PIA MASIERO

The Question of Racial Identity in William Faulkner's 'Ad Astra'

The desire to be has become the desire to belong.
We assume that because we have the label we have the understanding.
Jean Toomer, *Essentials.*

'Ad Astra', first published in *American Caravan* in 1931, then revised for *These 13* later that same year,[1] was published in William Faulkner's *Collected Short Stories* as the story which opens its fourth section, 'The Wasteland'.

The vacuum-suspended atmosphere of the last days of war away from home which pervades and dominates the whole short story makes of 'Ad Astra' a privileged *locus* for the assessment of the dynamics at play in the definition of identity along racial lines. The theme of the definition of an ethnically-connoted identity runs as an undercurrent in the macrocosm of Faulkner's fictional world. We may actually say that Faulkner's texts are all at least "relatively about" [2] the mechanisms of creation of usable identities in black and white.

I would argue that the presence of a non-white character - the subadar - in a non-American setting, may indirectly shed light on the color issue, as it is played upon in the heart of Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha county.

The two narrative *loci* on which I will focus my attention in order to assess how this central issue is concretely at work in 'Ad Astra' are acts and names. I believe, in fact, that these two categories are both - if differently - definitional. On the one hand, the (re-)shaping of the world which is the intrinsic end of any action may be viewed as an unveiling of the identity of the shaper - of his desires, of his perception and understanding of the world

and of himself. On the other, names (and appellations) are the linguistic manifestations of social and racial conceptions of self and world and as such they may be considered the vital center of the definition of an identity.

The acts and namings the subadar either perpetrates or suffers are the starting point from which I will read emblematically the identity of a non-white person among a color-conscious group of white Americans.

> I dont know what we were. With the exception of Comyn, we had started out Americans, but after three years, in our British tunics and British wings and here and there a ribbon, I dont suppose we had even bothered in three years to wonder what we were, to think or to remember. And on that day, that evening, we were even less than that, or more than that: either beneath or beyond the knowledge that we had not even wondered in three years.[3]

The first person narrator's opening words, "I dont know what we were", are the underlying motif which informs the dialogues and the characters' different understanding of who they are. The existential problem is stated in very clear terms. The first person narrator acts as a catalytic agent: he, in fact, gathers the personal threads of his own and his companions' living "beneath or beyond" the consciousness of an easily definable and definite existence. All of them seem to have lost completely the coordinates of a usable definition of themselves: their original identity - being Americans - is covered and hidden behind a uniform which makes them, on the one hand, British, and on the other, soldiers.

The loss of their most true, because original, identifiable self, is represented symbolically by the uniform of a foreign country. Yet, wearing a British tunic is only the most visible mark of a sort of existential schizophrenia: the dispossession of their selves is, in fact, represented most notably by their living a life away from the preoccupation of having lost an organizing center. "I don't suppose we had even bothered", we were "either beneath or beyond the knowledge", says the narrator, looking twelve years back in recollection: their lives seem to be characterized much more by the quality of mere survival, than by that of a meaningful living.[4]

The existential condition hinted at in these first lines provides

the background against which we can measure the subadar's sense of his own identity, his choices as regards his definition of himself. Quite in contrast with the 'we' the first person narrator has depicted in the opening paragraphs, the subadar is immediately presented as the most acute reader of the new condition created by the war.

Untouched by alcohol, the subadar is, in fact, the first one to answer indirectly to the 'what-we-were' question put forward and left suspended by the narrating voice. He suggests: '"We are like men trying to move in water, with held breath [...], robbed of all save the impotence and the need.'"(*CSS,* 407)

This similarity which helps the subadar to define the whole party ('we') is followed by a definition of himself: '"In my country I was prince. But all men are brothers.'" (*CSS,* 408) This first brief statement about himself already contains the subadar's existential parable in condensed form.

According to the first part of it, there was a time and a place in which the subadar was something very different from what he is now: 'then' and 'there' he occupied one of the highest places in the socio-political hierarchy of his homeland. The change, both in his status and in his present location, is obviously contained in the verbal tense he uses: the 'was' implies that the subadar is *now* living a downgraded foreign life, being a soldier among soldiers. The second half of the statement adumbrates the reason for this Copernican change in his life: the logic of hereditary privilege which is in its own nature associated with inequalities, clashes, in fact, with the ideological faith in the brotherhood of all men, based on the background premise that everyone should share in the same dignity as a human being. This theme will be repeatedly returned to by the subadar and echoed by the German prisoner, two men who seem to be both in need to repeat, first of all to themselves, the reasons for their actions.

> "By removing myself I undid in one day what it took two thousand years to do. Is not that something." [..] "Well", Bland said, "I suppose the English government is doing more to free your people than you could." (*CSS,* 427)

This exchange touches the core of the subadar's identity and provides a deepening of his first definition of himself. The

subadar's identity emerges through the description of an act which has marked for him the beginning of a new life and imparted a completely new meaning to it.

The subadar's propeller seems to be, borrowing Charles Taylor's expression, "a new ideal of authenticity", which requires him to shun the mechanisms of definition of identities typical of hierarchical societies: the subadar perceives that his possibility of being authentic passes through the rejection of an identity "largely fixed by one's social position". The direction the subadar wants to give to his life leads to a reshaping of his identity, away from his socially derived one, in search for an "inwardly generated"[5] way of being.

> My discovering my own identity doesn't mean that I work it out in isolation, but that I negotiate it through dialogue, partly overt, partly internal with others. That is why the development of an ideal of inwardly generated identity gives a new importance to recognition. [...] On the intimate level, we can see how much an original identity needs and is vulnerable to the recognition given or withheld by significant others. It is not surprising that in the culture of authenticity, relationships are seen as the key loci of self-discovery and self-affirmation.[6]

As Taylor makes clear, the subadar's decision to be true to his own original identity places him in a completely new relationship to others. Whereas, in his own hierarchical society, other people's recognition was directed by fixed social roles and thus, being divested of any kind of shaping power, was virtually irrelevant, in the society the subadar decides to live in, other people become a crucial presence insofar as identity is a concept to be negotiated in this egalitarian context. Both self-discovery and self-affirmation, i.e., the birth and adulthood of one's self-image, depend on this negotiation: thus, as identity stands at the crossroads between the self and others, both parties have to be considered its active shapers.

The subadar's case highlights the dialogic nature of the definition of an identity very well: the dynamics which underlies the negotiation of the subadar's identity, namely, the dialectics of recognition or misrecognition- are played out before the reader's

eyes in the confrontations which take place, first in the Cloche-Clos room and then in the cars.

Before addressing the issue concerning this negotiation directly, it is worth taking a step back and looking at the presentation of the German prisoner on the stage of the short story. The way in which the narrator recollects his appearance emphasizes how the question of someone's identity is filtered and reaches us through other people's perceptions and reactions in strongly visual terms.

The German prisoner makes his appearance beside Monaghan, as "a second man, also in a tunic [...], with a bandage about his head." (*CSS,* 410) In the following lines he is offered a bottle which he declines, he is referred to as "the other man, the one with the bandaged head" (*CSS,* 411) and speaks, as the orthographic changes suggest, the English of a person of German origins. In spite of this already significant detail concerning his identity, the narrator goes on:

> But I dont think any of us paid much attention to him until we were inside the Cloche-Clos. It was crowded, full of noise and smoke. When we entered all the noise ceased, like a string cut in two, the end raveling back into a sort of shocked consternation of pivoting faces, and the waiter [...] falling back before us, slack-jawed, with an expression of outraged unbelief, like an atheist confronted with either Christ or the devil. [...] [T]hree French officers sat watching us with that same expression of astonishment and then outrage and then anger. As one they rose [...]. That was when I turned and looked at Monaghan's companion for the first time. (*CSS,* 411)

The prisoner's identity is brought to the narrator for the *first* time by the reaction he ignites among French people. How this reaction hides, and amounts to, a definition, is highlighted by the fact that "the other man" becomes "the German", after the description of his entrance in the Cloche-Clos, without the usual transition through an indefinite article.

The look the speaking I grants him, and the very detailed description which follows, are triggered by the anger and outrage the German's identity has aroused. It is interesting to stress how the prisoner's trait which has started the shocked reaction, namely, his being German, seems to be the most relevant aspect of his identity

both for the narrator and the others, as the absence of a proper name indicates. The fact that, from now on, he will be simply 'the German', shows onomastically how the French people's reading of his identity has had a subtly informing power on the narrator's own perception of him.

The subadar undergoes a similar yet different definitional process: similar, because he, too, is not granted a proper name, [8] as he is always referred to as 'the subadar', an appellation which indicates both a function-title [9] and a nationality; different, because, in his case, the crucial trait is his nationality only superficially. This characteristic is actually relevant, only insofar as it both contains intrinsically, and stands for, his not being white.

> [Bland] turned back to the subadar. "You spoke before the Union once. I remember you." "Ah," the subadar said. "Oxford. Yes." " He can attend their schools among the gentleborn, the bleach-skinned," Bland said. "But he cannot hold their commission, because gentility is a matter of color and not lineage or behavior." (*CSS*, 409)

Bland's words respond indirectly to the sudabar's "all men are brothers". As we have already suggested, the latter's represent the ideal which has pushed him to perform his action of undoing and to leave his homeland to live up to them; the former's condense in a peremptory statement how things really are, as regards hierarchies.

The social hierarchy the subadar has left behind him has given way to a racial hierarchy: while the society of his homeland denied him authenticity because it fixed him in a social category, the society he has chosen in the name of the freedom to affirm himself in his own original terms, crams him into a racial category. The change turns out to be pejorative, as the subadar's chances to seize control and power over his life are severely limited by racial sets of prescriptions and codes of behavior, which are based on the axiomatic concept that non-white people are subhuman.

The subadar had accepted a negotiation of his identity, probably thinking of it as a dialogic (and fair) assessment, to use Bland's terms, of his color, lineage and behavior, but, from the moment he exposes himself to this negotiation, he falls prey to a

society which empties his own definitional power, as it "can only see the melanin content of his skin".[10]

He leaves a world in which color does not belong to the fundamental defining traits of a person's identity to enter a color-hyperconscious one, in which color is deemed crucial in identifying persons and assessing their worth. In this context, any kind of negotiation is impossible, because the social equality the subadar considered as the guarantee of the possibility of generating his authentic self stops at the color line.

The negation of equal status the subadar suffers is, furthermore, highlighted by a syntactical detail: Bland answers only indirectly to the subadar's own remembering, referring to him with the third person personal pronoun 'he', which suggests his considering him more an object of discussion than a person to interact with. Instead of being considered equal, he is treated as 'other'. Crucially, the narrator and not the blond Bland will ask the subadar a direct question and will listen to his reply.

The subadar's attempt to win recognition through exchange has failed. This failure is all the more burning, once we consider that Bland's reasoning admits indirectly that the subadar's lineage and behavior may be ranked among the best.

The subadar's choice to go to Oxford, on the one hand, shows his intention to create for himself the apt *curriculum* to enter this new world from the front door, and on the other, is the first sign of his internalization of its set of values. This internalization crucially reaches its destructive acme on the color issue:

> The subadar made a brief gesture, dark, deprecatory, tranquil. "I was a white man also for that moment. It is more important for the Caucasian because he is only what he can do; it is the sum of him." "So you see further than we see?" "A man sees further looking out of the dark upon the light than a man does in the hght and looking out upon the light." (*CSS,* 409)

This dialogue between the narrator and the subadar stresses the latter's disillusioned realization that equality cannot be disassociated from whiteness, that "color is for him the great negator"[11]: speaking before the Union made him feel white, because he was acting a

white action. The subadar's "Ah...Oxford" gives to his remembering a tinge of nostalgia: his being for that moment a white man has, in fact, granted him the dimension he craved for, namely, being an equal who is allowed, as such, to play his cards in self-affirmation.

The subadar's nostalgic tone hides a dangerous internalization, as it reveals his espousing exactly that set of values which negates his own authentic self denying any definitional scope to non-white persons. If we draw the underlying logic at its extreme conclusions, we face a devastating paradox: as the subadar is reduced to his color, the denial of this trait would amount to his total elimination. According to the racist logic, in fact, he cannot exist outside his skin-color, as there is nothing more to him, than this all-informing trait. In this respect, the subadar's act turns out to be an undoing of his own self.

The philosophical statements which follow point in a different direction: through them the subadar places his race and consequently himself, on a superior level. The Caucasian, he argues, depends for his identity on what he does, doing for him is crucial as it is the *only* measure of his being. The implication seems to be that the non-Caucasian's identity is, either independent, or beyond, his acts. It is not clear and remains to be assessed whether the subadar views this supposed racial trait as the result of a sort of genetic selection due to the restrictions imposed on black people, or as an innate mark of superiority.

This complex philosophical reasoning does not succeed at wiping completely away the subadar's emotional recollection and the destructive charge we have highlighted. The juxtaposition of his statements and his reaction strikes, in fact, a jarring note and points toward a different and less flattering interpretation of the subadar's 'philosophizing': his words could be a desperate attempt at rationalizing his truncated existence. [12] His supposed ability "to see further" and the consequent possibility to interpret what lies in the light more perceptibly than the 'we' the narrator feels he belongs to - a further, subtle indication of the subadar's otherness - neither change nor dispel the darkness he admits he is surrounded by.

The passage we have been analyzing opened with the subadar's making "a brief gesture, dark and deprecatory". The

adjectives express the subadar's psychologically ambiguous state visually: the deprecation may, in fact, concern either the narrow-mindedness of the society he has chosen, or his own enjoying the chance he had to be a white man. In the former case, he would enact the superior stance his philosophical argument has just expressed, in the latter case, he would deprecate himself because he realizes he has internalized his own inferiority.

> The M.P. was rolling another cigarette. He watched the subadar, upon his face an expression savage, restrained, and cold. He licked the cigarette and looked at me. "When I came to this goddam country," he said, "I thought niggers were niggers. But now I'll be damned if I know what they are. What's he? snake-charmer?" "Yes" I said. (CSS, 419)

The military policeman's words voice and sum up the subadar's ambiguities: on the one hand, his non-white skin makes of him a member of the category 'niggers', on the other, his words and behavior seem to give the lie to this indubitable and inescapable membership. The M.P.'s usage of the typically American appellation 'nigger' highlights the all-pervading nature of the color issue which comprises the subadar's un-American 'blackness' as well. It stresses, furthermore, how such an appellation is much more than a purely descriptive racial label.

The exception created by the subadar's non-conformity to the American M.P.'s expectations does not, nevertheless, make of him a white man: according to the military policeman, who embodies here the role of keeper of the law of social order, the subadar, who is neither white, nor 'acts black', is nothing more than an exotic man who plays a dangerous game.

The circle of definitions closes in upon the subadar striking dead at its roots any possibility of self-validation along the lines of his own sense of himself.

> "So you will be an exile for the rest of your days, eh?' [...] "Did you not hear what he said? This life is nothing." "You can think so," Bland said. "But, by God, I'd hate to think that what I saved out of the last three years is nothing."(CSS, 427-8)

The brief exchange rounds up the issue of the subadar's identity.

The subadar mayor may not be an exile, the exile may be purely geographical or psychological as well, it may be both physically and spiritually self-inflicted or forced upon him by others: all these alternatives which aim at naming the subadar's true condition are deemed irrelevant. The subadar evades this last definition of himself: yet, he escapes it only recurring to a vaster, ontological denial, which cannot be ascribed simply to the devastation of the war.

"Misrecognition", writes Charles Taylor, "shows not just a lack of due respect. ['.J Due recognition is not just a courtesy we owe people. It is a vital human need". [13] The misrecognition the subadar keeps suffering has dried the vital sap of his life making of it a wasteland. Once the possibility to be authentic has been choked by preexisting definitional categories, life turns out to have been stifled as well. The underlying theme of the living dead [14] includes, thus, in the subadar's case, the denial of self-affirmation we have thus far analyzed. Life is nothing for the subadar, insofar as there is nothing he is allowed to do, as a non-white person, to shape his life in his own terms.

"Life is nothing" are not the subadar's words, but the German prisoner's; this character, too, does not belong to the party the first person narrator refers to with the first plural personal pronoun 'we'.

> And beneath it all, unmoved, unmoving, alert, watchful and contained, the German and the subadar sat, the German with his high, sick face, the subadar tranquil as a squat idol, the both of them turbaned like prophets in the Old Testament. [15](CSS, 423)

These two characters are depicted as standing on the margins, apparently untouched by the vortex of chaos and violence which has been ignited by the German's presence in the French bar, sharing the same attitude of superior and detached attentiveness. As the sudabar's reference to the German's words makes clear, they seem to share the same philosophical stance as well: furthermore, in both cases the tragic or, possibly, stoic conclusion concerning what life is, stems from a personal confrontation with the problems regarding the dynamics of the negotiation of one's identity with others.

The German prisoner follows a definitional parable similar to the subadar's: the very vocabulary he uses to describe it echoes [16] the subadar's words. He refuses the hereditary role of baron and follows his penchant for music: when events force upon him the despised title again, he acts an extreme action: "So I burn all my papers, the picture of my wife and my son that I haf not yet seen, destroy my identity disk and remove all insignia from my tunic -" (*CSS,* 420). The German prisoner, thus, faces powers which impose upon him an unacceptable identity he tries to dismantle.

The obvious similarities between the two characters make the difference the more conspicuous. The most glaring diversity concerns the narrative space granted to the two of them by the recollecting narrator: the German's history told in his own voice occupies almost two pages, whereas we must evince and, in a way, guess, the subadar's, from his very brief and fragmentary statements which, furthermore, meet sometimes unlistening ears. This is not to be considered a banal detail, as it highlights formally how the subadar is not granted a voice to define himself: as we have seen, in fact, he is the victim of other people's definitions, rather than presenting his own point of view on his personal history and choices.

Secondly, the German prisoner eliminates every record of himself - the photo, the identity disk and the military insigna which represent the different functions and names he had in his life - and thus enters the realm of non-personhood. He removes himself from the world choosing a putative death which shields him from an externally-generated identity and group-imposed definitions. On the other hand, once he has cut loose from the imposition of hereditary definitions, the subadar looks for a group-validated identity exposing himself to other people's categorizing. Though the definitional actions the German commits go in the direction of self-denial rather than self-affirmation, they remain, nonetheless, his definitions: once he realizes that no identities are available to him outside the label 'baron', the German keeps dictating the terms of his own definition thus maintaining the active role of self-namer though in self-negating acts. Furthermore, the German demonstrates he knows the dynamics of negotiated identities and,

thus, acknowledges the fact that he has no other positive chances to break out from the vicious circle of imposed categories, than becoming a non-person.

The German's choice of non-personhood suggests a parallel with the protagonist of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man:* the similarities between the two help to assess contrastively the crucial differences which mirror back the subadar's case, too.

Both the German and the invisible man seem to discover the only viable way to escape (un-)defining labels and become impermeable to them in invisibility; both characters pass through the realization of "the emptiness of group choices as devices for self-validation" [17] and the intuition that names, and the identities attached to them, may be manipulated; furthermore, both of them destroy their written records,[18] a clear indication of their desire to undo and thus modify the categorizations they have gone through.

Ellison's protagonist's invisibility and namelessness and the German prisoner's non-personhood, cannot be associated further than that. The diversities do not lie simply in the different contexts which ground the two characters' existential conflicts - the devastation of war, for the one, and a race-centered discourse, for the other - but, more importantly, in the meaning the two give to their actions of undoing: whereas the invisible man's choice opens to him a world of "infinite possibilities", [19] the German prisoner's act is the first step of a suicidal plan, which aims at freeing himself from external definitions, but annihilates the very possibility of any future-oriented perspective.

Quite differently from the invisible man's opinions about a future of possibilities, for both the subadar and the German prisoner "life is nothing". The disillusioned conclusion is the same, though the roads which have led to it are different: the subadar arrives at it after he has suffered the painful dismantling of his idealistic views on self-affirmation at the hands of racist others, the German reaches it doing the dismantling himself.

The annihilation of the subadar's project of authenticity highlights dramatically the impossibility for a non-white person to act (and live) "beneath and beyond" his ethnic identity. Faulkner's 'foreign' 'Ad Astra' with its 'foreign' non-white character stages

emblematically the inescapable and all-pervading logic of racist discourse which turns out to be limitless in its prescriptive and informing power.

1 James, B. Meriwether, *William Faulkner: A Check List*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Library, 1957, p. 11.

2 "[W]hatever a text IS *absolutely* about is ascertained by what the specific text states. Yet that which is only *relatively* about is ascertained by the juxtaposition of this text with other, relevant texts (or with beliefs derived from them)" Menachem Brinker, 'Theme and Interpretation' in Werner Sollors (ed.), *The Return of Thematic Criticism*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England, 1993, page 31-32, my italics.

3 Page 407. All quotations from 'Ad Astra' are from *Collected Stories of William Faulkner*, New York, Vintage Books, 1977. All further references to this text, hereafter cited as *CSS*, are from this edition and will be given in parentheses in the text.

4 There is no need to stress how the themes of survival and of the search for a meaningful existence are typical of the Twenties

5 Charles Taylor, 'The Politics of Recognition' in, Amy Gutman (ed.), *Multiculturalism*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1994, page 31, 32.

6 Charles Taylor, Ibidem, page 34, 36.

7 For an illuminating discussion of the role of this dialectical negotiation from an ethnical perspective, see Werner Sollors (ed. by) *Theories of Ethnicity. A Classical Reader*. New York, New York Uruversity Press, 1996.

8 To be more precise, we should make a distinction as regards the absence of a proper name, as well the nationality-name the German is granted, In fact, should be considered, in a way, more true to him as his statement "I am German; that iss beyond the I, the I am" *(CSS*, 418) seems to suggest.

9 The title of subadar is crucially different from the title of prince this character had in his homeland: this latter, in fact, entitled him to an available leading role, whereas the former is only a label, as it is worthless in the society he has chosen for his new and authentic life.

10 Reginald Martin, 'Faulkner's Southern Reflections' The Black on the Back of the Mirror in 'Ad Astra", *African American Review*, 27 (1993), page 57.

11 Reginald Martin, Ibidem, page 54.

12 "The positioning of blacks upon Faulkner's canvas may reveal to the critic a discursive network of unarticulated interdependence, but it likewise reveals the fact that - largely deprived by the narrative of interior voice, of point of view, of a sense of their own sense of past and future (their memories and desires) - blacks as represented by Faulkner are truncated figures" Philip Weinstein, *Faulkner's Subject. A Cosmos No One Owns*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992, page 44.

13 Charles Taylor, Ibidem, page 26.

14 Like the theme of survival, this theme too has numerous literary ramifications in post-war literature. In this respect, the title section 'The Wasteland' is highly suggestive.

15 It is interesting to note that the detail here used to link the subadar and the German - the turbaned head - is elsewhere used to stress their difference "[He was] roundfaced, not

old, with his immaculately turned bandage which served only to emphasize the generations of difference between him and the turbaned subadar." (*CSS*, 411)

16 "I return home, I say to my father, in the University I haf learned it iss not good, baron 1 will not be. He cannot believe. He talks of Germany, the fatherland, I say to him, It iss there, so. You say fatherland, I, brotherland, I say, the word *father* iss that barbarism which will be first swept away; it iss the symbol of that hierarchy which hass stained the history of man with injustice of arbitrary instead of moral, force instead of love" *(CSS*, 417)

17 Reginal Martin, Ibidem, page 58.

18 The invisible man's burning the contents of his briefcase completes the process of unveiling the truth concerning the names he has been given. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, London, Penguin Books Edition, page 457.

19 *Invisible Man*, page 464.