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“WHO INVENTS RITUALS?”:
RALPH ELLISON READS LORD RAGLAN

Abstract: Discussions of myth and ritual in Ralph Ellison’s work typically reference the Cambridge Ritualists as a whole, but focus specific attention on Lord Raglan’s book *The Hero*. As scholars of Ellison and of American literature well know, for decades after its publication Ellison invoked Raglan when telling the origin story of his famous, award-winning novel, *Invisible Man*. Yet, I suggest that the tale of Ralph Ellison’s appropriation of the Cambridge Ritualists and their work is one that has only partially been told. Although literary critics have long accepted Ellison’s articulation of Raglan’s text to his novel’s opening, archival evidence suggests that this account of *Invisible Man*’s birth may be more retrospective sensemaking than historical fact. In this essay—part of a book-length project on the Ritualists’ influence on Ellison’s fiction and nonfiction—I therefore raise anew the question of Ellison’s engagement with Lord Raglan. Rather than simply adopting Ellison’s oft-repeated “myth of origin,” this essay uses archival materials to craft a more nuanced portrait of Ellison’s reading of *The Hero*. Through examination of Ellison’s personal copy of Raglan’s book, I trace four central arguments that Ellison appears to have gained from it—only one of which involves the familiar archetypal hero. I contend that this project allows us to more carefully illuminate the book’s importance in Ellison’s thinking on the nature of ritual—and to indicate points where he both drew and departed from it in order to stake out his position on American culture and literature.

Keywords: Ralph Ellison; African American authors; Lord Raglan; Cambridge Ritualists; myth; ritual; race in the U.S.; Stanley Edgar Hyman.

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«КТО ИЗОБРЕТАЕТ РИТУАЛЫ?»
РАЛЬФ ЭЛЛИСОН ЧИТАЕТ ЛОРДА РЕГЛАНА

Аннотация: Как правило, рассуждая о мифе и ритуале в текстах Ральфа Эллисона, говорят о группе кембриджских ритуалистов в целом, но прежде всего обращаются к работе лорда Реглана «Герой». Как хорошо известно специалистам по творчеству Эллисона и американской литературе, спустя не одно десятилетие после ее публикации Эллисон упоминал Реглана, рассказывая историю создания своего знаменитого романа «Невидимка», за который он получил премию. И все же, как мне представляется, о влиянии кембриджских ритуалистов и их работ на Ральфа Эллисона сказано далеко не все. Хотя литературоведы давно сошлись на том, что первые страницы романа Эллисона отсылают к тексту Реглана, архивные свидетельства наводят на мысль, что такое истолкование замысла «Невидимки» – скорее переосмысление процесса создания романа задним числом, чем исторический факт. В этом эссе – написанном как часть книги о воздействии ритуалистов на художественные и нехудожественные произведения Эллисона – я вновь затрагиваю тему интереса Эллисона к лорду Реглану. Вместо того чтобы воспроизводить часто повторяемый миф о рождении этого романа, я пытаюсь, опираясь на архивные материалы, нарисовать более детальную картину чтения Эллисоном «Героя». На основе анализа принадлежавшего Эллисону экземпляра книги Реглана я прослеживаю четыре ключевых идеи, которые Эллисон, по всей видимости, из нее заимствовал и лишь одна из которых связана с известным нам образом архетипического героя. Я полагаю, что такой подход позволит нам точнее понять, как повлияла эта книга на представления Эллисона о ритуале и увидеть, в чем он сближался с ее позицией, а в чем, наоборот, отдался от нее, формулируя собственную точку зрения на американскую культуру и литературу.

Ключевые слова: Ральф Эллисон; афроамериканские авторы; лорд Реглан; кембриджские ритуалисты; миф; ритуал; расовая проблематика в США; Стэнли Эдгар Хайман.

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In 1956, during his residency at the American Academy in Rome, Ralph Ellison wrote his friend Stanley Edgar Hyman, describing his efforts to engage fellow participants on the subject of myth and ritual: “I’ve introduced the Ragland [sic] to several of the classicists who are working on Homer and such but are totally unaware of the Cambridge School. Some of these cookies are from Amherst and Princeton too, so maybe you and Kenneth [Burke] have given me a better education than I could even buy.”¹ In keeping with this wry reflection, discussions of these themes in Ellison’s work typically reference the Cambridge Ritualists—and, more specifically, Fitzroy Richard Somerset, Baron Raglan, and his book *The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth and Drama*.² As scholars of Ellison and of American literature well know, for decades after its publication Ellison invoked Raglan when telling the origin story of his famous, award-winning novel, *Invisible Man*.

In the 1954 interview “The Art of Fiction,” Ellison spun it this way: “on a farm in Vermont where I was reading *The Hero* by Lord Ragland [sic] and speculating on the nature of Negro leadership in the U.S., I wrote the first paragraph of *Invisible Man*.”³ Seven years later, in “That Same Pain, That Same Pleasure,” the story varied only slightly: “When I started writing *Invisible Man* I was reading Lord Raglan’s *The Hero*, in which he goes into figures of history and myth to account for the features which make for the mythic hero, and at the same time I got to thinking about the ambiguity of Negro leadership during that period.”⁴ Similarly, in his 1974 lecture “On Initiation Rites and Power,” Ellison again repeated the story of Raglan as a central catalyst for his book.⁵ Eventually, this anecdote became part of

¹ Ellison, Ralph. Letter to Stanley Edgar Hyman. 22 June 1956. Box 6, Folder 30. Stanley Edgar Hyman Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, DC. As this letter suggests, Kenneth Burke was a formative influence on Ellison. See Crable, Bryan. *Ralph Ellison and Kenneth Burke: At the Roots of the Racial Divide*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2012.

² Raglan, Lord. *The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth, and Drama*. London: Methuen & Co., 1936. Although this will be explained later in this essay, by the “Cambridge Ritualists,” I am referring to a group of British classicists whose work collectively formed “a school or tendency influential from the 1920s through the 1960s that sought to discover mythic and/or ritual patterns underlying literary works” (Ackerman, Robert. *The Myth and Ritual School: J. G. Frazer and the Cambridge Ritualists*. New York: Routledge, 1991: xi). Raglan, although not a part of the “core group” of the Ritualists, was heavily influenced by their writings.

³ Ellison, Ralph; Callahan, John F., ed. *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*. New York: Modern Library, 1995: 218.

⁴ *Ibid.*: 76.

⁵ *Ibid.*: 523-525.

the accepted lore surrounding Ellison's novel; within twenty years of its publication, interviewers simply took Raglan's importance for granted: "You once mentioned that you were reading Lord Raglan's *The Hero* as you began to write *Invisible Man*. Am I right in finding the heroic quest pattern operating repeatedly at all levels of the novel?"⁶

Yet, I suggest that the tale of Ralph Ellison's appropriation of the Cambridge Ritualists and their work is one that has only *partially* been told. Although literary critics have long accepted Ellison's articulation of Raglan's text to his novel's opening, this account of *Invisible Man*'s birth may be more retrospective sensemaking than historical fact.⁷ In this essay—part of a book-length project on the Ritualists' influence on Ellison's fiction and nonfiction—I therefore raise anew the question of Ellison's engagement with Lord Raglan. Rather than simply adopting *Invisible Man*'s oft-repeated "myth of origin,"⁸ this essay uses archival materials to craft a more nuanced portrait of Ellison's reading of *The Hero*. Such an endeavor allows us to more carefully illuminate its importance in Ellison's thinking on the nature of ritual—and to indicate points where he drew on and departed from it in order to stake out his position on American culture and literature.

Although the secondary literature already contains some fruitful discussions of the link between Raglan and Ellison, I feel that this body of work nonetheless remains uncritical in its assumptions regarding what exactly Ellison drew from them. For example, although Ellison's biographers offer detailed treatments of his first novel, they simply repeat Ellison's account of the inspiration that he derived from Raglan's work. Jackson faithfully writes that, as Ellison was sketching out the first lines of the novel, "He was even reading Lord Raglan's *The Hero* as research to help him structure the mythic dimensions of his character."⁹ Rampersad is only slightly more

⁶ Carson, David L. "Ralph Ellison: Twenty Years After," in Graham, Maryemma and Singh, Amritjit, eds. *Conversations with Ralph Ellison*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1995: 195–196. Ellison simply replied: "Of course."

⁷ Rampersad, Arnold. *Ralph Ellison: A Biography*. New York: Alfred Knopf, 2007: 194 indicates that "In the years 1944 and 1945 he seems to have been involved in writing three novels," not just one, and, further, he may or may not have written the famous opening lines in Vermont. Moreover, I have found no summaries of, quotations of, or notes on, Raglan in any of the drafts or working notes for *Invisible Man*. Although there are good reasons to mistrust Rampersad's perspective on Ellison, I would thus concur that *Invisible Man*'s origin may be less straightforward than its author would have us believe.

⁸ *Ibid.*: 195.

⁹ Jackson, Lawrence. *Ralph Ellison: Emergence of Genius*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2002: 320.

cautious in describing the importance of Raglan's text: "Ralph indeed had read, or read in, Raglan's *The Hero* . . . a prized book for many admirers of the myth-and-symbol school, as Ralph had become."¹⁰ For Rampersad, like Jackson, Ellison consulted *The Hero* for help with his narrator, since within it "Raglan tries to trace the origins of celebrated heroes, both secular and religious, emerging from different cultures at different times to 'one archetypal hero.'"¹¹ By adapting Raglan's ritual pattern, both biographers agree, Ellison was thus able to craft a compelling, black American hero, one who arrives at a higher consciousness over the course of the novel through his navigation of a series of (archetypal) incidents.

Other notable scholars, building on the work of these biographers, have more fully explicated the influence of Raglan on Ellison. Timothy Parrish, for example, offers an extended meditation upon the debt that Ellison's fiction owes Raglan: "Ellison had his own narrative riddle to solve: how to invent a black hero who could act 'heroically' within a social structure that seemed to deny him agency . . . Ellison's 'inspired prophecy' was predicated on a narrative genius that was able to identify and dramatize *the mythic structures* scripting the heroic saga of blacks in America."¹² By providing a unique viewpoint on this seemingly-intractable problem, according to Parrish, "Lord Raglan gave him the clue he needed—to finish his first novel if not his second."¹³

By contrast—and in keeping with her emphasis on Ellison's leftist politics (and his, and others', occlusion of them)—Barbara Foley is less convinced of the value of Raglan's emphasis upon "timeless formal and psychoanalytical patterns in heroic quest narratives."¹⁴ Yet, Foley, too,

¹⁰ Rampersad. *Ralph Ellison*: 194.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Parrish, Timothy. *Ralph Ellison and the Genius of America*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012: 181.

¹³ *Ibid.* For Parrish, Ellison's reading of Raglan also allows us to understand the heroic role played by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., during the American Civil Rights Movement, and the struggle to generate effective, and collective, political action by black Americans after his assassination—matters which troubled Ellison in his work on a second novel.

¹⁴ Foley, Barbara. *Wrestling with the Left: The Making of Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010: 85. Foley's book, unlike most sources in the literature, places strong emphasis on other members of the Cambridge School, such as Jane Ellen Harrison and George Thomson. Although outside the scope of this essay, I would still take issue with Foley's Marxist reading of Harrison and other Ritualists; it is an incomplete and, in some ways, reductive account of ritual in archaic, preliterate societies. However, a full development of this argument must be postponed to my book-length treatment of these issues.

identifies within *Invisible Man* implicit and explicit references to Raglan's archetypal hero; she finds them in several excised portions of the book, such as those devoted to the character LeRoy and to an interview given by the book's narrator. Not only is *The Hero* one of the volumes on LeRoy's shelf, but the narrator's interview is, she writes, quite telling: "In concocting for himself a history of being raised by a woman named Mary and then going to sea, he [the narrator] obviously has on his mind not just LeRoy but also LeRoy's books about the hero; the invisible man's fictional pedigree is straight out of Raglan."¹⁵

Complementing these accounts, which emphasize *Invisible Man*, Patrice Rankine underscores the influence of Raglan on Ellison's unique perspective on race in America—as displayed in his fiction *and* nonfiction. In both *Invisible Man* and its successor—portions of which were posthumously published as *Juneteenth*—Rankine finds the heroic tale of Odysseus harnessed as "a metaphor for the racialized individual's challenges within American society."¹⁶ Further, Rankine contends, within his nonfiction "Ellison taps into the mythic dimensions of race in America . . . through one of the most disturbing challenges that African Americans faced in the twentieth century: violence—and *literal* dismemberment—through lynching."¹⁷ In short, Rankine concludes, Ellison's work exemplifies and depicts "the hero's (or America's) travel through a classical past, into the abyss of race, and to a potential triumph, namely our realization of a broader cultural integrity."¹⁸

Although these treatments of Ellison and Raglan vary somewhat in their focus, they share a common emphasis upon Raglan's best-known argument: "the life of a hero of tradition can be divided up into a series of well-marked features and incidents—I have taken twenty-two, but it would be easy to take more."¹⁹ To talk about Raglan and Ellison, these accounts suggest, is to talk about how Ellison applied this pattern of twenty-two incidents to the black American hero—a role with its own unique constellation of constraints, demands, and opportunities. This position, in turn, entails a commitment to one central assumption: this archetypal heroic pattern is what Ellison gained from reading *The Hero*. Yet, I would point out,

¹⁵ Ibid.: 271.

¹⁶ Rankine, Patrice D. *Ulysses in Black: Ralph Ellison, Classicism, and African American Literature*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006: 19.

¹⁷ Ibid.: 154.

¹⁸ Ibid.: 16.

¹⁹ Raglan. *The Hero*: 190. Further page references will be given parenthetically in the text.

this *is* an assumption, and one that is hardly unassailable; when examined more closely, it appears to rest almost solely on Ellison's description of the birth of *Invisible Man*—an account that, as noted earlier, may be as much a matter of invention as of memory. If, instead, we turn to Ellison's archives, I contend that we gain a richer understanding of his reading of Raglan—both what he took from the text, beyond the archetypal hero, and where he broke with its author in interesting ways.²⁰

As the opening quote of this essay suggests, Ellison stumbled upon Raglan's book thanks to his friend Stanley Edgar Hyman. Hyman was, from the 1940s onward, a prominent advocate of the Cambridge school—even writing a series of books and articles that both explicated and defended the Ritualist perspective on myth and ritual.²¹ Of this body of work, however, Raglan's text was one of Hyman's particular favorites. One of his colleagues at *The New Yorker* later recalled the evangelical fervor that Hyman displayed in discussing *The Hero*: “intellectually, we sat at his feet and learned as he learned. For a time, Lord Raglan, that crotchety but astute anthropologist and authority on myth, became our god; for a time, there could be no other god than Raglan.”²²

In Hyman's work, I believe, we can thus find not only the impetus for Ellison's encounter with Raglan, but also something of its direction and tenor. There is, of course, no question that Hyman found great value in Raglan's book; in *The Armed Vision*, he called it “one of the most important and little-appreciated books of our time,” since “its general contentions are so sound, so unquestionable, and so revolutionary . . . that, more widely read, it

²⁰ That is not to say that I would dismiss the importance of Raglan's archetypal hero for Ellison, or his novel; Rankine, in particular, demonstrates the power of this figure, the “Ulysses in black,” for analysis of Ellison's work. However, I believe that we benefit by more carefully scrutinizing the preserved evidence of Ellison's reading of Raglan—since it suggests additional avenues for exploring the development of Ellison's views on American race ritual.

²¹ See, for example, Hyman, Stanley Edgar. *The Armed Vision: A Study in the Methods of Modern Literary Criticism* [1948]. New York: Vintage Books, 1955; Hyman, Stanley Edgar. *The Tangled Bank: Darwin, Marx, Frazer and Freud as Imaginative Writers*. New York: Atheneum, 1962. For his polemical articles on the “Cambridge school,” see Hyman, Stanley Edgar. “Myth, Ritual, and Nonsense.” *The Kenyon Review* 11 (Summer 1949): 455-475; Hyman, Stanley Edgar. “The Ritual View of Myth and the Mythic.” *The Journal of American Folklore* 68 (Oct./Dec. 1955): 462-472.

²² Gill, Brendan. *Here at The New Yorker*. New York: Random House, 1975: 246. Hyman also regularly gave copies of the book to his students at Bennington College; Gill remembers procuring hundreds of copies for Hyman from Raglan's daughter when the former's supply ran low.

could single-handedly end a good deal of the nonsense that currently passes for folk criticism.”²³ As this comment indicates, Hyman saw much more in *The Hero* than a pattern of twenty-two incidents; although some of Hyman’s writings mention Raglan’s archetypal hero, Hyman more often portrayed the text as an *accessible summary* of the Cambridge school’s central positions on myth and ritual. In a 1948 study of folklore, for example, Hyman praised “the ritual view developed by Sir James G. Frazer and his followers, exhaustively demonstrated in specific areas by Gilbert Murray, Jane Harrison and the Cambridge group, Jessie Weston, and many others, and most effectively popularized by Lord Raglan in *The Hero*.”²⁴

In this last phrase, we see the role that Hyman most frequently attributed to Raglan: he was an effective *translator* of the Ritualists’ work for a mass-market audience. A 1949 essay by Hyman paid only glancing attention to the archetypal pattern, simply noting the book’s “study of the common features of all hero myths”; instead, Hyman emphasized that it was “written in a fittingly popular and aggressive style, and constitut[ed] the first general statement of the ritual theory for all areas of myth and folk literature.”²⁵ He applauded its “attack on historicity and the whole euhemerist position”²⁶—the characteristic Ritualist critique of the view that myths ultimately trace back to a particular historical individual or event. Hyman reiterated this point in 1955, identifying the defining accomplishment of Raglan’s “enormously influential” work as having “broadly generalized the ritual origins of all myth, as against the historical.”²⁷ If Hyman was the source of Ellison’s engagement with Raglan, then, it would also seem likely that Hyman’s reading of *The Hero* would carry significant weight with his friend—that Ellison, in short, would find more than the heroic archetype in Raglan’s text. However, there is no need for speculation regarding this point; evidence supporting this contention lies within Ellison’s personal library, preserved at the Library of Congress.

Ellison’s library, at least in the form that we currently have it, does contain one copy of the first U.S. edition of *The Hero*.²⁸ This archival vol-

²³ Hyman. *The Armed Vision*: 125.

²⁴ Hyman, Stanley Edgar. “Some Bankrupt Treasuries.” *The Kenyon Review* 10 (Summer 1948): 498n2.

²⁵ Hyman. “Myth, Ritual, and Nonsense.”: 465.

²⁶ *Ibid.*: 465.

²⁷ Hyman. “The Ritual View of Myth and the Mythic.”: 465.

²⁸ It is unclear exactly when Ellison acquired the text, but the volume preserved in the collection has a copyright date of 1937. The edition that I cite throughout this essay

ume testifies that Ellison did, indeed, study Raglan's book; this, certainly, is no surprise, given Ellison's repeated invocation of the text when discussing *Invisible Man*. A clipping of Raglan's obituary from the September 15, 1964, edition of *The New York Times* rests inside its pages, Ellison's name is written in the upper right corner of the inside cover, and there are a number of pencil marks and notations in the text. More important, though, is the *pattern* constituted by these annotations; it provides us our best clue to the portions of the text that Ellison engaged most closely.²⁹

Although the secondary literature focuses almost exclusively on Raglan's archetypal hero, this topic comprises only a portion of the book's contents. The first of three parts, "Tradition," advances the anti-euhemerist argument cited by Hyman: "The rapidity with which historical events are forgotten shows how unlikely it is that what is remembered in the form of tradition should be history." [17] If history is not the source of traditional tales, according to Raglan, they must instead be derived from myth. [121] The second part of the book, "Myth," builds upon this argument, developing in great detail the Ritualist contention that "a myth is a story told in connection with a rite." [225] Within this section of the text, five of its nine chapters are devoted to unpacking this statement, with the remaining four focused upon the pattern of incidents in the life of a hero—commonly (but mistakenly) seen as the entirety of Raglan's argument. The third and final section of the text, "Drama," draws the first two together, concluding that the ubiquity of this archetypal pattern indicates that "all drama is derived originally from ritual drama." [225]

Given this brief summary of the three parts of *The Hero*, we are able to more critically evaluate the assumption that animates the extant treatments of Ellison and Raglan; following their lead, we would expect that Ellison would have heavily marked—indeed, *most* heavily marked—the chapters of "Myth" that delineate the features of the archetypal hero. Yet, the archival evidence on this point is startling: Ellison's copy *contains absolutely no*

is the U.K. first edition, which was copyrighted a year earlier; however, the pagination is the same as Ellison's copy.

²⁹ Ellison could, of course, have originally had multiple copies of this text, but I think it unlikely that, if so, only one would have been preserved. His library contains multiple copies of books by other authors, such as Kenneth Burke, acquired decades apart. It appears, then, that he was not in the habit of disposing of multiple copies of works that he found important. Moreover, the fact that he included a 1964 obituary in a book likely acquired in the 1940s makes it more likely than not that this was his only copy of *The Hero*.

markings in the four chapters of the book devoted to this topic. There are several passages annotated in the section devoted to “Tradition,” and several more in the section devoted to “Drama.” By comparison, “Myth” is *much* more heavily marked—but even so, Ellison’s notations end just before Raglan’s meditations on the hero begin, and do not pick back up again until well into the third part of the book.

This absence does not, of course, prove that Ellison’s recollections of *The Hero* are entirely fabricated; a lack of annotations does not *necessarily* mean that he studied these chapters less closely than the others, nor does it mean he gained *no* inspiration from Raglan’s archetypal hero. Yet, I insist that this archival evidence tells us *something*; if nothing else, it asks us to question our assumptions about what Ellison *must* have been studying in *The Hero*. By examining the sections that Ellison marked, I believe that we can reconstitute the portions of text that Ellison found most important, and worthy of note—and thereby gain new insight into his reading of Raglan. If we do so, I suggest that—judging from the number and pattern of his annotations—there are four interrelated arguments that appear to have been most compelling to Ellison, only *one* of which—partly—involves the hero.

First, not surprisingly, is Raglan’s attack on the euhemerist view of folklore and folk tales—the claim that traditional works are traceable to a specific historical event or person. This foundational tenet of the Cambridge school is the subject of the first passage underlined in Ellison’s copy of the text: “I shall try to show as this book goes on that all traditional narratives originate in ritual.” [43]³⁰ Two pages later, Ellison checked a similar passage where Raglan invokes ritual to explain the similarity between the pan-European story of the “Sleeping Warriors” and kingship initiation rites in Fiji. Here, Raglan writes, we see a clear case where the origin of a traditional tale lies not in some actual historical event, but in a seemingly-universal ritual process for managing the transition between rulers. [45]³¹ In the next chapter, Ellison checked a paragraph where Raglan attacks the historicity of Sigurd/Siegfried—noting that the character’s appearance in different cultures, across more than a thousand years, again militates against the euhemerist position on this tale. [61]³² Ellison seems to have found the evidence for this key Ritualist position compelling—the idea that, as Raglan summarizes, “there are no valid grounds for believing in the historicity of tradition.” [121]

³⁰ Ellison also bracketed these lines in the right-hand margin.

³¹ Ellison’s check mark is in the right-hand margin.

³² Ellison’s check mark is in the right-hand margin.

As noted earlier, Ellison marked the second part, “Myth,” much more heavily; one portion of these notations and underlined sentences center on a key Ritualist argument, the link between ritual and myth. Ellison drew a line alongside Raglan’s preview of his central claim: “What, as I shall try to show, are the wrong explanations are firstly that myth is a statement of historical fact clothed in more or less obscure language, and secondly that it is a fanciful or speculative explanation of a natural phenomenon.” [121]³³ Ellison also underlined Raglan’s preferred explanation: “what a myth really is is a narrative linked with a rite.” [121] A few pages later, Ellison checked a passage that debunks the view that myths are etiological—that is, primitive or “bad” science³⁴—but the majority of his markings in this section focus on Raglan’s argument for the bond between myth and ritual.

For example, on a page devoted to several of the Ritualists, such as Jane Harrison, J. G. Frazer, and A. B. Cook, Ellison underlined a key sentence: “I shall begin with Professor [S. H.] Hooke, who defines myth as ‘the spoken part of a ritual; the story which the ritual enacts.’” [129] Two pages later, Ellison singled out a long paragraph unpacking this claim in greater detail. Within this passage, Raglan offers a helpful illustration: “when we part from a friend, we shake him by the hand and say ‘Good-bye.’ The handshake is the rite, and the expression ‘good-bye,’ which is a shortened form of ‘God be with you,’ is the myth.” [131]³⁵ Raglan points out that, in contemporary culture, the mythic phrase “now has no direct connection with the rite.” [131] However, he suggests, we can still use this example to recapture something of the archaic inseparability of myth and ritual:

If, however, when shaking hands on parting, we were in the habit of saying, “King Solomon, when he parted from the Queen of Sheba, shook her by the hand and said ‘God be with you,’” we should give a sacramental character to the rite by attributing its foundation to an ancient and sacred personage; this is what a myth normally does. [131]

Here, as elsewhere in the text, Ellison’s pencil signals his interest in Raglan’s discussion of the original, functional unity of language and action, myth and rite.

³³ Ellison drew a line next to this quote in the right-hand margin.

³⁴ The passage in question reads, “when we feel the first frost it never occurs to us to suggest that the life-blood of summer is oozing away.” [125]

³⁵ Ellison drew a line next to this long paragraph, and the first two lines of the next one, in the right-hand margin.

This position, according to Raglan, tells us also about the nature of ritual; this is, I suggest, the third key argument Ellison appears to have gleaned from the text. According to Raglan, myth is needed for the performance of ritual, but both, originally, were vital to the preservation of the group. Another set of Ellison's annotations focus specifically on this motivation for ritual enactment; for example, Ellison marked Raglan's claim that "The purpose of ritual is to confer benefits on, or avert misfortunes from, those by or on whose behalf the ritual is performed, by means of actions and words which from a scientific point of view are entirely ineffective." [131] From the perspective of the ritual performer, the scientist is incorrect; ritual action *does* have important empirical effects. Only by means of correct ritual performance can the life of the group be preserved and protected—and time itself renewed. Several times in the book, Ellison highlighted this emphasis on the cyclical nature of time within archaic communities, which necessitates ritual enactment: "Change and decay are apparent and not real, since they are prevented from becoming real by a faithful performance of the ritual. The ritual which now is is that which was in the beginning." [115]³⁶ He drew lines next to two similar passages where Raglan discusses the nonlinear nature of time in ritual, the enactment in the present that preserves the past and protects the future of the community.³⁷ Elsewhere, Ellison underlined a summary of this argument: "Myth is ritual projected back into the past, not an historical past of time, but a ritual past of eternity." [151]

For Raglan, this elucidation of the nature and purpose of ritual enables new insight into the tales ultimately derived from it—such as literature and drama. The pattern formed by Ellison's markings suggest that this is the final argument that he found important in *The Hero*. Ellison even summarized it in a brief note in the margins: "1st myths Ritual then art."³⁸ Once the original rite is lost, Raglan contends, then its spoken portion—the myth—is available for transformation into various art forms. In a passage marked by Ellison, Raglan thus writes, "It is not merely myths and fairy-tales which contain these reminiscences of ritual, but the sagas, romances, and even novels . . . not to mention their verse forms, the epic, the ballad, and even the nursery rhyme." [147]³⁹

³⁶ In addition to underlining this quote, Ellison drew a line in the right-hand margin alongside it. He marked similar passages on 146–147, 152, 160.

³⁷ Ellison drew a line in the left-hand margin for the last quarter of page 158, and a line in the right-hand margin in the middle of page 159.

³⁸ This phrase is written in the right-hand margin. [161]

³⁹ Ellison drew a line in the right-hand margin alongside the last paragraph on that page. Ellison marked similar passages on 132, 168, 170.

The remainder of Ellison's annotations focus upon Raglan's derivation of drama from archaic ritual—in terms of plot, setting, and character. For example, Ellison marked an entire page devoted to explaining the familiar placement of dramatic scenes in palaces, temples, and doorways: "The place where the ritual can most appropriately be performed, that is to say, where sacredness can be combined with visibility, is the entrance to the shrine, and it is there that the ritual drama is performed." [258]⁴⁰ More interestingly, however, Ellison also noted important plot points originally derived from ritual, such as the "rule of three in the sagas," [259]⁴¹ and the importance of what Raglan calls the "royal hero."

Here, and only here, we see that Ellison attended to Raglan's account of the nature of the hero. Across from an underlined description of Odysseus, Ellison wrote a note in the left-hand margin: "a king alone is thus . . . a man . . . hero." [274]⁴² On the facing page, he underlined a phrase referencing two portions of the archetypal pattern, "10 and 11 in the career of our typical hero" [275]—which involve the hero's return to "his future kingdom," and the subsequent "victory over the king and/or a giant, dragon, or wild beast." [180]⁴³ Finally, and most interestingly, on the next page Ellison bracketed an entire paragraph, and placed four check marks next to it:

Yet the hero of tradition is usually alone. We often find him miles from the nearest habitation, often with a sword, sometimes with a horse, but never with any spare clothing or any provisions for the journey. His lack of provision never causes comment, though his loneliness is explained in various ways. A solitary journey through desolate country, connected with and usually leading up to a single combat, is, however, a normal feature of a hero's career. [273]⁴⁴

Clearly, given Ellison's emphasis upon this paragraph (and his other annotations in this section), he thought this topic important—giving us good reason to find echoes of "the rule of three," and of Raglan's solitary hero, in

⁴⁰ Ellison drew a line alongside this entire paragraph in the page's margin.

⁴¹ Ellison underlined this phrase.

⁴² The ellipses refer to placement—"a man" was written below the first phrase, with "hero" below that.

⁴³ Interestingly, as noted earlier, Ellison has no markings in this section of text, even though he underlined Raglan's later reference to these two archetypal incidents.

⁴⁴ Ellison's four check marks are in the right-hand margin, and there is a line drawn in the margins on each side of the paragraph.

Ellison's *Invisible Man*. To this extent, the standard treatments of Ellison and Raglan are correct.

Yet, I would point out that the vast majority of Ellison's notations—and their absence from the chapters on the hero—ask us to broaden our focus. To me, the pattern formed by his pencil indicates that he was at least as intrigued by Raglan's descriptions of the nature and purpose of ritual as by the hero. These markings thus suggest that, in addition to the archetypal hero, Raglan provided Ellison an engaging summary of the Cambridge Ritualists' key tenets, an education in the role played by correct ritual performance in the preservation and protection of communal life. The full significance of this point, I believe, emerges when we attend to one final annotation—where Ellison tellingly objected to a claim from Raglan.⁴⁵

While arguing against euhemerism, Raglan scoffs at the notion that folklore could be the spontaneous invention of common people—i.e., the “folk”—seeking to commemorate some great event or person. Ellison marked a passage aimed at proving this point, where Raglan cites the example of Theocritus: “if the greatness of a great poet consists merely in improving upon the efforts of his predecessors or rivals, how can it be supposed that an unlettered rustic could invent themes and metres for himself?” [143]⁴⁶ Next to this passage, Ellison raised an objection: “Who invents rituals?”⁴⁷ With this simple question, I suggest that we glimpse the non-heroic dimensions of Ellison's encounter with Raglan—his interest in ritual processes, their communal origin, and their social function.

Ellison's question indicates that he was interested less in the “great poet,” and more in the *community* for whom a ritual performance is sanctified and enacted. If we follow this logic, we can see dimensions of Raglan's influence on Ellison that stretch beyond the heroic archetype. We can, instead, see Raglan at work in Ellison's treatment of race ritual in powerful essays like “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke,” “Twentieth Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity,” and “If the Twain Shall Meet,”⁴⁸ as well as

⁴⁵ I find it notable that the secondary literature assumes that Ellison was fully in agreement with Raglan—an assumption that we would also do well to question.

⁴⁶ Ellison drew a line in the right-hand margin alongside this portion of the paragraph.

⁴⁷ Here, too, I hear echoes of Hyman in Ellison's reading of Raglan. Although Hyman was an enthusiastic proponent of the book, he still described *The Hero* as “a cheeky, snobbish, and frequently irritating book” (Hyman. *The Armed Vision*.: 125).

⁴⁸ For these, and other similarly ritual-focused essays, see Ellison and Callahan. *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*.

his inhabitation of white consciousness in *Three Days Before the Shooting...* Further, we can hear echoes of Raglan in Ellison's meditations on nonlinear time.⁴⁹ In my new book, I will develop these Ritualist themes to address Ellison's insight into white supremacy in the U.S. In the meantime, we as Ellison scholars can harness Ellison's interest in ritual—all dimensions of it—for the purposes of cultural critique. All we have to do is follow his *actual* reading of Raglan—not what we assume it to have been.

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⁴⁹ Germana, Michael. *Ralph Ellison, Temporal Technologist*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. Germana's argument is compelling, but suffers from a lack of attention to Raglan and the Ritualists.

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