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“Tell Nannan I Walked”: Reconstructing Manhood in Ernest J. Gaines’s *A Lesson before Dying**

Abstract: Drawing on a variety of philosophical and ethical views, as well as on African American studies, this paper discusses the way in which Ernest J. Gaines’s *A Lesson before Dying* reconsiders the black male character in the context of racial prejudices in the segregated South in the late 1940s. The paper demonstrates that Gaines is one of the authors who had to face the difficult task of transforming the invisible African American presence into the central element of his narrative. From a silent, subjugated figure, from being simply a substitute of the white man, the black protagonist metamorphoses into a *polytropic* character. The article proposes a close textual and intertextual analysis of Gaines’s reconstruction of black male identity. The main argument focuses on the way in which Gaines rewrites the earlier representation of the lonely rebellious African American – (de)constructing the image of the *native son* and *invisible man* – by insisting on the importance of the pedagogical role of the community.

If we must die, let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot. (Claude McKay)

The major conflict in my work is when the black male attempts to go beyond the line that is drawn for him. But you’ve also got conflict between young and old, between the desire to go back to the place where you were born or to stay where you are, between religious feeling and atheism [...]. There has to be conflict before there can be a story and before the story reveals racial tensions. (Ernest J. Gaines, in Magnier 1995, 6)

1. “A White-Defined Heroism”: Beyond Assumptions

Stripped of their humanity, their names and social status, African Americans strangely creep inside canonized white narratives in which they act as contrasting images for defining white heroes. In these works, the authorial focus has always been on the white protagonist’s quest, whose heroism is narcissistically highlighted by a black presence “playing” in the background. By specifying that “literary blackness” is part of the world of “literary whiteness,” Toni Morrison criticizes the assumption that “traditional, canonical American literature is free of, uninformed, and unshaped by the four-hundred-year-old presence of, first, Afri-

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cans and then African-Americans in the United States” (1992, 4-5). As she stresses in *Playing in the Dark*, the main characteristics of American literature are shaped as a response “to a dark, abiding, signifying Africanist presence,” which is “crucial to [the white writers’] sense of Americanness” (6).

What would have happened, we can ask with Morrison, if such a black character as Hemingway’s Wesley had been individualized, given a prominent role in a narrative in which his only function is to underline the white man’s omnipotence? Hemingway’s text and countless others foreground instances of white heroes whose identity development feeds in a vampire-like manner on the marginal black presence.¹ In order to let the subaltern speak, African American authors had to face the difficult task of transforming this invisible black presence into the central element of a complex racial, spiritual, and cultural adventure. From a silent, subjugated figure, from being simply a substitute of the white man, the black protagonist metamorphoses into a *polytropic*² character, whose restorative presence changes the others’ destiny for the better.

In the motley landscape of contemporary African American literature, Ernest J. Gaines has a distinguished place; his fame grew after the 1970s with the publication of his acclaimed revisionary slave narrative, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*. In his novels – *Catherine Carmier* (1964), *Of Love and Dust* (1967), *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971), *In My Father’s House* (1978), *A Gathering of Old Men* (1983), and *A Lesson before Dying* (1993) – Gaines explores in depth the dehumanizing consequences of racial discrimination, the collision between past and present mind-sets, as well as the importance of resistance to the myth of white supremacy.

Gaines’s novel *A Lesson before Dying* (winner of the 1993 National Book Critics Circle Award) is an intricate instance of the subtle ways in which authorial awareness succeeds in disassociating blacks from degrading images. The author moves away from the representation of black manhood as a simple shadow of the white man’s superego, and moreover, he presents black heroism as a central element of his narrative. In order to accomplish his task, Gaines reaches down to the lowest social strata and brings up the most miserable character – an epitome of the wretched of the earth.

The author chooses the period of the late 1940s, a difficult time characterized by postwar economic uncertainty, racial tensions in a segregated South where Jim Crow laws prevailed, and a growing Southern resistance to integration and recognizing black civil rights. Documenting the violent changes of the time, Gaines describes an event that shakes a small Cajun Louisiana community: the trial of a young black man, Jefferson, who is accidentally involved in shooting a

¹ In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison broadly analyzes the antithesis between the white man, Harry, and the black man, Wesley, two characters in Ernest Hemingway’s *To Have and Have Not*.

² Polytropic from Gr. *polytropos* (*poly* + *tropos*), turning many ways, versatile, also much traveled. As *The Oxford English Dictionary* (1989, vol. XII, s.v.) points out, the term refers to the capability “of turning to many courses or expedients.” In my understanding of the term *polytropic*, there are two basic meanings: first, being polytropic means being in a continuous mental movement; second, it means deviating from settled rules in a multiplicity of directions.

white storekeeper. Accused of murder, Jefferson is condemned to death in the electric chair several months later. During his imprisonment, Jefferson is able to reinvent himself and proves to be an example of humanity for both the black and the white characters. He appears as a symbolic person whose emancipatory movement from physical bondage to spiritual liberation takes place within the circumscribed area of panoptic white power. Jefferson's story is told from the perspective of a black teacher, Grant Wiggins, the character-observer who narrates both his and the others' inner struggle.

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Organized into four sections, the present paper focuses on the importance of reconstructing black manhood in *A Lesson before Dying*. The framing argument is provided by the first section that discusses Gaines's rewriting of the seminal image of the "violent man" or "bad Nigger"³ present in Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940). After addressing some of the similarities in Wright's and Gaines's depiction of the criminal, the analysis moves to various methods employed by Gaines in order to depart from Wright's naturalistic view of existential isolation. While Wright's setting is Chicago after the Great Migration (a cityscape where Bigger gets alienated from the others), Gaines's setting is a Southern town in the late 1940s (a countryside where Jefferson is placed in relation to a supportive community).

The second section demonstrates that it is the teacher's *maieutic* mission to awaken Jefferson's conscience, to transform his *self-crushing*⁴ image into a heroic effigy.⁵ The teacher also has the role of a mediator between the main protagonist and the community. Using Foucault's late writings, the analysis underlines the interrelation between the domains of ethics and freedom, which become essential in reconstructing black manhood.

The third section discusses Gaines's novel in connection with Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952). Tackling the notion of the dominant white discourse, and shaking the buttresses of the white educational institutions, both Ellison and Gaines produce a harsh critique of black existence either as continuous flight or as

³ For a complex analysis of the figure of the "bad man," see Jerry H. Bryant (2003) who discusses nineteenth-century bad man ballads in connection with the image of the violent man in the fiction of authors such as Wright, Baldwin, Ellison, Himes, Mosley, Wideman, and Morrison. The multiple connotations related to the term "bad nigger" are underlined in Litwack 1998, 438.

⁴ "Self-crushing" is a striking attribute to be found in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* 1990 [1937], 122.

⁵ In her essay "New Narratives of Southern Manhood: Race, Masculinity, and Closure in Ernest Gaines's Fiction," Suzanne W. Jones discusses the way in which Gaines's *Lesson* proposes new versions of black masculinity that disagree with traditional male roles. Jones demonstrates that for Gaines's heroes, "being men in a modern world means accepting their vulnerability, expressing a range of emotions, asking for help and support, learning nonviolent means of resolving conflicts, and accepting behaviors that have traditionally been labeled feminine" (30). The present paper takes for granted Jones's ideas and moves the discussion in a new direction by proposing an intertextual analysis of Gaines's ability to reconstruct black male characters.

mere imitation of white models. From the perspective opened by Ellison, the paper stresses how Gaines condemns the false pedagogy that manipulates students according to white rules, and how he insists on a form of resistance pedagogy that implies “communal responsibility” (cf. Folks 1999). Gaines’s novel thus reconceptualizes African American identity as heroic behavior that subverts pre-existing forms of power.

The last section of the paper reveals that *A Lesson before Dying* addresses issues of transcendence. Its message refers not only to the trespassing of racial and social lines, but also to one’s ability to move beyond the designated limits by means of religious belief or faith in a black communal hero. Gaines does not simply restore Jefferson’s dignity, humanity, and sense of liberation in the face of death. He also places him in a religious environment where his heroic redemption resonates deeply into the others’ consciences. His final words inscribed in his journal can be understood as a symbolic “lesson” that encompasses a *peratology* – a science of crossing one’s limits – in which the student/teacher roles are interchangeable.

2. Dispossessions: Native Son’s “Unfinished Quest”

Even though Gaines does not “see the world” in the same way as Richard Wright, he admits in an interview that both of them struggle to present in their writing the same dehumanizing effects of racism (Magnier 1995, 7). Gaines differentiates his manner of writing from that of his precursor, while simultaneously acknowledging their common focus on redefining black identity. As Keith Byerman specifies, “this very denial of literary fathers, also made by James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, and Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), has itself become part of a tradition” (1985, 41).

By drawing an intertextual parallel between Gaines’s *A Lesson before Dying* and Wright’s *Native Son*, one should take into account the two authors’ focus on similar literary matters: the importance of finding imaginative ways of redrawing the figure of the negative character – the outcast, the criminal, the prisoner. Both Wright and Gaines deconstruct the stereotype of the black man as a “beast” reflected in numberless literary portrayals from the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries.⁶ Both authors present young rebellious heroes who seem to “hide from humanity” by experiencing feelings of anger and shame – “that ubiquitous emotion in social life” (Nussbaum 2004, 173). While

⁶ See, for example, Thomas Nelson Page’s *Red Rock* (1898) and Thomas Dixon’s *The Clansman* (1905) as turn-of-the-century novels that proliferate the “beast” image of the black man, an image that has roots in biological views of the African race as inferior. In *The Black Image in the White Mind*, George M. Fredrickson indicates that, at the beginning of the century, demonized images of blacks were propagated mostly in connection with rape. Moreover, “although rape was the central and most horrifying example of the Negro’s allegedly inherent criminality, some writers took a broader approach and emphasized the increase of Negro crime of all sorts” (Fredrickson 1987, 281).

denouncing public exposure and imprisonment as ways of reinforcing white morality, both authors rethink the rebellious image of the *native son* as a means of reconstructing African American manhood.

There is a long, thorny path from Jefferson's wordless apathy to his final words: "Tell Nannan I walked" (254). Jefferson's phrase echoes Bigger's message to his mother: "Tell Ma I was all right and not to worry none" (453). In both novels, self-erasure is replaced by self-affirmation, as expressed by the two heroes' final gesture of overcoming the determinism of social forces. For both characters, their imprisonment initiates the process of self-awareness. On the one hand, Bigger assumes the significance of his crimes as part of his self-definition and learns to articulate his own story in order to defend himself. On the other hand, Jefferson becomes conscious of the uselessness of his anger and the impossibility of claiming his innocence, while acknowledging that a dignified attitude is the only solution.

A Lesson before Dying begins where *Native Son* ends.⁷ While captivated by the sensational thriller of Bigger Thomas's troubled existence, while watching his two crimes, his flight, capture, trial and death sentence, one is left with a sense of Bigger's unfulfilled potential. Subtly connecting in a naturalistic manner the relationship between Bigger's environment and his reaction to it, Wright places him in a communal void. As Nick Aaron Ford suggests, the main theme of Wright's novel encodes "the inability of the individual to find satisfactory fellowship in the group" (1970, 29). What triggered the causes of his "unfinished quest"?⁸ What made Bigger surround himself with this impenetrable aura of spiteful solitude? Was it his mother's version of the American Dream, her desire for him to find a decent job that would pull them out of the poorest black neighborhoods in Chicago? Or the impossibility to continue attending a Southern school during the Great Depression of the 1930s? Or the killing of his father in a riot when Bigger was a boy?

Trapped in a hostile social environment, Bigger is alienated from both the black and the white community. When he is fortunate enough to get a "decent job" as a chauffeur for a white family, the Daltons, he still perceives their Daltonism, their color blindness that accounts for their inability to really see him. Even Mary, their "open minded" daughter, makes him feel insecure whenever she treats him as her equal, thus stressing the racial/social gap between them. As some critics have suggested, although he kills Mary by accident, his act might be fully intended.

The above remarks were primarily supposed to draw attention to the feeling of universal dispossession that Wright constantly inflicts upon his character. The

⁷ It is interesting to remember here *Native Son*'s genesis. Disclosing the process of writing his novel in his Introduction to *Native Son*, Wright confesses that he initially wrote the last part of the novel, that is, the scene in the courtroom.

⁸ Cf. Fabre (1973) who argues that *Native Son* seems to end without developing Bigger's sense of liberation. In Wright's own words, the novel seems to contain a number of "unrealized potentialities" (Wright 2000, 30).

writer himself underlines that Bigger Thomas “is the product of a dislocated society,” that “he is a dispossessed and disinherited man” (Wright 2000, 15). Hence the epigraph of his novel, pointing to the emblematic story of the Biblical Job – whose loss functions as a test of faith:

Even today is my complaint rebellious,
My stroke is heavier than my groaning. (32)

Bigger’s dispossession should be considered both in a social and economic context, as well as from a cultural and religious perspective. As most critics have suggested, his failure to be integrated into the system is mostly due to the very system that “is responsible for everything Bigger is” (Jackson 1985, 447). More than that, Bigger is dispossessed of human assistance, as he dangerously inhabits an emotional wasteland. He becomes estranged from his girlfriend, Bessie, whom he rapes and later kills for fear that she would betray him. He has no real friend to show him compassion, the only exceptions being the communist Jan and his advocate Max, who finally do their best to understand him. As we follow Bigger’s tempestuous race, all the other characters fade into mere sketches, lose their concreteness, and no longer interact with him. In such a Sartrean, existentialist novel, the individual is left alone and there is no prospect to transcend subjectivity.

If we read *A Lesson before Dying* with *Native Son* as a point of reference, we observe that Gaines’s book opens with the same motif of crime and punishment with which Wright’s novel ends. In prison, Jefferson embodies a new version of a Native Son: a lonely, victimized, orphaned character. Job’s complaint is even truer in Jefferson’s case, since he is a naïve young man who suffers undeservedly. Even if he is accidentally involved in the shooting of a white man, even if the defense calls him “an innocent bystander,” the prosecutor keeps stressing Jefferson’s premeditated crime, placing his story in a stereotypical scenario where he presumably plays the role of the “bad Nigger.” His attempt to establish the truth is useless, his testimony does not count:

A white man had been killed during a robbery, and though two of the robbers had been killed on the spot, one had been captured, and he, too, would have to die. Though he told them no, he had nothing to do with it, that he was on his way to the White Rabbit Bar and Lounge when Brother and Bear drove up beside him and offered him a ride. After he got into the car, they asked him if he had any money. When he told them he didn’t have a solitary dime, it was then that Brother and Bear started talking credit, saying that old Gropé should not mind crediting them a pint since he knew them well, and he knew that the grinding season was coming soon, and they would be able to pay him back then. (4)

The above scene reminds us of another instance in *Native Son*, in which Bigger’s pals Gus, Jack, and G.H. are the same sort of troublemakers as Jefferson’s friends, Brother and Bear. In *Native Son*, Bigger and his friends plan to rob a white man’s shop, but the plan is never realized. What is only suggested in Wright’s novel does actually take place in Gaines’s story. Here, Jefferson’s friends do not commit a premeditated crime, since their only intention is to have a drink. As the white storekeeper refuses to offer them alcohol, they shoot and kill each other. Left

alone at the scene of the crime, Jefferson acts unintentionally, in a state of prostrated bewilderment. His half-conscious decision of having a drink and getting the money from the counter stigmatizes him in white people's eyes as a criminal, a drunkard, and a robber.

Without social and moral status, Jefferson suffers another form of dispossession: he is deprived of his manhood, his intelligence, his humanity. Significantly, this blow does not come from the prosecution, but from the defense that uses the argument of racial inferiority as the very proof of Jefferson's lack of guilt. In front of a racially mixed audience, the court-appointed attorney invokes Jefferson's racial inferiority as an argument for his innocence. He thus brings forth the reductive perspectives upon Africans that have been perpetuated by the works of such philosophers as Friedrich Hegel, David Hume, or Arnold Toynbee. The zoomorphic definition that the attorney manages to imprint on Jefferson's identity – "a cornered animal," "a hog" (7) – discloses the attorney's internalization of white prejudices. Intertextually, this definition evokes another scene in Wright's novel, where Buckley, the prosecuting attorney, repeatedly calls Bigger a "half-human black," a "thing," a "beast," a "fiend" (403). In addition, the newspapers proliferate an animal-like image of Bigger, a demonized version of a criminal and rapist whom the enraged whites desire to lynch. As Trudier Harris explains, lynching was a form of punishment that emerged as a result of racial antagonism, serving as an instrument to consolidate white supremacy by symbolically and literally emasculating black men (1984, xii). Even if the events in *A Lesson before Dying* happen nearly twenty years after those in *Native Son*, and even if Gaines's novel does not explicitly discuss lynching, this idea appears in infinitely subtle ways. One may argue here that Jefferson is spiritually lynched, crippled, and mortified. Like Bigger, Jefferson is "a particular person who struggles with the burden of his humanity" (Gibson 1995, 35), with the white reductive gaze that stigmatizes him as a criminal.

Jefferson's precarious notion of *being* is defined in terms of not *having*, so that his own pejorative self-definition marks his dispossession, as is revealed by the dialogue between Jefferson and Grant:

"Reverend Ambrose say I have to give up what's down here. Say there ain't nothing down here on this earth for me no more."
 "He meant possessions, Jefferson. Cars, money, clothes – things like that."
 "You ever seen me with a car, Mr. Wiggins?"
 "No."
 "With more than a dollar in my pocket?"
 "No."
 "More than two pair shoes, Mr. Wiggins? One for Sunday, and for working in?"
 "No, Jefferson."
 "Then what on earth I got to give up, Mr. Wiggins?"
 "You've never had any possessions to give up, Jefferson. But there is something greater than possessions – and that is love..."
 "Y'all asking a lot, Mr. Wiggins, from a poor old nigger who never had nothing." (222)

In addition to the reference to Jefferson's lack of possessions, this scene also contains the solution employed by Gaines to redefine his protagonist. As this paper

will further explore, *A Lesson before Dying* stresses that only Jefferson's responsible care for the others, as well as the others' united efforts to help him can be channelled towards a collective project of spiritual redemption.

3. The Teacher's "Lesson": Ethics and Freedom

Enlarging Wright's textual quest, Gaines accomplishes a thorough revision of African American male identity in relationship to Southern communal values, social institutions, and racial issues. *A Lesson before Dying* thus focuses on an initiatory process, during which Jefferson acquires a polytropic identity so that his self-definition changes from an animal-like to a heroic image. In this way, Gaines's "fiction demonstrates his penetrating understanding of the complexities and subtleties of universal nature that affect and are affected by these regional realities" (Hudson 1985, 515). In truth, the South appears as a significant regional reality whose ethical principles contribute to Jefferson's self-reconstruction. Unlike Bigger – an uprooted character taken from his native South to Chicago – Jefferson is beneficially affected by the Southern traditional culture, "which includes African-American religion, respect for elders, loyalty to family and neighbors, and common-sense morality, a useful and enduring cultural tradition that can be set against the fragmentation inherent in the long Diaspora" (Folks 1999, 259).

In this Southern milieu, Gaines creates a constellation of symbolic black figures that contribute to Jefferson's development: the teacher (Grant Wiggins), Jefferson's godmother (Miss Emma), Grant's lover (Vivian), Grant's aunt (Tante Lou), the priest (Reverend Ambrose), and the children whom Grant teaches. In addition, a white man significantly named Paul Bonin appears to show sympathy for Jefferson; like the Biblical Paul converted to Christianity, Paul Bonin is "converted" to an understanding that transcends racial limits. In this way, Gaines's reconstruction of black manhood transforms his hero's invisibility (imprisonment/marginality) into visibility (liberation/centrality) by placing him in relation to the black and white community.

By highlighting the principles of the elders, Grant Wiggins makes an important contribution to Jefferson's conversion. His role is reminiscent of a mediator between the *puer* and the *senex*, between Jefferson (the rebellious youth) and Miss Emma (the wise elder). Grant has to assume the role of an educator, as urged by Miss Emma's words: "I don't want them to kill no hog. I want a man to go to that chair, on his own two feet" (13). Miss Emma's words intertextually allude to the famous lines written by the Harlem Renaissance poet Claude McKay: "If we must die, let it not be like hogs/Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot" (1997, 984). McKay's insistence on heroic self-reconstruction is echoed by Grant's ideas. Grant thus realizes that his task of assisting Jefferson in redefining himself implies going against the white system that strives to implant self-denigrating images in young black men. Sensing the implications of such a burdensome enterprise, Grant's first gesture is one of negation, of refusal to play "God" (31).

As autumn stretches inaudibly into winter, Grant undertakes a subtle metamorphosis during which the complex facets of his personality are polished through his interaction with the elders. Together with Miss Emma, Reverend Ambrose, and Tante Lou, Grant pays visits to Jefferson in prison, striving to reach beyond the boy's inaccessible blankness. Grant's double task as witness and agent of Jefferson's trial opens up the text for new symbolic readings:

I was not there, yet I was there. No, I did not go to the trial, I did not hear the verdict, because I knew all the time what it would be. Still, I was there. I was there as much as anyone else was there. Either I sat behind my aunt and his godmother or I sat beside them. (3)

Through the technique of *indirect directness* which suggests both attachment and detachment, the above fragment hints at the narrator's ubiquitous *presentia in absentia*, to his position as an insider/outsider, able to preserve his perspective while incorporating the views of others. The paragraph also sets the utterly simple, objective tone of the novel à la Hemingway; it points to the procedure of not burdening the sentence unnecessarily, as if leaving space for the words to breathe.

This metaphorical freedom of words is made explicit in the message of the novel: the importance of liberating oneself from the white normative discourse that reifies blackness. In this respect, the book deeply resonates with Michel Foucault's views. Throughout his work, Foucault stresses the impossibility of liberating oneself from the network of power in which one is caught, while he nevertheless maintains that one can become free only in connection with others. In his late texts, Foucault constructs the "ethics of the concern of the self," in which one's self-formation is connected with one's relationship to others. He considers that "human freedom is expressed in the deliberate actions individuals perform in response to others and the world," so that "one can be neither detached from one's own actions and possibilities nor inconsiderate of others and still be free" (Infinito 2003, 156-7).

Gaines emphasizes that the complementary domains of ethics and freedom are equally important for his characters' ontological (re)definition. In a creative sense, both ethics and freedom are essential for Jefferson's and Grant's self-transformation, as well as for changing others. Being a teacher, Grant strongly advocates the importance of ethics for a new educational system that assists one's formation, in an antinomian manner that defies normalized identities.⁹ Struggling to disrupt various formative discourses, Grant must fight on several battlefields: the black man's cell, the black children's school, the white man's kitchen, and the black people's club. Using what Foucault called "technologies of the self" (1988a), Grant helps Jefferson assume a fully realized identity by revealing to him his potential

⁹ James Marshall states that Foucault's work on power has challenged the process of education from two points of view: "first, philosophically, his work challenges liberal education philosophy (and liberal education) and its use of authority as the fundamental concept for describing and understanding the 'process' of the transmission of knowledge [...]. Second, he challenges the relationship between teacher and learner and the sorts of human relationship that underline that relationship" (2002, 413-4).

for spiritual freedom in spite of the imprisoning conditions. This form of reconstructing manhood is thus achieved only through intense self-examination and dialogue with others.¹⁰

Even if he is placed in the privileged position of a literate person, Grant himself passes through an acute crisis characterized by his feeling of entrapment within the limitations of his own community.¹¹ His frustration is exacerbated by the scarcity of financial means, the poverty of children, and meagre teaching materials. The place where he teaches – the church – functions as a symbolic setting, framing his pedagogic assignment within the community's religious activity. By juxtaposing the church and the school in the same institutionalized space, Gaines urges the reader to consider their equal importance in education. Both the church and the school appear as systems of power that work to discipline either the body or the spirit. Conscious that the church is imbued by white ideology, Grant admits that even his teaching has to follow the imposed white norms meant to “tame” black children by keeping them half-illiterate.

In the segregated South of the late 1940s, where the doctrine “separate but equal” actually meant “separated but unequal,” Grant is able to recognize the social and economic reasons that made many white people oppose any education for blacks. Seen as “mules and oxen,” African Americans were needed as a source of cheap labor and this is why they were consciously denied access to knowledge (Litwack 1998, 101). As Frank Schubert cogently notes, Gaines's novel is “a strong reminder of the South's success in the Civil War.” The novel stresses the maintenance “of a two-tiered racial system, albeit without chattel slavery, through a combination of legislation, custom, and outright terror for an entire century. The vocabulary of Gaines's novel underscores the South's long-term triumph – ‘plantation,’ ‘quarter,’ ‘back door’ – as does the entire narrative regarding social arrangements” [Schubert, copy in author's files].¹²

¹⁰ As Justen Infinito points out, “absolute control of or liberation from the forces of power was not Foucault's goal – indeed, for him this is an impossibility – nevertheless, he advocated exerting our positive freedom by experimenting on and creating a self” (2003, 163). According to Foucault, there are certain technologies of self-formation that allow us to disrupt various discourses. Exploring the ancient technologies of the self, Foucault noticed that the Greeks used to understand their own existence as a permanent exercise (1988 b).

¹¹ Grant's desire to leave is also hindered by his relationship with his girlfriend, Vivian Baptiste, who gets divorced and, in order to keep her children, cannot leave Bayonne. Symbolically, Vivian reminds us of Catherine Carmier, the title heroine of Gaines's first novel (1964). Like Catherine, Vivian comes from a Creole family who forbids her to associate with anyone darker than herself. Like Catherine, who falls in love with Jackson, a black man, Vivian's first husband is black – hence the racial and emotional conflict initiated by her family's mentality. Moreover, by describing the relationship between Grant and Vivian, *A Lesson before Dying* also stresses another aspect: Vivian's struggle to be accepted as a Creole by Grant's black community. Since Vivian, Grant's aunt, and Miss Emma share the same religious and ethical values, they learn to accept and respect each other.

¹² Schubert's point is also supported by Oliver and Lois E. Horton, who draw attention to the difference between the urban, industrial North and the rural, agrarian South where the two-tiered slave system survived during Reconstruction, and later during the twentieth century: “As the nation turned its attention to the more northern concerns of industrialization, urbanization, and European migration, the South was increasingly free to develop its own

A significant instance of disciplining ideology is offered in a key scene, in which Dr. Joseph, the school inspector, pays a visit to the school. As in an episode taken from a slave narrative, Dr. Joseph starts inspecting the children's hands and teeth. His "lesson" to them lays stress on hard work, leaving little room for intellectual activities: "In other words, hard work was good for the young body. Picking cotton, gathering potatoes, pulling onions, working in the garden – all of that was good exercise for a growing boy or girl" (56). Mispronouncing Wiggins's name, Dr. Joseph hilariously calls him *Higgins*, a name that reminds us of the professor in Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*. Indeed, departing from the model offered by Dr. Joseph, Grant assumes the true role of a Pygmalion, one who does not only transform himself, but also models his students internally into "responsible young men and young ladies" (39). Through a Foucauldian lens, Grant's demand from each of his students is to *work* on himself or herself, seeking to "develop and transform oneself, and to attain to a certain mode of being" (Foucault 1984, 282). By all means, Grant searches for transgressive ways of breaking the vicious circle that makes these children either run away from Bayonne or remain at home to live in poverty. His option for a form of pedagogical ethics that is constructive rather than reductive points to his understanding of education as a liberating process of self-creation and not as a process of normalization.

4. Rethinking Ellison: "A Myth of Success"

Searching for new pedagogical means of reconstructing black identity, Gaines undermines the white institutionalized educational standards. In his *Lesson*, he highlights two types of fallacies that have led to an erroneous idea of freedom: first, the error of negating the black community's values, and second, the mistake of unselectively adopting the white educational models. The representation of African American identity forks in two directions: in the first instance, the black person turns into an outsider/runaway, while in the second, he/she turns into a mere imitator/pretender.

A famous critique of these two stereotypes – the runaway and the imitator – can be found in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Ellison's masterpiece stresses the same point as *A Lesson before Dying*, i.e. negative images of black identity are proliferated in order to consolidate the myth of white domination. As will be further discussed in this part, both Ellison and Gaines expose the necessity of subverting hegemonic norms by challenging the image of the black fugitive and that of the black imitator. At the beginning of *Invisible Man*, the narrator's grandfather urges the reader to become accomplice to his haunting message: "To Whom It May Concern: Keep This Nigger-Boy Running" (26). As the nameless narrator obeys his grandfather's advice, his existence proves to be a continuous flight. We follow his convoluted trajectory from the rural South to the urban

policies on race, and southern blacks found themselves isolated in poverty and oppression. For most African Americans freedom remained – in the words of poet Langston Hughes a generation later – 'a dream deferred'" (2001, 199).

North, from the Edenic college to the paint factory, from the Brotherhood to his hibernating hole. While “the boomerangs of history are ever whirling down on the protagonist’s naïve head” (O’Meally 1994, 245), two more decades will pass before he acknowledges the uselessness of his running, the illusion of his progress.¹³ In order to do that, he will have to get rid of his dream of equality, of his “unquestioning willingness to do what is required of him by others as a myth of success” (Ellison 1972, 177). His innocence manifests itself on various occasions: when he is expelled from college for revealing too much about his black people to Mr. Norton, a white man; when he is unable to obtain a job as a result of the accusatory letters he receives from Dr. Bledsoe; when he misinterprets the Brotherhood’s manipulation of phony social slogans. Ultimately, his descent into his well-lit hole conveys the pointlessness of his existential flight and the revelation of his emblematic invisibility.

The grandfather’s message in *Invisible Man* adumbrates Matthew Antoine’s ideas in *A Lesson before Dying*. A former teacher, Matthew Antoine stresses the importance of escaping a choking environment by prompting his students to run away from Bayonne, despite the violent death that might await them in the future. Putting into practice Antoine’s advice of breaking their vicious circle, a great number of young men have been mesmerized by the Eldorado of a better life. Away from their community, labeled as criminals, they could never transcend the poverty and violence of their condition. Consequently, Antoine’s pedagogy perpetuates the myth of black illiteracy that goes back to the time of slavery. Referring to the inability to surpass the determinism of social forces, Antoine chastises Grant for his increased efforts to educate his pupils, to “scrape away” their ignorance:

When you see that those five and a half months you spend in that church each year are just a waste of your time, you will. You will. You’ll see that it’ll take more than five and a half months to wipe away the blanket of ignorance that has been plastered and replastered over those brains in the past three hundred years. (64)

Antoine and Wiggins therefore personify two contrasting educational views. While the first advocates the uselessness of any didactic effort, the latter strives to find ways of guiding the students in their attempt to overcome the oppressive conditions of their circumscribed existence.

At the same time, via Grant, Gaines does not only criticize the image of the black fugitive, but also that of the black imitator. In order to accomplish his liberating mission, Grant must prove the falsity of the learning he has received from the university, the place where one is told “how to succeed in the South as a colored man” (Gaines 1993, 65). Whereas in college he was taught mere numbers and letters, Grant now realizes that he needs to grasp the real situation of his people. Gaines emphasizes the black students’ manipulation by means of the mirage of a successful career – an idea to be found in *Invisible Man* as well.

¹³ The invisible man acknowledges his awareness in the prologue of Ellison’s book, where he thinks retrospectively: “I have been boomeranged across my head so much that now I can see the darkness of lightness” (5).

In the famous college episode in *Invisible Man*, Ellison ironically depicts two heroic black men whose intellectual efforts have lifted their people: the Founder and Dr. Bledsoe.¹⁴ Their legendary biographies document poor men who rose to important positions, leaders who strove to inspire tender minds. A dangerous Janus-faced personality, Bledsoe models his existence upon the white men's standards, while he stands as an example to be emulated by black students. As his voice modulates into humbleness and his face assumes the mask of meekness, he is a master of appearance whose power manipulates the white millionaires who "support" the college but cannot really control it. Conscious that all institutions are run by white people, Bledsoe has to be subversive and "act the nigger" in order to maintain and consolidate his position. Under his façade of humility, his tactic is doubly aimed at controlling influential white men and deceiving innocent black students – the future teachers.

Searching for a solution to the white-faced education presented in *Invisible Man*, Gaines creates another type of black teacher, essentially different from Bledsoe. Grant Wiggins does not have Dr. Bledsoe's material possessions, influence and power, nor is he the leader of a prosperous Southern college. Yet, at the modest school level, Grant dares to search for various educational methods that can reconstruct a liberated image of African American identity. His confession to Jefferson encompasses his open dissatisfaction with the normative system:

I have always done what they wanted me to do, teach reading, writing, and arithmetic. Nothing else – nothing about dignity, nothing about identity, nothing about loving and caring. They never thought we were capable of learning these things. 'Teach those niggers how to print their names and how to figure on their fingers.' And I went along, but hating myself all the time for doing so. (192)

As the scene takes place in the day room of the prison where Jefferson is brought with chains around his ankles, the teacher's words attain a profound significance. Jefferson is one of those misled children who have wrongly internalized the whites' belief in their own superiority, one who was turned into a victim by the whites' need to consolidate their authority by scapegoating others.

In order to help Jefferson regain his self-esteem and develop his personality, Grant asks him to become a hero, in his own words, to be one who does something for others. Grant's demand of sacrificial heroism is essential not just for Jefferson's redemption, but also for educating others.¹⁵ In this respect, black children need someone who can stand as a genuine model of higher conduct. Jef-

¹⁴ Commenting upon the portrait of The Founding Father and Bledsoe, Robert Stepto affirms: "While the demystification of these would-be examples is prerequisite for the *Invisible Man*'s blossoming as a truly literate figure, the thrust of the narrative is not to replace these portraits with that of the *Invisible Man* as a heroic example. Rather, it is to *identify* Bledsoe, Norton, and the rest as varying fictions of reality and history which must be deposed [...], defiled in order for the fiction that is the narrative to be imagined" (Stepto 1986, 61).

¹⁵ There are two instances in the novel when Grant searches for models of heroes. One is Jackie Robinson (the first African American to play baseball in the major leagues and an activist in the Civil Rights Movement in 1947). The other one is Charles Stewart Parnell (the Irish national hero, leader of the Irish nationalist movement during the early 1880s).

erson's godmother also needs his courage in order to die peacefully, and in his turn, Reverend Ambrose needs Jefferson's conversion as a religious example for his community. Last but not least, Grant himself acknowledges Jefferson's importance for his own self-discovery and development as a true teacher. As Suzanne Jones specifies, Jefferson's ability to make something of himself becomes a true lesson for Grant, "who by succeeding with Jefferson learns that he can make a difference by teaching in the rural South" (2004, 140).

At a deeper level, Jefferson's heroism represents a means of destabilizing white supremacy, the "old lie that people believe in" (192). As Grant explains to Jefferson, black people need someone who is able to embody the "common humanity that is in us all" (192). Through Jefferson's example, the meaning of a whole history of slavery is overturned, left without a justification. By demonstrating his humanity, Jefferson proves the falsity of the white myth, as shown by Grant: "I want you – yes, you – to call them liars. I want you to show them that you are as much a man – more a man than they can ever be [...]. You – you can be bigger than anyone you have ever met" (192-3).

In this light, Gaines undertakes a thorough reconsideration of Ellison's pedagogic view. While, in essence, both authors strive to undermine the white supremacy that propagates degrading images of black people, the two employ different techniques in order to find educational solutions. Ellison acknowledges pretension as a subversive weapon, whereas Gaines ascribes a redeeming role to heroism.

On the one hand, Ellison advocates invisibility and camouflaged fighting through the use of masks and ambivalence as means of overcoming white power. For that reason, the invisible man's grandfather utters oracular words on his deathbed, advising the narrator to be "a spy in the enemy's country," to "overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction" (13). In this sense, the narrator's emblematic invisibility is nothing else but "covert preparation for a more overt action" (*Invisible Man* 11).

On the other hand, Gaines stresses the significance of Jefferson's visibility and exemplary posture as a means of undermining white rules: "You have the chance of being *bigger* than anyone who has ever lived on that plantation or come from this little town. You can do it if you try" (193, my italics). Above all, the author conflates a strong message of racial uplift in Jefferson's transfiguration. It is the aim of the final part of this paper to demonstrate how Jefferson's identity comes to symbolize that "piece of drifting wood" that can be polished through the increased efforts of communal support.

5. Jefferson's Notebook: "Humanity Masked with Blackness"

Gaines asserts the importance of an education based on communal solidarity and searches for new pedagogic ways that strengthen intra- and inter-racial relations. His view on human solidarity distances him from Wright's and Ellison's tradition that emphasized the characters' isolation from their community. Gaines ultimately aims at rewriting the former image of the lonely black individual as a *native son* or

invisible man (partly juxtaposed in Jefferson's portrait) by providing us with a pedagogy of communal responsibility.

Importantly, Gaines manages to subvert in his novel the preexisting perception of intra- and inter-racial relations.¹⁶ Through the communal lesson, not only black people attain a complex awareness of themselves, but also white people acquire a new perspective upon blackness.¹⁷ While at the beginning of the novel, white people perceive African Americans in a degrading way, some of them gradually change their views. Impressed by Jefferson's Christ-like courage in the face of death, Paul Bonin, for instance, is "converted" to a new understanding that transcends racial limits. Witnessing Jefferson's death, Paul comes to testify for Jefferson's heroic manhood, symbolically ingrained in his message: "Tell Nannan I walked" (254).

Jefferson's "standing," his heroic reformation is finally accomplished in the process of writing. In this way, his self "is constituted intertextually across a range of discursive practices," his subject being "active in the negotiation of those discursive practices" (Lloyd 1996, 253-4). Coming from a half-literate character, Jefferson's notebook represents the antithetical response to a whole system whose social, racial, religious, and even economic basis is undermined. In a broken confession, his writing emerges as a fundamental means of reconstructing black male identity. His *écriture masculine*¹⁸ has the therapeutic function of overcoming the traumatic event of his inevitable death by transmitting to the others his most intimate thoughts.

The pen and the notebook – which were symbolically given to Jefferson by the teacher – become essential instruments in redefining Jefferson's identity. As Jefferson's journal is preserved and shown to others in the future, his writing has the role of *communication* that takes "the form of a *community*-making" (Sell 2004, 29), i.e. of creating links between various individuals and acknowledging their common beliefs. Gaines therefore succeeds in creating a Bildungsroman in which Jefferson recreates himself from an enslaved man into someone who is able to transfigure his existential imprisonment into a liberating "lesson" for others. Unlike in canonized white texts, the black protagonist is no longer a meek, shadow-like presence reinforcing the splendor of the white character. On the contrary, Gaines's novel reveals to us the African American man as a standing hero, whose final endurance remains an exemplary lesson inscribed in both the black and white communal spirit.

Returning to the initial argument of this paper, we may finally notice that the stereotypical assumption undermined in Gaines's novel is the inability of the African American character to transform, to evolve, and to be more than a simple

¹⁶ Gaines does not only reconsider black and white relations. He also pays attention to the relation between blacks and Creoles in two significant instances. One of them hints at Vivian's Creole blood, the other at the conflict between blacks and Creoles at the Rainbow Club.

¹⁷ At the end of the novel, Jefferson's death is narrated from the perspective of various black and white characters who sympathize more or less with his suffering.

¹⁸ Mark J. Justard used the term "écriture masculine" in his essay on male physicality, stressing how this type of writing "deconstructs stereotypical constructions of masculinity" (1996, xi).

pawn in the white people's legal game. No longer a scapegoat or a contrastive image, the African American character becomes part of a redemptive project that makes both black and white people reconsider their deepest held convictions. To paraphrase Ellison, Gaines tells us that "in his America humanity masked its face with blackness" (1994b, 148).

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Gaines's novel *A Lesson before Dying* (winner of the 1933 National Book Critics Circle Award) is an intricate instance of the subtle ways in which authorial awareness succeeds in disassociating blacks from degrading images. The author moves away from the representation of black manhood as a simple shadow of the white man's superego, and moreover, he presents black heroism as a central element of his narrative. Organized into four sections, the present paper focuses on the importance of reconstructing black manhood in *A Lesson before Dying*. The framing argument is provided by the first section that discusses Gaines's rewriting of the seminal image of the "violent man" or "bad Nigger" present in Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940). Ernest J. Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying* offers a painful yet inspirational tale of institutional injustice and personal redemption. It addresses the biggest theme possible—"how one affirms life in the face of death. What is the NEA Big Read? That Ernest J. Gaines wrings a hopeful ending out of such grim material only testifies to his prodigious gifts as a storyteller. How *A Lesson Before Dying* Came to Be Written. The following is excerpted from Ernest J. Gaines's interview with Dan Stone. The Pulitzer jury shortlisted Gaines again. He walked off with the prestigious National Book Critics Circle Award. A MacArthur Fellowship finally gave him some financial security, and he married Dianne Saulney, a Miami attorney who grew up in "where else?" Louisiana. "Tell Nannan I Walked". Reconstructing Manhood in Ernest J. Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*. If we must die, let it not be like hogs. Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot (McKay 1997, 984)). The major conflict in my work is when the black male attempts to go beyond the line that is drawn for him. But you've also got conflict between young and old, between the desire to go back to the place where you were born or to stay where you are, between religious feeling and atheism! There has to be conflict before there can be a story and before the story reveals racial tensions (Gaines, in Magnier 19 Main *A Lesson Before Dying*. Mark as downloaded. *A Lesson Before Dying*. Gaines Ernest J. Categories: Fiction. Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Gaines, Ernest J., 1933—"A lesson before dying / Ernest J. Gaines." 1st Vintage contemporaries ed. p.cm. (Vintage contemporaries) 1. Afro-American men—"Louisiana"—Fiction. 2. Death row inmates—"Louisiana"—Fiction. — That's not a simple sentence, I told her. That's a slanted sentence. A simple sentence is written on a straight line. *A Lesson Before Dying* - Free download as Word Doc (.doc), PDF File (.pdf), Text File (.txt) or read online for free. a lesson before dying. Ernest J. Gaines, in his own words: "We all know—at least intellectually—that we're going [to die]. The difference is being told, 'Okay, it's tomorrow at 10 a.m.' How do you react to that? How do you face it? That, it seems to me, is the ultimate test of life. "When I speak to black students about Hemingway, they often ask me what I expect them to learn from 'that white man.' I tell them: 'All Hemingway wrote about was grace under pressure. And he was talking about you. Can you tell me a better example of grace under pressure than our people for t