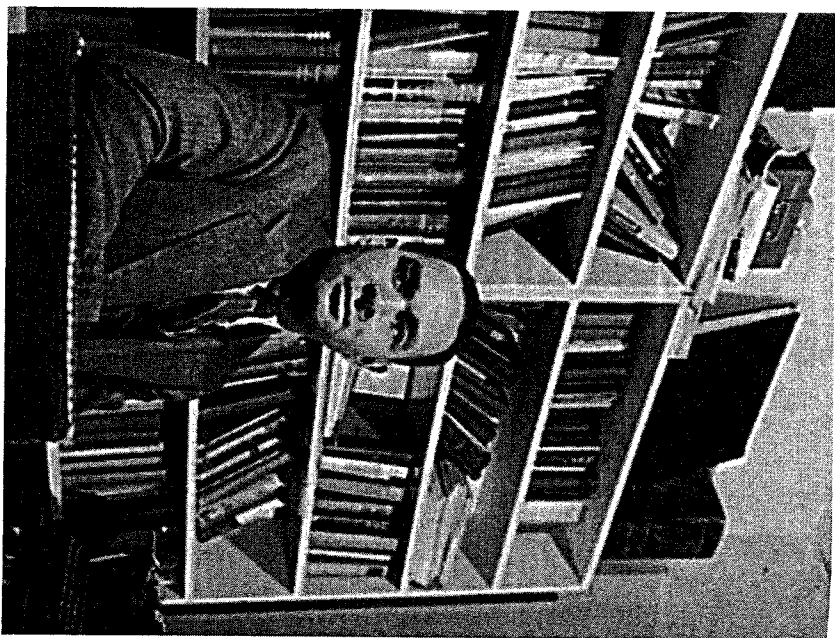


Figure 8 Portrait of Richard Wright, poet. Photograph: Gordon Parks, 1943.

readers would draw... The controversy about *Native Son* would never die.¹

No writer received more support from Wright or used it more wisely than James Baldwin. But not would any writer so well encapsulate the controversy about *Native Son*, or so savagely turn against his one-time mentor in critical attack. Baldwin's responses to *Native Son* still stand as the most important critical statements on the novel, and they are unrelentingly hostile. These facts alone – the fact that Wright helped Baldwin considerably and the fact that the latter turned ferociously against his mentor – reveal that the two possessed a close, perhaps too close, relationship. There was certainly an affinity between them. Although they occurred at opposite ends of the Great Migration, Wright's upbringing in the 'fire' of Jim Crow Mississippi bore a striking resemblance to Baldwin's boyhood in what Claude Brown would later call the 'frying pan'

of Harlem, New York.² Both novelists disliked the men they thought of as their fathers and, at times, disliked themselves for such feelings of antipathy. As adulterous as they are devout, as violent as they are remote, Nathan Wright in *Black Boy* and David Baldwin in writings such as 'Notes of a Native Son' (1955) inspire guilt and anger in equal measure: the figures they cut are not just repugnant but also strangely insidious, strangely powerful, as though they alone know the truth about their sons and are able, thanks to this secret knowledge, to exert a hold on them – to blackmail them from beyond the grave. And in such writings this friction – these irresolvable feelings of guilt and anger – contaminate Christianity itself. Knowledge of the fathers' hypocrisy, for Wright and Baldwin alike, spills out into the theological and leads both to reject a gospel whose emotional power they cannot help but hear. Hunger, fistfights, canings, knives, arrests, drunkenness and discord all constitute biographical connections further to the mesmerizing, narcotic, obsolete beauty both men heard in the black gospel voice. Spurning the church even as they recoiled from the dangers in the home and on the street, both Wright and Baldwin turned instead to literature, reading, not only for succour, but also for some way to avoid the traps that society set for black men. Thus, just as Wright smuggled books from Memphis's segregated library, so Baldwin virtually moved in to Harlem's two main libraries, claiming to have read everything their shelves held by the time he reached thirteen.

In May 1945, and when he was still only twenty years old, James Baldwin was taken by the journalist Esther Carlson to meet Wright. Wright had read a semi-autobiographical manuscript that Baldwin was working on and, seemingly stirred by its parallels with his own upbringing, was keen to do all he could to get it published.³ As Hazel Rowley records, Wright suggested that Baldwin apply for the Eugene F. Saxton Trust Fund, which the publishers Harper & Brothers had recently established to help promising writers. Wright 'put in a good word' and, by the end of the year, Harper's judging committee returned a 'unanimous' decision.⁴ Baldwin got the money.

As it happened, Baldwin would have to wait eight more years before the manuscript he had asked Wright to read was published as *Go Tell It on the Mountain* in 1953. But this delay had to do with matters beyond Wright's control, and it is clear that his interventions were what first placed the young Harlem novelist on the path of a literary career. Admittedly, the brilliance of this novel's prose – the way in which its sentences so beautifully mix jazz rhythms with a Jamesian intelligence, embellishing both with biblical allusion – indicate that Baldwin was talented enough not to need Wright's help to get published. But Wright guaranteed that he got published when he did, ensuring that he could devote the 1950s to the production of the superb essay collections *Notes of a Native Son* (1955) and *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961). Every bit as impressive as *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, these essays pivot on an enquiry into the nature of American democracy and of the black citizen's ambiguous role within it. In the course of this

1 Hazel Rowley, *Richard Wright: The Life and Times* (New York: Henry Holt, 2001), pp. 192–3.

2 Claude Brown, *Manchild in the Promised Land* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), p. 8.

3 Lesley Conger (1995) Jimmy on East 15th Street', *African-American Review*, 29 (4), pp. 557–66 (pp. 557–9).

4 Rowley, *Richard Wright: The Life and Times*, p. 316.

political and philosophical enquiry, Baldwin casts his eye over some of the more intriguing phenomena of the decade. He wonders how the white Mississippians William Faulkner, having produced the most riveting explorations of race and the South in American literature, could now call upon Civil Rights activists to silence their protests against Jim Crow. He worries about the bullish white journalist Norman Mailer's controversial essay 'The White Negro' (1958),⁵ instantly grasping the racial stereotypes asstir in its celebration of the 'blackness' of the decade's hipster and beatnik style. And he lambastes Hollywood for its undiminished appetite for the African exotic, disparaging films such as the 1955 production *Carmen Jones* for what he saw as their reactionary racial politics.

Another of these essays – one of the first – interrogated American political literature. Initially published alongside Wright's own short story 'The Man who Killed a Shadow' in the opening edition of the Paris journal *Zero* (1949), most of 'Everybody's Protest Novel' is devoted to a critique of one of the most famous Baldwin, Stowe's anti-slavery novel epitomized the genre's terminal weakness for 'the ostentatious parading of excessive and spurious emotion'.⁶ It was hardly a difficult target. Ever since its publication prior to the outbreak of the American Civil War, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had been the source of a great deal of contempt. Within the black community and sometimes outside it, the name of Stowe's protagonist soon entered popular parlance, a byword for any African-American man seen to be childish or deferential.

It is tempting to speculate on what Wright did upon collecting that opening edition of *Zero*. It is tempting to imagine him, nervously scanning the typescript of 'The Man who Killed a Shadow' for errors, before delving into 'Everybody's Protest Novel', the latest effort by his friend Baldwin. Puzzled, perhaps, by the essay's opening references to an unspecified African-American novel, Wright could well have felt increasingly convinced by Baldwin's eloquent denunciation of Stowe's 'theological terror', agreeing that she possessed a weakness for racial caricature, a tendency to reduce all human life to a 'conundrum to be explained by Science'.⁷ Tempting as such speculation is, though, it is nigh on impossible not to picture the horror soon to sweep across Wright's face.

Bigger is Uncle Tom's descendant, flesh of his flesh, so exactly opposite a portrait that, when the books are placed together, it seems that the contemporary Negro novelist and the dead New England woman are locked together in a deadly, timeless battle; the one uttering merciless exhortations, the other shouting curses. And, indeed, within this web of lust and fury, black and white can only thrust and counter-thrust, long for each other's slow, exquisite death, death by torture, acid, knives and burning; the thrust, the counter-thrust, the longing making the heavier

that cloud which blinds and suffocates them both, so that they go down into the pit together.⁸

Such fiery passages effectively accuse Wright of failing to practise what he preached in his 'Blueprint for Negro Writing' of 1937. In that blueprint, after all, Wright accused the writers of the Harlem Renaissance of acting a little like Uncle Tom: they entered the 'Court of American Opinion dressed in the knee-pants of servility' when what they should have done is ignore it altogether, concentrate on black audiences and produce for their benefit a truly new and independent literature.⁹ Baldwin is surely right to say that Wright fails to follow his own advice. Clearly, the last thing *Native Son* does is ignore the 'Court of American Opinion'. On the contrary, throughout the novel, Wright does all he can to offend it. And in itself, this deliberate provocation – the urgency with which *Native Son* sets about disconcerting, affronting and horrifying its readers – evidences Wright's assumption that most of these readers will be white. Indeed, the irony of *Native Son* is that the more radical it becomes – and the more avidly black nationalist – the further it drifts from a properly independent African-American literature of the kind Wright had demanded three years beforehand.

For Baldwin, Bigger Thomas is the walking sign of this failure, his every step illuminating *Native Son's* continuing bondage in stereotype. Everything Bigger is, Uncle Tom is not. Rapacious rather than chaste, restive rather than content and violent rather than conciliatory, Bigger is indeed not just a 'larger' Uncle Tom but the precise and systematic opposite of this ennobled, stupid, merciful slave. And yet, whereas Wright hopes that the characterization of his protagonist will help to discredit and even perhaps to annihilate Tom and all other such cretinous stereotypes, for Baldwin this process – this development of Bigger's personality through the accumulation of antitheses – seems risky, counterproductive and a strategy that suggests nothing more than that the epistemological fetters of white supremacy still maintain their hold.

Baldwin accordingly views the distance between Stowe and Wright's characterization as proof of an alarming and hitherto-unremarked intimacy, as proof that both spring from a common source. That is to say, Baldwin's potent critical intervention effectively suggests that, just as bullying intimidates some and makes others aggressive, so Bigger's brutality and Tom's ridiculously overdeveloped capacity to forgive simply manifest variations on the response that the powerless may make to their condition. Neither is likely to succeed; both, it seems, are compromised by an anticipated inadequacy.

And yet the evangelical fervour of 'Everybody's Protest Novel' – that fire-and-brimstone temper which leads it to pair Wright with Stowe and then to despatch both into the flames together – suggests that Baldwin's concerns ran even deeper than this. Indeed, the essay is so apocalyptic, so sadistic and so clearly indebted to the Book of Revelations, one eventually comes to feel that Baldwin regards *Native Son* as something more than an artistic failure, that he regards it, in fact, as a personal outrage. Zealously insisting upon *Native Son's* involvement in the very practices of racial marginalization that it is meant to denounce, 'Everybody's

⁵ Norman Mailer, 'The White Negro', in *Advertisements for Myself* (London: Flamingo, 1994), pp. 290–310.

⁶ James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (London: Penguin, 1995), p. 20.

⁷ Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, p. 21.

⁸ Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, p. 27.

⁹ Wright, 'Blueprint for Negro Writing', p. 1382.

Protest Novel' eventually comes to seem like nothing so much as a new version of the old argument between the aesthete and the literary realist – a version far uglier, harder and more personally embittered than any that came before it.

Earlier versions of this argument had typically taken place between those who regarded literature and ideology as inseparable and those who felt such a viewpoint to be utilitarian, doctrinaire and corrosive to the integrity of art. Known as aestheticism and sometimes encapsulated in the slogan 'art for art's sake', this latter sensibility frequently presented an apolitical face to the world. Indeed, although the versions of aestheticism that they forward are in other ways very different, Henry James's urbane 'The Art of Fiction' (1884) and Walter Pater's overheated *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873) both imply that politics is something other people do; true art, for both, must keep its distance from such a humdrum world.¹⁰

Henry James's influence is everywhere in Baldwin's work – in the title *Notes of a Native Son*, which glances over Wright's shoulder and toward the earlier transatlanticist's *Notes of a Son and Brother* (1914),¹¹ and in the labyrinthine sentences of his meditative, introspective, essays. And this Jamesian heritage flows further, seeping into the criticisms that 'Everybody's Protest Novel' makes of *Native Son*, many of which closely match those 'The Art of Fiction' makes of literary naturalism in general and of Emile Zola's oeuvre in particular. Neither James's juvenile enthusiasm for Zola nor Baldwin's similar feelings about *Native Son* faded away so much as they burned with undimishing ferocity into a negative just as strong. 'The Art of Fiction' duly berates Zola's fictions of mining life for organizing plot to suit dogma, for offering an all too 'narrow' vision and for radiating 'an air of working in the dark' appropriate to their subject but inappropriate to their form.¹² And 'Everybody's Protest Novel' bears similarly cruel witness to Baldwin's dramatic turn against his former friend Wright, denouncing *Native Son* for a similar narrowness that seemingly warped the Chicago South Side, erasing its libraries, its schools and, indeed, of anything able to keep bigger than the electric chair.

The closeness of this structural symmetry at the same time draws attention to those moments when 'Everybody's Protest Novel' departs from this Jamesian script. In particular, it draws attention to the fact that the opposition between the *political* and the *apolitical*, which helps to organize 'The Art of Fiction' and most of James's other writings about writing is nowhere to be found in Baldwin's essay. Perhaps this was inevitable. The formidable reputation that Baldwin acquired during the 1950s owed much to the way his essays turned a sharp eye on the binary oppositions of American culture. Having unpacked the psychological terrors fermented by the division of the American people into black and white or by the organization of the earth itself into Communist and capitalist zones of influence, Baldwin could hardly then move on to an unquestioning reinscription

of James's aforementioned tendency to view politics as other people's business. There again, perhaps the firm objectivity cultivated by the Victorian aesthete would always have been unavailable to Baldwin. Baldwin was, after all, as close to the ghettoized cast of *Native Son* as Henry James was remote from the hard world of Zola's tough proletarian characters. The human consequences of aesthetic shortcomings were always going to seem far more conspicuous to the young black writer. After all, a novel that erased libraries from Harlem also erased Baldwin from his native landscape, sucking the air out of his lungs.

Many have since read 'Everybody's Protest Novel' psychoanalytically, the essay's violence encouraging them to see it as an arbitrary to a friendship that only sporadically and opportunistically analyses *Native Son*. The clutter of a thousand claims and counterclaims have since confirmed this impression, drawing attention away from the literary conflict at the heart of the controversy and towards the ostensibly public rows that followed it. Indeed, critics wishing to concentrate on the personal terms of this debate have a veritable smorgasbord of documentation at their disposal. They can quote from Baldwin's 'Alas, Poor Richard' (1961),¹³ a barbed homage which presents Wright as a egomaniac with whom few could get along. They can allude to an unpublished lecture Wright delivered to Paris's American Church in 1953, in which he seemingly painted 'Everybody's Protest Novel' as the work of a rampant egomaniac liable to get himself hurt.¹⁴ Such critics could venture further, perhaps to endorse the passionate disgust of Houston A. Baker, an advocate of politicized literature and of Wright's oeuvre in particular, who sees Baldwin's critical disdain for his one-time mentor as being 'extraordinarily derogatory'.¹⁵ If taking sides is not their game, meanwhile, these critics could well turn with relief to Chester Himes's more objective account of the arguments between the men, which suggests that, although Baldwin indeed belloved certain inane slogans ('the sons must slay their fathers') in Wright's direction, he did so only after some provocation.¹⁶

Although they are so obviously at variance with each other, these viewpoints share an important, and regrettable, tendency in common: they start us talking about Baldwin and Wright's personal relations and stop us talking (or worse still, *reading*) their work. Baldwin's biographer James Campbell observes:

The old charge of slaying the father is sometimes cited by critics as if it explained *everything* about the relationship between these two highly complex men. It contains a certain amount of truth, but it is, in fact, no more than a proverbial crime, a supposition. Their quarrel, at the nitty-gritty, was actually over something more tangible – the social and artistic responsibilities of the writer.¹⁷

¹⁰ Henry James, 'The Art of Fiction' in Vincent B. Leitch (ed.) *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (New York and London: Norton, 2001), pp. 851–70. Walter Pater, 'Excerpt from *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*' in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, pp. 833–41.

¹¹ Henry James, *Notes of a Son and Brother* (London: Macmillan, 1914).
¹² Henry James, 'The Art of Fiction' in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, pp. 855–70 (p. 869).

¹³ James Baldwin, 'Alas, Poor Richard', in *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son* (New York: Dell, 1961), pp. 146–70.

¹⁴ James Campbell, *Talking at the Gates: A Life of James Baldwin* (Boston, Mass. and London: Faber & Faber, 1991), p. 65.

¹⁵ Houston A. Baker, *Long Black Song: Essays in Black American Literature and Culture* (Charlottesville, Va. and London: University Press of Virginia, 1972), p. 140.

¹⁶ Chester Himes, *The Quality of Hurt: The Autobiography of Chester Himes* (New York: Doubleday, 1972), p. 200.

¹⁷ Campbell, *Talking at the Gates*, p. 69.

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What Campbell characterises here is the way in which critics have repeatedly swept up in Wright and Baldwin's personal conflagration and dragged away from their far more important, more meaningful, literary differences. It is precisely to avoid such a fate that the example of Baldwin's criticism reproduced in this book is 'Many Thousands Gone' (see *Critical Readings*, pp. 76–87). The second of Baldwin's three essays on Richard Wright, 'Many Thousands Gone' sits between the denunciatory 'Everybody's Protest Novel' and the elegiac 'Alas, Poor Richard', and is blessedly free of the emotional heat of both. Neither dispatching Wright to Hell nor posthumously seeking his forgiveness, 'Many Thousands Gone' thus sets out most closely the argument I outline above: that *Native Son*, to Baldwin's mind, remained trapped in the logic it described, inadvertently regurgitating racist stereotypes it sought to destroy. And this was an argument to which, as we will now see, many have returned.

First responses: Ralph Ellison and Irving Howe

Immediately upon its publication, then, *Native Son* was hailed in America and beyond as the definitive 'black' novel. Critics far and wide lauded its social realism, some suggesting even as others insisted that its sustained political engagement – its attritional, unrelenting didacticism – illuminated the way forward for all black art. Baldwin was not the only successor of Wright's to feel overwhelmed by the 'definitive', canonical status of *Native Son*. The author of the landmark novel *Invisible Man* (1952), Ralph Ellison, also objected to the configuration of a post-war, post-*Native Son* literary landscape in which African-American novelists could only hope to sell their manuscripts if they consented to try 'out-Wrighting Richard'.¹⁸ As his double-edged tribute 'Remembering Richard Wright' (1971) put it:

[I]n my terms, Wright failed to grasp the function of artistically induced catharsis – which suggests that he failed also to understand the Afro-American custom of shouting in church (a form of ritual catharsis), or its power to cleanse the mind and redeem and rededicate the individual to forms of ideal action. . . . Yet it is for such moments of inspired communication that the artist lives. The irony here is that Wright could evoke them, but felt, for ideological reasons, that tears were a betrayal of the struggle for freedom.¹⁹

Ellison's doubts about *Native Son*'s impact overlap with many of those that Baldwin expresses in 'Everybody's Protest Novel' and 'Many Thousands Gone'. In particular, the two writers shared a determination to escape what they saw as the mandatory politicization of the black writer. Just as Baldwin would lament

the polemicism of *Native Son*, so Ellison cautioned time and again against any attempt to straitjacket the black writer, noting, in 1955, that if 'the Negro, or any other writer, is going to do what is expected of him, he's lost the battle'.²⁰ Ellison's most emotive statement of this belief was prompted by the 1963 publication in *Dissent* magazine of 'Black Boys and Native Sons', the influential Marxist critic Irving Howe's rebuttal of James Baldwin's attacks on *Native Son*. The substance of Howe's argument was that *Native Son*'s implied definition of the novel as a political tool was far preferable to Baldwin's (and by extension Ellison's) sentimental faith in its capacities for individual reinvention, expression and determination. Baldwin's and Ellison's naïve faith in the 'assertion of self-liberation', for Howe, was merely 'a favorite strategy among American literary people in the fifties'. It was 'also vapid and insubstantial. It violates the reality of social life, the interplay between external conditions and personal will.' *Native Son*, for Howe, made no such mistake and acknowledged that literature by black writers was duty bound to protest. The novel seemed implicitly to ask:

What, then, was the experience of a man with a black skin, what *could* it be here in this country? How could a Negro put pen to paper, how could he so much as think or breathe, without some impulsion to protest, be it harsh or mild, political or private, released or buried?²¹

Ellison's answers to these questions echoed the objections 'Everybody's Protest Novel' raised: the problem with *Native Son*, as Ellison saw it, was that 'Wright could imagine Bigger, but Bigger could not possibly imagine Richard Wright. Wright saw to that'. Howe's problem, meanwhile, was that he 'seems to see segregation as an opaque steel jug with the Negroes inside waiting for some black messiah to come along and blow the cork. Wright is his hero and he sticks with him loyally'.²² *Native Son*, Ellison suggests, for all its power, is a novel and thus neither equipped nor meant to be equipped with the messianic powers of the political saviour. Reading the novel as though through the prism of Howe's positive appraisal of it, Ellison comments:

One unfamiliar with what Howe stands for would get the impression that when he looks at a Negro he sees not a human being but an abstract embodiment of living hell. He seems never to have considered that American Negro life (and here he is encouraged by certain Negro 'spokesmen') is, for the Negro who must live it, not only a burden (and not always that) but also a *discipline* – just as any human life which has endured so long is a discipline teaching its own insights into the human condition, its own strategies of survival. There is a fullness, even a richness here; and here *despite* the realities of politics, perhaps, but nevertheless here and real. Because it is *human* life. And Wright, for

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¹⁸ Ralph Ellison, *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison* (New York: the Modern Library, 1995), ed. John F. Callahan, p. 161.

¹⁹ Ralph Ellison, 'Remembering Richard Wright in *Going to the Territory*' (New York: Vintage, 1995), pp. 198–216 (pp. 211–12).

²⁰ Ellison, *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, pp. 212–3.

²¹ Irving Howe, 'Black Boys and Native Sons', available online, at the American Studies web site of the University of Virginia, <<http://roads.virginia.edu/~DRBR/howe-bla.html>> (accessed 17 February 2005).

²² Ellison, *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, pp. 162–3.