

# Talk With Ralph Ellison

By HARVEY BREIT

**J**UST over medium height and strong and substantial of physique, the author of "Invisible Man" is visible indeed. His face is firm and sensitive and remarkably handsome, a scar and a thin mustache failing to mar it. He's a standout in any company. The name is Ralph Ellison, heard here and there and one hopes everywhere these days because of his first, distinguished novel. And to be heard of in the future, if any predictions are worth anything at all.

Though up until this relatively triumphant event Mr. Ellison has been, it must be admitted, obscure. Before putting him on record as a thinking, talking chap, it seemed a good idea, therefore, to root around in Mr. Ellison's biography. It turned out he was born in Oklahoma City, in 1914. He lived there

most of his life. Mr. Ellison spent three years at Tuskegee Institute, where he studied music and composition. Then he stumbled on sculpture.

That got him to New York, bent on exploring stone with a hammer and clay with a wire gimmick. Just about that time, though, along came "The Wasteland"—T. S. Eliot's, of course, and that turned out to be the most influential book in his



Ralph Ellison.

life. "It got me interested in literature," Mr. Ellison said. "I tried to understand it better and that led me to reading criticism. I then started looking for Eliot's kind of sensibility in Negro poetry and I didn't find it until I ran into Richard Wright."

**T**HE work or the man? "Both," Mr. Ellison said. "We became friends, and still are. I began to write soon after. Meeting Wright at that time, when he hadn't yet begun to be famous, was most fortunate for me. He was passionately interested in the problems of technique and craft and it was an education. Later the Communists took credit for teaching him to write, but that's a lot of stuff. I published a short story in American Writing, I think, in 1940. I was in Cross-Section. That was, I believe, 1944, in which some of the first work of Norman Mailer, Arthur Miller and Shirley Jackson appeared."

Was "Invisible Man" Mr. Ellison's only novel? "I wrote a short novel in the process of writing this one," Mr. Ellison replied, "just to get a kindred theme out of the way."

Now, Mr. Ellison couldn't just slough off that one. How could he have been that clear? Why hadn't he been just enough confused—as most of us would be

—to try to assimilate the kindred theme into the big novel? Mr. Ellison laughed a little. "I could see," he said, "it was not part of the novel because it had to do with a more mature character. While thematically it was part of the book, it nevertheless would have required different treatment; its reality wasn't as intense, as surreal, as the reality of the novel."

**T**HAT was pretty much that then. Mr. Ellison continued. "Several reviews pointed out parts of the book they considered surrealistic. I'll agree with that; however I didn't select the surrealism, the distortion, the intensity, as an experimental technique but because reality is surreal. I used to get this same sense of a distorted reality years ago when I'd come every once in a while on a shell-shocked veteran of

World War I. It was up in Harlem and he used to stop traffic on a street crossing by throwing imaginary bombs at the cars. Of course, the traffic flowed on quite normally. This fellow was reliving a trauma. But people were used to it and they went normally about their business."

What about the business (wasn't it nonsense?) of being a Negro writer? Wasn't one a writer who

happened to be a Negro? Mr. Ellison tackled the question with what could only be called a beautiful honesty. "The thing that's forgotten is that everyone has to master his craft or profession. Without the mastery no one is free, Negro or white. You remember Hemingway saying he'd fought a draw with Balzac or whoever? Well, it's right. You enter into mortal combat with the best in your field. It at least keeps your feet on the ground," Mr. Ellison said laughingly. Hands clasped on the table, he went on:

"It is felt that there is something in the Negro experience that makes it not quite right for the novel. That's not true. It becomes important to the novelist because it is in this problem, as Faulkner makes us aware, that the American human conflict is at its most intense and dramatic. That's a rough way of putting it. What is exciting about it is that it hasn't really been written about except in a sociological way. That which for the sociologist presents itself as racial conflict becomes for the novelist the American form of the human drama. In Faulkner, Negro and white are catalyst for each other. If Faulkner could have found a more intense catalyst, he would have used it."