RACIAL EXILES IN TWENTIETH CENTURY AFRICAN AMERICAN AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND FICTION: LANGSTON HUGHES, RICHARD WRIGHT AND RALPH ELLISON

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In the following, dealing with the idea of racial exile in the autobiographical works of Langston Hughes, and in the major novels of Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, I intend to explore the relation existing between autobiography and fiction in order to highlight the quest for authenticity and the dilemmas of human inadequacy taking effect due the contradictions of a quickly developing society. The speed of cultural transition in the interwar America resulted in enhancing a sense of loss growing from the relativisation of human values. The modernist age brought the ideal of novelty and reform along with the "new" identity of the black, confronting black consciousness with the issue of segregation and/or integration. Ever since Du Bois affirmed that the "problem" of the American society was the "color line", it became unrealistic not to account for the bleak inequity of racial relations, and not to consider the warping consequences of segregation as regarding the symbols of democracy.

The new identity of the black wore the imprint of a dramatic self-discovery, webbing self-denial and self-assertion in a pattern of revolt against racial blindness. Writing after the effervescent period of the Harlem Renaissance, Hughes, Wright and Ellison unveiled the gaping contrast between the ideal of progress in the American society and the aftermath of the Great Depression. *Big Sea*, *I Wonder as I Wander*, *Native Son*, *Battle Royal*, (the core of *Invisible Man*) had been published in a period when the awareness of a profound rift severing America on one hand, and the outside world, on the other, was antagonizing the public mind. Modes of separation with tradition were experimented in immanent visions upon art, literature, but also in politics and racial consciousness. Modernist strategies reinforced the freedom of writers and artists primarily to create personal, subjective and contradictory visions on world, history, individual, literature and art, forging authentic expressions of the individual.

It is therefore not surprising that stylistic formal (ist) experiments (more consistent in *Invisible Man*) suited the portraying of the fragmented "history" of the black individual, in search of a meaningful present, which eventually could overpass the shame and guilt of a traumatic past. American democracy was interpreted by Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King

not only as redemption from the bondage of the past, but as an explicit possibility for black to achieve the ideal of Americanness. The tradition of black autobiography stood therefore as a token of recognition working in both directions, inside and outside black community, cementing the (re)construction of the black identity, and accounting for its various sources of difference with white identity. Autobiography provided for black authors and their mixed audience (the white audience was actually involved as much as the black one in witnessing segregation and its repercussions) a literary and cultural locus to express the trial of difference. Delayed expectations of racial justice shed light on the righteousness of a cause and on the courage of its avowal, yet for both blacks and whites, according to different historical events, the consensus for a common civil culture was not reachable.

The import of autobiography grew considerably due to literary experiments evincing in the blurring of the genres as in essay, reportage and novel writing. Autobiography attested a rising interest for the documented evidence of reality, providing the literary and cultural stage with personal interpretations of the significance of modernity in the life of blacks as individuals or as a community and the idea of emancipation. Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, Washington T. Booker, James Baldwin, Malcolm X, Henry Louis Gates Jr., and quite recently Barack Obama bestowed on autobiography various types of recognition, yet focusing on the black self and its expression. Modernism caused in its unbridled and riotous manifestation the birth of a new sensibility. The rising interest in exploring the "lives" of symbolical individuals, dwellers of soulless urban landscapes (as in Joyce, T.S. Eliot, Kafka, Musil, Faulkner), fathoming the personal or collective unconscious (Virginia Woolf, D.H. Lawrence, André Gide, Thomas Mann) showed that preoccupation with the "small" stories of the individual superseded the images of "great" history, in creating epiphanies of the present. Consciousness of the present turned to be the ephemeral sublime of modernism.

In this understanding, the figure of the artist, seen as the author (creator, innovator) of his own life and consciousness, opposing the successful bourgeois rose to public recognition. The cult of the artist descended in the street, embracing the grotesque, ridiculing hypocrite social harmony, claiming the revising of all values which could not survive the test of life in its immanent and immediate concurrence. Modernist newness celebrated the "crisis", the separation and the fragmentation of the American dream. The "un-accommodated man" (Berman 185) came out from the underground of society, breaking the walls of silence which kept him apart from the rest of the world, bestowing in his nihilistic attitude the fury of a "revolutionary" order. The de-humanization of art, as Ortega y Gasset named the new course taken by modernism proclaimed the divorce between

reliving the life experience in the work of art and the audacious flight from any mimetic dependence.

It is known that the genealogy of racial exile is biblical. Secularization and later on, de-secularization did not change significantly the ways of excluding the other on racial grounds. The post-Enlightenment period and the modern European revolutions provided well-known instances of resorting to racial violence and social dislocation of individuals and communities in order to instill racial superiority. Religious fundamentalism inspirited racial stigma, and last century totalitarianism used racial and ethnic traditional differences to create deep cultural and political cleavages among modern individuals. Biologization of power was after all a tragic failure of imagining the other as a possible equal human being, and consequently the politics of racial hate continued to deepen the already existing antagonistic racial stereotypes. All these construe the present-day perceptions of "exile" (diaspora, displacement, exclusion, expatriation, expulsion, extradition, immigration), underscoring marginalization, discrimination and repression of individuals and/or communities others than the leading majority. The old meaning of "banishment" was replaced in the understanding of exile by the tacit acceptance instilled by the majority to forbid other members of the same society to share the same social and cultural symbols, rights and resources. The mounting pressure of the majority which pushed minorities to the margin, into the "blank" space of non-representation, has been built differently fashioned in the pulpit, political discourse, or, in the media discourse. The nowadays meanings of the exile may be seen as being anchored in the tactics of populism, which eventually blurred borders between authoritarianism and democracy. Nevertheless, in democratic regimes, and in the Unites States primarily, cultural wars sparked an open debate for the rights of representation, claiming either the change of the cultural canon, or its preservation, underlining the effect of the successive waves in democratizing the concept of culture. The American experience stands therefore apart form other examples in the world, pointing to how racial barriers were firstly recognized before being removed.

Racial equality was not observed as public goal in the United States until the second half of the last century, and multiculturalism, heralded as early as 1915, succeeded in getting public recognition only a few decades ago. The prevalence of the political factor within the American federalism succeeded eventually in winning over ethnic or racial ideologies, bringing into life norms of racial recognition and equality. North-American racial relations are regarded even nowadays as challenging if not even problematic, in spite of the triumph of the liberal policies of the 60's. The liberal-conservative dispute over racial entitlements and implicitly over the new

consequences of racial equality or inequality continues to wage its disputes on the political and cultural stage. Cornel West considered that:

> Racial progress is undeniable in America. Never before we had such a colorful menagerie of profesionals in business, education, politics, sports, and the labor movement. Glass ceilings have been pierced – not smashed, by extraordinary persons of color. Overt forms of discrimination have been attacked and forced to become more covert. Yet the legacy of white supremacy lingers – often in the face of the very denials of its realities. (xiv-xv)

The ironical understatement of the author unveils the ensnaring circumstances of today's consumerist society, as the "soul" (Du Bois's term) of the black race lost its integrity and visionary force because of its being entangled in material temptations of the consumerist society and due to the absence of a committed, strong black leadership. Cornel West denounced the black individual's postmodern alienation, a far more dangerous phenomenon than the interwar segregation, he deemed, when in spite of the violent victimization the black exile, though bereft of hope, black community was unharmed by consumerist relativism. The new racial exile consists for West in nihilist attitudes dividing black society along with self-hate and self-contempt, spiritual blindness, which all eventually concur in blighting the promise of real progress. Cornel West's voice was not singular in criticizing the benefits of the much applauded post-liberal policies. A founder and promoter of multiculturalism, Charles Taylor remarked on the relations between recognition and the actual shaping of identity:

> The demand for recognition in these latter cases is given urgency by the supposed links between recognition and identity, where this latter term designates something like a person's understanding of who they are, of their fundamental characteristics as a human being. The thesis is that our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Non-recognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being. (25)

On the other side of the street, conservatives, black conservatives as well, deplored the disappearance of the American genuine moral values and the gradual lack of concern if not disrespect for the so-called 'American

genuine moral values', which in their opinions, rendered the American social life more brittle. Dinesh D'Souza condemned the birth of anti-liberalism, the source of a new brand of paternalism whose present-day consequences undermine social accountability and the ideals of Americanness.

> So, what about racism? The conclusion of our inquiry into the history and nature of racism suggests that it is not reducible to ignorance and fear. Not only is the liberal remedy for racism incorrect; the basic diagnosis of the malady is wrong. Racism is what always was: an opinion that recognizes real civilizational differences and attributes them to biology. […] The racist fallacy, as Anthony Appiah contends, is the act of 'biologizing what is culture'. (D'Souza 537-538)

Kwame Anthony Appiah warned against the dangers of implementing the ideal of authenticity in Charles Taylor's understanding of recognition, actually in building self-recognition.

> The rhetoric of authenticity proposes not only that I have a way of being that is all my own, but that in developing it I must fight against my family, organized religion, society, the school, the state - all the forces of conventions. This is wrong, however, not only because it is in dialogue with other people's understandings of who I am that I develop a conception of my own identity (Taylor's point) but also because my identity is crucially constituted through concepts and practices made available to me by religion, society, school, and state, and mediated to varying degrees by the family. (Appiah, "Identity, Authenticity, Survival" 154)

Appiah upheld a universal type recognition relying on the notion of the "stranger", speaking of the necessity of applying to our dissenting world the ethics of cosmopolitanism.

> Often enough, as Faust said, in the beginning is the deed: practices and not principles are what enable us to live together in peace. Conversations across the boundaries of identity – whether national, religious, or something else – begin with a sort of imaginative engagement you get when you read a novel or watch a movie or attend a work of art that speak from some place other than your own". (Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism* 85)

It is known that in construing the creed of the American modern democracy racial exile remained an unsolved obstacle until the second half

of the last century. Thomas Jefferson did not conceal his fear for the "alarm bell" which would toll the time of judgment for those who benefited from the spoils of slavery. A century later, Tocqueville left an incredibly true picture of the racial exile of the black slaves:

> The negro of the United States has lost the memory of his country; he no longer understands the language that his father spoke; he has abjured their religion and forgotten their mores. In thus ceasing to belong to Africa, he has however acquired no right to the goods of Europe; but he has stopped between the two societies; he has remained isolated between the two peoples, sold by one, repudiated by the other, finding in the entire universe only the hearse of his master to offer him the incomplete image of his country. (Tocqueville 304)

Martin Luther King reminded Americans and actually all individuals living in the postwar world about the dream of living in the present, and to render the present time hospitable for the other:

> This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism. Now is the time to make real promises of democracy. Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood. (King 2484)

In spite of aesthetic different visions, the aforementioned works of Hughes, Wright and Ellison render of the ordeal of segregation delving into American reality, conjoining the tragic with the burlesque. For Hughes, racial exile meant the fatal ambiguity of human identity and the possibility of its expiation through the adventure of becoming a writer, bringing thus testimony to the silenced sufferings of the many. Wright thought of the racial exile as of a tragic social crisis resulting in revolt and violence for the black, whereas Ellison resorted to a powerful allegory, the invisibility of the black, an unprecedented parable of modern American inequities.

For Langston Hughes, the meaning of autobiography approaches probably mostly the classical definition of one's life account within the content of verisimilitude. Yet, there are some significant changes in the personal framing of the narration of a life. In *Big Sea* and *I Wonder as I Wander* the author *knows* that redemption from exile will be actually accomplished through the carrying out of his writer's vocation. The autobiographical story is rooted in an explicit literary consciousness, which is even more obvious in *I Wonder as I Wander*, a writer's diary. *Big Sea*

contains a number of themes which would be later deepened and brought by Wright and Ellison to a more refined and dramatic subtlety. Self-hate ensuing social failure, the broken promise of education, the forbidden path to acquire respectability through a dignified job, and chiefly the everyday survival within a segregated public space are interrelated in the same frame of racial estrangement provoked by the indifference or the hostility of the white majority. In *Big Sea*, cruelty of life is accepted as such without resignation, with a sense of humor sometimes, but always with a silent vulnerability, since the story of survival lacks heroism. Wright thought that a naturalist deterministic rendering of the black's inescapable present would be truer to life, whereas Ellison chose both the construction of the character as an American black picarro as well as allegory of the "invisibility" of blackness to surpass naturalist recognition.

Wright's bringing black fiction to unprecedented fame was nationally and internationally hailed, and his European exile due by his communist activities (1934-1942) brought an unprecedented popularity to a black American writer. Wright's artistic biography opened new vistas for the younger black writers such as Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin, though the latter one criticized the clichés which underpinned black identity, and chiefly the ideological preference of his forerunner. For Richard Wright the mirror-like correspondence between biography and fiction, in *Uncle Tom's Children*, and *The Ethics of Living Jim Crow* buttressed didactically the lesson of realism in *Native Son.* Wright's stunning capacity to create an enduring fictional character which had an overt likeness with the black ghetto life was at the same time a peak and an end in the course of late American naturalism. The striving to create a symbolic character which would denounce of the racial crisis of twentieth century America was for Wright a personal reason to experience freedom:

> The more I thought of it the more I became convinced that if I did not write of Bigger as I saw and felt him, if I did not try to make him a living personality an at the same time a symbol of all larger things I felt and saw in him, I'd be reacting as Bigger himself: that is, I'd be reacting out of fear if I let what I thought whites would say constrict and paralyze me. (Wright 868)

The realist-naturalist mimetic technique is prevalent in *Native Son*. The grim and highly strung rendering of the experience of living in the segregated urban underworld appears as an ominous adventure, jeopardizing the very idea of normalcy. Actually, the tension of meeting a hostile destiny concealed in the triviality of everyday life encodes the symbolical condemnation of belonging to a race different from the white one. Ironically, the opportunity of having obtained a job becomes for Bigger a highly

dangerous opportunity at the end of which death awaits him. The marginality and randomness of an outcast's life boiled down eventually in the manifestation of the secret vulnerability transformed into anger. A murder caused by the logics of circumstances, described with great acuteness turns Bigger into a perfect victim of both his instincts and his racial condition. The ill-fated "life" of Bigger portrays a captive collectivity, lacking trust, vision and hope. The moral paralysis of the black people is shown as being so the more aggravated with the insurgency of Marxism, or with the radicalism of black nationalists, which cannot sort out for blacks the path to individual independence. Instead, the fragile streak of confidence existing between the two races will become even thinner and the cleavage between white and blacks is shown as lasting forever, an immovable landmark of America. Resignation and desolation dwell both in the mind of the author and its main personage, without the cathartic transformation of suffering into a liberating understanding.

According to the Wright's words, Bigger inhabited the author's early frustrating personal experiences, a shadow of his compassion for the unknown victims of racial oppression.

> The extension of my sense of the personality of Bigger was the pivot of my life; it altered the complexions of my existence. I became conscious, at first dimly and then later on with increasing clarity and conviction of a vast, muddied pool of human life in America. (Wright 868)

By reminding his readers the crucial importance of to "feel" and "see", Wright did not depart from a déjà vu relation between stimulus and reaction, showing a deterministic understanding of the social ties which underlie the social milieu. All characters, not only Bigger, are rendered in a mechanism-like perception of human action, where the impersonality of social relations prevails, and hence cruelty and an unconscious necessity rule the minds of the individuals. Wright's characters experience the burden of being cast into the roles of a pre-determined life, a lifeless social order which underscores the triumph of the "system" against the individual. The overwhelming power of social constraints distorts characters' intentions to reach for their goals. Mary Dalton's superficial attempts to escape paternal and social authority and her dallying with communism and racial oppression, while exploring sexual freedom, are juxtaposed to Bigger's humiliating circumstances of earning his family bread, and the suppressing of his smoldering revolt. The unknown result of the characters' intentions shown in the episode of Bigger and his friends planning a robbery, or in Bigger's confession to Bessie after having killed Mary point to an invisible,

oppressive force with which a cruel necessity takes its toll on innocent people, randomly.

> … because the very tissue of their consciousness received its tone and timber from the strivings of that dominant civilization, oppression spawned among them a myriad variety of reactions, reaching from outright blind rebellion to a sweet, otherworldly submissiveness. (Wright 858)

Reaffirming "the environment makes the consciousness", Wright explains the condition of the segregation of the black man in a language suggestive for the ideological fundamentalism of his convictions, namely, sustaining that the black being "product of a dislocated society; he is a dispossessed and disinherited man". Interesting to note, Wright showed in an indirect manner the depth of segregation in the modernist cast of mind when recounting in an essay a dialogue between Lenin and Gorky while they took a trip to London. Choosing to guide Gorky in a cultural tour of London and of the British imperial symbols, Lenin kept saying *their* Westminster, *thei*r Big Ben, their etc., indicating the rift between the two nations, worlds and political identities. Wright was surprised to notice that that was the way in which he imagined Big Thomas assess American reality and its symbolism, an estranged individual feeling dispossessed and rejected, a native son in a "foreign" country.

Wright wrestled with the fear that while attempting to increase his character's tragic potentiality residing in its violent destiny, he could impair the construed image of the black community. Furthermore, Wright was pondering whether in substantiating Bigger's tribulations he defied the dogmatic leftist circles' positions. Wright confessed that he had avoided not to be tagged by such circles "an ideological confusionist", or "an individualist and dangerous element". *Native Son* had to be cautiously steered between self-censorship and ideological 'betrayal' as the this label was often employed as a condemning phrase for those early party committed writers who broke the canon of socialist realism. The publishing of *Native Son* meant eventually the victory of the author against his own sense of censorship, against the criticism of some leftist intellectual circles, which apparently controlled black symbolism.

> Though my heart is with the collectivistic and proletarian ideal, I solved this problem by assuring myself that honest politics and honest feeling in imaginative representation ought to be able to meet on common healthy ground without fear, suspicion, and quarreling. I steeled myself by coming to the conclusion that whether politicians accepted or rejected Bigger did not really matter; my task, as I felt it,

> was to free myself of this burden of impressions and feelings, recast them into the image of Bigger and make him true. (Wright 868-869)

With Ralph Ellison's masterpiece one meets a totally different literary case. By using the first person and by creating an authorial mask as a creditable voice, Ralph Ellison superseded the seduction of autobiography. Instead of an autobiographically recognizable character, Ellison brought forth an authorial character who attempts to learn the art of survival, preserving at the same time its innocence. Building a musical type of plot, providing his novel a main theme and various alterations, Ellison placed in center of his novel the becoming of a "personality", in strong contrast with its invisibility, scaling up and down, ironically different versions of segregation in twentieth century America. Blending the subjectivity of authorial mask with the objective construction of symbolical and/or easily recognizable characters, Ellison created a playful distance to reality, warning the reader against the dangers of mimetic interpretations and of their stereotypes. Resorting to the picaresque experience, Ellison plunged into the American "collective unconscious" looking at American from a subterranean hole, a safe shelter for an unwanted human who fears other humans.

He demonstrated artfully his conviction that fiction is not confined to the mimetic accounting of reality only, but rather to the foretelling of man's future, if the writer is endowed with the moral passion to uncover evil from its banal decoy. The storyteller, as the key-holder of the meaning in the narration, does not represent a simple locus of the artistic convention, but anti-heroic hero whose existence is a continual blending between innocence and deception, a modern *everyman* in a godless, deluding, cynical world. Ellison's character is obviously an anti-mimetic, an anti-essentialist type clothed in a picaresque experience, making its invisibility shimmer among between realism and imagination, grotesque and parable, shattering any streak of respectability for the middle class and the grandeur of the myth of education, the moral guarantee of the American creed.

Since the allegory of life's knowledge and its value hold a central place in *Invisible Man*, it might be useful to review "recognition", the Aristotelian concept of *anagnorisis*, and the relation between recognition and reversal, *peripeteia* in order to better perceive the play between invisibility and visibility in Ellison's novel. Chapter IX of the *Poetics* shows that the necessary and the likeness constitute the confines bordering the author's epic or rather tragic invention, the poet being a "maker, inventor" of topics rather than a versifier, since the imitation is an imitation of the action (Aristotel 65-66). In chapter XI, one reads that recognition is the "passing from innocence/ignorance to knowledge", a change or a metamorphosis, (the term *metabole* is crucial to understand the linkage between recognition and reversal), effecting on the friendship or enmity with other characters destined

to either happiness or doom. *Peripeteia* or the reversal is a sudden change in the contrary course of the events, within the limit of likeness and the necessary (MacFarlane 372).

Far from saying that Ellison was particularly influenced by Aristotelian recognition, I want to remark that he challenged the fundamental question of imitation, while using tradition and by implying that the novel is a "form of symbolical action", (Kenneth Burke), refusing the naturalist "slice of life" technique. At the same time, Ellison was not far from Lukács's concept of defining the novel as a work of "totality", yet for him the idea of the "totality" of the novel resounded in complex inventory of narrative techniques than in resorting to mimetic techniques. Ellison's aesthetic view focused on the play between recognition and reversal as a matrix of the becoming and significance of the becoming, as an original interpretation of the *metabole*, consisting in a cycle of epiphanies, self-discovery, and deception. The interpretive strategy of Ellison's novel is deeply connected not only to the rhetorical substance of his characters, but to the foretelling of an "end". Invisibility is not only sitting at the core of deception, which makes us think of the interplay between an *eirone* and an *alazon*, but is germane to the idea of *the possible*, as this concept was defined by the masters of the nineteenth century American novel, whom Ellison admired.

There are two hermeneutical directions to my opinion, underpinning the idea of racial exile in the case of the three aforementioned black writers. The first one demonstrates Ellison's being familiar with Kenneth Burke's pragmatic view of the relation between society and literature, namely as an "equipment for life" (Gusfield 23-24). Not being a scientific experiment, as naturalist writers believed, neither a socialist realist copy of reality, not an existentialist essay either, or a pure linguistic experiment as in the new French novel, literature has an epistemic foundation, without being only a field of knowledge proper. The crucial role of literature in designing and experiencing a new awareness in a cultural transition was shown in Ellison's dealing with the symbols of black identity seen as transgressing race.

The second hermeneutical path regards chiefly the rhetorical structure of Ellison's characters, alluding to the divorce between the written and the spoken word, seen as a consequence of secularization, and a main cause to the relativization of public trust. The spoken word has decayed from its yester salvaging power, being substituted by political phrases in the age of democracy. The rhetorical substance of Ellison's characters, which conjoins the sequences of the sinuous narration told in the first person indicates the omnipotence and yet the ambiguity of expressing the self in the labyrinth of the postmodern maze. Is there a meaning in the accounting of a life? The question remains the dark riddle of the novel. Ralph Ellison found an oasis in a "morality of craftsmanship", in the "sacred" responsibility of the author, in his mission "to create reality" and not mimic it (O'Meally 162-

163). In this way, he shows his support for the ideal of non-conformism, defending through the moral drama of an individual the uniqueness of life in the age of mass democracy.

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