

the arts

NATIVE SON

by W. J. Weatherby



picture of James Baldwin by La Rue Williams

A UNANIMOUS sigh of relief went up from James Baldwin's friends when he returned to New York after nearly nine years in France. They had feared he was drifting into permanent exile like Richard Wright. Exile had been disastrous for Wright's talent as a writer, but it might have been even worse for Baldwin's. His work depends for much of its passion on his intense love-hate relationship with his native city, and in cutting himself off from it he might have lost his subject. Or possibly even himself.

He had come back, but nobody was quite sure why. He had certainly not returned because of any nostalgia for the skyscrapers. "Don't forget this city has tried to kill me," he said reprovingly when I suggested it must be love of New York that had really brought him back. We were walking along Third Avenue in the evening, and he talked as if the darkened skyscrapers were leaning threateningly towards him. They must have looked that way when he was a poor boy in Harlem growing up in the worst of the Depression, but he had come back a best-selling author and the pressures on him should have relaxed. They clearly had not.

"On the way here," he said, talking rapidly, intensely, "my brothers asked the cab driver to take them to Harlem. He refused. I had to threaten to take his number and report him before he would." He puffed quickly, nervously, at his cigarette. "It's still difficult to know when you can relax."

I had last interviewed him three years before, soon after the publication of his second novel, "Giovanni's Room," and his book of essays, "Notes of a Native Son." He was then widely regarded as one of the most promising younger writers, but he had yet to win a large audience. A second volume of essays, "Nobody Knows My Name," and his recent novel, "Another Country"—soon to be published in Britain—had turned him into a best seller. He had been a Greenwich Village rebel when I first met him. Now he was increasingly appearing on lecture platforms and on television—so much so that some of the more militant Negroes who wished to claim him exclusively for themselves began to fear he had been taken over by the whites. But now, three years later, I could see no change in him. Life had never allowed him even as a boy to hold the illusions that sustain most of us, and so the illusion of fame could hardly affect him. As he said in talking of his years in France, "I was then—and I have not changed much—a very tight, tense, lean, abnormally ambitious, abnormally intelligent, and hungry black cat."

"And what made you decide to come back?"

"I haven't come back for good. I'll probably spend six months a year here and six months in Europe. After a time in New York, I just have to get away. I feel it sitting on me."

"But you came back to it?"

"At first I didn't intend to. In New York the colour of my skin stood between myself and me, but in Europe that barrier was down. But I found I had been both released from an affliction and divested of a crutch. I discovered the question of who I was was not answered because I had removed myself from the social forces which threatened me because these forces had become interior and I took them with me, so that the question of who I was was at last a personal one, and I could only find the answer in me."

"But you thought Europe a more sympathetic place in which to look for it?"

"Without my crutch, I think I felt frightened and that was one reason why I dawdled in my European haven for so long. Yet I knew also that I should have matured beyond the need for havens, the need for illusions. I believe that the unexamined life is not worth living, and the writer certainly cannot afford any self-delusion for his subject is himself and the world he is in. So in quitting America, I began to see it as an attempt at self-delusion, a fear of looking any deeper into myself. I had told myself I was going to be free—free even of colour—and I was going to be as good a writer as I could be, God and Satan and Mississippi notwithstanding."

"Is colour prejudice another form of self-delusion, to save asking oneself these questions?"

"That's it. The question of colour hides the graver questions of the self and that's why the whole thing is so hard to overcome and why it's so dangerous for our society. I left America because I thought that if I survived at all I would drown as a writer in bitterness. I wanted to be a writer, not a Negro writer. I wanted to discover how my experience connected me with other people and not how it divided me from them. And I discovered in Europe that I was as American as a Texan or even more if that's possible. All the Americans I met in Paris had this in common. It did not matter that the origins of white Americans were European and mine were African. They were no more at home in Europe than I was. Once I could accept that we had this in common—and it took me a long time—I was released from the self-delusion that I hated America, and it was time to

go back. I had made my first breakthrough and won my first battle with myself."

"That's what I told you—it's love that has brought you back."

"No, there is a lot of hate left, too. One writes out of one thing only—one's own experience. Everything depends on how relentlessly one forces from this experience the last drop of blood. The only concern of the artist is to create out of the disorder of life the order of art. My problem as a Negro was that I was prevented from examining my own experience too closely by the killing demands and dangers of my social situation. The first discovery is that you are a bastard of the West, that your past takes you not to Europe but to Africa. This is not my heritage and yet there is no other I can hope to use. I have to appropriate these white centuries and my discovery that after all I am an American—my European discovery—has helped."

"But you do seem more relaxed than when I saw you in 1959. You were actively hating New York then."

"The most difficult thing I did in

Europe was to force myself to admit what the American Negro has had to hide from himself as the price of his public progress—that I hated and feared white people."

"You loved only Negroes the way some writers can only love poor people?"

"No, it didn't mean I loved black people. There was much in them I despised because in so doing I was really despising what I hated in myself. I really hated and feared the world. This meant that I gave the world too much power over me and also I was not free to write to the top of whatever talent I had. I faced all these things in Europe in order to be free of them—or at least to know them."

He went on to talk about the play he was writing, the historical novel he was planning, and his work as television critic for the "New Yorker"—and as he talked the skyscrapers seemed to look less threatening, to stand up a little straighter, for there was this difference in him—he talked now like a free man, free to know the best as well as the worst.