

ROBERT PENN WARREN RALPH ELLISON TAPE #1

MR. WARREN: This is a conversation with Ralph Ellison in New York City, February 25th. Ralph, shall we begin by - let me just give a quote from duBoise a while back - he said this in a number of different ways, but this is good enough I guess - the Negro has long been divided by a dilemma as to whether his striving upward - it should be a Negro group - should be aimed at strengthening its inner cultural and group bonds, both for and for offensive power or whether he should seek escape whenever and wherever possible into the surrounding American culture. Discussion on this matter has been American culture rather than last sentence the question

of the split psyche and all that in many ways. I think I know your line on that but I'd like to hear you rephrase it if you will.

MR. ELLISON: Well, I think this - that it's a little bit more complicated than Mr. duBoise thought about it. That is, there's no way for me not to be influenced by American values, and they're coming at me through the newspapers, through the books I read, through the products that I buy, the television programs, through all the various media - through the language, of course. What becomes a problem, of course, is that when you turn from the cultural, the implicit cultural pluralism of the country, to politics, social customs, then there is a certain value, but it seems to me that the real pressure is to achieve on the socio-political level the same pluralism which exists on the level of gossip. I don't see it working any other way. And the idea that the psyche is split is not as viable as it seems.

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It's much too easy. My problem, as I said, is not whether I will accept or reject American values. It is, how can I get in a position to have the maximum influence upon those values. And my guide to that is not as arbitrary as I would like it to be, but it's determined by what my experience is in the country and where I stand, about what I can do and can not do.

RPW: In your controversy with Irving Howe you of course touched on this - not only touched on it, you developed it. You developed it in somewhat different terms, but it's the same thought, isn't it?

RE: Yes - yes - right.

RPW: The matter is a matter of the human absorption without reference to - without the question of official identity as Negro or official identity as American, is that right?

RE: Right.

RPW: You encountered this - you always encounter it in print and sometimes encounter it face to face - a Negro who will say he has regrets at the possibility of loss of racial identity - of absorption - long-range absorption.

RE: I don't think it works that way. I think it's a fair - I think that there are principles of selection which will assert themselves despite the absence of outside pressures. That is, - just on the esthetic level, there are certain types that you like, there are certain sounds of speech, your voice, of nuance - there are a number of things - and then there are the old Freudian concepts that boys tend to seek women who remind them of their mothers. I don't know how far I'd want to follow that, but I think all of this goes on too. And the

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other thing is that Negroes, despite what some of our spokesmen say, do not dislike being Negro. I like being a Negro. I don't see it as standing in the way of my being as much an American as I can be. If the absorption occurs, other people will have to have given up a lot of their resistances.

RPW: As you have taken the line before - most recently with the articles - exchanges with Irving Howe - that it's not merely suffering and deprivation, it's a challenge and enrichment.

RE: Yes - indeed. As I was telling the kids this morning at Rutgers, I'm just too interested in how it's going to work out, and I won't impose my will upon it to the extent that I can. I want to help shape it, not merely as a semi-outsider but as one who is in a position to have a responsible impact upon the American value system.

RPW: Well, of course, you've already implied this isn't what some leaders says but am I understand that some of the presentation is in terms of tactics - - the presentation - the total agony.

RE: Yes, well, this becomes part of the strategy of exerting pressure. There is a danger in this, of course - the danger is - in emphasizing the extent to which Negroes are alienated, and to which the racial predicament imposes an agony upon the individual. This being available to political manipulation can be a source of power, and it's being asserted as such within the present struggle. However, there's another aspect of it. The American Negro has a dual identity, as most Americans have, and the - it seems to me ironic

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that the split and the discipline out of which this present action is being exerted comes out of a - does not come out of simple agony - it comes out of long years of learning how to live with pressure, to deal with provocation and with violence, and it grows out of the necessity of establishing a value system and a conception of the Negro experience and of Negro personality which does not always get into the sociology and psychology .

RPW: As I understand this, then, to rephrase it, that - I think I can get it - that the power of organization, of character, of self control - all of these qualities that are making this - the Negro movement now effective, did not come out of blind - it came out of something that absorbed those elements, is that right?

RE: Exactly - exactly.

RPW: It didn't come out of self pity.

RE: It did not come out of self pity, and it did not come out of self hate, although some of these elements, being human, would be found within it. But when the world was not looking, when the country was not looking at Negroes, and when we were restrained in certain of our activities by the interpretation of the law of the land, something was being - was there to sustain us. When you go back and you look at the expression, look at the folklore, look at the - listen to the music, listen to those tales which are told by Negroes among themselves, you get a totally different person. I'm so annoyed whenever I come across a perfectly well meaning figure saying, well, the

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Negro has suddenly discovered courage. They make it a dramatic event. Suddenly they are looking at it and so they say, well, Negroes are doing so-and-so. I remember when I was riding freight trains through Alabama to go to Tuskegee, was a well known figure and he was a rough figure in Birmingham. You always hear the stories about from the boys from Birmingham who were at Tuskegee. But you also heard - which I don't hear any mention of these days - is events of violence between Negroes and whites in Birmingham and the outcome. And one story that was told over and over again was the story of Ice Cream Charlie. Ice Cream Charlie was a manufacturer of ice cream and he must have been very good. It led to his death. His competitors ordered him not to sell his ice cream to white people. The white people wanted it and he sold it, and it ended up with them sending the police after him, and he killed twelve of them before they burned him out. Now, there are many, many of these stories which are in the possession of Negroes and they are part of how we looked at ourselves - nonviolence notwithstanding. This, too, is present, and the memory of Negroes is continuous. It's just like the white - they remember what has gone on. And we remember. We know what's happened to us.

RFW: Let me - you started so many things there - let's pull one or two of them out to pursue. Let's come back to the question of violence - a separate topic. But the matter of identity, the matter of alienation - those topics were mentioned. What do you think of the

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suggestion that part of the Southern resistance is a question of maintaining identity not based on the question of race as such.

I'll try to put it another way -

- Southerner who

feels himself as Southerner as opposed to American - that's still the Southern psyche

he discovers identity is involved,

he somehow

a lot of things in one package being

Southern - one of those many things which he

is segrega-

tion. He doesn't realize that this is not necessarily concomitant

to having an identity. He

associated his love for

which he presumed constituted identity. A large part

of his existence is based on

and his culture

and his identity. But the problem might be alleviated considerably.

What disintegration of this love idea could take place? Does that make any sense to you?

RE: It makes a lot of sense to me, because one of the areas that I feel, and I think I see when I look at the Southerner who has these feelings, is that he has been imprisoned by it, and that he has been prevented from achieving his individuality, perhaps more than Negroes have. And this is a tough one for Northerners to understand very often - that is, Northern whites, and sometimes even for Northern Negroes.

RFW: I think it is too - some of the people I know.

RE: Yes, it's very difficult to get that across, and if it could be spelled out, if we could break this thing down and see that segregation isn't going to stop people from being Southern, it isn't going

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to stop the main current of the way of life, because as I have seen the South as a musician and as a waiter and so on, some of the people who are most afraid of Negroes invading will never be bothered because that way of life is structured in a way which is not particularly attractive to Negroes.

RPW: One thing that Van Woodward said to me yesterday in a conversation at lunch, was that a lot of fear in the South is primarily a fear of one of the white men - or a large part - but the fear is of some secret pressure in one sense or another about something which isn't a real issue. Does that make sense to you?

RE: I think it does. I think it does.

REW: a Negro sus-
picion among whites has set in to prevent a normal, free expression of opinion or personality.

RE: Yes. Because if you say that, all right, I feel that this might work, then the whole structure seems threatened.

RPW: That notion, an interlocking structure, interlocking
structures supported just one thing now of segregation.

RE: Yes, and it's so unreal, actually, when you see the whole political structure being changed anyway, and when the political structure changes it's going to be seen where Negroes were stopped and where they'll go. What isn't appreciated sufficiently I think is that over and over again Negroes of certain backgrounds take on aristocratic values. This is one reason why we don't have a real middle class.

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RPW: That's been one of the things that have been commented on by observers from the 18th century on.

RE: But over and over again, my intellectual friends they have no conception of this. They can't understand - I mean, it appears ludicrous to say that so-and-so is an aristocrat in his image of himself and in the values which he has taken over from the white South. Nevertheless it's true, and some of the biggest snobs that you could run into are some of these poor Negroes - well, they might not be poor actually, they might be living very well - but there are just certain things, certain codes, certain values which they express and they will die by them. And there's quite a lot of that.

RPW: Speaking of codes which are inherited, I had a conversation with Mr. Evers - Charles Evers, ten days or so ago, two weeks ago - he got off on the point of what hope there was for Mississippi and for the Negro in Mississippi -

He said there's a good deal of hope here, some real hope here, otherwise I wouldn't be here - to paraphrase it. He said, one thing about even the most died-in-the-wool segregationist, he said, despite the number of and cowards anywhere, but these people are raised on some kind of old-fashioned tradition or notion of courage. He said they're really taught to respect it. He said when they get the notion that this Negro is standing up to them, is showing courage he said they have to have respect for that fact. He said they won't have to like it but there's a base of respect there. He said this is Then he went on

to say in the same breath almost, that when you sit down with this same died-in-the-wool segregationist and talk, talk but he won't like it. He said he won't bother to lie because it's across some line in himself. He thinks there's something to build, you see. He says that's why I'd like to stay here. He says there's some hope. Does that make any sense in your experience?

RE: In my experience, yes, and it's been - well, it's part of the Negro folklore - But if you can get one who makes up his mind to be fair, you can talk to him and he'll tell you the truth, and you can depend on it. He's not going to back out. And this is said very frequently now by Negroes when they run into difficulties with Northern liberals - Northern white liberals.

RFW: That's the - Mr. Evers said he preferred this man - those who he said up North would pat you on the back and tell you how much they're for you, and then that's all.

RE: This is true. Of course, one part of the Negro's given such situations, is that he has been known - how this man differs from the other. You know, he'll say if you get them together, he's going to talk as much segregation as anybody else. But this one you can go to and he will come through in the clinch. This is I would say built in to people who have to live in the South. That is, you've got to know who can help and who might even keep somebody from doing you in. And there have always been that type of

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person.

RPW: Who were acting out in terms of either simple decency as opposed to theoretical decency, or acting out in terms of a paternalistic, patronizing sense. This again can involve character -

RE: It can involve character - and cause. But the person - the Negro making the judgment is making the judgment.

RPW: It's important for him to make that judgment.

RE: It's very important for him to make that judgment, and it's very important for him to know more about that man than perhaps the man would suspect that he knows.

RPW : Or knows about himself.

RE: Or knows about himself.

RPW: Let me pull another conversation I had a while back - in Washington I was talking to a Miss Lucy Thornton, a very brilliant young lady, second in her class in the Howard University Law School, and she's been through the demonstrations, she's been in jail and so forth. She was raised she said on a farm in Virginia, and when I first met her - we were sitting at a luncheon together at a long table - there were fifteen or twenty people there - she turned to me and said, I'm not optimistic about the way things are probably going to go here - or may go here, she said, about getting a human settlement after the white troubles are over. I said why? and she said, well, because we have been on the lam together. She said, we have a common history which is some basis for communication for living together afterwards - some human recognition - that was the idea. And she went on to say, I'm very much afraid

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in Detroit and Chicago. She said, from my background I don't see where this recognition can come in - I don't see the basis for it. Now,

RE: Well, it is true that when you share a common background, a common culture, you don't have to spell out so many things, even though you might be fighting over recognizing the common identity, and I think that that's what's part of the South - part of the South's struggle. It's just very hard for Governor Wallace to recognize that he has got to share not only the background but the power of looking after the state of Alabama with Negroes who probably know as much about it as he does.

RPW: Pathologically.

RE: That's right. Now, here in New York I know many, many people with many, many backgrounds and very often people who think that they - people who do know me as an individual - frequently reveal that they have no sense of the experience behind me - the extent of it and the complexity of it. What they have instead is good will and intellectuality.

RPW: That's a human problem, of course, all the way. It can be special in a case like this I presume.

RE: It can be special because suddenly something comes up and you realize, well, my gosh, all of the pieces are not here. That is, I've won my individuality in relation to other individuals at the cost of that great part of me which is a part of a group experience.

RPW: I encounter the same thing, I suppose, in this way. I've been

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congratulated by a well meaning friend who I think was a good friend - means well, you see - suddenly say after years of friends - it's so nice to meet a reconstructed Southerner or a liberal Southerner.

This makes . I don't feel reconstructed, you see. I don't and put me together.

my experience, and I don't feel liberal. I feel logical, and I resent the word - I resent the word reconstructed. I must say that it's been a kind of a liability here, and I said this to a musical man in Louisiana a few weeks ago, and he recon-structed Southerner going over the country

So it was and everything else.

RE: I remember recently and I were out in the middle west and a very friendly man, in fact, he was our host, and we were drinking and having a warm exchange, and at one part he asked my wife, well, how did you and Ralph become so poised?

RPW: reconstructed?

RE: The point of it was, he said, he had some abstract idea of how people from our background should think, but I said this, you have to remember we're city people. I knew that he was from a farm. And he forgot. Well, their people just - they lose sight of how complicated human experience is and how you absorb it in many, many ways. When I waited tables, I couldn't help but listening to conversations - I couldn't help but observe people - I couldn't help but make judgments as to their character - all waiters do. I had some sense of what was going on - new notions came to me just by standing around

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and serving a man a meal. You can say that this is not dignified, you can say that this does not have status and so on, but you can't take away from me what I absorbed from them, and once I get it, it depends upon what I want to make of it.

RPW: Like Shakespeare.

RE: Yes, or like anybody.

RPW: More like what you make of Shakespeare.

RE: It's like this notion of the culturally deprived child - one of those phrases which I don't like - as I have taught white middle class children, young people, who are what I call culturally deprived - they are culturally deprived because they are not oriented within the society in such a way that they are prepared to deal with its problems.

RPW: It's a different kind of cultural deprivation, isn't it? And actually a more radical one.

RE: That's right, but they don't even realize - they don't recognize that this is - that sometimes these people can be much more trouble than the child who lives in the slum and knows how to exist in the slum.

RPW: What this is is action - action of words and action of economics. The other person is missing something another way - it's not their - it's more mysterious, what's happening to him - is that right?

RE: Yes, it's quite mysterious, because he has everything but he can make nothing of it.

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RPW: It's twice as difficult to remedy because you can't see how to remedy it.

RE: He can't see how to remedy it and he doesn't know to what extent he has given up his past. He thinks he has it, but every time you really talk with him seriously you discover that, well, it's kind of floating out there, and the distance between the parent and the child - the parents might have it, they might have it in the old country, they might have it from the farm, and so on, but something happens with the young ones.

RPW: Do you think there's a real crisis of values in the American middle class, then?

RE: I think so.

RPW: I agree with you. I think there is too.

RE: I think there's a terrific crisis, and one of the events it's testing - in fact, bringing the crisis on, is the necessity of dealing with this Negro freedom movement.

RPW: Now, put it this way - does this work two ways - there are those who can't deal with it, only to withdraw from it, who can't accept the necessity of dealing with it on realistic terms - this is North or South or West or anywhere - forget the Southern picture for this moment. The other one is there are those who move into it - I'm making a statement now but I mean it as a question - there are those who are into it because they - it is their personal salvation to find a cause to identify with something outside themselves, outside their - the flatness of their middle class American spiritual ghetto and find a reality there to gain a true romance

over that. Now, there have been several people including Robert Moses in Mississippi said the resistance of Negroes there to white well wishers or even courageous fellow workers is very great - very great. One thing absorb arbitrarily in their Negro culture, Negro speech, Negro musical terms, Negro musical tastes, and move in and grab, as it were, the other man's soul. There's real resistance, he says, but he and try and get something for themselves out of it. This is - it's particularly resented.

RE: Yes, it is, and it always has been, and what's new about it is its being stated, its being articulated. Because it's reductive. It's the assumption that the characteristic expression can just be picked up without paying the dues for it.

RFW: Take an apple off the cart and running -

RE: That's right, and you say, well, you know, it's not like that. It isn't possible. A friend of mine told a story of a young white salesman who came down to Tuskegee in the '50's and he became friendly with some of the fellows who used to stand around on the block and talk and drank a little bit. And he found that this was a good way of liking the speech, and he ended up trying to become a part of it. And many of these were quite unsophisticated fellows but they were quite amused to see this form of naivety. It's like Christopher Newman in James' The American going over and trying to move into French society and finding this complexity of values and attitudes. But, to get back to the other point, Negroes have resented the

appropriation of their character, their image, and so on for commercial purposes as well as by those people who as you say are seeking causes. And I'm sure that there must have been quite a lot of resentment among the Negroes who encountered certain abolitionists, because the tendency is to use the other person for your convenience.

RPW: It's awful human, isn't it?

RE: It is, it's awful human

RPW: Of course, now, this same question, as some of you say, I don't care what your motives are if they're useful to a cause. That's one - that's a practical approach.

RE: That's very practical.

RPW: Another person of a - would diagnose this - a very subtle minded man would diagnose this resistance, you see, not merely as a jealousy of command post taken over by say a Harvard boy who is going to train a local boy. He' isn't seeking that post but it's forced on him because it's a training post. Now, resentment or jealousy, human as it is, but this deeper more thing. Of course that's marginal and is explosion which settles down But the element is an indication, isn't it, of the white middle class danger?

RE: I think that some of that comes into it. I think that it's so difficult for white middle class people to understand that the time has passed where their values could be so easily imposed upon Negroes. This gets into the question of leadership in Negro civil rights organizations and so on. That is, they've had the long experience -

and I can't speak as an official of any of these organizations, but the experience certainly is of long duration, whereby you make allies with people to work toward goals. But when it begins to pinch them they say hold off. And there is a matter of sacrifice and the use of that phrase self-determination involved here, and considering the added pressure upon the Negro groups through automation, through the increase of school dropouts, through the lack of reading skills and so on, there is a desperation which we feel which others don't have to feel.

RPW: That is, here in the midst of what has been an expanding economy you have a contracting economy for the unprepared situation having been more poorly and poorly prepared for the change than his white brothers have been. Is that the parallel that you wanted

RE: That's the paradox - there's the paradox. And then there's the other thing - the assurance, the unrealistic assurance that you can - because you come from a certain background you are in a position to know more about what you've begun. Now, this is a paternalistic attitude which has not been earned, it's not traditional, it's nothing except an assumption of superiority.

RPW: You mean it's not even with responsibility?

RE: It's not with responsibility either. But you assume that you are in a position to be a spokesman and analyze it, and you never stop to discover, well, what is this that I'm trying to do. And it also doesn't allow for something new which has come into the picture, a determination no longer to be the scapegoat, no longer to pay, to

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be sacrificed, to - the inadequacies of other Americans. We want to socialize this problem. Let's all of us sacrifice a little bit.

RPW: Now, the sacrificing is not merely a conveniences and vanities but a - but what more?

RE: Well, if the cost in terms of character, in terms of courage and determination and self discovery, to bring Americans' conduct in line with its professed ideals. This is a basic thing, to really act out the old American ideal which you make so much fuss about. Negroes are doing it and they are most American in that they are doing it. And others are going to have to do the same thing. Well, I say "have to" - I don't mean that we're in a position to force anything, except the exertion of -

RPW: Well, let's say force - but force has been a manifestation.

RE: Yes - a matter of pressuring and keeping this country stirred up. Because we have to keep it stirred up.

RPW: What has historically proved that thing - not just in America but elsewhere - social change doesn't happen automatically - something has to happen to make it

RE: Yes, it's, well, Harold Rosenberg and his "Tradition of the New" has an essay on character and drama and character in terms of the law, and he makes the point that drama is not like life, but the interaction, the plot, the scenes and the characters, everything are organized and selected to express certain values of the author, and with the law, it is the act - for instance, the act of murder - which reorganizes, reshapes the whole character of the man. That is,

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the law views the murdered as a murderer, he is a man without previous history in that sense, unless -

R PW: The definition hinges on the act, is that it?

RE: On the act - that's it. But this is not true in life, and it isn't true in the larger sense of what's happening to Negroes now. There was a dramatic action involved, but it was an act of law, a decision of the Supreme Court which made possible a broader ground for struggle.

RPW: Let me ask a question bearing on that, Ralph - how much change in the general climate has there been, not merely the crystallizing out of policies of resistance on the part of Negroes and

principles of organization and fact - but how much general climate of opinion, you see, in the world - in America as a whole - the white man's America is the Negro's America -

is it merely a matter of what has happened to the Negro to put his pressure on, or has there been a real change, say in a hundred years, in the climate and basic attitudes

RE: Yes, I think so. We can look at the popular images of Negroes - I think that's changed. It's changed, as Albert Murray said, it's gotten so now if a man says well, let's go to the limit, James, he's going out to see a bunch of Negroes, and he's going to our concert and he's going - part of the time he's going to just see some Negroes and hear some Negroes.

RPW: These facts make a difference of attitude in themselves.

RE: I think so. And the other thing - we don't recognize to what

extent the country has been organized and kept in balance by the images of popular culture, and I'm thinking of - well, to go back to the minstrel show idea of the Negro which was so popular for a long time - this was entertainment, but the idea, taken away from the entertainment, had a lot to do with how Negroes were treated, and this becomes very ambiguous when you get a book like Uncle Tom's Cabin, where for the right reasons many wrong conceptions of the humanity of Negroes were thrown into the public mind. That's why Negroes dislike the idea of Uncle Tom - that's a negative term for us. And the other thing that has changed--well, remember The Birth of a Nation--- that idea, and all of those movies which followed, showing the bug-eyed Pullman porter and so on - well, that has gone out of it.

RFW: Something has happened there.

RE: Something has happened.

RFW: Now effect of Douglas and Plessey before 1954 - something happened. Now, this is a general climate of opinion - a general attitude toward society.

RE: Yes, I think so, and I think that much of this comes back into World War I, with the actual - and the desegregation of the army - that had a tremendous impact - that, and the rise of the dark nations.

RFW: As a general context.

RE: I was listening to Louie Lomax on television on Sunday night in New Haven, and he made a point which is made by Negroes all the

time, he said, the guys who were shooting at me during the second world war can come over here and make it impossible for me to go into a building. He can go right past me, and yet he was accepted as the country's enemy. And this sense of one's predicament is inescapable for Negroes, and it becomes even more dramatic when African diplomats come in and be served in places where American Negroes cannot be.

RPW: Well, it's clear to anyone with any imagination or even powers of observation what has happened to the Negroes in America. I would think what's happened to the white people in America a change of spiritual climate. Partly as a result of course something has happened to the Negro - I don't mean it has happened by itself - how much has happened that is there?

Is there enough gain to stake something on it, do you think?

RE: One can only hope about these things. I think that we have such a resistance - such a resistance toward events - we've had the luxury of evading moral necessities from the Reconstruction on -

RPW: As Ben Williams said yesterday, to quote him again, as a on the national conscience, General Grant was somewhat miscast.

RE: He certainly was. He was in no position to handle it, and much of the looseness which we suffered from can be dated back to that period. It just seems to follow that you have to learn how to be morally correct when you have so much when you have so much mobility, when you can postpone the moment of truth. But I think that as we have become the major power in the world, we are being disciplined in the experience of frustration, and the experience of

being found inadequate. We're being - we're slowly learning that the wealth doesn't do us any good, that that isn't what is needed.

RFW: Now, we were saying about another topic - same topic - well, we were talking about the spiritual dangers in the American middle class - here's a national danger which is isn't it? Is that right? Either bankruptcy - or at least the danger of bankruptcy - and in a world situation - a danger there of the bankruptcy of power because intelligence, is that it?

RE: I think so. That makes sense. I think so, and I think that what happens, either in the instances where we must use force or where we should use force, we don't know how to confront this, because we have - we're compromised so damned much with events and with ourselves. We think we can slip out of certain things but I don't think so. I don't think a great nation can act that way. It's rather amazing to see the - all of the prosperity, all of the possibilities of leisure, and still have a nation which is in a state of anxiety. Something is wrong there. Something there is wrong and it isn't the presence of Negroes. It isn't even the presence of the civil rights problem although this is an aspect of it.

RFW: It does flow into it. I could agree with you immediately that that is not the central fact - flow into an American national situation and aggravate it. But the other thing which would have happened anyway - it's happened in other parts of the world where they have no Negroes.

RE: That's right. Well, what does man do about having so much power? We have always been in the position of controlling our own appetites and deciding how far we should go - that is, the problem of Ahab as against Moby Dick, and we just - the sky's the limit. The national values become so confused that you can't even depend upon your writers for some sense of the realism of character. There has been so much self indulgence - much of it to be traced back to the fad of psychoanalysis - the concept of Manman doesn't exist for many, many people in this country.

RPW: The concept of syntax doesn't either. And perhaps

RE: Perhaps. This is rather strange to watch. I believe that there is a basic strength in this country, but so much of it is being socked away and no one seems to be too much interested in it.

RPW: It's sadly true, I think. Let me switch the topic, if you will. Let me read you a passage here from Dr. Kenneth Clark on Martin Luther King's philosophy - this will lead us back to the whole question of the nature of violence and nonviolence in a situation like this - the social revolution. On the surface, King's philosophy appears to have health and stability, while the Black Nationalists betray pathology and instability. A deeper analysis, however, would reveal that there is also an unrealistic if not pathological basis in King's doctrine. The natural reaction to injustice, oppression and humiliation are bitterness and resentment. The form which such bitterness takes need not be overtly violent but the corrosion of human spirit seems inevitable. It would seem,

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therefore, that any demand that the victims of oppression be required to love those who oppress them places an additional and probably intolerable psychological burden upon them.

RE: Well, is a man who is missing the heroic side of this thing, and he reveals to what extent he isn't a Southern Negro. Now, I think this - it might sound mystical, but I don't feel it's so because I think it's being acted out - that there is a great deal of power - and Dostoyevski has made us aware - in humility. In fact, Jesus Christ has made us aware. It could be terribly ambiguous and it can contain many, many contradictory forces. is not working out of yesterday nor the day before yesterday. He is working out of a long tradition which is reinforced with all the - by religion and a number of other things. The people who are involved have been conditioned to contain these contradictory elements.

RFW: Do you mean conditioned by their training or by their history?

RE: By their history - by their history - I mean, many of them couldn't even spell out what I'm talking about - even the leaders.

RFW: And not just the nonviolent clinics?

RE: No - no - not that - I'm talking about the necessity of having to stay alive during periods where many, many Negroes were killed. We know what the violence - the history of the violence, but the personal courage was not even a factor in this. The individual personal courage had to be held in check, and he had to determine who he was involved with and at what point he wanted to sell his life. This is the - certainly has been part of my experience, where I had

to decide I might go into - to take on and fight over this - this guy wants me to fight, he's trying to make me fight, what do I have to gain? Am I going to let him determine my worth? - to me?

RPW: To let him determine your worth to you, is that it?

RE: By some small insignificant violence. Because one thing that Clark forgets is that Negroes learned about violence in a very good school, and they have known for a long, long time that they ^{can} take a lot of head whipping.

RPW: Let's go back now to what you said a moment ago - you said he lacked the conception of the basic heroism.

RE: Yes - the basic heroism of - the person who must live within a society without recognition, without real status, but who is involved in its ideals and who is trying to make his way to that society and who, because of this predicament in the society and his position in it, learns more of the real problems, the real nature of that society, the real values of it. He might not be able to spell it out philosophically, but you know that this is the truth - I live the truth and you do not live the truth, because you are not taking this into consideration. This imposes upon that person the necessity of understanding the other man and giving up some of his revenge.

RPW: Of understanding himself too.

RE: Of understanding himself too - yes. Understanding himself and understanding himself in relationship to the other man. This puts a big strain - yes, it puts a big strain upon the individual. Never-

theless, isn't this what civilization is about? Isn't this what we aim for at the highest? Isn't this what tragedy has always taught us?

RPW: One or two people whom I have asked this question say, well, this reflects their Christian philosophy, as it does - that the Christian philosophy believes in the redemption of the natural man and now you're saying something else - different and not necessarily contradictory - you are saying - this is not forgetting Christianity, it's forgetting heroism - another kind of redemption.

RE: That's right - you're forgetting sacrifice, and the idea of sacrifice is very deeply inbred in Negroes. This is the thing - my mother always said I don't know what's going to happen to us if you young Negroes don't do so-and-so-and-so. The command went out and it still goes out. You're supposed to be somebody, and it's in relationship to the group. This is part of the American Negro experience, and this also means that the idea of sacrifice is always right there. This is where Hannah Ernst is way off in left base in her reflections on Little Rock. She has no conception of what goes on in the parents who send their kids through these lines. The kid is supposed to be able to go through the line - he's a Negro, and he's supposed to have mastered those tensions, and if he gets hurt then this is one more sacrifice.

RPW: This is the end of the first tape of the conversation with Ralph Ellison. Resume on Tape 2.