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A Personal Resistance

The African American experience of the self and society as narrated in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*

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Introduction

This study is based on two books: Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*. The focus is placed on the themes of self-perception and of the relationship between the self and society in the African American subject, as described in the two works. While the analysis mainly deals with each work singularly, in order to look at the way in which the experience of the self and of the self's relation to society is engaged, the last chapter gathers and confronts the previously-made observations. My first contact with the field of African American studies was with Professor Elisa Bordin and Professor Pia Masiero's courses at Ca' Foscari University of Venice, which I both thank for having sparked my curiosity; the topics of self-perception and relationship with society were chosen out of personal interest.

This work aims to establish a dialogue between Ellison and Baldwin by comparing *Invisible Man* and *The Fire Next Time.* Although the two works belong to different literary genres – Ellison's book is a work of fiction while Baldwin's is not – both deal with similar topics analysed and compared in this work. Besides their subject matter, the two books have been selected for their belonging to a similar historical period, that is, when American society was on the cusp of immense change: although *Invisible Man* was published in 1952 and *The Fire Next Time* in 1963, they both came into being during the period of the Civil rights Movement, and before the Civil rights Act of 1964 which symbolically marked the end of such a period. Both works, finally, are canonical texts of African American literature, for their lucid and impassionate portrayal of the African American experience.

The first chapter is structured as a twofold introduction: on the one hand it gives

an overview of African Americans' battles for civil and political rights from after the Second World War to the achievement of the Civil rights Act of 1964 and of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The second part introduces Du Bois' concept of "double consciousness", an essential notion to introduce the theme of the split self-perception in the African American subject. Chapter Two focuses on Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Firstly, it analyses the possibility of establishing a relationship between the classical genre of the Bildungsroman and the narratives of African American experience. Secondly, it reads the protagonist's progress in the novel as a process of liberation from externally-imposed identities and narrations; the protagonist's progress ends with his self-definition, achieved through the act of self-narration. Chapter Three gives a close reading of Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, focusing on how Baldwin, starting with the description of his personal experience of growing up in Harlem, deals with the theme of African Americans' self-perception and gives an insightful analysis of race relations in America. The first part of the last chapter includes the writers' hopes for the future of African Americans as expressed in the two works. The last part brings together the two writers' works and thought, by comparing their depiction of the African American condition and their hopes for its future.

1 Historical and theoretical background

This first chapter is conceived as an introduction to the two works I will later compare and analyze: Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*. The first part consists of an historical introduction to the years in which the two books were published. Since both works address the African American condition, it will be useful to give an overview of the African Americans' struggle for civil and political rights in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. The second part deals with Du Bois' concept of "double consciousness", which is included as a theoretical introduction to the theme of self-perception in African American subjects, on which this thesis focuses in Chapters Two and Three.

1.1 The African American struggle for civil rights

By outlining the historical, social, and political events regarding African Americans' struggle in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, this chapter aims at portraying the social turmoil of those years and the way in which the American institutions dealt with it. I chose to start with the years following World War II not so much for the importance of African Americans' battles of those years, as for the significance of African Americans' direct experience of the conflict, with regard to the profound social and political consequences it led to.

1.1.1 The Second World War and the following years

The U.S. Army remained segregated for the whole duration of the Second World War, a situation which neither the President Roosevelt nor the General Staff had in their

interest to change (Luconi 2021, 216). In spite of this reality, in 1941 President F.D. Roosevelt signed the executive order 8802, an important document which outlawed all forms of discrimination based on race, color, origin and creed in all departments and agencies operating for the Ministry of Defense. Furthermore, it established the Fair Employment Practices Committee, with the aim of receiving and investigating complaints against any form of discrimination. As Luconi notes, although the motivations behind the passing of the executive order 8802 were more practical than ideological – that is to say, to preserve unity between the races during the war effort – and despite the fact that the concrete effects of the Committee were definitely limited, the importance of such legislative measure lies in its affirming, for the first time after the Reconstruction, the idea that the Federal Government was responsible and had to take action to reduce the gap between the democratic ideals of the nation and the realities of racial discrimination and segregation (2021, 217-218).

The Second World War had far-reaching effects on the American society. On the one hand, certain groups of immigrants, such as the Italians, started to be considered as fully Americans. Indeed, people who were neither of Anglo-Saxon origin nor African Americans had until then occupied a middle place in the American racial hierarchy, as they were not treated like African Americans but, at the same time, they were not considered fully Whites. For these people the conflict accelerated the process of acquisition of a fully White American identity, a dynamic which often involved the taking on the hatred and contempt for African Americans, considered the real outsiders of American society (Luconi 2021, 220-221).

On the other hand, the war was also a catalyzing event for Black[1] pride. The experience of having fought in a continent where segregation did not exist and of having risked their lives for a country where they were treated as inferiors and subjected

[1] In this thesis I use the initial capital letter for the nouns and the adjectives in which the color points to ethnicity. In quotations, however, I have maintained the original spelling.

to Jim Crow laws, led African Americans to claim for more civil and political rights once they returned home. Consequently, in the war years the African American civil militancy grew sharply: if, at the breakout of the war, the members of the NAACP, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, were 50.000, by the end of the conflict the number had reached 450.000 (Luconi 2021, 223).

The years following the Second World War were characterized, particularly in the southern states, by new violence against African Americans, who were no longer willing to bear in silence the daily injustices they were subject to. For the Truman administration such violence represented a double problem for domestic and foreign policy, as not only were they a violation of the federal law which the government could not tolerate, but they also stained the image of a nation which, in the context of the Cold War, wanted to stand as the bastion of liberty (Luconi 2021, 236). The first Truman government dealt with these episodes setting up a federal board of inquiry appointed to investigate on the discrimination of African Americans, called To Secure These Rights. Among all the adopted measures suggested by the board it is important to remember the 1948 executive order 9981, which ratified the integration of the armed forces.

1.1.2 The 1950s and the battle for desegregation in education

The 1950s were the years of the most important battles against segregation in education, the ruling condition especially in the southern states, where African Americans lived under Jim Crow laws. In these states the “separate but equal” doctrine was in force, a principle which affirmed that racial segregation, both in public and private spaces, did not violate the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, which granted equal protection to all the citizens. The constitutionality of this doctrine was restated by the Supreme Court’s decision of 1896 of confirming the Plessy v. Ferguson sentence,

which enshrined the right of every state to legislate about racial segregation.

The NAACP was leading legal battles in the field of education since before the outbreak of the Second World War and was able to achieve its first outcomes in the university sector (Luconi2021, 239-240). The Association's greatest victory in this sector was undoubtedly the Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka case, widely considered a landmark moment in the Civil rights struggle as it legally outlawed segregation in education. In 1951 twelve African American families led by the Browns filed a lawsuit against the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, as their children were not allowed to attend the local all-White school and were forced to enroll to a segregated school located further away. The U.S. District Court for the District of Kansas proclaimed that the situation was in agreement with the dictates of the "separate but equal" doctrine, and therefore rejected Brown's charge. In 1954, on behalf of the Browns and the other families, the NAACP appealed the ruling directly to the Supreme Court, which declared the inherent inequality of separate educational facilities. Acknowledging that no segregated education could be considered fair in front of the law, the verdict thus ratified for the first time the inherent unconstitutionality of the "separate but equal" doctrine.

To this decision, one year later, followed the controversial Brown v. Board of Education case, with which the Supreme Court issued the directives to implement its newly announced constitutional principle. As different US regions had different difficulties in enforcing integration, the Supreme Court recognized the need for local solutions, thus gave schools and local courts greater power so that they could carry out the process of desegregation "with all deliberate speed" (History - Brown v. Board of Education Re-enactment). Despite the verdict's good intentions, the ambiguity of the adjective "deliberate" was used by the segregationists to hamper and postpone as much as possible the process of integration (Luconi 2021, 242). The revolutionary Brown I

verdict met several resistances and was hampered also with systematical strategies. In many schools, for instance, the admission criteria of race was replaced with an evaluation of the applicants' general welfare, a strategy that, based on the African Americans' generally lower income, was able to maintain racial discrimination without formally acknowledging it (Luconi 2021, 245). The peak of the episodes of racial hatred originating from the schools' desegregation process took place in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957, where the state governor Orval Faubus used the National Guard to prevent nine African American students to enroll at the Central High School, a situation which president Eisenhower handled by putting the military body under the federal government's control and by sending to Little Rock a thousand soldiers to protect the nine students for the whole year (Luconi 2021, 246).

In 1955 another hate crime took place and shocked the United States: the assassination of Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old African American from Chicago: during his visit to the family in Money, Mississippi, he was kidnapped, tortured and killed by two White men for having allegedly flirted with a White woman. Instead of having a quick funeral in the South, as the authorities wanted, the mother decided to have an open-casket funeral in Chicago, to show how the brutality of the tortures had left the corpse of her only son utterly unidentifiable. Despite the awful tragedy, the two assassins were pleaded not guilty by an all-White jury.

1.1.3 The late 1950s and the early 1960s: the heart of the civil rights movement

The Civil rights Act of 1957 marked a milestone for Black history, as it was the Congress' first legislation on the rights of African Americans after 1875. It established a new branch of the Justice Department, the Civil rights Section, which had in its powers

the ability to prosecute through court injunctions any form of interference with the right to vote, even when not denounced by the aggrieved part. Despite this law, one of the tactics that were used, especially in the South, to limit Black people's right to vote remained legal: a literacy test as a precondition to register to vote. Formally given to both White and Black people, and therefore able to stand the accusation of discrimination, it was designed to let only White Americans pass. To remedy such injustice, in 1960, a new Civil rights Act was released, allowing the federal inspection of local voter registration polls and, amongst the other measures, making a federal crime any interference with court orders regarding school desegregation (Luconi 2021, 247).

Whereas these two government acts, together with the Brown cases, can be considered as forms of "integration from above", as top-down processes where the goal of integration was pursued with concrete actions from the institutions of the federal government, the same years also witnessed similar attempts to pursue the struggle for civil rights from below, as bottom-up processes, carried out by common people gathered and organized in civil associations and movements (Luconi 2021, 249-250).

Indeed, in the same years of the Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, 1955, the famous Alabama's bus boycott took place. Organized by Edgar Daniel Nixon, leader of Montgomery's NAACP, this nonviolent protest firstly aimed at obtaining a better treatment for African American people on the city's public transportation system and, as the number of participants grew, raised its aim to ask the end of segregation on the buses. The representative figure of this battle was Rosa Parks, an African American woman arrested for violation of racial segregation after she sat in the White section of the bus as all the seats in the colored section were taken, and refused to give up her place. The boycott, which started on December 5, lasted for 381 days and involved around 52000 African Americans. Its remarkable success is also due to the creation of an alternative net of transportation for the protestors, based on carpooling.

It is in this context that Martin Luther King gained national and international visibility. A Baptist minister with a PhD in theology at the University of Boston, he was chosen as the leading figure for the Montgomery Improvement Association, the organization that coordinated the city's bus boycott. King is remembered also for his belief in nonviolence, the idea that civil and social progress can be achieved through nonviolent methods such as civil disobedience and different forms of protest. This philosophy, which distinguished him from other Black leaders such as Malcolm X, had the bus boycott as testing ground and became the preferred form of action in the Civil rights struggle for the following decade (Luconi 2021, 254-255).

The African American protestant church also played a major role in the struggle for civil rights: the believers and the clergymen also became, respectively, "an organized mass base" and its "leadership", while the churches functioned as "meeting places where the masses planned tactics and strategies and collectively committed themselves to the struggle" (Morris 1984, 4). Although the Black church was a long-standing presence in the American landscape, it is after the Montgomery's bus boycott that it tried to take on a role of leadership in the civil rights movement (Luconi 2021, 257). Indeed, less than a month after the end of the boycott, on January 10, 1957, around sixty pastors coming from ten different southern states gathered to found the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), an organization that merged the evangelic message with the principles of nonviolence, civil disobedience and direct action. Differently from the NAACP, whose main *modus operandi* were the legal battles in courts, this organization favored the concrete action of everyday people as the propeller of social change.

The SCLC gained a relevant importance with the Greensboro's sit-ins, episodes of a certain revolutionary nature, as they represented a successful spontaneous protest, not organized by any associations active in the Civil rights Movement (Luconi 2021,

258-259). Indeed, the intervention of the SCLS happened after the protest had already begun, with M.L. King's intention to coordinate it. On February 1, 1960, four African American students of the North Carolina A&T University – Joseph McNeill, Ezel Blair Jr., Franklin McCain, and David Richmond – went to a Greensboro supermarket to buy some stationery items and asked, unsuccessfully, to be waited at the adjacent coffee shop, with a journalist from the local newspaper documenting their being rejected. The next day the students repeated their act of protest, with more people joining and, in the following weeks, the protest spread and involved more shops. Overall, more than 70.000 African American students in several southern cities joined the protest, reaching their goal: to end segregation in the food and beverages sector. This collective experience gave birth, in April of the same year, to a new organization: the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), founded with the aim of preserving the students' independence in the struggle for civil rights.

1.1.4 The intensification of the fights for civil rights

The presidential elections of 1960 were won by J.F. Kennedy. Although he was extremely popular in the African American community, in his policy towards the civil right struggle Kennedy was mainly dilatory and likely to hold off important decisions and concrete actions, as his intention was to gain also the votes of the conservative democratic electorate of the south (Luconi 2021, 265).

The Freedom Rides of 1961 were a particularly important episode from the years of his first mandate which required the government's direct intervention. This protest, organized by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) on May 4, had the aim of directly applying the 1960s Supreme Court verdict that declared unconstitutional the segregation on interstate public transportation and in the related places, such as toilets,

waiting rooms and refreshment stand. Several volunteers, both Black and Whites, organized two bus trips from Washington D.C. to New Orleans, Louisiana, as in the South the segregation of such environments was still the matter-of-fact rule. As the protesters expected, the two buses were attacked as soon as they entered South Carolina, but the most serious episode of violence happened in Alabama, where they risked their lives. Indeed, in Birmingham the chief of local police Eugene Connor allowed the Ku Klux Klan fifteen minutes of free, unpunished violence before the formal intervention of the police: once arrived at the terminal, the freedom riders were almost beaten to death. In order to stop these tensions, the federal government had to put into action the federal agents and Alabama's National Guard as escorts for the buses. Similar episodes of violence took place in other southern states, where only in the month of June more than three hundred riders were arrested. The need for a concrete action led the Interstate Commerce Commission, the federal authority for the interstate exchange of goods and services, to forbid the racial segregation of public interstate transports. As Luconi notes, the Freedom Rides were able to demonstrate that only such openly visible episodes of violence were able to rouse the Federal Government from his inaction (2021, 269).

Another episode that attests the obstinate violent opposition of the southern states towards integration is the case of James Meredith. The first African-American student enrolled at the University of Missouri in 1962, his attendance at the local university was made possible by the intervention of more than five thousand men, between soldiers and federal agents. A violent riot, with two persons killed, followed the episode and three hundred soldiers had to be settled in the city until the end of the academic year.

The Birmingham protest of 1963 was a key moment in Black History, as it was able to stir up public opinion, especially of White Americans, on the battle for civil rights. To challenge the city ban on protest against segregation, the SCLC, led by M.L.

King, decided to carry out a series of peaceful protests between April and May which also led to the arrest of Reverend Abernathy and Dr. King who, during his eight-days arrest, wrote *Letter from Birmingham Jail*. The police's reaction to the nonviolent march was terribly aggressive, involving the use of dogs, billy clubs and tear gases against all the people, women and children included. All the main newspapers and television channels captured and reported the violence, causing a national scandal that deeply changed the general awareness on violences and injustices that were the reality of that time. The impact of such phenomenon was so majestic that is worth mentioning: in just a few months the percentage of Americans that believed in the urgency and relevance of the racial issue raised from 4% to 52%: the broadcasting of the police aggressions was able to radically change the public's consideration as no other mean before (Luconi 2021, 270-271).

Following these events, the federal government decided to unlock the impasse, asking the Congress, in June 1963, to legislate on civil rights (Luconi 2021, 272). To support this initiative, on August 28 around 250.000 Americans – 80.000 of which White – peacefully marched in Washington to express their belief in an integrated society where Blacks and Whites could live together and where the color of the skin wouldn't represent a distinctive feature, hopes most famously expressed in "I Have a Dream", M.L. King's speech of that day.

However, the Congress was still unable to reach a common agreement on the bill and only Kennedy's assassination, occurred on November 22, was able to unlock the situation (Luconi 2021, 273). On July 2, 1964, Kennedy's successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, signed the Civil Rights Act, prohibiting any segregation and discrimination on the grounds of race, color, sex or national origin. It also included the creation of a federal commission against work-based discrimination, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, with the power to file lawsuits on behalf of the aggrieved part

and with the possibility, under the Attorney General's authorization, to financially cover the costs of the legal expenses.

After the huge success in the battle for civil rights that the bill represented, the fight of the Black community moved to political rights. Indeed, in many southern states the African Americans' right to vote was impeded on with violence, intimidations, and threats of losing their job or economical subsidies; the worst situation was in Mississippi, where in certain counties the percentage of African Americans enrolled in the voter registration polls was equal or close to zero (Luconi 2021, 277). To protest against such violations of political rights and to encourage the government to act against it, the SCLC organized, on March 7 and 9, 1965, two pacific marches in Alabama, from Selma – a city where segregation was still the norm – to Montgomery. Together with segregationist groups of people, the police, which hadn't authorized the march, aggressively attacked the demonstrators and arrested more than 3500 people; and the wide broadcasting of the violence made once again Selma a national case. The shock which the episode caused in the public opinion encouraged at the Congress the formation a majority that could let the Voting Rights Act pass (Luconi 2021, 281). Signed on August 6, 1965, it outlawed all kinds of discriminatory voting practices, such as literacy tests, and assigned federal authorities the task of supervising the voter registration polls in the southern counties where the election turnout was lower than 50%.

This chapter has given an overview of the African American struggle for social and political rights, which intensified after the Second Word War. Despite some improvement of their conditions came from the institutions – for example, the desegregation of education legislated by the Supreme Court – the most significant achievements were reached with bottom-up fights, through the battles of several organizations operating by means of legal battles as well as popular initiative. The

impressive violent opposition to black participation in civil life, both from White people and from the police is an undeniable indicator of White America's rampant racism. The Federal Government's missing siding with Black struggle further demonstrates its distance from African Americans' fight for equality.

1.2 W.E.B. Du Bois and the concept of "double consciousness"

This section introduces the concept of "double consciousness" as presented in 1903 by W.E.B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk*. With it, Du Bois introduced for the first time the theme of the split self-perception for African Americans, a recurring element also in Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*. Because of this recurrence, I deemed essential to use it here as the theoretical introduction for the analysis which follows.

An African American born in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, in 1863, Du Bois studied at Fisk and Harvard University where, in 1985, he became the first African American to earn a doctorate, with a later-published dissertation on "The Suppression of the African Slave Trade". An established and influent American academic, he taught and researched for Wilberforce University, then at the University of Pennsylvania and later at Atlanta University in Georgia. Du Bois' powerful writing allowed him to become a popular and influent intellectual and a charismatic leader advocating for African Americans' civil and political rights (Du Bois 2018, IX). In 1903 he published *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*, a groundbreaking collection of essays on race. Widely considered a cornerstone of African American literature, the book applied for the first time the concept of "double consciousness" to the African Americans' condition.

In the first essay of the book, "Of Our Spiritual Strivings", Du Bois recalls his early years at school when, for the first time, he was victim of racial discrimination, an episode from which he derived a subsequent awareness of the difference between his condition as a Black person and that of his White classmates, perceiving that he was "shut out from their world by a vast veil" (Du Bois 2018, 2). The duality of the African American condition is then introduced:

> "the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, – a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world" (Du Bois 2018, 3).

The nature of the African American consciousness is here firstly described as divided, as *unable* to see itself directly and clearly – counter, we can infer, to White Americans' consciousness – and only *able* to look at itself through the lens of the "other world," the world of Whites. The impossibility, for the Black consciousness, of a uniform and harmonic existence can be interpreted as a first cause of suffering. Du Bois then advances, elaborating on that "other world's" gaze:

> "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (Du Bois 2018, 3).

In this passage the suffering condition of the African American consciousness is further stressed, as it is forced to see and measure itself with a contemptuous and pitiable look. Indeed, as Allen argues, the peculiar suffering condition of this consciousness does not lie in its being forced to look at itself through the eyes of the other, a condition which belongs to every intersubjective relationship, but it arises from the fact that this process leads to a "a self-questioning of one's intrinsic worth" (2002, 228). Du Bois' text continues as follows:

> "One ever feels his two-ness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (Du Bois 2018, 3).

The torn and therefore suffering nature of the African American condition is here declined in the souls, thoughts, strivings and ideals belonging to two different and simultaneously present identities, the American and the "Negro" one, both inescapable parts of the self. Analyzing what the writer meant with these terms, and particularly focusing on the author's believes about ideals, Allen acknowledges that the issue Du Bois is presenting here is not about the supposedly different ideals characterizing Black and White people: it is rather a "conflicted deliberation concerning the actual ability of Black people to hold ideals – that is, a question ultimately turning upon the recognition of Black folks as human beings" (2002, 230).

Therefore, in a wider perspective, it is possible to see how the concept of "double consciousness" is inscribed in a wider context of inequality, violence and discrimination, a condition of second-class citizenship where civil and political rights are systematically denied. In this daily reality, African Americans' living condition in a predominantly White society that systematically rejects and denies their humanity is the root cause of their suffering. Thus, the "double consciousness" originates from this painful condition of second-class citizenship. In an earlier essay, "The Conservation of Races", published in 1897 in *The Problem of the Color Line at the Turn of the Twentieth Century,* Du Bois questions his own identity and his possibilities of being, writing:

> What, after all, am I? Am I an American or am I a Negro? Can I be both? Or is it my duty to cease to be a Negro as soon as possible and be an American? If I strive as a Negro, am I not perpetuating the very cleft that threatens and separates Black and White America? Is not my only possible practical aim the subduction of all that is Negro in me to the American? Does my Black blood

> place upon me any more obligation to assert my nationality than German, or Irish or Italian blood would? (Du Bois 2014, 58)

The uncertainty about his own identity, torn between Americanness and Blackness, the doubts on the same possibility of coexistence of the two, the deep concern about having to suppress part of his own being in order to survive, and the very responsibilities that come from the color of his skin: all these questions are constitutive of the feeling of "double consciousness" described by Du Bois. In this passage, Allen argues, the concept is declined "in a much more historically specific light" (2002, 245), as a practical, political choice, where the concrete consequences of being a Black American, such as discrimination and violence, lead to a torn state of mind. Possible answers to these questions can be found in "Of Our Spiritual Strivings":

> The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, – this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world (Du Bois 2018, 2-3).

These lines hold the writer's hope for a 'reunited' consciousness, a third way solution to the aforementioned dilemma posed by the "double consciousness": a new way of being where the African and the American identity can come together without losing their peculiarities, originating a new harmony. The solution of this striving is the peaceful coexistence of the opposites which, together, form a reunited inner self. Moreover, the metaphor leads itself to a second interpretation, as it also represents the struggle of the American society to acknowledge and accept African Americans, thus finally end any form of discrimination. Indeed, the text continues as follows:

> He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face. This, then, is the end of his striving: to be a co-worker in the kingdom of culture, to escape both death and isolation, to husband and use his best powers and his latent genius (Du Bois 2018, 3).

In these lines it is possible to foresee Du Bois' hopes of Black inclusion and empowerment in American society. He conferred great importance to Black intellectuals who, in his beliefs, had the power and responsibility to uplift the living condition of American Blacks by contributing to the intellectual life of the country.

The second part of this chapter has introduced the concept of "double consciousness" which Du Bois explained in relation to the African American condition. The torn and suffering self-perception of African Americans is further increased by their experience of being subjected to the contemptuous look of White society and of having to confront this disparaging self-image. The conscious struggle to fight and reject the negative self-image produced by society is again at the center of the next two chapters.

2 Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

2.1 Ralph Ellison: life and works

The following paragraphs contain an overview of Ellison's life and published works, with a focus on the early part of his life and on his main sources of inspiration, which provide a general background for the writing of his novel *Invisible Man*. Whereas differently specified, the quotations refer to Rampersad's biography on Ellison, to which the full reference can be found in the Works Cited section.

Ralph Waldo Ellison was born in on March 1, 1913, in Oklahoma City from Lewis and Ida Ellison. Following his father's will, Ellison was named after the transcendentalist thinker, essayist and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson who, also for his passionate claims against slavery, was an important influence for Lewis as well as for the writer's teachers and community leaders (2007, 11). Acknowledging in his name the hopes of literary success that his father had for him, Ellison would later read the episode of his father's naming as a good omen fulfilled through "the suggestive powers of names and of the magic involved in naming" (quoted in Rampersad 2007, 12).

Lewis's early death caused by a work-related injury – his job consisting in delivering ice and coal to local businesses – marked a turning point for the family, composed of the three-years-old Ellison, his mother Ida and a newborn brother, Herbert Maurice. Aside the emotional loss, the passing away of the father marked for the family the beginning of hardship, in the form of "shabby rented rooms, hand-me-down clothing, second-rate meals, sneers and slights from people better off, and a pinched, scuffling way of life" (2007, 7). The experience of his mother's difficulty in dealing with economic issues while progressively falling into poverty "until, in the end, she had

lost whatever cachet she had brought with her to Oklahoma as a pretty young bride" undoubtedly left a sign in the writer's sensibility and on his perspective on the African American condition (2007, 13). He was also the grandson of a slave, named Alfred and born in South Carolina in 1845. In Rampersad's biography, this figure is remembered for its character, which showed "intelligence, integrity and grit during the perilous Reconstruction", as well as for his eagerness towards political participation, for example in the Republican party and in the Black Union League (2007, 8).

In Oklahoma City, Ellison attended the Frederick Douglass School, an institute which combined elementary and high school, where he studied from 1919 to 1931. There he met his main source of musical influence, his teacher Mrs. Zelia N. Page Breaux, prominent Black leader of the city, promoter, entrepreneur, and co-owner of the Aldridge Theatre, where classical, jazz and blues concerts where held. Ralph's involvement with music grew over time: he had already started taking free private trumpet lesson at his neighbor's house when he joined the school band, under the exhortation of his teacher, who would eventually give him the opportunity to have concerts in the theatre, sometimes accompanying him on the piano (2007, 26). Breaux's influence was twofold, as it helped Ellison not only to grasp the mélange of classical and vernacular style in the musical culture, but also to perceive himself as an artist and to learn the discipline required by the artistic production (2007, 26). As music became such an important element of Ellison's life, he started to consider the possibility of a serious career in jazz music. The neighborhood in which he was grew up, in the early twenties, was the "Deep Second", the "the heart of Black life in Oklahoma City", a vibrating environment for the night life and also an important jazz center, one of the most important west of Chicago, and which celebrities such as Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong visited (2007, 14).

Music, the most favorite and important form of art for the African American

community in the city, was divided in three main competing genres: jazz and blues, religious, and Western classical music. While a certain association existed in the last two, jazz was poorly regarded, even by the educated upper class of African Americans, as an inferior form of expression belonging to the lower classes (2007, 27). Reflecting on the difficulty of choosing between these different stylistic paths, Ellison remembers that the decision went beyond musical tastes, touching on two different moods: the normative stance, associated with the classical genres, whose imperative was to play and express what one was supposed to feel, and the rebellious impulse to give voice to what one really felt and saw around, in the form of jazz and blues (2007, 27). The importance of jazz and blues resided in their giving voice to under-represented and discriminated cultural world with an artistic form able to provide wholeness and coherence, thus representing a vital institution for the African American community (2007, 27).

Another important influence in Ellison's early life where the Randolphs, a wealthy and prominent family belonging to the city's Black leadership, who befriended the Ellisons and employed Ida as a servant, counterbalancing the family's economic needs and the lack of a fatherly figure by providing money and affection (2007, 15). Among the ordinary communal moments, the writer would more vividly remember those spent with the older member of the family, the grandfather, who influenced Ralph with his love for books and storytelling. Ellison's passion for his narrative style, in which "the Black and white rhetorical traditions of the South blended with Southwestern humor" and expressed in long sessions of "tales, jokes, history, personal confessions and maybe some outright lies" would form the future writer's linguistic repertoire, deeply influenced by a "dynamic American approach to language" (2007, 15).

Ellison graduated from Douglass school in 1931, when the Great Depression was bringing America to its knees and Jim Crow ruled uncontested, with Governor Murray imposing segregation on the city in 1933. To get by, he worked for two years firstly at the university club serving meals and was then hired as a janitor at a clothing store. Passionate about music, his dream was to be a successful classical composer. As Rampersad points out, the African American artistic production of classical European music and of other established forms of arts such as painting and literature was driven also by the Black community's need to prove its dignity and equal humanity by excelling in a recognized-by-Whites form of art. This collective need for an external-sourced form of approval was not an inherent need of the African Americans who, by themselves, "would never have questioned their innate humanity", but it originated by the systematic discriminations and marginalization they were subjected to (2007, 41). Ellison cultivated his passion for music by taking private lessons from Ludwig W. Hebestreit, a German musician teaching at his former school, with a cornet bought at the local music store, which he would have to pay in installments for one year.

At this time, his hope was to get into the Tuskegee's Institute, encouraged by a friend who informed him on the school band's need of skilled trumpeters and on the possibility of receiving financial aid but, as the acceptance letter did not arrive, Ellison faced another psychologically tough time. Willing to accept the sudden and urgent call arrived months later, but without any money to buy the train ticket, he reached the college by illegally hopping on a freight train with a skilled hobo friend, thus crossing Missouri and Tennessee and arriving in Alabama. In many ways, Tuskegee's rules were limiting: every aspect of the students' lives was "systematically regulated and supervised", and the study was always second to the manual aspect of instruction, work, to the point that the school defined itself as a "vast workshop" (2007, 41). These years, from 1933 to 1936, meant for Ellison a continuous worry about his financial situation,

but even if the possibility of not being able to enroll in the next school term was often present, he always managed to continue his studies thanks to side jobs and other people financial help, above all his mother's.

Two important persons would contribute to shape Ellison's mind in these years. The long, late-night conversations with his friend Walter Bowie Williams, the librarian at Tuskegee, where the two would engage in artistic and cultural topics. These conversations would stimulate him, "drawing out of him a latent, original quality", nearing him to the possibility of an aesthetic career in writing more than music (2007, 68). The other relevant figure, who substituted the former after his departure from the college, was his English professor Mort Sprague, who introduced him to several important contemporary books, among all T.S. Elliot's *The Waste Land*. The stifling environment of the Black institute in the deep south motivated Ellison to search for a more challenging and open environment and, as soon as his economic situation was made favorable by a scholarship, in 1936 he decided to fulfil his dream, moving to New York City.

In that city, he frequently visited Harlem, recognizing its "complexity […] its incongruities and paradoxes" and noting on its inhabitants' faces different kinds of suffering, "signs of psychological disorder, the result of the denial, pain, and humiliation" (2007, 87). Despite being in the 'Black Mecca' of the nation, he did not feel drawn to a complete identification with it, as in his eyes the neighborhood represented a northern form of segregation, and he was annoyed by its inhabitants' lack of artistic, historical, and cultural taste (Rampersad 2007, 88).

Under Hughes's influence, and with his new job in a paint factory, where he was heavily discriminated, Ellison's political thought radicalized and he approached the Communist Party, which saw Harlem as a concentration point of national relevance, where it led several institutions and activities. Richard Wright was the most relevant

person of the early years in New York and a close friend of Ellison. As Rumpersad notes, the two men shared many similarities: their familiar situation, as they grew up without a father and with a poor mother, a sense of "existential chaos in life", hunger for fame and love for art, literature and ideas, besides a general disillusionment and dissatisfaction with Black political and religious leaders (2007, 97). Ellison admired Wright for his poetry and for being the first African American he knew to be so knowledgeable about literature and politics; inspiring was also his way of working: his passion, intensity, and commitment meant for Ellison his first direct contact with a professional writer (2007, 98). It is on Wright's commission that Ellison would make his first attempts at writing, initially with a review for the first issue of *New Challenge*, a progressive and radical newspaper. Wright also encouraged at Ellison's first try at a short story.

The loss of his mother, occurred on October 15, 1937, marked his return to Dayton, where Ida lived with his brother. This was perhaps the harshest period of his life as, besides having to face the humiliating conditions in which her mother lived and died, he and his brother had to cope with extreme poverty, experiencing "hunger, cold and homelessness" and surviving day by day (2007, 104). However, even in such suffering conditions, Ellison never quitted writing and, driven by his passion and by the desire to rise again, with the money from Ida's health insurance, in early 1938 he was back in New York with a rich dossier of creative writing.

Back in New York, Ellison joined the Federal Writers' project, issued by Roosevelt's New Deal for unemployed writers. In what would become his job for the next four years, motivated by a strong sense of interest and curiosity, Ellison collected materials that testified the Black presence in New York state with a particular interest in Harlem, where he "recorded the ditties, songs, and improvised street games of children" (2007, 116). It is through this job that Ellison acquired much of his knowledge on Black

folklore which, in the larger frame of his personal formation, "drastically altered his sense of the past and of human nature and culture itself" (2007, 116). Alongside his new job, in the following seven years Ellison worked on critical reviews and short fiction which he would publish on left-wing journals such as the *New Masses*.

On September 16, 1938, he married Rose Poindexter, an actress who had worked in Europe performing also as a singer and dancer. The marriage would not last long and in 1946 Ellison will happily remarry with Fanny McConnell Buford, in a happy and supportive marriage that would last for all his life.

Furthermore, Ellison's readings were contributing to shape his mind, his main influences being Malraux, Dostoevsky, and the same Wright. Malraux was important in that he introduced the Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno, who "proposed that our physiological construction […] determines our ideas, including our pessimistic or optimistic vision of life", a thought which Ellison applied to justify African Americans' psyche, often characterized by "qualities of fatalism and passivity" (2007, 120). He related to Dostoyevsky's description of the "ordeal of searching for a sense of dignity and identity in a hostile world" and the "threat of chaos underlying the human condition", which well applied to the African American experience (2007, 121). Finally, as much as he had read and loved Wrights' novel, *Native Son*, published in 1940, his emotional reaction to the 1941's photodocumentary book *12 Million Voices* was unparalleled. Wright had written about the bitter and lacerating experience of being an African American, a hardship made even greater by the lack of a consoling happy childhood and had described the emotional numbness that results from such a suffering. Ellison had deeply identified with the painful episodes described in the book, and his "arctic numbness" had broken down into tears and confession of similar kinds of hardships toward his friend, whom he felt now closer than ever (2007, 145).

To provide the context in which Ellison, in the summer of 1945, began writing

Invisible Man, Rumpersad points out a few convergent factors, belonging both to the historical context and to the writer's personal life. Having severed his ties with the Communist party, whose influence was impairing his creative powers, Ellison experienced a greater freedom and vitality in his writing, which was starting to appear in mainstream journals and was encouraged by the reception of a book contract followed by a fellowship. Having to contribute to the nation's war effort, in 1942 Ellison joined the U.S. Merchant Marine as a cook, visiting firstly Wales and then France: as for many other African Americans, the direct experience of the European society, where segregation did not exist and Blacks faced less discrimination, was revolutionary in that it brought a fresh and critical perspective on America's handling of race issues. Furthermore, Ellison shared the prevalent feelings of awe and horror that followed the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Finally, his stay of a few months in Vermont, where he lived in a friend's house, allowed him to experience the deep quiet of the rural countryside, an ideal place for concentration. This whole situation is thusly synthetized by Rumpersad:

> In August 1945 the world was new again—he was new again—and the time had come for a rebirth of American culture, which he, as an artist and an intellectual who had known poverty, despair, radicalism, and now a transcendent wisdom, would endeavour to shape (2007, 196).

This is the context in which Ellison began the seven-year-long drafting process of *Invisible Man* and took the two most important decisions related to the form of the novel: "to entrust his story to the first-person narrative […] and […] to suffuse it in surrealism" (2007, 197). Although Ellison did not have the novel's unfolding of events already decided form the start, he was nonetheless convinced about certain features of his character and his general trajectory as well: the protagonist was meant to be an opportunist and submissive social climber, an individualist moving upward through the

middle class, experiencing involvement in left-wing politics and descending in the chaotic urban life of Harlem to change different types of personalities (Rampersad 2007, 204).

The first copies of the book appeared in March 1952 and were dedicated to Ida Guggenheimer, a long-time friend who financially supported Ellison throughout the years. Officially launched by Random House on April 13, 1952, *Invisible Man*'s initial warm reception announced the success of the novel, as "the first tremors of a major earthquake" (2007, 259). Indeed, the following year *Invisible Man* won the National Book Award, which Ellison accepted recognizing the importance of his novel for "its experimental attitude and its attempt to return to the mood of personal moral responsibility for democracy" (2007, 270). The enthusiastic reception of Ellison's work of fiction made him a respected representative figure of the African American voice, recognized both in academia and the public.

Over the years, Ellison's position towards the various movements related to the African American struggle was not always supportive. For example, he was very skeptical about Malcolm X and criticized the use of violence promoted by the Black Power movement (2007, 413). Furthermore, he did not support the African independence movement: he considered the willful renunciation to Western culture, the subject of his life-long study, as an inevitable cultural loss, and he also expressed doubts about the "ability of suddenly empowered Blacks to govern" (2007, 300). Finally, he also kept his distance from the Black Arts movement, which he believed "lacked in aesthetic excellence" (Motyl 2017, 279). Overall, his reluctance to associate with these movements through the reaffirming of intellectual independence brough Ellison in a position which became increasingly isolated from the African American community (Motyl 2017, 279).

In 1964, always with Random House, Ellison published *Shadow and Act*, a collection of essays which presented his aesthetics principles and analyzed the role of Black expressive culture in the bigger frame of the American identity. The essays addressed a variety of topics such as music, literature, and society, illuminating the complexity of African American culture with a "mature, civilized, sophisticated, learned, playful, and sympathetic voice" which managed to convey Ellison's knowledge and love for Black mass culture and for America at large (2007, 410).

Going to The Territory, his second and last collection of essays, was published by Random House in 1986. The essays gathered in this book reflect on the multiculturality of the United States and on the relationship between single cultures and the American identity. Ellison rejected the idea that cultures were born and thrived in isolation, describing how "our culture and identity have been shaped by a constant process of cultural assimilation" (Dickstein 2010, 52). All the different cultures present in the nation, he believed, would form the American identity by coming together while maintaining their peculiarities, thus forming a "unity, embracing and nurturing but not overriding diversity" (Scott 2004, 122-123).

Ellison passed away in 1994, on April 16. Since the publication of Invisible man, he had also been relentlessly working on a second novel, which he never managed to finish and publish. Of this unfinished struggle, 2,000 pages of manuscript would be edited and published in 1999 by his literary executor, John F. Callahan, as *Juneteenth*. The novel recounts the story of a reunion between an African American preacher (the father) and a conservative senator (the prodigal son). In 2010, a more comprehensive version was published as *Three Days Before the Shooting*.

2.2 *Invisible Man* and the Bildungsroman

The following paragraphs discuss the possibility of establishing a relationship between the classical genre of the Bildungsroman and the narratives of African American experience. Starting with a definition of Bildungsroman as provided in one of the major studies on the genre by Franco Moretti, the discourse moves to Kenneth Burke's reading of *Invisible Man* as pertaining to the genre. Finally, this section gives an overview on the debate concerning the possibility of existence of an African American Bildungsroman, including meaningful perspectives from the literary criticism, which will result useful to discuss Invisible Man's progress in the novel.

2.2.1 Defining the Bildungsroman

In his study on the Bildungsroman, Franco Moretti identifies the birth of the genre with Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, published in 1795, and defines the key terms that are constitutive of the genre: the youthfulness of the protagonist; the social mobility which allows him to move upwards or downwards the social ladder; and the focus on his interiority, intended as psychological introspection (1987, 4). Considering the genre as the "symbolic form of modernity", he argues that the representativeness of the genre comes from its ability to "accentuate modernity's dynamism and instability" (1987, 5).

In his analysis, Moretti acknowledges that the Bildungsroman derives strength, inexhaustibility and adaptability from its "contradictory nature", and connects the long success of the genre to its inherent creative tension between opposite values, as "the contradiction between conflicting evaluations of modernity and youth, or between opposing values and symbolic relationships, is […] above all the paradoxical functional principle of a large part of modern culture" (1987, 9). These sometimes-contradictory

values such as “freedom and happiness, identity and change, security and metamorphoses” are constitutive of Western thought, and as our world strives towards their coexistence, which is also a survival of the opposites, it also requires a “cultural mechanism capable of representing, exploring and testing that coexistence” (1987, 9). In this cultural scenario, the thriving of the Bildungsroman can thus be explained as “one of the most harmonious solutions ever offered to a dilemma conterminous with modern bourgeois civilization: the conflict between the ideal of self-determination and the equally imperious demands of socialization” (1987, 15). This observation can be taken as a broad but effective definition of Bildungsroman, as a literary genre that includes the two opposite struggles respectively for individuality and socialization, trying to answer the question: “How can the tendency towards *individuality*, which is the necessary fruit of a culture of self-determination, be made to coexist with the opposing tendency to *normality*, the offspring, equally inevitable, of the mechanism of socialization?” (1987, 16).

As a reason for its unquestionable success, the most classical form of Bildungsroman would solve this productive opposition in the end, creating a fusion “with a force of conviction and optimistic clarity that will never be equaled again”, in a finale where “one’s formation as an individual in and for oneself coincides without rifts with one’s social integration as a simple *part of a whole*” (Moretti 1987, 16). Compromise, which can be considered another important feature of the genre, becomes thus a celebrated element able to provide an effective closing.

The dual nature of the Bildungsroman is also mirrored in its containing two different minor novel genres, the *Entwicklungsroman* and the *Erziehungsroman*. The former can be described as the ‘novel of personal development’, where the subjective individuality is unfolded and the hero moves between different, meaningful stages of life, each one being a necessary introduction to the following, in an “upward and

onward vision of human growth" (Jeffers 2005, 49). The latter term can instead be translated as the 'novel of education,' where the didactic process is objectively described and outwardly observed and whose aim is "explicitly and pointedly pedagogic" (Jeffers 2005, 49). Not only does the Bildungsroman encompass these two different types of novels, but it also represents, even if partially, a "synthesis that nullifies the previous opposition" between these two genres (Moretti 1987, 16-17).

2.2.2 *Invisible Man* as a Bildungsroman

Before looking at Burke's reading of *Invisible Man* as a Bildungsroman, it is useful to provide a summary of the main events of the novel. After the prologue, the narration goes "some twenty years" back, to Invisible Man's youth (Ellison 2006, 15). In the first chapter, the protagonist recalls his grandfather's cryptic deathbed words, which encouraged him to be obliging towards white people until this behaviour would destroy them. The same chapter narrates the episode of the battle royal, where he and other African Americans are forced to watch a naked white woman dance and, afterwards, to box in front of the rich White audience. At the end of the fight, the protagonist makes a speech and receives his scholarship (Ellison 2006, 17). The narration of the college years begins in the second chapter: the reader learns about the protagonist's intense involvement in the college's foundational ideology, built around the values of hard work and discipline. He then recounts the false move which caused his expulsion from the college: after receiving the privilege to drive a trustee, Mr. Norton, around the college, he brings him to the slave quarters, exposing him to Jim Trueblood, a farmer who narrates the story of the incest with his daughter. Shocked and in need of a drink, the white benefactor is taken to the Golden Day, a bar filled with prostitutes, where he is assisted by a Black doctor, who argues that the college is only perpetuating African

Americans' inferiority. Invisible Man is therefore punished and expelled by Dr. Bledsoe and moves to New York to find a job. In the city, he reads one of his recommendation letters, finding out that they are instead meant to destroy any chance of personal success and realizing that going to the college has never been a possibility for him. Afterwards, he finds work at Liberty Paint, a company that produces an extremely successful white paint, called Optic White. Severely injured by a violent explosion, Invisible Man is cured in the factory's hospital, where he is subjected to shock treatment. Released, he is hosted by a benevolent Black woman, Mary Rambo, who takes care of him in his convalescence period and offers him a place to stay. While addressing with a passionate speech an angry crowd protesting against the eviction of a Black couple, he is noted by Brother Jack, who convinces him to join the Brotherhood, a political organization aimed at improving the conditions of the lower classes, including the Harlemites. In this organization, he studies its ideology and methods and becomes a leading successful speaker. Towards the end of the novel, however, the protagonist's attitude towards the Brotherhood becomes more critical and disillusioned; and with the death of Tod Clifton, a friend and colleague who had previously abandoned the organization, he realizes that the White leadership overlooks African Americans' conditions. He then decides to remain in the Brotherhood, showing himself supportive and collaborative on the surface while, at the same time, he secretly undermines it. However, after realizing the inefficacy of his conduct, the protagonist is caught up in a riot in Harlem where he murders Ras the Destroyer, a violent, Black-nationalist leader who wants to kill him. Finally, while escaping from his supporters, who want to kill him, he falls into a hole underground, from which he decides to tell his own story.

In what began as a letter to his academic friend Ralph Ellison and was later expanded to be published as an essay in 1987, Kenneth Burke defines *Invisible Man* as a Bildungsroman, comparing it to Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*. To sustain his argument,

Burke traces a parallel between the trajectories of the two protagonists in their respective novels, arguing that Ellison's Invisible Man follows a pattern of self-development similar to Wilhelm Meister's advancement from apprenticeship through journeymanship toward the ideal of mastery, a tripartite growth which, interestingly enough, is confirmed by Ellison's division of the novel's movement and structure in "purpose, passion, and perception" (Callahan 2004, 13).

Burke briefly dwells on Invisible Man's apprenticeship, intended as the process of leaving childhood behind, which he identifies with "the stage of life when a black man at that time in our history was confronting strong remembrances from the days of the plantation from which 'your kind of humans' had not long ago by constitutional amendment been 'emancipated" (Burke 2004, 68). Referring to the African Americans' harsh living conditions in the south, under Jim Crow laws, the author thusly inscribes the protagonists' college years in the first part of his subdivision.

The passage from apprenticeship to journeymanship, Burke argues, takes place after Invisible Man's moving north and being expelled from college for having directly exposed Mr. Norton, a benefactor, to Trueblood's shocking story of incest, thus endangering the college reputation by revealing the condition of an African American which did not conform to the image of the 'educated negro' (2004, 68). More specifically, this transition of phases is introduced in chapter 9 of the novel and represented in chapters 10, 11 and 12, where a series of incidents and transformations "epitomize, within the conditions of the fiction, a 'myth-and-ritual' of 'being born again" (2004, 70). The narration of these transformative episodes has a double value, as it is useful to Invisible Man in the process of "intuiting such a psychic process" and, at the same time, calls for a certain "responsiveness on the part of readers" (2004, 70).

Burke's reading of the significative moments of these chapters thus begins: in chapter 9 the protagonists discovers that Bledsoe's letters of supposed recommendation

are instead designed to give him the runaround. The analysis proceeds with a focus on the fight which happens at the factory and on the following explosion and the resulting hospitalization. Unjustly accused of being part of a trade union, the protagonist is repeatedly cursed by his Black boss and tries to handle the situation by telling to himself that he was "trained to accept the foolishness of such old men as this […] trained to pretend that you respected them and acknowledged in them the same quality of authority and power in your world" (Ellison 1980, 217). After being threatened with death, the protagonist loses control of himself and gets into a fight with his black boss: at this point, remembering his strategy of obedience and submission while rebelling for the first time against his boss' verbal violence, "everything comes to a focus" (Burke 2004, 70).

A violent explosion, caused by the two men's neglect of the pipes and of the machinery they were operating, severely injures the protagonist, who is recovered at the factory's hospital. The sequence of the post-explosion surgery, with the severing of the cord attached to his belly, is read as "part of a rebirth ritual, […] the severing of the umbilical cord" (Burke 2004, 71). The episode concludes the transition from apprenticeship to journeymanship, with the newly acquired awareness of the shared human nature that characterizes all human beings, beyond the barriers built by the color of the skin (2004, 71). After being discharged from the hospital, Invisible Man is hosted and cured by Mary Rambo who, in the gratuitousness of her love toward the protagonist, is seen as a "Virgin Mary, in her wholly feminine role as nurse and mother" (2004, 76). As the Brotherhood enters the scene with a job offer under the conditions of getting a new name and severing all social bonds, Invisible Man grimly decides to leave Mary, thus signaling his readiness to enter the next phase: "he had outgrown his new adolescence and had to hurry on, in effect, growing up and 'leaving home" (2004, 76-77).

Although acknowledging the different but shared patterns of social mobility that allows the protagonists' journeys, Burke's juxtaposition of the two novels ends with an undeniable "critical difference between Wilhelm Meister as white and your [Ellison's] narrator as black" (2004, 73). The different living conditions of the authors cannot be downplayed, as it is reflected also in their respective character's stages and feelings:

> Whereas Goethe's father was quite well-to-do, you began with the vexations that were vestiges of life as experienced by slaves on the southern plantations. The second stage of Wilhelm's apprenticeship (the first had been a kind of Bohemianism, among people of the theater) centered in friendly relations to the landed gentry. And the theme of his Wanderjahre is "resignation", an attitude that is denied you so long as so many blacks are still so underprivileged (2004, 73).

This final observation opens a debate on the possibility of applying the genre of Bildungsroman to describe the experience of marginalized and discriminated individuals. Indeed, a new line of thought, which takes in consideration the systematical social, economic and cultural disadvantages that African Americans experience in their daily life, has come to question the same possibility of applying to their life experience the classical literary genre born in a White European context.

2.2.3 The Bildungsroman and the African American experience

To point out the different "incidents and subsequent responses" that concern the experience of growing up as African, African Americans and African West Indians, Greta LeSeur uses the term "Black Bildungsroman" (1955, 19). Black writers, she acknowledges, have "consciously or unconsciously" adapted the classical genre to describe their protagonists' process of formation, adopting similar features, such as the journey theme (1955, 19-22). Among the similarities with the classical genre, the Black Bildungsroman shares indeed a similar trajectory, involving the protagonists' leaving

home, a symbolic movement corresponding to leaving childhood behind, and moving to a big city, where they often have sexual experiences and experiment psychological discomfort, usually in the form of isolation and paranoia (1955, 19).

LeSeur then lists a set of features which characterize the Black Bildungsroman. In the case of African Americans, the movement is often from the rural South to the urban North, the former being usually represented as more economically underdeveloped and openly racist than the latter. Despite the feelings of hope for a better living condition associated with the journey, the movement does not lead to any improvement, as the different environment of the city presents the same cruelty which hampers the protagonist's development (1955, 24). Marginalization and discrimination commonly characterize the African American experience, often from an early age, depriving them of a happy childhood and thus making them live as "exiles in their 'own' country" (1955, 27). When the Bildungsroman contains autobiographical elements, the denunciation of "those conditions that robbed the writer of a memorable and happy childhood" is in many cases a driving force behind the writing (1955, 27). Such a condition of oppression, when already experienced from the childhood years, can lead to a "feeling of inferiority" caused by the fact of not belonging to the "privileged group"; a reality that presents a "major problem" in the formation of the personal identity, for it can be internalized as a "black self-hatred or negative self-image" (1955, 27).

In her study, Claudine Raynaud reflects on the concept of "coming of age" in the African American experience, an idea which can be inscribed into the broader genre of the Bildungsroman, as it "entails the achievement of the goal", intended as the reaching of maturity and thus the readiness to face the outside world (2004, 110). Adopting the well-known scheme of the classical genre, Raynaud argues, the African American novel "effects a critique of coming of age" for, in depicting the impossibility

of success, and thus the failing of its black protagonists, it "leads to a subversion – and even a negation – of the American dream in terms of race relations" (2004, 109). Indeed, only certain novels provide a "solution to the formation of the Black subject in America" while, in the other cases, the defeat, loss and damage are the only remaining elements at the end of the novel (Raynaud 2004, 110).

Further expanding on the role of the negative feelings about oneself originated from the external environment, Raynaud underlines the centrality of struggle "between self-acceptance as opposed to self-hatred or self-denial" inherent in the process of creation of the self-image (2004, 106). This ceaseless internal struggle leads her to argue that the concept of personal identity, for the African American experience, consists more in a "process/trial rather than monolithic category", whose outcome is not granted and thusly questioned: "Does the narrative depict the emergence of a stronger individual, better integrated, better self-integrated, both or neither?" (2004, 106). This process is usually conveyed through the use of an omniscient narrator combined with an internal focalization, which allows the reader to enter the protagonist's mind (2004, 117).

Education is, of course, an essential feature of the character's development in the "coming of age" narrative and, in the African American experience, the discovery of the society's racism is often the most important educational moment (Raynaud 2004, 106). This perspective leads Raynaud to argue that, for the protagonist, the necessary step to reach adulthood is "To know and master the mechanisms of racism, to understand the workings of his/her oppression rather than fall prey to them" (Raynaud 2004, 109).

In her analysis, Raynaud touches on both sides of the "coming of age", that is, the introspective process of creation of a positive self-image and the successful integration of the self in the surrounding environment. Addressing both the struggle of the African American psyche, which aims to create a positive self-image against the

negative external pressures of a racist society, and the almost impossibility of a successful integration into it, Raynaud claims that the eventual negative outcomes of these processes demonstrate that "coming of age is the necessary transposition of an impossible progress" (2004, 119).

This disillusioned perspective on the possibility of a positive outcome of the "coming of age" process is also shared by Kester who, comparing the African American experience with the Bildungsroman uncovers their fundamental incompatibility (2005). The author introduces the term "African American 'narratives of Bildung'" to address those novels in which the Black subject confronts the double process of *Anbildung*, the path towards maturity and internal growth, and *Ausbildug*, the fruitful integration of the protagonist in the surrounding community (2005, 8).

The Bildungsroman, Kester argues, promotes "positivism, white male superiority and a sense of the self as a unified identity" as it describes the "coming of age" of a White protagonist whose perception of the self is monolithic and not concerned by internal divisions (Kester 2005, 7). The African American subject, on the other hand, is characterized by a difficult experience of the self-identity, which is torn and striving between two opposites, as DuBois' concept of double consciousness well describes. This inherent opposition between the values on which the Bildungsroman is based and the Black experience as the subject of representation leads Kester to claim that the genre is "anathema and inappropriate […] in relation to African American ways of writing the subject" (2005, 7).

Kester's analysis moves then to the second aspect of the process of formation, the protagonist's successful acceptance in a community, the "social 'enveloping' of the individual" (2005, 8). A difference emerges from the comparison between the European and the African American Bildungsroman, lying in the portraying of society: if in the former it is depicted as "a benevolent force which envelops the individual with care", in

the latter it is described as “arbitrary, antiindividual, unjust and cruel” (Kester 2005, 9). Usually tainted with systemic racism, the societies represented in the African American narratives of Bildung “ignore their responsibilities of ‘enveloping’ and the subjects’ different attempts to develop in spite of racial and gendered oppression” (Kester 2005, 8).

Finally, the analysis turns to the duality inherent in the two objects of comparison, an apparently shared feature which instead reveals all their incompatibility. The aforementioned, multi-layered dialectic nature of the classical Bildungsroman, specifically its relying on the tension between individual and society is, at the end, solved in a compromise, “the novel’s most celebrated theme” (Moretti 1987, 9). The two-folded duality of the African American experience, on the other hand, lies both in the psyche, well described by the concept of double consciousness, and in its relationship with society; however, the traditional, harmonious ending where unity is reached through compromise does not await the Black protagonist. Indeed, the concept of the subject as a “unified and singular identity” is not proper to describe the African American experience of self-identity, as the psyche often remains wounded and torn between opposites (Kester 2005, 7). Moreover, the marginalized and discriminated Black individual cannot hope to find the wholeness and unity deriving from the positive acceptance in the surrounding society, which remains instead oppressive and discriminating. Enduring this twofold duality and unable to provide a traditional ending, Kester argues, the African American narrative of Bildung “often questions the whole notion of closure” (Kester 2005, 11).

Overall, the development of the discourse upon the juxtaposition of Bildungsroman and African American experience has shown several and different perspectives. Starting from Burke’s reading of *Invisible Man* as a Bildungsroman, LeSeur’s concept of “Black Bildungsroman” was introduced to point out the differences

that many African American narratives share from the classical genre. Reflecting upon the coming of age in the African American novel, Raynaud has sown how these narratives often stand as a critique of the process. Finally, analyzing the many incompatibilities between the two elements of comparison, Kester has shown how the term Bildungsroman is inappropriate to talk about the African American experience. The discourse has thusly developed from a point of view which validates the juxtaposition of the two terms to a skeptical and critical perspective, whose arguments support Katrina Motyl's claim:

> There is no such thing as an African American Bildungsroman – at least not before the Civil rights Act of 1964, and those who hold that African Americans are deprived of full civil rights to this day would argue that the notion is still absurd in 2015 (2017, 288).

Section 2.2 has explored the possibility of approaching the African American experience of 'coming of age' through the classical genre of the Bildungsroman. By showing the critical points of this juxtaposition, these paragraphs have stressed the impossibility, for Black characters, of a successful self-affirmation in the American society, which acts as a racist and oppressive force. This section works as an introduction to the following one, which deals with Invisible Man's failure to successfully affirm himself in the surrounding social environment.

2.3 Invisible Man's journey towards self-identity: disillusionment and narration

Although the juxtaposition of the novel *Invisible Man* and the genre of the Bildungsroman results problematic, the novel arguably presents a personal progress, where the protagonist, who is also the narrator, moves in space and time, climbs and

slips down the social ladder, experiencing different social environments. In moving firstly from the all-black southern institute to New York city, then from the working-class environment to a left-wing political organization and finally giving up every form of social participation to retire in a hole underground, Invisible Man sets out on a journey towards self-knowledge. This process of self-development has critically been addressed in a variety of ways, and this chapter includes Morris Dickstein and Valerie Smith's critical interpretations. Focusing on Invisible Man's physical and metaphorical journey towards the achievement of his self-identity, the following paragraphs analyze the centrality of the concepts of disillusionment and narration in the protagonist's personal trajectory.

2.3.1 *Invisible Man*'s prologue: a close reading

The prologue of the novel deserves a special attention, as it introduces the features of the narrating I and the theme of invisibility, which are present from the very first sentence, "I am an invisible man" (Ellison 2006, 1). These two features are strictly connected, as the reader soon realizes: the narrator, who is also the protagonist, is about to tell the story of his life with a retrospective perspective focused on the realization of his own invisibility, articulated in twenty-five chapters, and enclosed by an Epilogue. Prologue and Epilogue, with their framing-of-the-narrative function, belong to the same chronological moment in the fabula, the present, although their stand as antipodes in the development of the plot, respectively opening and closing a narrative whose events took place in the past – a past which joins the present of narration in the last chapter. At the end of the vicissitude narrated in the novel, after having killed the black nationalist leader Ras the Destroyer in a Harlem riot, Invisible Man is running from his violent

supporters when he falls into a hole thus saving himself. He then decides to remain underground and to tell his story.

The first sentence introduces the theme of invisibility, a condition which is not inherent but social, as it originates in the interpersonal context: "I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me" (Ellison 2006, 1). Furter expanding on this feature, the narrator specifies that he is talking about a metaphorical invisibility, not concerning his physical body but the way he is perceived by others:

> That invisibility to which I refer occurs because a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of construction of their inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality" (Ellison 2006, 1).

This social invisibility becomes an occasion for self-definition: "invisibility also invites those unseen or falsely seen to shape their own versions of identity and experience" (Callahan 2004, 299). Indeed, although the protagonist will remain nameless throughout the whole novel, this self-naming represented in his decision to call himself invisible represents a point of arrival, a psychological and personal achievement, which he reaches at the end of the story. As the narrator points out, acknowledging his invisibility is the crucial step in the self-making of his identity: "I, myself, after existing some twenty years, did not become alive until I discovered my invisibility" (Ellison 1980, 6). The first sentence of the prologue thus presents two key elements in Invisible Man's process of achievement of a personal identity: invisibility and self-narration.

2.3.2. The role of disillusionment in Invisible Man's progress

If the protagonist's identity is fully realized with the recognition of his invisibility, it is through different and repeated moments of disillusionment that this awareness is reached. The two moments that are here taken in consideration represent the two great

ideological deception of which Invisible Man is victim, namely the ones connected with the college and with the Brotherhood.

At the start of the novel, Invisible Man believes in a set of values functioning as a moral code. The first of these is the value of hard work as a necessary condition for success, a narration which conforms to that of the American dream and is even more relevant for African Americans, for whom hard work is useful to prove "themselves indispensable to the Southern economy, and […] worthy of equal rights" (Motyl 2017, 286). This was Booker T. Washington's interpretation of the African American struggle, according to which the most effective way for Black people to reach social and political equality was not through fighting but by proving their social usefulness through work. This perspective, often defined as 'accommodationist', promoted also other values such as deference and humility towards the dominant White class and was therefore accused of being racist, as it implicitly accepts African Americans' subject position.

In the Jim Crow south where he lives, Invisible Man shares this vision, to the point that he visualizes himself "as a potential Booker T. Washington" (Ellison 1980, 17). The protagonist's speech at the battle royal clearly exemplifies his sharing of this ideology. In quoting Washington's motto "Cast down your buckets where you are", he repeats to the Black part of his audience the exhortation to make themself socially useful through hard work and mutual assistance, while remaining in the South. Invisible Man's speech, however, is accepted by the racist White audience only because it implicitly tolerates segregation and other forms of discrimination. Indeed, when he pronounces the words "social equality", he is forced by the white Mc to take them back, because Blacks "got to know [their] place at all times" (Ellison 1980, 31).

Furthermore, these same values represent the ideological foundational base of the college, where the protagonist and the other students "worship the administrators

and trustees, embodiments of the material success that supposedly ensues from hard work and clean living" (Smith 1988, 30). This narration is stressed in Reverend Barbee's sermon that praises the sacrifices and humility of the black founder and the leadership of Dr. Bledsoe, whose story "typifies the standard rags-to-riches formula" (Smith 1988, 30).

This narration, however, starts to crumble with Mr. Norton's incident. After having received the privilege to drive the benefactor around the college area, he exposes him to Jim Trueblood's destabilizing story of incest, which shocks the guest. A farmer belonging to the black-belt class, his existence does not comply to the narrative on African Americans promoted by the college: exposing a white member to it is therefore considered as a dangerous and potentially destabilizing move. Called to account for his action, he learns from Dr. Bledsoe that he should have lied to Mr. Norton, not driving him outside the polished college quarters for, in doing so, not only didn't he uplift the race, but he torn it down: "We take these white folks where we want them to go, we show them what we want them to see" (Ellison 1980, 100). The college director thusly shows the protagonist his true, hypocrite self, obliging but at the same time liar and manipulating: "The white folk tell everybody what to think – except men like me. I tell them; that's my life, telling white folk how to think about the things I know about" (Ellison 1980, 140). Thus, Invisible Man learns from Bledsoe that the insistence on these values, especially on humility, is not aimed at improving African Americans' condition but at securing and maintaining a form of power which is subordinated to that of whites: "I had to be strong and purposeful to get where I am. I had to wait and plan and lick around…Yes, I had to act the nigger!" (Ellison 1980, 140).

However, Invisible Man does not fully grasp the implications of this impressive conversation, so much so that he convinces himself of the rightfulness of his expulsion and, following Bledsoe's orders, he intends to make amend to it by spending the

summer working in New York, thusly returning to college. The full realization of the inauthenticity of that narration finally comes when he is applying for a job in a company owned by Mr. Emerson, a financial supporter of the black institute. Confessing to him that he is never going to get the job, Mr. Emerson's son invites Invisible Man to read one of the many recommendation letters written for him by Bledsoe:

> The bearer of this letter is a former student of ours (I say *former* because he shall never, under any circumstances, be enrolled as a student here again) who has been expelled for a most serious defection from our strictest rules of deportment. […] it is to the best interest of the college that this young man have no knowledge of the finality of his expulsion. For […] in his fall [he] threatens to upset certain delicate relationships between certain interested individuals and the school. […] I beg of you, sir, to help him continue in the direction of that promise which, like the horizon, recedes even brightly and distantly beyond the hopeful traveler (Ellison 1980, 184).

The reading of the letter signifies a harsh blow for the protagonist, who finally realizes the hypocrisy and the falseness of the rhetoric which had guided him for his whole life. It also represents the first disillusionment of the novel, an episode after which Invisible Man realizes that a chapter of his life has inevitably come to an end, as that narrative cannot be pursued, and no future awaits him in the southern college. Acknowledging his deception and accepting his fate, the narrator is now ready to begin a new life in New York city.

It is indeed in New York that he is contacted by the Brotherhood, a political organization whose way of working recalls the communist party. As the protagonist is addressing with a passionate speech a crowd protesting against the brutal eviction of an old black couple, he is noted by one of the leading members, brother Jack. The Brotherhood, interested in having him as a speaker, hires him and offers a lot of money to pay debts, a good salary, an apartment to live and study their principles and ideas, but also demands that he change his name and severe all kinds of personal relationships,

even with his family. Being hired in the organization represents a significative positive step for Invisible Man, as not only the job is respectable and well-paid, but it also brings great hopes for the future:

> Here was a way to have a part in making the big decisions, of seeing through the mystery of how the country, the world, really operated. For the first time, lying there in the dark, I could glimpse the possibility of being more than a member of a race. It was no dream, the possibility existed. I had only to work and learn and survive in order to go to the top (Ellison 1980, 342).

Despite the different frictions between him and the other leading members' inflexible line of thought and action, for a long time the protagonist is held at bay by the organization's tempting and almost hypnotizing promise of control over the world, in the illusion of being able to write and control History:

> I was dominated by the all-embracing idea of Brotherhood. The organization had given the world a new shape, and me a vital role. We recognized no loose ends, everything could be controlled by our science. Life was all pattern and discipline; and the beauty of discipline is when it works. And it was working very well (Ellison 1980, 368).

Among all the conflicts and arguments with the party leadership, it is Tod Clifton's death that instills an unremovable ideological crack which will open the way to the final disillusionment with the party. Seeing his esteemed and recently disappeared colleague Clifton selling Sambo dolls on the street, Invisible Man is shocked and perplexed at his incomprehensible decision:

> Why should a man deliberately plunge outside of history and peddle an obscenity, my mind went on abstractedly. Why should he choose to disarm himself, give up his voice and leave the only organization offering him a chance to "define" himself? […] Why had he turned away? Why had he chosen to step off the platform and fall beneath the train? Why did he choose to plunge into nothingness, into the void of faceless faces, of soundless voices, lying outside history? (Ellison 1980, 422)

At the perplexity of this scenes the tragedy adds up, as right afterwards the protagonist's friend rebels to a policeman's physical mistreating and is consequently shot dead, under the daylight, in the ordinary city chaos. At his funeral, Invisible Man gives a speech focused on race, the determinant factor in the shooting of an unarmed black man; the ceremony itself is a touching moment with the gathering of part of the city's black population in the communal mourning. After Clifton's death is liquidated as the simple death of a traitor, Invisible Man realizes that he can no longer be part of an organization which does not value single individuals and where the meaningfulness of race as a distinctive category is denied. He thusly realizes that his importance in the party does not depend upon him as a person but upon his strict following of the orders and discipline finalized to reach the expected results, and that his disadvantaged condition of African American is even less relevant:

> Here I had thought they accepted me because they felt that color made no difference, when in reality it made no difference because they didn't see either color or men … For all they were concerned, we were so many names scribbled on fake ballots, to be used at their convenience and when not needed to be filed away. (Ellison 1980, 489)

It is indeed with this second disillusionment that the protagonist finally acknowledges his invisibility, an invisibility that had indeed accompanied him for all his life but that he could not see, a reality he is now ready to accept and explore as the fundamental constituent of his identity:

> I was simply a material, a natural resource to be used. I had switched from the arrogant absurdity of Norton and Emerson to that of Jack and the Brotherhood, and it all came out the same - except I now recognized my invisibility. (Ellison 1980, 489-490)

Besides the realization of his own invisibility, Invisible Man's progress towards self-identity also involves the liberation from externally imposed identities. This is indeed the reading that Invisible Man retrospectively gives of his story before beginning its narration:

> I was looking for myself and asking everyone except myself questions which I, and only I, could answer. It took me a long time and much painful boomeranging of my expectations to achieve a realization everyone else appears to have been born with: That I am nobody but myself. But first I had to discover that I am an invisible man! (Ellison 2006, 15)

In the first chapters, Dickstein argues, Invisible Man presents himself as "an anonymous protagonist with no identity except what others are continually trying to impose on him, no strategy except his eagerness to please" (2004, 134). Indeed, very often in the novel the protagonist's need for acceptance is so strong that his desire to fit into the social environment is more important than the respect of his own individuality, which easily gets sacrificed. The protagonist's desire of fitting into a social environment able to provide meaning to his life are thusly followed by repeated moments of ideological deception and consequent disillusionment, so much so that Dickstein considers the novel "as lively mockery of every kind of respectability, black or white, corporate or communist, middle class or working class" (2004, 136). Indeed, the black college's ideals are revealed as a strategy to deceive the dominating white class while maintaining, under a submissive surface of inferiority, power and control. The Brotherhood, on the other hand, presents itself as a political organization advocating for the poor and vexed people, while in reality it completely neglects individuals in their peculiarities and considers them only for their vote.

In each of these contexts somebody in a superior hierarchical position, such as Dr. Bledsoe or Mr. Jack, tries to impose his ideology upon him, working as "a false God exacting tribute, a would-be mentor trying to determine his path" (Dickstein 2004, 137).

After the disappointment with the brotherhood, however, Invisible Man changes his attitude, putting aside the "the naiveté he had resumed in nearly every episode", which caused his fall in the following ideological trap, thusly recognizing "the fakery inherent in social role-playing" (Dickstein 2004, 136).

Although the novel might appear as uniquely focused on this negative part, the protagonist's self-identification with his own invisibility represents the first step of a positive construction, which might conceivably continue with his leaving the underground world: "hibernation is a covert preparation for more overt action" (Ellison 2006, 13). This double process of liberation and self-definition, Dickstein recognizes, aligns with Ellison's belief that "identity is fashioned rather than given, created rather than determined by biology or social statistics" (quoted in Dickstein 2004, 134). Invisible Man's progress is, in fact, at the same time the act of liberation from the externally given definitions and of self-creation of an identity: both this deconstructive and constructive part are performed by the subject, whose identity is formed as the outcome.

2.3.3 The role of narration

In this regard, Valerie Smith analyzes the importance of the protagonist's crafting of his self-narration in the process of achievement of his personal identity, placing therefore the novel in a rich tradition of African American literature which counts, for instance, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. The decision to narrate his own story stands as the objective part of the internal process of reclaiming his personal identity, a decision taken after the various deceptions and disillusionments narrated in the twenty-five chapters that separate the Prologue from the Epilogue.

As Smith argues, these events, already partly mentioned and analyzed in the previous paragraphs, cause the fall of Invisible Man's interpretative scheme of reality: it is, in other words, by going through these several disillusionments that the protagonist slowly gives up his perception of reality, of himself and his future. Indeed, until the reading of Bledsoe's recommendation letter, Invisible Man faithfully believes in a "collectively shared set of values or ethics" (1988, 35). Among these is the belief that reality is as it appears, logically dominated by relations of cause-effects: concretely, he believes in the already-mentioned college values of the American dream and of the uplifting of the race, having faith in "material rewards await the virtuous" (1988, 30). For the protagonist this narration is arguably reassuring, as it provides a sense of control upon reality through agency, a promise of order in the interpretation of events and, most importantly, is able to "bestow[ed] upon him a meaningful identity", giving him a definition of who he is and where he is headed (1988, 35).

As Callahan observes, the novel presents three different angles from which Invisible Man narrates his story: "as he was, as his present self sees that former self, and, finally, as the person he is in the present brooding on the story he has just written" (Callahan 2004, 295). In the first of these perspectives, his recounting not only reports his vicissitudes, but also interpretations and reactions to them. It is in the reading of his thoughts, Smith argues, that it is possible to foresee his reluctance to give up his pre-established interpretative sight on reality, even after the many obvious and potentially undermining inconsistences. At the battle royal, for example, he cannot see "the disparity between his expectations and the actual situation": instead of realizing the racism inherent in the whole event, where African Americans are firstly aroused, then forced to fight and finally violently ridiculed, he firmly believes in the efficacy of his speech and on the importance that it will have on the distracted and disrespectful white audience, even after the criticizing of his words claiming for "social equality" (Smith

1988, 29). He is furthermore unwilling to accept the ideological implications of Bledsoe's reproach, the inauthenticity of the college ideals, as well as the inherent injustice of his punishment, which should not have happened: Invisible Man is reluctant to accept that "contradictions and accidents can happen and effects will not always follow from causes" (Smith 1988, 31). Unable to handle this irrationality, he creates a narrative that justifies his punishment and reads "his humiliation into a mere rite of passage" in the bigger trajectory of "both the American dream and the myth of racial uplift" (Smith 1988, 32).

Although the opening of Bledsoe's letter causes the final disillusionment with this narration, this moment of freedom from externally imposed ideologies does not last long. Indeed, shortly afterwards Invisible Man joins a political organization that offers him "a system of beliefs that both differs strikingly from the one that deceived him and promises to restore meaning and thus quiet to his life" (1988, 36). In the Brotherhood, once again, the protagonist exchanges the acknowledgment of its obvious incongruences between ideology and action for its promise of order and meaning, training himself to keep his dissenting part "pressed down" (Ellison 1980, 323). After Clifton's eye-opening episode, he makes a last attempt at following an externally dictated ethics and tries to follow his grandfather's advice of false compliance and hidden enmity, hoping to "protect himself from further deceptions and acquire some authority over his own life" (Smith 1988, 41). Once realized the ruinous outcome of this double conduct, which leads to a riot in Harlem aimed at destroying the African American community, Invisible Man decides to give up any form of social and political participation and goes underground. In severing his connections to society, he quits his search for identity among the externally imposed ideologies and finally "accepts responsibility for creating his own identity" (1988, 3).

The protagonist thus begins this process of self-definition by accepting his painful past, composed for the main part of deception and humiliations, and therefore often denied and easily forgotten:

> I began to accept my past and, as I accepted it, I felt memories welling up within me. It was as though I'd learned suddenly to look around corners; images of past humiliations flickered through my head and I saw that they were more than separate experiences. They were me; they defined me. I was my experiences and my experiences were me (Ellison 1980, 489).

The process of self-creation of an identity is thusly achieved through a re-consideration of his past, in which Invisible Man "commits himself to sifting through those experiences and attributing his own meaning to them" (1988, 3). The crafting of a narration, Smith notes, is also functional to the protagonist's need for order and meaning, to his necessity of saving himself from falling into chaos and meaninglessness: the narrative he creates describe "a persona that develops, indeed exists, in contradistinction to the images that others projected onto him" in a trajectory that goes "from naivete and powerlessness to wisdom and authority" (1988, 43; 48). In crafting his identity through self-narration, Invisible Man aligns himself with Jim Trueblood and Brother Tarp, two characters who tell their stories of incest and slavery respectively, "creating a sense of identity independent of what an organization or a collective set of assumptions requires" (1988, 43).

Finally, in organizing the narration of his own story, the protagonist "redress[es] the abuses he suffered and overturn[s] the authority of those who misled him in college and in the Brotherhood" (Smith 1988, 48). This subversion of the relations of power is achieved through different strategies. While, for example, Mr. Norton's philanthropic aims were deeply believed and shared by Invisible Man, the retrospective narration presents the real drive force behind them, a father's "incestuous attraction" towards his

daughter. (1988, 49). Reverend Barbee's blindness, moreover, can be read as a metaphor for his intellectual blindness over the moral values he is preaching, a sign of their corruptness (1988, 51).

This section has considered the process of creation of a self-identity in *Invisible Man*, starting with the disillusionment that permeates the whole novel. Dickstein's perspective has stressed the centrality of the moments of disillusionment and interpreted them as occasions to debunk all the identities that different people tried to impose on Invisible Man, to finally leave space for the process of self-definition.

Smith's analysis, on the other hand, has shown the centrality of the concept of narration in Invisible Man's journey, both in its deconstructive part – given that the various disillusionments can be interpreted as the fall of false narrations of reality – and in its constructive counterpart, given that the narrative act is the process through which the protagonist defines himself, thus creating his identity.

3 James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*

3.1 Life and Works

The following paragraphs contain an overview of Baldwin's life and writings. The text is not meant to be exhaustive, so not all of his published works are mentioned, nor are the events concerning his private life. The chapter rather wants to provide an introduction to the writer's background and to the most recurrent themes of his artistic production. A particular attention is placed on his younger years, whose understanding is essential to properly approach the text I later analyze, *The Fire Next Time*. Whereas differently specified, the quotations refer to Leeming's biography on Baldwin, to which the full reference can be found in the Works Cited section.

James Baldwin was born on August 2, 1924, in Harlem. His mother, Emma Berdis Jones, was a twenty-two-years old, unmarried woman who had come to New York from Deal Island, Maryland, to escape Jim Crow. Three years after James's birth, Emma married David Baldwin, a humble laborer born from a slave mother and a Pentecostal preacher from New Orleans, with whom she had eight children.

Baldwin had a complicate relationship with his stepfather: he was afraid of him, but he also disrespected him for his subservient attitude towards White men (1995, 5). Furthermore, as Leeming notes, he stood as

> The archetypal black father, one generation removed from slavery, prevented by the ever-present shadow and the frequently present effects of racial discrimination from providing his family with what they needed most—their birthright, their identity as individuals rather than as members of a class or a race (1995, 5).

David also failed to be for his family what was mostly needed: a loving father; he was affected by an "arbitrary and puritanical discipline and a depressing air of bitter

frustration" which worsened the "pain of poverty and oppression" of the family (1995, 5). He also criticized James for his love for books and movies and for having White friends, all habits that, in the minister's eyes, represented a deviation from the road to salvation; furthermore, he constantly reminded his son of his physical ugliness. Later in his life, Baldwin would understand his stepfather's never-ending bitterness as a result of the self-hatred he felt for himself as a Black person (24). Baldwin talked about his father's interiorization of the negative connotations associated to his Blackness as a personal defeat: "He was defeated long before he died because, at the bottom of his heart, he really believed what white people said about him" (Baldwin 2017, 13). However, Baldwin managed also to forgive him, feeling compassion for his attempts at loving his family and recognizing that, despite his unsuccessfulness, he still represented "an act of love" (Baldwin quoted in Leeming 1995, 8). This realization was possible thanks to the influence of his mother, who taught him that "people have to be loved for their faults as well as their virtues, their ugliness as well as their beauty" (1995, 9). James kept with Emma a close relationship for all his life, especially through written correspondence, conferring great importance to her words and always accepting her "message of love and tolerance" (1995, 11).

Baldwin began school at the age of five, and was soon noted for his intelligence, particularly for his "talent for research and for writing" as well as for his love for books: when he was younger, his two favorite writers were H. B. Stowe and Charles Dickens (1995, 13). It was at school that Baldwin met a very influential person, Bill Miller, a White schoolteacher who befriended him and who took him to museums, plays and movies. Their friendship, which lasted for all his life, was also important as, in being a genuine and mutual affectionate relationship with between a Black and a White person, it allowed Baldwin to overcome the racial barriers and resulting hatred. Indeed, recalling the effect of this friendship in the early years of his life, Baldwin remembers it

instilled in him the suspect that "white people did not act as they did because they were white, but for some other reason" (Baldwin quoted in Leeming 1995, 17).

At the Frederick Douglass Junior High School, which he entered in 1935, Baldwin met Countee Cullen and Herman Porter, two teachers whose influence was of significant importance. Porter, a famous Harlem Renaissance poet, welcomed him into the school literary club, working with him on poetry and fiction. Most importantly, he stood for Baldwin as a living proof that "a way around the mentality of despair" of African Americans' poor living conditions and low expectations for the future, was possible (1995, 22). Porter introduced Baldwin to the school magazine *The Douglass Pilot*, where he could have his first works published. Three years later, at the age of thirteen, Baldwin graduated from the Junior High school. The three years that followed would mark an intense period in his life, torn by the opposite forces of homosexuality and religion. As Leeming notes, Baldwin lived his first experiences of sexual desire with shame and sense of guilt, and turned to religion as a mean of salvation from what he considered his great depravation (1995, 24). Church represented for him the salvation form both "the adult's world sexual guilt which had begun to overcome him" and from the Harlem's underground world of pimps and prostitutes, alcohol and drugs, poverty and ruin which he saw around him (1995, 24). Thus, at the age of fourteen, he became a preacher, finding in religion "the 'gimmick' he needed to protect himself from himself" (1995, 25). The experience of preaching would be very important for Baldwin in that it helped him improve as a writer and a spokesman, instilling in him the satisfaction that came "with the effective use of 'the Word" (1995, 25).

In the fall of the same year, 1938, he was admitted at the De Witt Clinton High School, a prestigious institute in the Bronx that played an important role in Baldwin's life, especially for his participation in the school's literary magazine *The Magpie*. Indeed, the debates with the other collaborating students represented a great opportunity

for exchanging ideas on broader topics such as religion, politics, and history and the magazine allowed him to publish poems, plays and short stories.

As noted by Leeming, although the three years spent in the school coincided exactly with his years as a preacher, the two environments stood, in many ways, as opposites. On one side stood Harlem, his family and the church, a world "marked by extreme poverty and bleakness and by deprivation, denial, and repression" (1995, 27). On the other side was the White liberal high school with his cultural turmoil, where Baldwin's literary talent and ambition could be expressed and where a certain hopefulness for the future could be found. Finally, in the late 1940, also thanks to the realization that "the passion that overcame him in the church services was merely a mask for his own repressed sexuality", Baldwin took the decision to leave the church and to quit preaching (1995, 28).

At the age of sixteen, going through a very difficult period in his life, torn between sexuality and religion, living an unstable present and looking at an uncertain future, Baldwin met the painter Beauford Delaney, probably "the most important influence in his life" (1995, 33). Thanks to him, he came in contact with the "first living exemplar of the black man as functioning, self-supporting artist" (1995, 32). A loveable, generous and honest man, he soon took James as his protégé, functioning for him as a supportive fatherly figure. Moreover, he formed the writer-to-be as an artist, taking him to events and presenting him to his friends from the world of African American art and music. Finally, he passed on to Baldwin the ability "to see beauty even in the metaphorical and literal gutter" and the "willingness to face ugliness in order to find what the artist has to find", two aspects which firmly settled in his protégé as the belief that "finding the truth often involves confronting one's own fears" (1995, 34).

Baldwin's first published works appeared, thanks to the help of Richard Wright, in 1948 on *Commentary*. Titled "The Harlem Ghetto" and "Previous Condition", the

former was an essay on antisemitism in Harlem and the latter a short story. As an African American and homosexual, in these years he was obsessed with the question of his identity and, unable to find some peace from his psychological restlessness, he decided to leave for Paris, in search for "time and new space in which to confront his own inner world" (1995, 56). However, in the early years unruly spent in the French capital, he was unable to find the longed-for psychological rest deriving from "personal acceptance and commitment" (1995, 73). Regarding the relationship between the color of his skin and his nationality, Baldwin could note how, in Paris, he was not much considered as a Black person as an American. This fact strengthened his belief that "because of their tragic and obsessive relationship in American history, American blacks and whites could not, finally, deny each other" (1995, 62).

In 1949 he published on *Zero* "Everybody's Protest Novel", an essay where he criticizes protest writing and writers, such as his friend and supporter Wright. Bringing him praise and a relative fame, this essay was followed by the 1951 companion "Many Thousands Gone". Most importantly, in working on this successful text, Baldwin elaborated his creed that "the artist's job is to absorb and re-create not only the deeds of humanity but the motivations for those deeds, which spring from human ambiguity, human complexity" (1995, 65). Indeed, he believed that "only within this web of ambiguity, paradox, this hunger, danger, darkness, can we find at once ourselves and the power that will free us from ourselves" (Baldwin quoted in Leeming 1995, 67).

In these years Baldwin had a relationship with Lucien Happersberger, a seventeen-year-old man from Switzerland. Although the love affair between them did not last long, the two remained friends for all their lives and their relationship was so close, Leeming writes, that Baldwin will call later call him "love of his life" (1955, 233). In 1953 he published *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, a partly autobiographical novel addressing the multi-layered African American condition as experienced by the author

in his relationship with his family, religion, Harlem, and his nation, and dealing with the question of self-identity. Baldwin had been working on the novel for over ten years and, as Leeming notes, managed to finish it only after he could psychologically "understand his stepfather's agony" and therefore "forgive" him (1995, 86).

Despite the positive critical reception of the book, Baldwin was still penniless and with a finished love affair. Moreover, the relationship with his family was not at its best: he still had not openly confronted his homosexuality with them, who resented him for the way in which he had depicted the character inspired to his stepfather in the novel. All this marked the continuation of the writer's psychological hardship.

His first collection of essays *Notes of a Native Son*, dated 1955, can be considered as a "manifesto, an overture to the story he [Baldwin] was to tell during the rest of his life" (1995, 100). Mainly drawing from autobiographical experience, the essays that are gathered in the book touch on Baldwin's most dealt-with themes: "the search for identity in a world that because of its racial myths cannot recognize reality, the acceptance of one's inheritance […] as one claims one's birthright […], the loneliness of the artist's quest, the urgent necessity of love" (1995, 100). Finally, where the autobiographical, first-person perspective is not used, the African American condition is looked at from the outside, from the Whites' perspective; representing an "uninvolved objective point of view" which managed to gain the desired attention from White liberal milieux (1995, 102).

Baldwin's second novel, *Giovanni's Room*, was published a year later. The book narrates the passionate but tragical Parisian love affair between David, a White protestant American, and Giovanni, an Italian bartender. The narrating I, David, is unable to accept his feelings for Giovanni, as that means accepting the "vulnerability of love" (1995, 124). Afraid of such emotional depth, he exchanges Giovanni's mutual love with that of Hella, a younger woman. In the end, Giovanni commits suicide, a fact

which David has to face for the rest of his life. The story can be read as an allegory of American society at large, in which David, with its fears and its inadequacy, embodies White America's "self-denial"; while Giovanni, with its "ability to touch and to love" represents "the black American weapon" opposed to it (1995, 125).

In 1957, with his second novel published, Baldwin decided to move back to the United States to take part in his country's rising civil rights movement. Pushed by the motivation to observe from a closer point of view the historical change that was happening in the nation, he organized, for the first time, a journey in the South, where the major and often violent events where taking place. While visiting cities like Charlotte, Atlanta and Birmingham, he met important leaders such as M.L. King and Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth. In his talking and observing, Baldwin acted as a "novelist masquerading as reporter", interested once again in peoples' "motivation and inner complexities", in their private experience of racism and in the psychological workings of those who perpetuate it (1995, 142). He fairhandedly experienced the discrimination of the 'separate but equal' doctrine and sensed the "widespread sexual aspect of racism, a paradoxical hatred and fascination with the black man's sex" expressed as "secret desire mingled with fear and guilt" (1995, 141). Most importantly, this was an intense and inspiring journey, during which Baldwin developed some of his main ideas that can be later found in *The Fire Next Time*. Neglecting the systemic racism of its society as well as its evident consequences, his country was refusing to look at "one of the principal facts of its life"; and was therefore in "desperate need of honest self-examination" (1995, 46). The road towards the end of discrimination was still long, and Baldwin realized how this path was permeated with a sufferance which was not likely to fade in the near future: "there would be immense suffering, not only among the oppressed blacks but among the naive whites who were destroying their souls with hatred and fear" (1995, 197).

Baldwin's beliefs were also restated in a new, successful collection of essays published in 1961, titled *Nobody Knows My Name,* in which he "calls on America to look at itself, to tear down its myths and to regain an ability to see things as they are" (1995, 186). Later that year Baldwin met the leader of the Black Muslims, Elijah Muhammad. As he would later recall in *The Fire Next Time,* he felt somewhat uncomfortable in talking with the prophet, whose religious point of view reminded him of his father's belief that "all whites were devils, even the ones who seemed to be otherwise" (1995, 188).

In his third novel, published in 1962 with the name of *Another Country,* Baldwin reflects again on "love and the cost of the failure to love, on the relationship between racism and sexuality, on the necessity of honor and the dangers of safety" (1995, 201). In the first part of the novel Ida narrates the story of his brother Rufus Scott's suicide, a jazz musician who is "too broken to accept love or to give it" (1995, 201). Rufus was the victim of a society which, through its systemic racism, "has taken away his freedom to find his individual identity and in so doing has removed the self-respect and respect for human life that, for Baldwin, make love possible" (1995, 201). The second and main part of the novel concerns the survivors, "the five principal characters, who, directly or indirectly, had been witnesses to Rufus's destruction", and the relationships that exist between them (1995, 202). Like their friend, they too are "on desperate searches for the self-knowledge and self-esteem – the identity – without which real love is impossible" (1995, 200). Thus, trying to "accept the deeper call of life beyond prejudice", they live their relationships, each of which "is burdened by American myths of race, sex; or money that serve to deny that call" (1995, 202).

1962 was also the year in which Baldwin, accompanied by his sister Gloria, went to Africa. He did not support the idea that Black Americans should return to the African continent, nor that Africa represented their homeland; he rather believed that

they had a stronger and "unbreakable, if painful" bond with their fellow White countrymen (1995, 207). Although often forced by the situation to converse with American officials and local politicians, his main interest was towards the locals, of which he appreciated their way of dressing and behaving, "physical representation[s] of a way of perceiving" which expressed a longed-for "self-assurance" (1995, 208). Finally, he foresaw in the sufferings caused by colonialism that these people had to endure a dignity and beauty which characterized the African American experience as well: "Africa in all of its turmoil, in all of its pain, was teeming with the essence of what it was on the most basic level to be human and Africa was, above all, black" (1995, 208). This intense experience would motivate him to finish his essay "Down at the Cross", where he gave his "consideration of Western culture from the perspective of the people oppressed by that culture" (1995, 211). The essay would be sold to *The New Yorker* and published under the name "Letter from a Region in My Mind". At the same time, Baldwin wrote an open letter to his nephew James, his brother Wilmer's son, on the occasion of the one hundredth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. Published in *The Progressive* as "A Letter to my Nephew", the text would be used as an introduction to the former, and together the two texts will compose *The Fire Next Time*, published in 1963. The book, which was a remarkable success, would consecrate Baldwin as an internationally recognized writer and spokesman for the African American condition. As such, he contributed to the civil rights movement with his speeches and writings, in which he spoke as "the most articulate witness of his nation's agony" (1995, 216). On May 24, 1963, U.S. Attorney General Robert Kennedy held a meeting where Baldwin and other representatives of the several organizations fighting for the Black cause urged the government for a concrete recognition of the importance and urgency of the fight for equal rights. Moreover, in the early 1960s Baldwin became friend with Malcolm X, with whom he shared the same childhood background,

characterized by poverty and hopelessness. Later, he was also a supporter of the Black Panthers: although he did not completely share their ideology, he understood their rage as caused by the perpetuation of the racial-based inequalities even after the end of the Civil rights Movement (1995, 295). His fourth, 1972 non-fiction book, *No Name in the Streets*, dealt with the context of the African American struggle in late 1960s, addressing the assassination of three of his friends, Malcolm X, Marin Luther King Jr., and Medgar Evers.

From 1961 Baldwin also lived for eight years, although on and off, in Istanbul and in 1970 he bought a house in Saint-Paul-de-Vence, in the south of France, where he would spend the later years of his life. His fifth novel, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, was published in 1974. Standing as "another Baldwin blues song that transforms tragedy into a celebration of community or union", it narrates the love story between the twenty-one-year-old Tish and her boyfriend Fonny, a sculptor (1995, 323). Fonny is arrested for a rape he did not commit: behind his false accusation and unjust imprisonment lay the sexual stereotype associated to African Americans and White police's carelessness about the truth. *Beale Street* is also a story about a personal and communal resistance: Tish, her family and Fonny's friends and family believe in his innocence, and work hard to find the money to prove it to let him out of jail. In the end, Fonny is released and returns home where, in the meantime, Tish has given birth to their child.

His last, non-fiction book was published in 1985 as *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, which gathers the writer's personal reflections on the African American condition in his country: "*Evidence* was to the aftermath of the 'civil rights' movement what *The Fire Next Time* had been to its heyday" (1995, 361). Holding up as an example the Atlanta's murders – in which, between 1979 and 1981, twenty-eight African Americans were killed – Baldwin expressed his skepticism towards those who, referring to the emergence of few Black people in positions of power and success, foresaw a new era

for their country and talked about a “new South” (Baldwin quoted in Leeming, 1995, 354). In Baldwin’s opinion, systemic racism and the consequent inequalities still permeated the United States, a country in which those who were not subject to such injustices, “willing to trample on others to get ahead” were chasing the American dream, which “for American blacks as well as for American Indians and for many women […] represented a nightmare” (1995, 362).

Diagnosed with stomach cancer, Baldwin passed away on December 1, 1987, in his house in Saint-Paul-de-Vence. The funeral-home was held in Harlem, on December 7; and the funeral took place at New York’s Cathedral of St. John the Divine, the following day.

3.2 *The Fire Next Time*

This section focuses on Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time*. After a brief introduction to the work, I will give a close reading of the book, divided in two parts. The first part focuses on the portraying of the African American condition *per se*, whereas the second part shows how, in Baldwin’s analysis of his contemporary reality, the African American presence is a revelatory and disruptive element for the American society at large. Whereas differently specified, the quotations refer to Baldwin’s work, to which the full reference can be found in the Works Cited section.

When it was released, *The Fire Next Time* immediately became a best seller which internationally consecrated its writer as a spokesman of African Americans. It was a book on actuality: in a country in which the Civil rights Movement was the most relevant and discussed topic, and while the public opinion was shocked by the violence to which its supporters where subjected in the South, Baldwin came out with two essays

reflecting on “black anger, white innocence, and American hypocrisy” (Norman 2015, 136). The book is composed of two texts, both inspired by Baldwin’s trip to Africa: “My Dungeon Shook”, subtitled as “Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation”. It is an open letter Baldwin wrote to his nephew James and it works as an introduction to the following essay. In addressing his fourteen-years-old nephew, Baldwin speaks to the African American youth he is part of, specifically to “the young people challenging the old guard in the rights movement” (Leeming 1995, 212). As Leeming notes, the inspiration for the text came from the writer’s witnessing, in Dakar, Senegal, a classroom of African kids reading aloud a passage from the schoolbook. The book was evidently written for a White audience because, by reciting the French text, the elementary kids were talking about the voyage of their ancestors, the colonizers. Seized by the irony of the situation, but even more by indignation, he clearly saw how this simple task was denying children’s cultural and historical heritage. Furthermore, he saw the parallel between this situation and that of the millions of African American children, who every day were taught to consider as their ancestors “the Europeans, the pilgrims, the writers of the Constitution, and the pioneers” (Leeming 1995, 212). The second essay is entitled “Down at the Cross”: it is a longer and more autobiographical text, in which Baldwin gives a vivid description of his teenage years in Harlem, particularly focusing on his experience in the church as a minister. In the text, Baldwin also narrates his encounter with Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the nation of Islam. Besides these autobiographical parts, the essay also gathers the writer’s analysis of the relationship between White and Black Americans and his consideration of American society. In the final part of the essay Baldwin expresses his hopes for African Americans future.

3.2.1 The portrayal of the African American condition

Baldwin addresses the experience of what it means to be an African American since the very first paragraph of *The Fire Next Time*, in which he remarks his nephew's physical resemblance to the grandfather, who "had a terrible life" and "became so holy" (2017, 13). Here Baldwin recalls his stepfather's bitterness and his obsession with religion, two aspects which deeply influenced his early life. These two features were the result of a deep suffering, which derives from his stepfather's interiorization of society's negative image based on the color of his skin. The remembrance of David Baldwin is used as an opportunity to warn the nephew not to do the same: "You can only be destroyed by believing that you really are what the white world calls a *nigger*" (2017, 13). Thus, the writer is encouraging his nephew to resist by not believing to the negative narration which is and will be placed upon him: "You were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity, and in many ways as possible, that you were a worthless human being" (2017, 16). The danger of accepting such a narration does not reside in its attractiveness, but in its being ever-present, surrounding everyone, Black or White, from their birth to their death, and therefore difficult to isolate and get rid of: "The details and symbols of your life have been deliberately constructed to make you believe what white people say about you" (2017, 16). This violence, intended as the act of deliberately disparaging somebody, is something that all African Americans have to endure: "You were born where you were born and faced the future you faced because you were black and for no other reason" (2017, 16). Furthermore, this sentence bespeaks how racism goes beyond the verbal violence and materializes in the worse living conditions and lower aspirations:

> You were not expected to aspire to excellence: you were expected to make peace with mediocrity. Wherever you have turned, James, in your short time on this earth, you have been told where you could go and what you could do (and how

> you could do it) and where you could live and whom you could marry (2017, 16).

Here Baldwin refers to the many limitations African Americans had to face: lower wages and the inaccessibility of certain jobs, especially those involving positions of power and control; the economical impossibility of moving to certain neighborhoods where the cost of living was too high and the consequent marginalization into the poorer living areas, often referred to as 'ghettoes'; the taboo that surrounded mixed-race marriages.

Baldwin's commentary moves on to include Whites' position towards this reality:

> this is the crime of which I accuse my country and my countrymen, and for which neither I nor time nor history will ever forgive them, that they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it (2017, 14).

It is White people's innocence, intended as the refusal to acknowledge this injustice and the consequent unwillingness to act in order to change it, that represents their most profound guilt: "it is not permissible that the authors of devastation should also be innocent" (2017, 14). If, on the one hand, "It is the innocence which constitutes the crime", on the other hand Baldwin's position is not against White people *per se* (2017, 14). Indeed, as Baldwin explains, this narration aimed at deflating African Americans is so deeply-rooted in the American society that the majority of White Americans would find it difficult to isolate it and rationally analyze it: with this belief, the writer, in an almost contradictory way, refers to them as "innocent people" (2017, 16). Much of Baldwin's sense of compassion can be foreseen here, as he writes: "They are, in effect, still trapped in a history which they do not understand; and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it" (2017, 16-17). White Americans, he continues, "have had to

believe for many years, and for innumerable reasons, that black men are inferior to white men" (2017, 17).

One of this reasons is that such a narration was functional in the perpetuation of slavery: believing that Blacks were inferior to Whites and, in a way, not completely humans, or at least not to the degree in which they were, allowed slave owners to consider themselves morally righteous and to aspire to the Christian salvation. For them, as well as for many Whites even after the end of slavery, "the black man has functioned […] as a fixed star, as an immovable pillar" (2017, 17). The questioning of this narration stands therefore as a "terrifying" act "because it so profoundly attacks one's sense of one's own reality", with the destabilizing result which "in the minds of most white Americans, is the loss of their identity" (2017, 17).

If the White citizens are conceived, partially, as victims and prisoners of this communal narration, the letter's message remains fixed on the importance of resisting to it: "Please try to remember that what they believe, as well as what they do and cause you to endure, does not testify to your inferiority but to their inhumanity and fear" (2017, 16). This leads Baldwin to a reconsideration of two central words in the public debate on civil rights, acceptance, and integration: "There is no reason for you to try to become like white people and there is no basis whatever for their impertinent assumption that they must accept you" (2017, 16). In line with what has been said before, the two concepts are redefined in the reverse African American perspective. In the revisited meaning Baldwin attributes to them lies in fact his answer to the African Americans' struggle, which will be the object of study of the next chapter.

In the first part of "Down at the Cross", Baldwin recounts his teenage years in Harlem, specifically focusing on the personal feelings that led him to join the Black Pentecostal Church and on his experience in it as a preacher. In the second part, he talks about the meeting with Elijah Muhammad and gives a personal explanation of the success of his

organization, the Nation of Islam. The last section of the essay contains the writer's hopes for the future relationship between Whites and African Americans in his country. Therefore, this last part will be more directly addressed in the next chapter.

What Baldwin describes in the first section of this essay is a profound personal crisis, experienced during the summer he turned fourteen and intended as a period marked, among other things, by a growing self-consciousness and fear. He describes it, in the first sentence of the essay, as "a prolonged religious crisis […] meaning that I then discovered God, His saints and angels, and His blazing Hell" (2017, 23). Here Baldwin is talking about his seeking refuge into the church: "The word 'safety' brings us to the real meaning of the word 'religious' as we use it" (2017, 23). This is, however, an anticipation about the feeling of fear which led him to fully engage in the Pentecostal church: "I became, during my fourteenth year, for the first time in my life, afraid – afraid of the evil within me and afraid of the evil without" (2017, 23). Baldwin's uncovering of the reasons that stood behind this distressing feeling is at once a "psychologically compelling description of a vivid adolescent experience" and a cross section of what it means to grow up during the Depression as a poor African American, in Harlem (Hempton 2008, 167).

The physical changes of puberty and the raising awareness of his sexuality were certainly an important part of what he describes as "the evil within me"; they were two aspects that, owing to the rigid Baptist education he received from his father, caused an "abrupt discomfort" in him (2017, 23-24). The sight of the physical changes in people slightly older than him and the deriving consciousness that he himself would have been affected by a similar process caused in him a profound sense of guilt: "the fact that I had no idea what my voice or my mind or my body was likely to do next caused me to consider myself one of the most depraved people on earth" (2017, 24). There were, then, the "explicit [sexual] overtures" the young Baldwin received from "the whores

and pimps and racketeers on the Avenue" as well as from "boys and girls but also, more alarmingly, by older man and women", which caused him to perceive himself as "a source of fire and temptation", all of which in turn confirmed his "sense of [..] depravity" (2017, 23; 30).

The deeper, psychological changes he perceived in his peers, the surrounding social decay and white police's harassment, of which he was personally a victim, were evident signs of the "evil without" (2017, 23). Girls, he writes, underwent "an incredible metamorphosis" which went beyond the physical aspect and concerned their behavior and way of relating to boys, more serious now and aimed to righteousness:

> They began to manifest a curious and really rather terrifying single-mindedness. […] For the girls also saw the evidence on the Avenue, knew what the price would be, for them, of one mis-step, knew that they had to be protected and that we were the only protection there was (2017, 24-25).

As they started working after they finished or dropped out of school, boys became affected by "a curious, wary, bewildered despair, as though they were now settling in for the long, hard winter of life" (2017, 25). Indeed, Baldwin remembers seeing them becoming part of that "world of the Avenue", of that social decay that much frightened him: "one found them in twos and threes and fours, in a hallway, sharing a jug of wine or a bottle of whiskey, talking, cursing, fighting, sometimes weeping" (2017, 25). In the passage from school to work, representative of the full entrance into adult life, Baldwin's peers began to experience the material and psychological suffering caused by the everyday confrontation with the systemic racism of American society: the writer found them "lost, and unable to say what it was that oppressed them, except that they knew it was 'the man' – the white man" (2017, 25). Moreover, the life choices that appeared available around him, were all but encouraging:

> Many of my friends fled into the [military] service, all to be changed there, and rarely for the better, many to be ruined, and many to die. Others fled to other states and cities – that is, to other ghettos. Some went on wine or whiskey or the needle, and are still on it (2017, 26).

Furthermore, he realized that Whites' higher living standards were not dictated by any kind of superiority: not even religion could justify such deep inequalities, for African Americans were hard workers; but, for them, the "Puritan-Yankee equation of virtue with well-being" did not work (28). What allowed White people to behave towards them in a way which "neither civilized reason nor Christian love" could justify was "power", in the form of "judges, […] juries […] shotguns [and] the law", a "criminal power, to be feared but not respected" (2017, 27-28).

This was the social climate that surrounded the young James Baldwin, an atmosphere of widespread suffering which, already from its description, conveys a discouraging hopelessness. With the revelation, at fourteen, that he "had been produced by the same circumstances", Baldwin started to perceive this environment as "a personal menace" (2017, 23). Crime, in turn, "became real, for example – for the first time – not as *a* possibility but as *the* possibility […] I certainly could not discover any principled reason for not becoming a criminal" (2017, 27; 29). With all the situation sketched out, Baldwin recalls his at-the-time awareness of his condition and the deriving fear that pushed him towards religion:

> Every negro boy […] who reaches this point realizes […] that he stands in great peril and must find, with speed, a 'thing', a gimmick, to lift him out, to start him on his way. And it does not matter what the gimmick is. It was this last realization that terrified me and – since it revealed that the door opened on so many dangers – helped to hurl me into the church (2017, 29).

These were the premises which led Baldwin to accept his best friend's invitation to his Pentecostal Church. Tormented by growing feelings of guilt and fear, he would be

struck by Mother Horn, the preacher, for her exotic beauty and her smile and, at her question “Whose little boy are you?”, he would answer, “surrendered to a spiritual seduction”, “Why, yours” (2017, 32-33). What follows in the essay is a vivid account of his conversion experience: seized, while “singing and clapping” by an indescribable rush of religious visions, “anguish” and “unspeakable pain”, he would spend all night on the floor before the altar, his consciousness lost, to find himself, in the morning, “utterly drained and exhausted, and released, for the first time, from all my guilty torment” and, most importantly, “saved” (2017, 33-34).

In the description of what he experienced that night, Baldwin focuses on the feeling of loneliness shared by African Americans as citizens of a White country which despises them: “Black people”, he writes, “do not look at each other […] and white people, mainly, look away” (2017, 34-35). In a larger scale, this everyday reality results in the consciousness that “the universe […] has evolved no terms for your existence”, annihilating in the Black subject “all hope of communion”, even with his peers (2017, 33).

Not even God’s love could redeem the despair resulting from this painful awareness of “existential dissonance” (Hempton 2008, 167). Indeed, even in such an intensely religious moment, Baldwin remembers being aware that “God […] is white” (2017, 34). God’s preached love for all his children was, for him, unable to answer to the question: “Why were we, the blacks, cast down so far?” (2017, 34).

As he became a preacher, his disillusion with the Black church grew even more: he soon observed that the principles governing his congregation where not different from those on which the other churches were based: they consisted not in “Faith, Hope and Charity” but rather “Blindness, Loneliness and Terror, the first principle necessarily and actively cultivated in order to deny the two others” (2017, 34-35). With this came the realization that

> there was no love in the church. It was a mask for hatred, self-hatred and despair […] we were told to love everybody, […] it applied only to those who believed as we did […] And the passion with which we loved the Lord was a measure of how deeply we feared and distrusted and, in the end, hated almost all strangers, always, and avoided and despised ourselves (40-41).

Although Baldwin lists several reasons for what he calls "the slow crumbling of my faith, the pulverization of my fortress", this analysis focuses on his growing awareness of the dishonesty of the ministry, an experience he described as "being in the theatre […] behind the scenes" (2017, 37). In this regard, Hempton identifies two reasons, "the first having to do with the messengers, and the second with the message" (Hempton 2008, 170). Concerning the messengers, he felt discouraged by the widespread corruption he witnessed among the other ministers, for whom he lost all his respect. While, he writes, they "were waiting for me to come to my senses and realize that I was in a very lucrative business", he wanted to preserve his honesty, and thus ended up feeling "lonelier and more vulnerable than I had been before" (2017, 40). The deeper reason, anyway, concerned the message: addressing his congregation, Baldwin writes, "I felt that I was committing a crime in talking about the gentle Jesus, in telling them to reconcile themselves to their misery on earth in order to gain the crown of eternal life" (2017, 40). Confronting every day the poverty and suffering African Americans had to endure, with the conviction that this painful reality was perpetuated by Whites' "criminal power", he found it hard "not to stammer, not to curse, not to tell them to throw away their Bibles and get off their knees and go home and organize, for example, a rent strike" (2017, 40). It was, therefore, the "inability to reconcile the promise of spiritual egalitarianism implicit in the evangelical message with the reality of the African American urban experience" that led Baldwin to abandon his job as a preacher (Hempton 2008, 166-167).

In second part of the essay, Baldwin's report of his meeting with Elijah

Muhammad, leader of the Nation of Islam, becomes a fruitful occasion to reflect on the growing popularity of the organization. In trying to uncover the underlying reasons that pushed many to join the extremist thought of the Black Muslims, Baldwin's analysis returns an authentic psychological portrait of the African American experience. An Islamic religious movement, the Nation of Islam was founded in 1930 in Detroit by W.D. Fard Muhammad and grew after the Second World War, under the leadership of Elijah Muhammad: at its peak, the number of adherents was close to a hundred thousand (Curtis 2021, 658). The pivotal points of the movement's doctrine were the righteousness of the Islamic religion, considered as the original faith of all Black people, stolen form African Americans in the process of enslavement; the belief in the separation of races and in White people's inherent moral corruption; the advocating for separate Black businesses, schools and an independent state; and "the belief that that W.D. Fard was God in the flesh, and that Elijah Muhammad was the Messenger of God" (Curtis 2021, 658).

Baldwin reflects on the Nation of Islam's belief that all Black people had to return to Islam, their true faith, and that this religion would soon rule the world; as a consequence, the United States would perish as a doomed nation. In seeing the parallel with White Christianity and its historical role as an instrument of power, he dismisses the Nation of Islam's narration as follows: "The dream, the sentiment is old; only the color is new" (2017, 53). Nonetheless, Elijah Muhammad's invitation becomes an occasion to reflect on the organization's growing popularity after thirty years of existence and on its succeeding where the Christian Church had failed:

> to heal and redeem drunkards and junkies, to convert people who have come out of prison and to keep them out, to make men chaste and women virtuous, and to invest both the male and the female with a pride and a serenity that hang about them like an unfailing light (2017, 49).

Baldwin attributes time a fundamental role: time has revealed "the historical role of Christianity in the realm of power", as it was used as instrument and justification to command, conquer and enslave (2017, 45). Moreover, time has shown the shortcomings and the horrors committed by the White Christian world, arriving to the escalation of the Second World War and to the tragedy of the Holocaust, thus demonstrating itself "morally bankrupt and political unstable" (2017, 49). The second aspect that marked "a turning point in the Negro's relation to America" is the African Americans' experience in the Second World Conflict. Treated as inferiors and subhuman in a foreign land where they felt "far freer […] than home", they had to endure the return in their "despairing and diabolical" home country (2017, 51-52). Returning to the homeland for which they had risked their lives only to be subjected to the same injustices, violence and discriminations, Baldwin writes, "a certain hope died, a certain respect for white Americans faded" (2017, 51).

A precious psychological introspection on the African American experience surfaces when Baldwin reflects on the motivations that lead Black Muslims to accept such a "merciless formulation" of White people, described as "devils […] cursed […] and about to be brought down" (2017, 48; 61). In the beginning, he writes,

> "a Negro cannot believe that white people are treating him as they do; he does not know what he has done to merit it. When he realized that the treatment accorded him has nothing to do with anything he has done, that the attempt of white people to destroy him – for that is what it is – is utterly gratuitous, it is not hard for him to think of white people as devils (2017, 62).

As a consequence, "Most negroes cannot risk assuming that the humanity of white people is more real to them than their color"; therefore, as a defense mechanism, they have "long ago learned to expect the worst" form white people: at this point, Baldwin argues, "one finds it very easy to believe the worst" (2017, 62).

This personal interpretation is not intended, however, as an apology of the

Nation of Islam. Against the separatist instance, for example, the writer insists on Blacks' belonging to America: "the Negro has been formed by this nation, for better or for worse, and does not belong to any other – not to Africa, and certainly not to Islam" (2017, 71). Although this constitutes a painful truth, its acceptance is an essential step towards change:

> in order to change a situation one has first to see it for what it is […] The paradox – and a fearful paradox it is – is that the American Negro can have no future anywhere, on any continent, as long as he is unwilling to accept his past (2017, 71).

On a more general level, for Baldwin the most critical aspect of the Nation of Islam's thought is its being based on the concept of racial superiority, the same idea with which White people justified their treatment of African Americans. As he writes, "The glorification of one race and the consequent debasement of another – or others – always has been and always will be a recipe for murder" (2017, 72).

As much as African Americans' condition must be restored, the solution does not lie their doing "to others what has been done to them", as this would just perpetuate the "spiritual wasteland" which was his contemporary America and undermine "their dignity, […] the health of their souls" (2017, 73). Baldwin bases this claim on his firm conviction that "*Whoever debases others is debasing himself*" (2017, 73).

3.2.2 The "Negro" as a revelatory and disruptive presence for the American society

In this section, I will show how Baldwin, building on the intertwined nature of Black and White Americans, demonstrate how the African American condition is, at the same time, revelatory of "the spiritual wasteland" of contemporary America and a disruptive

presence for its assumptions and logic (2017, 73). The way in which Whites have behaved towards Blacks, Baldwin believes, is revelatory of White America's psychological workings.

African Americans share the past of slavery followed by a century of segregation, marked by oppression, marginalization, and discrimination. Their existence, therefore, reveals a permanent stain on the image of America as the land of freedom, where everybody is equal and has the right to happiness. In a country whose people define themselves as Christians and claim to live according to the highest standards of rationality, African Americans are treated in a way that "Neither civilized reason nor Christian love" could possibly justify (2017, 27). African Americans' poverty, furthermore, contradicts the narration of the American dream, which associates hard work to material success: although Black people were generally hard workers, they could not aspire to White standards of living (2017, 28). This leads Baldwin to claim that, despite "the standards by which the white world claims to live […] the Negro's experience […] is overwhelming proof that white people do not live by these standards" (2017, 28). African Americans are, therefore, a disruptive presence for America's self-narration, as "they are very well placed indeed to precipitate chaos and ring down the curtain on the American dream" (2017, 76).

Baldwin's most precious insight on White Americans' psychological workings is achieved through the analysis of their telling behavior towards African Americans. In his perspective, Black people are the subjects on which "The white man's unadmitted – and apparently, to him, unspeakable – private fears and longings" are projected (2017, 82). For instance, in White Americans' terror and inability to understand African Americans' sensuality, intended as the ability "to respect and rejoice in the force of life, of life itself, and to be present in all that one does", lies their estrangement from the simplest and purest form of life (2017, 43). In having begun to "distrust their own

reactions" to the aspects of everyday life, white people have lost "their touchstone for reality", substituting it with a labyrinth of […] historical and public attitudes" (2017, 43). This, in turn, has led to the "inability to renew themselves at the fountain of their own lives", a capacity without which "the discussion, let alone elucidation, of any conundrum – that is, any reality – [is] so supremely difficult" (2017, 43).

Moreover, Baldwin reflects on the reason why Blackness often "intimidates" White people (2017, 79). This effect, he argues, originates from the fact that Blackness represents "what we do not wish to face, and what Americans do not face when they regard a Negro: reality – the fact that life is tragic" (2017, 78-79). "Death", Baldwin writes, is "the only fact we have" and epitomizes this reality, but "white Americans do not believe in death", and are thus scared and intimidated (2017, 79). The text continues as follows: "It is the responsibility of free man to trust and celebrate things that are constant – birth, struggle and death are constant […] and to apprehend the nature of change, to be able and willing to change", where change is intended "in the sense of renewal" (2017, 79). But, he argues, "renewal becomes impossible if one supposes things to be constant that are not – safety, for example, or money, or power". If, like most Americans do, "one clings then to chimeras […] the entire possibility of freedom disappears" (2017, 79). In this context, "the Negro" stands as a disruptive figure: if "white Americans have never, in all their long history, been able to look him as a man like themselves", his same existence, for what it represents, threatens to reveal the fact that the American society is founded on wrong assumptions, bringing about "its destruction" (2017, 79).

The African American presence reveals the shortcomings of American society, the fact that "people are not, for example, terribly anxious to be equal […] but they love the idea of being superior" and that "only a very few people" have "any real desire to be free", because "[f]reedom is hard to bear" (2017, 77). It discloses, in other words, the

fact that “the American dream has […] become something much more closely resembling a nightmare”, a reality which Americans “do not dare examine” (2017, 76-77). Baldwin saw in this reluctance the reason underlying the ignorance of African Americans’ truth-telling presence: “a knowledge of the role these people played – and play – in American life would reveal more about America to Americans than Americans wish to know” (2017, 86).

Therefore, White Americans’ way of relating to African Americans is telling about themselves: “whatever white people do not know about Negroes reveals, precisely and inexorably, what they do not know about themselves” (2017, 44). In the way in which the American society dealt with African Americans, Baldwin believed, lies White America’s reluctance to openly admit its injustices: “a vast amount of the energy that goes into what we call the Negro problem is produced by the white man’s profound desire not to be judged by those who are not white, not to be seen as he is” (2017, 81).

If, in Baldwin’s analysis, White America is revealed as blind towards the real condition of African Americans, these people, on the other hand, know “about white Americans what parents […] know about their children” (2017, 86). “[T]he great advantage of having never believed that collections of myths to which white Americans cling”, has given them ideological freedom from the toxic national narration about itself (2017, 86). From this position, they can see White Americans for what they really are, that is, “as the slightly mad victims of their own brainwashing” (2017, 86). Unaffected by this ideological imprisonment, he argues, “Negroes, on the whole, and until lately, have allowed themselves to feel so little hatred” towards White American (2017, 86). Furthermore, in their inferior, subjugated position, African Americans have not yielded to the temptation of hate, thus demonstrating themselves morally superior: “It demands great spiritual resilience not to hate the hater whose foot is on your neck, and an even greater miracle of perception and charity not to teach your child to hate” (2017, 85).

Moreover, Baldwin insists on the importance of suffering in the process of growing up. In their oppressed condition, the Black subject has been “forced each day to snatch his manhood, his identity, out of the fire of human cruelty that rages to destroy it”; yet he has achieved “his own authority and […] is unshakable” (2017, 84). Accustomed to survive “the worst that life can bring”, he has ceased “to be controlled by a fear of what life can bring” and, at the same time, has managed not to be controlled by hatred, which “becomes too heavy a sack to carry” (2017, 84). In his tenacious battle resisting and battling against “the mighty and indifferent fortress of white supremacy”, he has shown “great force and great cunning” (2017, 85).

If, up to now, the analysis has focused on the revelatory and disruptive features of Blackness in the United States, another role is now be added, which brings the discourse to the next and final chapter. In 1963, when the essay was published, the Civil rights Movement was living its core years, protests were spreading across the country, and African Americans were making themselves heard in politics and in the public debate.

With these protests, Baldwin believed, the Black population was "barring yet another door" to White America's "spiritual social ease” (2017, 74). This challenge represents “the most important thing that one human being can do for another” and, Baldwin believed, is the “enormous contribution that the Negro has made to this otherwise shapeless and undiscovered country” (2017, 74-75). Therefore, African Americans’ presence is also salvific, because it has the power to redeem White Americans, addressing the “anguish […] rooted in the white man’s equally profound need to be seen as he is, to be released from the tyranny of his mirror” (2017, 81). In Baldwin’s analysis, the Black subject is, therefore, a fundamental presence for White America, as its existence forces the nation to face its flaws, which was a necessary step in the process of change.

4 Conclusions: hopes for the future

This final chapter establishes a comparison between the two books on which this thesis focused. The first two parts, after a brief recapitulation of the previous chapters, explore the writer's hopes regarding Black people's future as expressed in the two works. The last part highlights the similarities between these visions, as well as between the writers' dealing with the theme of self-perception in African American subjects, with the aim to establish a dialogue between the two authors.

4.1 Hopes for the future in Ellison's *Invisible Man*

In Ellison's novel, Invisible Man narrates his twofold journey which is, at the same time, internal and external. From his expulsion from the southern college to his moving to urban north, from unemployment to being one of the most prominent speakers of a New York influential political organization, till his retiring underground, Invisible Man's progress is also a journey towards self-consciousness. In going through several moments of disillusionments, the protagonist sheds externally-imposed identities: from that of the devoted, hard worker southern student to that of the intellectual, rabble-rouser political speaker, "the narrator's passage to selfhood is a passage through and beyond the versions of self prescribed by others" (Callahan 2004, 195). The end of this trajectory – which is also a new beginning, for "hibernation is over" and the protagonist is "coming out" – corresponds to the achievement of an internally-born identity, crafted through self-narration: that of Invisible Man (Ellison 1980, 567). Thus, in giving up all kinds of social participation and retiring underground to reflect on his life, the protagonist exchanges "power for wisdom", and creates his identity by crafting, against

the diversity and chaos which are the true nature of life, his personal story of invisibility, able to provide meaning to his experience (Trimmer 1978, 50).

Invisible Man's disillusionment is clearly stated in the vision which closes the last chapter, where he sees "Jack and Old Emerson and Bledsoe and Norton and Ras […] all of them who had run me" (Ellison 1980, 556). To them, he responds "I'm through your illusions and lies, I'm through running" (Ellison 1980, 556). As the vision continues, they pull out of his body "two bloody blobs", and ask him: "how does it feel to be free of one's illusions?" (Ellison 1980, 557). The metaphor of running, which signifies the following of fake identities and narrations, comes from the dream Invisible Man recounts having after the battle royal, in the first chapter of the book. After having received the scholarship in the briefcase, he dreams of a similar scene in which he is opening another one with his grandfather. It contains a piece of paper, which reads "To Whom It May Concern […] Keep This Nigger-Boy Running": when he reads it, his grandfather laughs at him (Ellison 1980, 33). The meaning of the sentence is not immediately grasped, but the running image becomes clearer with time. Indeed, after the reading of Bledsoe's letter, Invisible Man realizes that he was following a false hope, that of returning to college, and paraphrases the text as "Please hope him to death, and keep him running" (Ellison 1980, 191). With the vision that closes the last chapter, the running image takes on the meaning of living following an ideal (Ellison 1980, 191).

In the epilogue, Invisible Man reflects on his grandfather's deathbed words, which are reported in chapter one:

> Son, after I'm gone I want you to keep up the good fight. I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open (Ellison 1980, 16).

In the novel, these lines are significantly placed before the beginning of the chronological narration of events, as their message hunts the protagonist throughout the novel, becoming "a constant puzzle which lay unanswered in the black of my [his] mind" (Ellison 1980, 16). In the first sentence, the grandfather sees African Americans' life as a constant battle and regrets his social conduct, defining his "meekness" as "treachery" (Ellison 1980, 40). In the second part, however, he encourages the nephew to adopt a behavior based on false compliance and hidden enmity, which contrasts with what has been said before, thus the message results contradictory and enigmatic. This ambiguous advice haunts the protagonist, functioning as a constant judgment on his behavior: "whenever things went well for me I remembered my grandfather and felt guilty and uncomfortable" (Ellison 1980, 16).

These words problematize his relation with White people: "When I was praised for my conduct I felt a guilt that in some way I was doing something that was really against the wishes of the white folks […] Still I was more afraid to act any other way because they didn't like that at all" (Ellison 1980, 16). In the novel, Invisible man yesses White people and is generally considered as "an example of desirable conduct": he adopts the college values, endorsed by the Whites benefactors and, in the Brotherhood, keeps his dissenting part "pressed down" (Ellison 1980, 16; 323). However, by looking at the protagonist's expulsion from college and to his being downgraded in the Brotherhood, it is clear how this compliance does not meet the expected results: this, as Trimmer notes, represents a further reason of confusion for the protagonist, "because his actions never produce that victory and because in his failure he detects the possibility of his own treachery" (Trimmer 1978, 47). Even when he wants to rebel against the Brotherhood and decides to destroy it from the inside,

following his grandfather's advice, the result is ruinous, as he becomes "merely an agent of subjugation and destruction" (Trimmer 1978, 48).

In the cave where he has retired, Invisible Man is "still plagued by his [his stepfather's] advice" and reflects on its possible meaning (Ellison 1980, 560). Thus, he formulates three possible interpretations posed as questions: each one "probes deeper beneath the surface to explore the nuances and subtleties latent" in the advice and, at the same time, "does not cancel the validity of the question that precedes it" (Trimmer 1978, 49). The first reasoning on the meaning of the grandfather's yessing is the following:

> Could he have meant – hell, he must have meant the principle, that we were to affirm the principle on which the country was built and not the men, or at least not the men who did the violence. Did he mean say "yes" because he knew that the principle was greater than the men, greater than the numbers and the vicious power and all the methods used to corrupt its name? Did he mean to affirm the principle, which they themselves had dreamed into being out of the chaos and darkness of the feudal past, and which they had violated and compromised to the point of absurdity even in their own corrupt minds? (Ellison 1980, 561)

This interpretation, as well as the two following ones, associates the grandfather's exhortation of yessing to the affirmation of "the principle on which the country was built" (Ellison 1980, 561). This, in turn, refers to the ideals of democracy, equality and freedom, which have been the foundational values of the United States, although, in the history of the country, they have often been betrayed – suffice it to think to slavery and segregation. Nonetheless, Invisible Man's reflection conveys Ellison's belief in the importance of a continuous attempt at reaffirming these foundational values, so that they might function as guiding principles for the country and its people.

The second speculation reads as follows:

> Or did he mean that we had to take the responsibility for all of it, for the men as well as the principle, because we were the heirs who must use the principle because no other fitted our needs? Not for the power or for vindication, but

> because we, with the given circumstance of our origin, could only thus find transcendence? Was it that we of all, we, most of all, had to affirm the principle, the plan in whose name we had been brutalized and sacrificed – not because we would always be weak nor because we were afraid or opportunistic, but because we were older than they, in the sense of what it took to live in the world with others and because they had exhausted in us, some – not much, but some – of the human greed and smallness, yes, and the fear and superstition that had kept them running. (Oh, yes, they're running too, running all over themselves) (Ellison 1980, 561).

Here, more specifically, the narrator refers to African Americans, to whom the "we" addresses. It is them who have to affirm the bedrock principles in the name of which, paradoxically, they were kidnapped, dehumanized and enslaved; and they have to do it not just for the greatness of the principle itself but also as an act of responsibility towards White people. Their historically subjugated condition has exhausted in them much of the petty aspirations which had driven White people along the path not only of violence and supremacy, but also of fear and dissatisfaction. Therefore, from their wiser position, African Americans have the responsibility to re-educate Whites. Because "he has suffered and transcended that suffering", Trimmer writes, the Black man "has become a more human and humane American": this condition places him in a favored position to realize the American ideals (Trimmer 1978, 49). The last two lines revive the metaphor of running which, this time, applies also to White people who, in chasing the American dream, are in a constant competition between themselves.

Finally, he gives a third explanation:

> Or was it, did he mean that we should affirm the principle because we, through no fault of our own, were linked to all the others in the loud, clamoring semi-visible world, that world seen only as a fertile field for exploitation by Jack and his kind, and with condescension by Norton and his, who were tired of being the mere pawns in the futile game of "making history"? Had he seen that for these too we had to say "yes" to the principle, lest they turn upon us to destroy both it and us? (Ellison 1980, 561)

The affirmation of the principle is here seen as an "universal affirmation of humanity", necessary to save the human race from the self-destruction produced by greed and exploitation (Trimmer 1978, 49). A few lines later, Invisible Man reflects on the exploiters: "Hell, weren't they their own death and their own destruction except as the principle lived in them and in us?" (Ellison 1980, 562). Here Ellison states his conviction that these people, by "deny[ing] the principle in others […] destroy their own humanity" (Trimmer 1978, 49). Nonetheless, the solution Ellison suggests is that the principle must be affirmed for them as well, because the alternative, which coincides with dehumanization, leads to self-destruction. Therefore, these lines stand as a call for a righteous, collective action, and an altruistic one as well: the principle must be affirmed for everybody, even the morally-corrupted ones.

4.2 Hopes for the future in Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*

In *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin's description of his experience of growing up during the Depression in Harlem vividly conveys the struggle for self-affirmation in the racist American society, out of which derives widespread suffering and hopelessness for the future. White America, unwilling and unable to deal with the shortcomings of U.S. ideals, does not see Black people as they truly are, but projects on them a negative, stereotyped narration based on the nation's deepest fears. Yet, in Baldwin's analysis, African Americans' often non-violent resistance and willingness to fight for improving their condition is proof of determination and inner strength. The way in which the American society has dealt with them is revelatory of its underlying psychological workings. Moreover, their presence represents a potentially undermining element, as it questions a type of society based on fake ideals.

Baldwin's ideas on how this painful reality had to be changed are already visible in "My Dungeon Shook", in his analyzing "the reality that lies behind the words *acceptance* and *integration*" (Baldwin 2017, 16). After having showed that Black people are not, as the racial stereotypes depict them, inferior to Whites, he revisits the word 'acceptance' in the African American perspective:

> There is no reason for you to try to become like white people and there is no basis whatever for their impertinent assumption that *they* must accept *you*. The really terrible thing, old buddy, is that *you* must accept *them*. And I mean that very seriously. You must accept them and accept them with love. For these innocent people have no other hope (Baldwin 2017, 16).

Baldwin does not consider violence and racial debasement as possible solutions; he is deeply convinced that the future of his people is in the United States. If, as he believed, the peaceful coexistence between different ethnic groups is the most desirable scenario for American society, African Americans have to accept their oppressors, defined as "innocent" to indicate their being victim of their own false beliefs.

This acceptance was considered as the first step towards a change which begins to be outlined in the redefinition of the second concept: "if the word *integration* means anything, this is what it means: that we, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it" (Baldwin 2017, 17). If the diversity associated to Blackness is only a product of society's racist narration, the so-called "Negro problem" does not really originate from Black people, but from White Americans. Therefore, it is only them, through a serious spiritual work, who can solve it:

> White people in this country will have quite enough to do in learning how to accept and love themselves and each other, and when they have achieved this – which will not be tomorrow and may very well be never – the Negro problem will no longer exist, for it will no longer be needed. (Baldwin 2017, 27)

If all the stereotyped narrations on Blackness are a part and parcel of White America's inability to face its failures, their letting go of such narrations is a necessary step of this spiritual work: "The price of the liberation of the white people is the liberation of the blacks – the total liberation, in the cities, in the towns, before the law, and in the mind (Baldwin 2017, 83).

At the same time Baldwin believed that American society had a profound need for a deep re-examination of the wrong assumptions upon which it was based, and he envisioned this sincere self-questioning as part of that needed process, a fundamental step towards ideological freedom: "the white man is himself in sore need of new standards, which will release him from his confusion and place him once again in fruitful communion with the depths of his own being (Baldwin 2017, 82-83). This spiritual rebirth was a necessary condition to realize "the most radical and far-reaching changes in the American political and social structure" in order to solve the American race problem (Baldwin 2017, 74).

Baldwin believed that "America, of all the Western nations, has been best placed to prove the uselessness and the obsolescence of the concept of color", showing how it "is not a human or a personal reality" but "a political reality"; however, because its people still believed to the past narrations and continued to perceive themselves as a White nation, the American society was unable to conceive and seize this opportunity (Baldwin 2017, 80; 88). Still, the need for such changes remains, and was beginning to be felt in all its urgency throughout the country exactly during Baldwin's years. During the core moments of the civil rights movement, *The Fire Next Time* exhorted "the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks" to "end the racial nightmare", thusly saving their own country from precipitating into chaos: "If we do not now dare everything, the fulfilment of that prophecy, recreated from the Bible in song

by a slave, is upon us: *God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time!*" (Baldwin 2017, 89).

4.3 Ellison and Baldwin: a dialogue

With the aim of creating a dialogue between Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time,* this thesis begun with an overview of the historical period in which the two works were written, with a specific focus on the Black history in America. It has touched upon the major social and political events, demonstrating the growing impatience of the African American community towards segregation and, more generally, the systemic racism of their country, which led to several protests and manifestations. The violence, both from the institutions and from the common people, with which such demonstrations were received vividly conveys White America's unwillingness to comply to the Black community's requests of social and political equality. Finally, the central government's lack of a concrete support towards the protesters and its delays in legislating on African Americans' civil and political rights demonstrate the distance of the White state towards the discriminated part of its population.

As the discourse explored the theme of self-perception in African American subjects, it has also included Du Bois' concept of "double consciousness", as it introduces a self-perception which is no longer unitary and uniform but lacerated and torn between one's own image of the self and another image, that originated from society's negative, racially-based narration. Both works by Ellison and Baldwin address the struggle for self-definition in African American subjects. Invisible Man's journey is the process of liberation from externally-imposed identities and from false narrations,

culminating with the protagonist's achievement of a self-definition as invisible. In his work, Baldwin stresses the importance of resisting to society's stereotyped narration, and his two essays vividly describe the African American's suffering condition while providing an insightful reading of race relations in America. Finally, this last chapter has analyzed the writers' hopes for the future of African Americans. The next lines will highlight the many similarities between them as well as between their dealing with the theme of self-perception in Black subjects.

Both writers deal with the liberation, in the perception of the self, from society's negative image. Invisible Man's struggle for self-liberation and self-definition can be also found in Baldwin's personal story of resistance: "I did not intend to allow the white people of this country to tell me who I was, and limit me that way, and polish me off that way. And yet, of course, at the same time, I was being spat on and defined and described and limited" (Baldwin 2017, 29). Moreover, Baldwin as well as Ellison recognize the danger of accepting such narration as truthful: if Baldwin warns his nephew that he can only be destroyed by believing to be "what the white world calls a *nigger*" (Baldwin 2017, 13), Invisible Man writes that "the real soul-sickness" comes when "you discover that you're as transparent as air […] But deep down you come to suspect that you're yourself to blame" (Ellison 1980, 562).

Baldwin recognizes the importance, for African Americans, to accept their sorrowful past. Similarly, after having spent many years avoiding his suffering and denying his southern origins, Ellison's protagonist finally comes to accept and affirm his past as a part of him: "Sometimes I feel the need to reaffirm all of it, the whole unhappy territory and all the things loved and unlovable in it, for all of it is part of me" (Ellison 1980, 566).

Both writers point to the importance of love as the only feeling able to transcend the received hatred and the deriving suffering. In *The Fire Next Time*, love, a central

theme in Baldwin's artistic production, takes the shape of the self-love necessary to survive to the surrounding oppressive environment, and of the love-for-the-enemy as the revolutionary feeling needed to change the American society. Also Invisible Man, in the epilogue, recognizes love's importance to be able to fully experience life: "I have been hurt to the point of abysmal pain […] And I defend because in spite of all I find that I love […] too much of your life will be lost, its meaning lost, unless you approach it as much through love as through hate" (Ellison 1980, 566). In conclusion, Ellison and Baldwin believed that African Americans were, for historical reasons, deeply and inexorably bound to their country, even in their future, and that their destiny was strictly tied to that of White Americans, who they had to accept and forgive. Both believed that Black people, for their determination and resilience, had a fundamental role in the realization of the principles of freedom, equality and democracy, whose full affirmation represented America's brightest future.

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