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ELLISON'S WHITE LIBERAL RHINEHART: THE NEGRO
AMERICAN CORE OF BOOK I OF *THREE DAYS BEFORE
THE SHOOTING...*

Abstract: Composed over a nearly twenty-year period following *Brown v. Board of Education*, Book I of *Three Days Before the Shooting...* renders an intricate narrative of the identification with blackness, and subsequent ideological transformation, required of white liberals for the meaningful desegregation of American society. This article positions Book I's narrator, Welborn McIntyre, as a crucial iteration of the racially indeterminate Rhinehart spirit that is the animating concern of Ellison's second novel. Drawing on a subtle allusion to the fiction of André Malraux in Book I's opening, this article frames McIntyre's Rhinehartian transformation as a shamanic ordeal that personally illuminates the Negro core of American cultural identity. The ordeal demands of McIntyre a grueling recalibration of his relationships to the interrelated imaginative landscapes of the American South, Western Europe, and Negro America, which are personified by the characters McGowan, M. Vannec, and Hickman, respectively. While McIntyre's enlightenment and transformation appear incomplete, they actually require the reader's critical collaboration to be realized. As a representative of the average white reader that Ellison envisioned during his novel's composition, McIntyre and his narrative therefore perform a crucial rite of initiation into Book II's fictive space and the desegregated American truth Ellison seeks to communicate.

Keywords: Ralph Ellison, Welborn McIntyre, *Three Days Before the Shooting*, white liberalism, desegregation, Negro American, blackness, identity, shamanism, André Malraux, Martin Luther King

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БЕЛЫЙ ЛИБЕРАЛЬНЫЙ РАЙНХАРТ ЭЛЛИСОНА:
НЕГРИТЯНСКО-АМЕРИКАНСКОЕ САМОСОЗНАНИЕ
В ПЕРВОЙ КНИГЕ РОМАНА
«ЗА ТРИ ДНЯ ДО РАССТРЕЛА»

Аннотация: Первая книга романа «За три дня до расстрела», написанная почти через двадцать лет после процесса «Браун против Совета по образованию», в сложной форме рассказывает о попытке отождествления с чернокожими и последующей идеологической трансформации, которой требовало от белых либералов осознанное освобождение американского общества от сегрегации. В этой статье Уэлборн Макинтайр, рассказчик первой книги романа, рассматривается как важнейший образ, переосмысляющий неопределенную расовую позицию, характерную для Райнхарта, которая является главной проблемой второго романа Эллисона. Анализируя едва заметную отсылку к текстам Андре Мальро в начале первой книги, автор статьи представляет «райнхартовскую» эволюцию Макинтайра как некое шаманское испытание, в котором сквозь историю конкретного человека раскрывается суть негритянского-американского культурного самосознания. Это испытание требует от Макинтайра мучительной перестройки отношений с соединенными взаимными связями воображаемыми пространствами американского Юга, Западной Европы и негритянской Америки, которые воплощены в образах Макгоуэна, М. Ваннека и Хикмена соответственно. Хотя духовное прозрение и изменения, произошедшие с Макинтайром, кажутся неполными, их понимание невозможно без критического соучастия читателя. Олицетворяя среднестатистического белого читателя, на которого ориентировался Эллисон в своем романе, Макинтайр и его рассказ выполняют роль обряда инициации, готовящего ко вступлению в художественное пространство второй книги и в мир справедливой, свободной от сегрегации Америки, который Эллисон и стремится показать.

Ключевые слова: Ральф Эллисон, Уэлборн Макинтайр, «За три дня до расстрела», белый либерализм, десегрегация, американские негры, чернокожие, самосознание, шаманизм, Андре Мальро, Мартин Лютер Кинг

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The 2010 publication of *Three Days Before the Shooting...* marked the beginning of a decisive evolution in Ellison studies. Since then, rather than asking, “Why didn’t Ellison finish his second novel?,” scholars have slowly begun to ask the much more fruitful questions: What did Ellison leave behind? What did he mean by it? And what do we make of it?

No work has proven more crucial to this shift than *Ralph Ellison in Progress*, a study in Ellison’s lifelong compositional history written by *Three Days* co-editor Adam Bradley. The most important insight that Bradley offers serious readers of *Three Days* is this: Ellison’s original intention for his second novel was to expand his imaginative exploration of Rinehart, the unforgettable archetype of personal hybridity and ceaseless metamorphosis—the “virtuoso of identity” whose middle name, literally, is Proteus—that *Invisible Man*’s protagonist discovers and becomes in the climactic final chapters of Ellison’s first novel [Ellison 2003: 110].

Rinehart teaches *Invisible* that “The world in which we lived was without boundaries. A vast seething, hot world of fluidity,” and that therefore “You could actually make yourself anew,” since “freedom was not only the recognition of necessity, it was the recognition of possibility.” [Ellison 1995: 498, 499] A collage-like “man of parts” containing and expressing multitudes, like the enigmatic figure on Riverside Drive that Ellison later described in “The Little Man at Chehaw Station,” Rinehart personifies an empowered state of natality—demonstrated finally by *Invisible* in his womb-like hole of “infinite possibility”—that speaks to the myriad potentialities for improvised self-creation that Ellison finds particularly latent in democratic culture [Ellison 2003: 509; Ellison 1995: 498]. Ever resistant of fixed forms and final words, Rinehart stands for the complex fate of becoming a full American.

Drawing from a notebook that Ellison began keeping before *Invisible Man*’s 1952 publication, which Ellison titled “NOVEL: Opus II” on the cover, Bradley usefully summarizes the second novel’s principal thrust:

As initially imagined in these notebook pages, Ellison’s second novel explores a landscape of American chaos with Rhinehart [sic] as the central character. As Ellison actually began writing the novel, Rhinehart would go by other names—first Bliss, the child evangelist of indeterminate race whom a former jazzman turned preacher named Alonzo Hickman raises as his own; then Movie Man, an itinerant scam artist who arrives in a small Oklahoma town to film a movie, only to con the locals out of money; and finally Adam Sunraider, a ‘race-baiting New England Senator’ who would ultimately be

struck down by a part of his own past, a shot fired by his estranged son, a child conceived years before during his travels in that small Oklahoma town. In the Book II typescripts that comprise *Juneteenth*, Bliss/Sunraider emerges as the central voice, alongside Hickman, of Ellison's fiction. [Bradley 2010: 125-26]

Importantly for my present purposes, Bradley perceives a subtle metamorphosis in Ellison's imagination, from the Rinehart of *Invisible Man* to the Rhinehart of the Opus II notebook. "Unlike *Invisible Man*'s Rinehart," Bradley writes, "whose rootlessness is the form of his freedom, the Opus II Rhinehart is a victim of his own free will [...] an individual particularly trapped by his own racial indeterminacy, his protean ability to shift shades as well as shapes." [Bradley 2010: 134]

This observation, about the dimension of "racial indeterminacy" that constitutes the civic evolution of Rinehart to Rhinehart, invites us to place the thematic concerns of Ellison's second novel in their historic context. While Ellison had begun to imagine the novel in the months preceding *Invisible Man*'s publication, his entire world changed two years later when, in May 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court declared, in *Brown v. Board of Education*, racially segregated public schools to be unconstitutional. Two days after the decision, Ellison wrote in a letter to Morteza Sprague, his former English professor at Tuskegee: "The whole road stretched before me and it got all mixed up with this book that I'm writing [...] Now I'm writing about the evasion of identity which is another characteristically American problem which must be about to change." [Qtd. in: Bradley 2010: 103]

Ellison rightly perceived the desegregation of schools as a major harbinger of racial indeterminacy—the result of what white supremacists derisively call miscegenation—in America's future. The "change" in America's characteristic "evasion of identity" would inhere in this culturally chaotic proliferation of racial mixture and subsequent ambiguity. Through the novel he was writing, Ellison wanted to show how deeply, albeit relatively invisibly, these same themes already ran in America's past. In notes from the Opus II notebook that Bradley quotes, Ellison wrote that "the problem of color is there as psychological self-rejection" in Rhinehart's character arc, "as reason for questioning, as main source of his sense of rootlessness." For Bradley, this means: "The novel's central action, as Ellison conceives it in this embryonic form, concerns Rhinehart's attempt to return to his neglected past, to embrace his blackness by reconciling with Hickman." [Bradley 2010: 134]

Bradley's interpretation of his own Ellisonian archaeology is more fecund than even he appears to realize. I will demonstrate this by identifying another major incarnation of Rhinehart—one facing the “problem of color” and “psychological self-rejection,” attempting “to embrace his blackness by reconciling with Hickman”—in *Three Days*: Welborn McIntyre, a liberal white journalist who is present at the scene of Sunraider's shooting and who undertakes an ideologically grueling quest to make sense of Hickman's ostensibly confounding presence there. By demonstrating McIntyre's essential Rhinehartism, I seek to advance a much needed conversation in Ellison studies about the structure and function of Book I, the substantial portion of *Three Days* that McIntyre narrates, which precedes any revelation of Bliss's transformation into Senator Sunraider and the role that Hickman played in it as his erstwhile adoptive father.

Submitted to Ellison's editor in 1972, Book I has twenty years of the author's imagination and craft behind it. Yet, as we near the end of this first decade of scholarship on *Three Days*, it remains woefully overlooked. Ellison himself gestured to the function it performs in his novelistic project in an interview given to the *Paris Review* in late 1954. “Perhaps the white reader,” Ellison said, “draws his whiteness around himself when he sits down to read. He doesn't want to identify himself with Negro characters in terms of our immediate racial and social situation, though on the deeper human level, identification can become compelling when the situation is revealed artistically. The white reader doesn't want to get too close, not even in an imaginary re-creation of society.” [Ellison 2003: 212–13]

Ellison made this comment just a few months after the *Brown v. Board* decision, during the same period that he was beginning to compose Book I in earnest. It is not by mere coincidence that Ellison began crafting McIntyre—a self-described “liberal, ex-radical Northerner”; a narrator modeled on the overwhelmingly white readership of Ellison's intellectual generation, what Lionel Trilling called, in *The Liberal Imagination*, “the literate, reading, responsible middle class of people who are ourselves”—during this early moment of desegregation [Ellison 2010: 61; Trilling 2008: 107]. The liberal white reader's implicitly segregationist refusal to identify with black characters had real, oppressive political effects. It produced what Martin Luther King, Jr. would later call, in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” “the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride towards freedom [...] the white moderate who is more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice [...] who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and

who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a ‘more convenient season.’” [Qtd. in: Rieder 2013: 176]

Having started on McIntyre’s narrative almost a decade before the publication of King’s “Letter,” Ellison knew that educated white moderates and liberals had to be shaken out of their hypocritical acceptance of the Jim Crow caste system, if America was to actualize its democratic promise and meaningfully desegregate. He also knew that this would happen only if white moderates and liberals were forced to radically reimagine their relationship to blackness and black people; to really understand, as he wrote in his 1970 essay “What America Would Be Like Without Blacks,” that “most white Americans are culturally part Negro American without even realizing it”—a task for literature, if ever there was one [Ellison 2003: 584].

For the majority of audience members that Ellison expected, then, Book I was intended to perform a crucial rite of initiation, preparing readers by way of imaginative dislocation—what Ellison conceptualized as a shamanic experience, which I will explain in this essay—for the racially integrative truth of Book II’s fictive space and the United States’s political future. McIntyre’s narrative should therefore be read as the necessary opening act for *Three Days*’s attempt to advance a post-Jim Crow American identity. Speaking to the world that produced it as a work of literature, a world that endures today in any number of forms, Book I calls on the American reader to cultivate the Rhinehart within himself.

* * *

Book I, Chapter 1, begins like this: “Understand me, I was there; sitting in the press section at the start of the shooting. I had been rereading M. Vannec’s most unexpected letter when suddenly it was as though a certain long-forgotten night of violence to which he referred had flared from the page and accelerated into chaotic life.” [Ellison 2010: 13]

Immediately, McIntyre notices the assassination attempt on Sunraider—the Senator had been giving a speech to which McIntyre was paying no attention—and Hickman’s emergence, “looming up like a bear suddenly cresting a hill, a huge old whiteheaded Negro” who tries to stop the assassin. Hickman, upon failure—since the shooter calmly jumps to his death and brings about “a shattering silence” in the Senate gallery—“suddenly calls out in a voice like a roughly amplified horn and begins to relieve himself of an inarticulate combination of prayer, sermon, prophecy, and song [...]

A projection so resonant with anguish, bitterness, yes, and with *indictment*,” McIntyre recalls [Ellison 2010: 14, 15].

Knowing Sunraider to be a virulent racist, McIntyre concludes, “It was absolutely confounding! [...] as though the High Chief Rabbi of Minsk were to have stood in front of the Pentagon and broken into loud lamentations over the death of Adolf Hitler—completely illogical, a scandalous affront to our sense of order. A slap in the face! Indeed, for me this man Hickman’s conduct is more upsetting than the shooting. Sunraider is not, after all, the first politician to get himself shot.” [Ellison 2010: 15]

In Chapter 2, McGowan, a Southerner and fellow journalist, arrives on the scene, amid the throng of reporters and other bystanders trying to make sense of what just happened. “Hey McIntyre!” McGowan shouts, “It’s unbelievable! [...] it’s unbelievable!” [Ellison 2010: 20] McGowan informs McIntyre that Hickman is riding in the same ambulance as Sunraider, “because the Senator *demande*d that they take him! [...] What’s more, he ordered them to make a place for the nigger in his own private room!” [Ellison 2010: 20, 21] McIntyre is “flabbergasted” by this development and its implications of a loving relationship between Sunraider and Hickman, which he characterizes as an “extreme of unreason.” [Ellison 2010: 21] Then he thinks to himself: “How could I ever describe to someone like M. Vannec the element of free-floating threat introduced into the scene by this simple yet incongruous fact? He’d think me mad. And perhaps, he’d be right, I told myself.” [Ellison 2010: 21]

M. Vannec is not a character that Ellison invented, but rather one that he appropriated and reconfigured from the French novelist André Malraux. (Malraux is of course a well-acknowledged literary ancestor of Ellison’s.) Claude Vannec is the protagonist of Malraux’s second novel *La Voie Royale* (*The Royal Way*). It is a story similar to Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, young Vannec follows a seasoned explorer named Perken on an expedition into the jungle of Indochina, searching for valuable indigenous sculptures. There, Claude Vannec indulges his fascination with disaster and decay, combating scores of savagely depicted natives and swarms of diseased, crawling things. He experiences anxiety, nausea, and mounting fear and desperation, becoming increasingly conscious of impending death and doom, to the point of nearly incapacitating hysteria. Young Vannec’s adventure constitutes a difficult and gruesome transformation—or, to use a favorite word of Malraux’s, metamorphosis. Guided by Perken into the wilderness, Vannec exchanges his civilized innocence for a deeper knowledge of the precarious, ultimately tragic human condition.

The key to understanding Vannecc's role in Book I of *Three Days* is a 1952 monograph titled *Malraux and the Tragic Imagination*, written by the Harvard-based critic W.M. Frohock. Ellison owned a copy of this book; along with the rest of Ellison's personal library, researchers can consult it in the Rare Books and Special Collections Reading Room at the U.S. Library of Congress. In this book, Frohock proposes reading the arcs of Malraux's principal characters, chief among them Claude Vannecc, through the lens of what Frohock calls "the characteristic pattern of the shaman's experience." [Frohock 1952: 147] With his mention of Vannecc in the second sentence of McIntyre's narrative, and subsequent identification of Vannecc as McIntyre's ideological anchor in Chapter 2, Ellison sends a subtle but unmistakable signal to his reader that McIntyre is in for a shamanic experience.

Initially inspired by an enigmatic reference to shamanism in Malraux's later novel *Les Noyers d'Altenburg* (*The Walnut Trees of Altenburg*), Frohock quotes generously from Richard Chase's *The Quest for Myth* to explain that the shaman archetype is "deeply neurotic and sometimes epileptic," that the shaman "subjects himself to the greatest rigors of discomfort and starvation; he has trances, and he emerges from his ordeal having attained, as [Paul] Radin says [in *Primitive Religion: Its Nature and Origin*], 'a new normalcy and re-integration.'" [Qtd. in: Frohock 1952: 138] As Frohock sees it, the shaman experience is comprised of three main parts: a withdrawal from one's kind, a difficult voyage that midwives enlightenment, and a return to communicate that enlightenment through story. The crux of this "psychic ordeal," according to Chase, is "the withdrawal of the ego from the objective world and the subsequent return of the ego transfigured and possessed of a new potency." [Qtd. in: Frohock 1952: 138]

A careful reader of Book I can see that McIntyre's narrative and character development are richly patterned by this template. Here I will trace and discuss two major shamanic experiences, simultaneous and intertwined, that McIntyre undergoes in Book I. In order to meaningfully identify with blackness, and achieve his full American identity, the white liberal must withdraw from and transform his relationship to two major landscapes that structure his imagination of race, culture, nation, and self: the American South and Western Europe. In McIntyre's consciousness, these landscapes are represented by McGowan and Vannecc, respectively.

* * *

On the day of Sunraider's shooting, McIntyre's view of blackness is entirely McGowan's. McGowan's consciousness is dominated by "the nig-

ra,” a reductive stereotype of black personality. For McGowan, according to McIntyre, “colored people were either objects for amused contempt or the greatest danger to the nation.” [Ellison 2010: 52] McGowan’s monologue in Chapter 5, an exhaustive catalogue of the ways in which “everything the *nigra does* is political,” bears this observation out to the point of absurdity [Ellison 2010: 52]. McGowan bases his entire notion of politics on the image of the black person who is “out of his place.” [Ellison 2010: 54] The crux of McGowanism is therefore a frantic, basically Sisyphusian effort to deny black people the freedoms of possibility and becoming, lest they threaten McGowan’s “idea of a well-ordered society” by doing, appearing, eating, reading, wanting, preferring, wearing, or saying anything that would be considered “untraditional” for them in the slavery-era South [Ellison 2010: 52].

This onerous imagination of blackness substitutes for self-knowledge. Without it, McGowan would be completely lost in the world. Narrating in retrospect, McIntyre perceptively notes that “McGowan was obsessed by history to the point of nightmare. He had confined the dark man in a mental package which he carried with him as constantly as the old-fashioned watch which he wore on a chain, and I imagined him consulting the one for time and the other for social and historical orientation.” [Ellison 2010: 60] Ironically, though not unsurprisingly, the white supremacist’s identity is most contingent upon the blackness he tries so hard to disavow.

In the time-present of Book I, McIntyre passively accepts McGowan’s simplistic and oppressive racial ideology, despite his loathsome intuition of McGowan’s “power to define so much of the social reality in which I lived,” and his suspicion that McGowan “was actually more honest than I, that his open expression of his feelings, his prejudices, made him freer than I.” [Ellison 2010: 61] McIntyre can betray his liberal principles—what he calls his “delicate balance of tolerance, justice, and sense of fair play”—and manage the resulting self-deception, because McGowan’s impulse to immobilize blackness in perpetuity maintains the psychological and political stability of his own white identity. [Ellison 2010: 60] By charismatically pontificating over what McIntyre suspects, in hindsight, to be “a notion concerning a non-existent past rather than a living people,” McGowan acts as a prophet and enforcer of anti-R(h)inehartism in American life, for whites as well as blacks [Ellison 2010: 61].

Upon arriving at the hospital where the Senator lies in surgery, McIntyre’s perilous psychic “voyage” away from McGowanism begins. Prompted by McIntyre’s series of increasingly unnerving encounters with Hickman, it is undertaken not across space, but rather *time*, as his memories of personal

encounters with other black characters, in both the near and distant past, begin to flow while he ponders Hickman's relationship to the Senator with mounting agitation. Herein lies the shamanic ordeal that should eventually cleave McIntyre from McGowan's democratically toxic ideology of race and culture, and transform his imagination of his own American identity.

The journey is fueled by McIntyre's own resistance to it. The ordeal becomes increasingly hysterical as he struggles unconsciously against disassociating himself from McGowan's ideological influence. In Chapter 9, McIntyre recalls "McGowan's voice" when "something seemed to crash in my head" and he gets to his feet down the hall from Hickman [Ellison 2010: 101]. In Chapter 11, only a few seconds later in the time-present of the narrative, he hears "an amused voice like that of McGowan [...] with the penetrating clarity of a mosquito's drone," just before running down to hall to try—unsuccessfully—punching Hickman in the face [Ellison 2010: 127]. In a note to himself about the novel, Ellison wrote, "One of the main tasks is to dramatize the theories which lead to the unleashing of violence." [Ellison 2010: 973] In forecasting the personal growth and practice of self-discipline that would be required of average white Americans for the nation to meaningfully desegregate, the idea of a brutal shamanic experience was for Ellison no mere metaphor or hyperbole.

In Chapter 13, still sitting down the hall from Hickman, McIntyre slips into a fitful dream, narrated entirely in italics to indicate its situation on the lower frequencies of the white liberal's consciousness. In the beginning of the dream, McIntyre encounters "*McGowan leaning wearily against a lamppost,*" looking "*strangely transformed and extremely weak.*" [Ellison 2010: 178] This dream-McGowan tells McIntyre that "*some new kind of nigra*" is blocking his doorway, and demands that McIntyre put this black personality back in his place [Ellison 2010: 178]. McIntyre agrees. He goes to the door and sees only a little, inanimate cast-iron statue of a black hitching-post boy, "*such as were once to be seen mainly in the South, but which in recent years have mushroomed throughout the North and are now all over the place [...] a cheap, crudely made symbol of easily acquired tradition; the favorite statuary of the lazy seeker for facile symbolic status.*" [Ellison 2010: 180] Described this way, the hitching-post boy ironically embodies the Northern white moderate's passive avowal of McGowan's basic ideology of blackness—and, by extension, whiteness.

When McIntyre picks him up, the statue announces itself as such, demanding: "*Why are you staring, McGowan?*" McIntyre responds: "*Sir? McGowan? Hell, my name is McIntyre!*" Then the boy says: "*Well, baby, you're*

McGowan to me. All of you ofays are McGowan to me—McGowan.” [Ellison 2010: 181] Then, at great length and with great eloquence, all the while calling him McGowan, the hitching-post boy lays bare McIntyre’s latent racism, psychological fragility, liberal hypocrisy, and civic immaturity. He says, for instance, “*I know you too well, baby. You’re one of those who love humanity real good, like a proper Christian should. [...] You love everybody and anybody until you see their faces, or hear their voices raised in passionate description of the truth of their own condition. [...] At the first sound you tell yourself, ‘Oh, oh, they’re suffering so hugely that they must hate me! Why can’t they be more considerate?’ That’s what you do.*” [Ellison 2010: 187]

The hitching-post boy’s piercing insight into McIntyre’s contemptible moral reality constitutes the climax of his shamanic experience. As occurred two chapters earlier vis-à-vis Hickman, McIntyre’s distress moves him to commit violence against the black man who defies his imagined expectations of appropriate behavior. The great lesson of this chapter, however, is that the black figure is a projection of McIntyre’s own subconscious imagination; the dream is really McIntyre struggling against *himself* to exorcise his own internalized McGowanism. “*Obviously, you wish to convince yourself that I’m not here,*” he hears the black boy say to him, “*You’d rather pretend that I’m simply a ‘figment of the imagination,’ a trace of the ‘irrational’ which has seeped in with your liquor. You’d rather plead insanity than deal with me honestly, such is your McGowan pride.*” [Ellison 2010: 184]

At the frenzied end of the dream, just as he is about to punt the boy, McIntyre recalls, “*For a flash his expression seemed to waver and flow, accompanied by a high, grating sound. I was watching the black orbicular cheeks give way and my own face, pale and ghastly, eyes closed and dank-haired, was emerging as from the cracked shell of a black iron egg.*” [Ellison 2010: 193] The white liberal is then startled awake, and although he does not realize it in the moment, his dream has just proven another important point made in Ellison’s 1970 essay: “Whatever else the true American is, he is also somehow black.” [Ellison 2003: 587]

The third and final stage of McIntyre’s shamanic experience, the “return,” is made plain by the fact that he is, indeed, telling us his story of the day the Senator was shot. Ultimately, though, McIntyre’s enlightenment is an open question. For instance, asking himself after his dream-encounter with the hitching-post boy, “What in my waking life could have conjured *him* up? [...] Surely it wasn’t Hickman,” he appears frustratingly ignorant of the insights he should have gleaned into his own worldview and identity [Ellison 2010: 194]. The Rhinehartian transformation appears stunted.

But in order to reach and provoke his reader, this is how Ellison intended it to be. As he wrote to himself in an undated note, beginning the novel with McIntyre's voice and narrative provides "the advantage of approaching the group [of Hickman and his congregants] from outside, which would prepare the reader for the mystery of [U.S. Negro] experience, background and purpose that the group embodies" in Book II [Ellison 2010: 974]. To achieve the preparatory function of Book I, Ellison requires that his reader notice and appreciate, according to the same note, "the forms of irony [McIntyre's] consciousness provides." Having ultimately transformed himself from a reporter and failed novelist into a bona fide *storyteller*, whose voice fluidly integrates a variety of others, and who seems to know more than he lets on at different moments of the telling, McIntyre demands the reader's critical engagement to recognize the blackness within him(self) and complete his American enlightenment.

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Fundamentally, the shaman's experience is one of initiation, into an unconventional and liberating wisdom. Its success depends on the presence of a guide, an elder who has gone through the experience himself before. In *The Royal Way*, the older explorer Perken performs this function; Claude Vannecc, Frohock writes in his monograph about Malraux, "stand[s] in relation" to Perken as "neophyte to initiate." [Frohock 1952: 143] In the exposition of *Three Days* Book I, Vannecc appears to have graduated to the position of initiate, with McIntyre playing his intellectual neophyte. Much like the grandfather's dying words in *Invisible Man*, Vannecc's letter to McIntyre poses him a riddle—"This Senator Sunraider of yours, how is he able to function in your section of the country?"—that keeps the white liberal running, so to speak, spurring his ordeal and transformation throughout the entire narrative [Ellison 2010: 89].

That said, it takes *Hickman's* presence in Sunraider's world to activate the riddle, to make Vannecc's questions real in McIntyre's consciousness. Until Hickman's emergence on the scene, Vannecc's letter was merely a source of "vanity," McIntyre admits in retrospect [Ellison 2010: 16]. The feeling of "status" that the letter provided him—"most tenuous contact with one considered a leading figure of our time"—kept him "flagrantly inattentive" at the moment of Sunraider's speech and shooting [Ellison 2010: 16]. "I've long admired M. Vannecc," McIntyre says at the end of Chapter 1, "(though from a great distance), who counts in my estimation of the scheme of things

for far more than does the Senator.” [Ellison 2010: 16] McIntyre’s enlightenment will require a much higher and more complex estimation of the cultural reality that Sunraider represents.

In order to answer Vannec’s riddle with the truth of racial indeterminacy that will eventually be revealed as Sunraider’s, McIntyre is increasingly challenged to recognize Hickman as the primary Rhinehartian initiate whose authority he must follow, and to reconfigure Vannec as Hickman’s ideological deputy in his own imagination. For McIntyre, this process, of shifting attention and value from distant European to homegrown Negro culture, constitutes another shamanic experience—a hard-earned acquisition of wisdom and excruciating egoic transformation—in itself. Without this initiation into fundamentally biracial Americanism, the sheltered white liberal would be unable to appreciate Sunraider’s Rhinehartism, the protean nature of his racial identity, the experience of blackness lurking underneath the Senator’s performance of whiteness.

Even without prior knowledge of Book II or Ellison’s Opus II notebook, a reader of Book I would gather from Chapter 3 that the Senator, described as having “great skill in mimicry,” is an exemplary Rinehart [Ellison 2010: 23]. Early in this chapter, McIntyre eavesdrops on a crowd of “legislators, reporters, and lobbyists [...] as they furiously re-created the Sunraider legend.” [Ellison 2010: 24] He observes “that, despite the heated blending of fact and fiction, real incident and rumor, cold observation and wild opinion, no one, not even those who ‘knew’ the Senator, seemed to know exactly who he was, nor what to make of him. [...] What was clear is that there is something basically willful, quirky, exasperatingly capricious, and downright questionable about him [...] confusing in the public mind [Ellison 2010: 24]. The Senator achieves this civic Rinehartism, his fluid and ineffable public persona, with what McIntyre calls the Senator’s “mysterious charm, a *charisma*.” [Ellison 2010: 24] As an unnamed man in the Senate gallery tells McIntyre, Sunraider’s powerfully discursive speeches leave him “relieved of my uncertainties, of some of my deepest fears [...] It’s hard to explain. But the way [Sunraider] goes over the details of a problem and relates them to other things, to other moves in government, to the economic cycles, you come away feeling that you’re ten times more perceptive than you usually are.” [Ellison 2010: 25] When McIntyre presses this man further, asking him, “But perceptive of *what?*,” he gets red in the face and sputters, “Hell, of life, events; of the patterns underlying the processes of public affairs. What am I, a philosopher? What I’m trying to convey is something he makes you feel—or makes *me* feel.” [Ellison 2010: 25] Along these lines, another man

in the discussion compares the Senator to “a wise priest” with “a subtle understanding of people [...] who sees their secret failings and understands them”—undertones of shamanic power, no doubt [Ellison 2010: 25].

Though the reporter does not appear aware of it in the time-present of Book I, the red-faced citizen’s feeling for Sunraider perfectly mirrors McIntyre’s own feeling for Vannecc. Whereas McGowan is the ideological authority figure that McIntyre would rather not acknowledge in the open, M. Vannecc, a European man of belles-lettres, personifies the white liberal’s proudly *avowed* worldview. As McIntyre says in Chapter 1, the Frenchman’s letter “gave me a sense of plunging suddenly into more important areas of life, of being in contact with one possessing a higher consciousness of the complexity of culture. Yes, and I felt somehow in touch with the darker, mysterious areas of events.” [Ellison 2010: 16]

In Chapter 7, McIntyre gives some insight into Vannecc’s complex cultural consciousness, which depends, like Sunraider’s, on spellbinding, discursive delivery. Vannecc, we learn, is “famous” in his native land “for raising those profound questions of a political-philosophical nature which upset wise men and ordinary citizens alike. He is forever explaining the meaning of everything—events, art, politics, stray blasts of torpid air. He informs the world with brain-rattling, spine-chilling eloquence just what is implied by historical developments, cultural fads, styles, costumes, slang, manners—all matters which usually leave me baffled. This is one reason I have admired him for so long,” McIntyre says. “He gives me an assurance that logic is still a dominant force in human affairs, even though he frequently confuses me.” [Ellison 2010: 79]

Also in Chapter 7, shortly after the preceding description of Vannecc’s charismatic “analysis of events,” McIntyre reveals his first-hand knowledge of Vannecc’s Rinehartian multiplicity of identities [Ellison 2010: 87]. Having first encountered Vannecc in the “decidedly mysterious” setting of wartime France, “only for the briefest instant” in the cathedral of Rouen, McIntyre was shocked to see, some years later, “the Frenchman for a second time.” [Ellison 2010: 80, 82, 85] Having been “assigned to cover a press interview at the French Embassy,” McIntyre tells us, “I realized that the legendary artist, activist, and French dignitary before me and the mysterious man in the dark cathedral were one and the same.” [Ellison 2010: 86] McIntyre recalls, “I had peeped into chaos and encountered a hero” in M. Vannecc, for the French intellectual “exhibited some of that mobility of identity and shifting of purpose which my work in Washington led me to believe was so common to our own society [...] I speculated as to the transformations, or, to use a

favorite word of one of the more intriguing French writers, the *metamorphosis*, the process, by which he had transformed himself.” [Ellison 2010: 87]

As an initiation into the depths of Sunraiderism, McIntyre’s second shamanic journey aims to transform his unthinking lionization of Vannec’s authoritative cultural identity. The ordeal inheres in the white liberal’s challenge to recognize in Hickman the same qualities that make the French intellectual his preferred ideological father figure: “brain-rattling, spine-chilling eloquence,” “a higher consciousness of the complexity of culture,” and “mobility of identity and shifting of purpose.”

Hickman demonstrates all of these qualities in his first encounter with McIntyre, at the beginning of Chapter 7. McIntyre attempts to interview Hickman in the corridor, outside Sunraider’s hospital room, asking him, “Why on earth would you weep for a man who is known, who is *notorious*, for hating your people?” [Ellison 2010: 70] The attempt is unsuccessful. “What on earth has your life taught you?” Hickman demands. “What has it prepared you to understand, or to respect?” [Ellison 2010: 71] Sensing a blindly segregationist worldview underneath the white liberal’s retort that he is “neutral” and represents “the nation,” Hickman compares him to the “square-headed [...] clown” McGowan, and angrily tells him, “Boy, get out of my face!” [Ellison 2010: 71]

Almost immediately, as if he could sense the spike in McIntyre’s alarm—“*Boy, he called me boy!*,” McIntyre thinks to himself, discombobulated by the inverted insinuation of racialized paternalism—Hickman turns back to deescalate the situation, showing his inner (jazz-inflected) shaman [Ellison 2010: 71]. “I’m sorry,” he tells McIntyre. “You don’t understand. You’re like a youngster who has grabbed his instrument and jumped on a bandstand full of strange musicians right in the middle of a complicated number and insists on trying to play without even knowing the riffs, the chords, and barely the melody. That’s the way it is. You don’t mean any harm. No, you’re just young; uninitiated.” [Ellison 2010: 72] Hickman then demonstrates his complex cultural consciousness—“But things like this shooting change the rules. It’s like a cyclone or hurricane, a break on the levee, or the time the Mississippi River ran backwards in its bed for miles and miles”—and his intimate knowledge of personal metamorphosis: “This is an awful event,” he tells the reporter, “but don’t forget, we’ll all be reborn some day.” [Ellison 2010: 72]

An obvious and eloquent musician-cum-minister, Hickman is without question Vannec’s intellectual and Rinehartian equal. But because Hickman is black, and McIntyre remains under McGowan’s ideological spell at this

time, the white liberal not only fails to identify with Hickman as he does with Vannec; he actively suspects Hickman of being disorder incarnate. “I had been allowed to hear the voice of a mysterious authority,” McIntyre narrates in retrospect, “the existence of which I was completely unaware; an authority that rested on no form of power that I understood or respected [...] And suddenly the growing sense of threat which I’d felt since the shooting became intensified. [...] Now this old Negro could speak to me of rebirth! Who the hell was Hickman, anyway?” [Ellison 2010: 72]

Suddenly lost in a world where Hickman exercises authority, McIntyre attempts to stabilize himself by rereading Vannec’s letter. But because the letter has him asked to make sense of Sunraider—a hidden initiate of Hickman’s world—in the context of American change, it only increases the reporter’s distress. Here begins his second arduous psychological journey, away from Vannec’s cultural authority and into the world that Hickman knows best. Whereas the letter had simply boosted McIntyre’s ego before the shooting, now it “threatened me from afar,” he says [Ellison 2010: 79].

Rattled by Hickman’s presence as framed by Vannec’s questions, the white liberal begins to question his loyalty to the European intellectual, to withdraw from the “kind” that Vannec represents. “M. Vannec, I thought angrily, is like many Europeans whom I’ve met,” McIntyre recalls. “He expects us to be familiar with all of *their* properties but fails absolutely to recognize the few we have of our own.” [Ellison 2010: 89] Struggling against his most precious ideological cornerstone, McIntyre displays the classic symptoms of a shamanic ordeal: agitation, paranoia, hopeless inner turmoil. “I felt stripped and disoriented,” he recalls [Ellison 2010: 72]. “Now, sitting in the hospital corridor in my shaken state [...] I felt that [Vannec] had subjected me to an insidious inquisition.” [Ellison 2010: 87]

Later, facing the explicit inquisition of the hitching-post boy, McIntyre encounters an unlikely democratic alliance of Hickman *and* Vannec, his internalized impressions of both figures working together to pry him from his McGowanist ideology. Hickman is of course the primary source of the boy’s physical appearance and speech in his imagination. But the European man of letters’s essential influence is apparent in crucial adornments, first in the way the boy is dressed—in a fashionable “Italian Continental” suit, rather than “the traditional blouse, short-visored beanie, and flapping trousers of such figures”—and then in the way he speaks, peppering his rebuke of McIntyre-as-McGowan with French phrases such as “mon enfant,” “au contraire,” and (in an obvious riff on Malraux that also echoes Hickman’s earlier paternalism) “*it’s la condition humaine, baby—nez pas?*”

[Ellison 2010: 180, 184] Most significantly, in words that carry Malrucian meaning but which point more deeply to the condition of black life in America, the hitching-post boy tells McIntyre more than once, “*I’ve been through many changes. I’ve undergone, in other words, many, many metamorphoses.*” [Ellison 2010: 190] The hitching-post boy proves to be a quintessentially American figure, a Rhinehartian initiate for the white liberal to follow, of European mind and Negro American heart.

* * *

As mentioned earlier, according to Richard Chase, the shamanic experience is only complete upon the “return of the ego transfigured and possessed of a new potency.” [Qtd. in: Frohock 1952: 138] In other words, the withdrawal from one’s kind is undertaken with the idea that the new initiate will return home, capable of exerting wiser forms of influence on his own people. One of the most transformational insights we should draw from Book I, to which McIntyre only gestures through very subtle irony, deals precisely with this: his—really, his American reader’s—idea of home.

In Chapter 7, following his disorienting first encounter with Hickman, McIntyre steadies his imagination by remembering his first encounter, and his “brief personal identification,” with Vannec in wartime France [Ellison 2010: 87]. In terms that invite us to view McIntyre as Ellison’s representation of his entire civic and intellectual generation of Americans, the white liberal refers to the war in Europe as “no mere interruption but involved the only living I had done during those violent years. It was, except for my concern over Spain, the one great fact of my youth and my youth’s true end.” [Ellison 2010: 85] The reporter recalls that years later, “through my work in Washington, I became interested in Europe again. This was probably a holdover from the thirties of my eager youth [...] I wished to see the place again, to regard once more the people and the old ancestral earth. I wished to see some of what had been so telescoped and explosive and accelerated and youth-consuming with my older, more sober—and conservative—eyes.” [Ellison 2010: 85]

The irony that is critical for readers to see is that McIntyre’s “old ancestral earth”—the site of his “youth’s true end,” which involved a great deal of “living,” “so telescoped and explosive and accelerated and youth-consuming” now in retrospect—is also Harlem, and in much much greater measure than Europe. Before he ever went to Europe, during the thirties of his eager youth, Harlem was the place where McIntyre dated a black woman named

Laura. It happened “during that time when my sense of the ideal, my yearning for perfect political solutions for all human problems, rejected that which my sense of patriotic duty made an act of irrational faith.” [Ellison 2010: 85] These are words with which the white liberal describes his decision to enlist in the navy, but they even more accurately describe his decision to pursue and later sabotage his relationship with the black woman and her family.

In Chapter 9, Hickman’s offer to donate his own blood to Sunraider brings the white liberal’s painful memory of a botched interracial love flooding back. “Basically we were in love,” McIntyre recalls, “and in our circles it was agreed that Laura and I represented, if not the future, at least a good *earnest* of that time when the old conflicts [...] would be resolved by transcendent love. I spent hours in Harlem. I visited clubs, attended dances, absorbed the slang, the music, the turns of phrase, made great efforts to identify with all of Laura.” [Ellison 2010: 101]

The relationship ended tragically, though, as McIntyre accidentally impregnated Laura, silently despaired over what he called “the practical problems of our relationship [...] no longer courageous, nor avant-garde, nor even sure of my own mind and heart,” obsessed over his “need for the security symbolized by that thin chain of being personified by my parents, that lifeline of kinship which extended through time and space, from England and France to America, that I hoped would sustain me in my adventure into the dark interior of society,” and was resoundingly rejected by Laura’s mother when he showed up unannounced to “do the manly thing” and half-heartedly demand her daughter’s hand in marriage [Ellison 2010: 102, 103].

McIntyre’s shamanic experience hinges on his rediscovery of, and re-identification with, this long repressed trauma and the fossilized promise of a biracial future it represents. Now faced with Hickman’s cultural authority, as framed by Vannecc’s riddle, he has a chance to continue the Rhinehartian transformation that his budding desegregated life in Harlem originally initiated. “Loving her, I’d lost myself in Harlem,” he recalls in Chapter 11, “for a highly intense time, had surrendered to its fascination as to some great foreign city. And willingly, as one gives one’s heart and mind to Paris.” [Ellison 2010: 135-36] Since his willful repression of his Harlem period, however, “I had developed a different quality of attention, a different sense of direction,” the white liberal acknowledges. “Events had come to possess a more limited extension of significance, and I no longer thought of the world in which [Laura] moved—wherever she now moved—as relevant. I lived in a quite different sphere, bound by different values, and events drew their meaning from within a different frame of reference.” [Ellison 2010: 136]

McIntyre's return to tell the story of Book I represents the recapitulation of an ideology, a "frame of reference," that imagines and recognizes the fullness of black personalities in the context of American "events." When read in this way, as a meaningful testament to the complexities of blackness and their central place in the American character, Book I represents the completion of McIntyre's Rhinehartian initiation, and functions as a provocation for the reader to start or continue theirs.

Ralph Ellison subjects Welborn McIntyre to the shamanic experience that is necessary for a reader uninitiated in the fundamental unity, variety, and fluidity of American racial narratives to be prepared for the story of Book II and the moral history of American culture it foretells. Ellison therefore leaves McIntyre's most important insights up to the reader to achieve. One of these insights consists of recognizing "the Harlem melting pot," as McIntyre calls it, as modern America's true ancestral earth, with origins in the South—home to "a life quite different from that of which McGowan ranted," McIntyre says upon reflection of what he learned from Laura—and whose cultural depth and richness easily match that of great European capitals like Paris [Ellison 2010: 136]. As embodied by the hitching-post boy in the white liberal's unconscious, full American identity may be racially indeterminate, incorporating elements from around the globe, but its core remains fundamentally Negro, because that's what its true fathers are.

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