The Language of the Streets

James Baldwin

The subject is vast—that is the only way I can put it. I can't imagine anyone being able to do justice to it. I will improvise, but I have more questions, as I have indicated, than answers because it is a great question and I am a city boy.

For example, I am trying to figure out what I am doing here. I thought—and I suppose this is insignificant, but this is how I began to think about the subject. Many years ago I was out of the city—that is the only way to put it—I was in the country, walking along a country road to go to the store, to do this or that, and a woman passed me—a white woman, by the way—and she said, "Good morning," and I thought, "Who is this nut!" No one in the city, except your immediate family—not always they—says good morning. I thought about it because it meant something, it meant something enormous, that I had grown up or I had become accustomed to such an incredible silence. Or again in New York, when it is immobilized by some natural disaster like snow. New Yorkers don't believe in snow. I have been there during a couple of blizzards when the city is completely immobilized: subways can't go, buses can't go, taxis can't go; people have to walk, and for the first time they talk to each other. They are like children at a fair: delighted by the snow, delighted by the fact the subways aren't moving, buses aren't moving, they can't get to work. All they got is each other. But when the snow melts and things go back to what we call "normal," nobody says a word to nobody.

Now, what does this mean? Obviously, I can't tell you what it means. I can only ask myself what it means, what it has meant for me in the time I have been on earth.

I think of one of our poets, a black poet, who wrote a song called "Living for the City." It was Stevie Wonder, and it contains these lines:

His hair is long, his feet are hard and gritty
He spends his life walking the streets of New York City
He's almost dead from breathing in air pollution
He tried to vote but to him there's no solution

And Stevie says, "Stop giving just enough for the city."[1]

It may be interesting to suggest that, apart from our other addictions, the city is probably the most visible product of the industrial revolution. People left the land to come to the city because they had no choice.

Now, I am not a sociologist, and I am not equipped to discuss in any detail the implications of the creation of the city, but I can say that that creation has had devastating effects on human life everywhere.

I have, for example, a typewriter somewhere else in the country, and I spend a lot of my time living in the country trying to work, trying to write, and in the country there is this: You wake up whenever it is that you wake up, and you look at the sky. It is there, and it gives you some idea what kind of a day you are going to have, and you walk on the ground. It's there. It gives you some sense of yourself, and you go about your duties: You have your lunch, you take a walk, you know that at a certain moment the sun is going to go down, and you prepare yourself to deal with that. Close the shutters, turn on the lights, have a drink, make love, go to sleep. And every day in the country is a little like that.

Every day in the city, on the contrary—and I grew up in the city—involves a subtle divorce from reality. There is something a little terrifying about being forty stories in the air and looking around you, and you see nothing but walls, other skyscrapers, and you don't dare look down. And if you are on the ground, if you want to see the sky, you must make an effort of the will and look up. And if you do that, you are likely to be carried off to Bellevue—but that is another story.

Now, if I am right, the tremendous noise of the city, the tremendous claustrophobia of the city is designed to hide what the city really does, which is to divorce us from a sense of reality and to divorce us from each other. When we are divorced from each other, we have no way back to reality, because even in this democracy people cannot live without each other—something Americans are going to have to discover again.

Now, for example, the European immigrants coming through Ellis Island is a very important matter. They had gone to the cities before I did; and once they had become white Americans, part of their function, part of their action, was to keep me out of the city. When I got to the city, I met slaughter. But more important than that, the reason my

father left the land and came to the city was because he was driven by the wave of terror which overtook the South after the First World War when soldiers were being lynched in uniform, slaughtered like flies. So, daddy came to New York—others went to Chicago, others went to Detroit—and we know what happened when we got there. We immediately became, from an economic point of view and from another point of view, a captive population. We immediately were herded into the ghettoes which the immigrants were trying to get out of; and, you see, part of the hidden thing—part of the hidden thing which Americans again are going to have to think about and confront—I know, historically speaking, what drove me to these shores, and I may be the only American who can say, quite candidly, "I know I never meant to come here." Never. A friend of mine, Judge Bruce Wright, says I am the only immigrant who never got a package from home.

Now, if that is so, and that is so, it says something about what I would call the price of the ticket, the price Americans paid for the ticket to cross all that water and to become Americans—and the price of the ticket was high. The price of the ticket was to become white. Americans failed to realize that they were not white before they got here: They were Greek, they were Russian, they were Turks—they were everything under heaven, but they were not white. They were being white because they had to keep me black; and there are economic reasons for that, and the economic reasons have moral repercussions and moral results.

The life of the city, watching it—I watched—well, I grew up in Harlem, and when we were able, when we made a little money, enough to put something aside—and do not underestimate that effort; it is hard for everybody, but, baby, try it if you are black—we began to move across the river to the Bronx. When we started moving across the river to the Bronx, all those people who had lately become white fled in terror, and one of the results of that is the present disaster called the South Bronx where nobody can live. The motion of the white people in this country has been—and it is a terrifying thing to say this, but it is time to face it—a furious attempt to get away from the niggers.

Now, having fled all the way to the suburbs and as a result having created the disaster that we call the inner city, which is an unmitigated disaster—time or courage will not even permit me to begin to talk about the schools—they now are trying to reclaim the land in Harlem and Detroit and Chicago, are moving back into the ghettoes that they drove us into and then drove us out of, are reclaiming the real estate, and nobody knows and nobody cares what is going to happen to the niggers.

Now, the quality of life in all of our cities is a direct result of the American terror. It says something, which I cannot describe, about the American morality. In short, the American panic has made all of our cities virtually unlivable.

What to do about this is more than I can tell you, but I do know that in the attempt to escape black people, for that is what it is, or the non-white person, for that is what it is, Americans have lost their own sense of identity. It is very important I think to suggest that of all the billions of people who came here—this is a paradox, and I want you to think about it—the only people who did not deny their ancestors—let's put it that way, and that is not much of a phrase—were black people. Concretely, for example, there was a moment in the Greek boy's life when he could not talk to his father because he had to speak English and his father only spoke Greek. One has overlooked the meaning of that rupture because it means when you are in trouble, there is nothing behind you, there is nothing to sustain you in the midnight hour when you have to get through somehow to your father and your mother and the people who produced you, who gave you the strength to move from one place to another. And if you give that up—of course, if you give that up, you may—well, you married the boss's daughter. Sooner or later you find a psychiatrist, and, sooner or later, as it is happening now, you go back to witch doctors and become born again.

Black people who were unknown to history, had no written history at all, who came here chained to each other from different tribes, unable to speak to each other, whom it was forbidden, it was forbidden by law, to teach to read or write—and that was a law—and the law also said he was three-fifths of a man and had no rights which the white man was bound to respect. That was law. That was not a thousand years ago. And the effect of that law lives among us still today.

This despised and unknown people, who were given one thing only—they were not given the Bible because it was forbidden to read—they were given the Christian cross. And that is all. And with that they had to forge an identity and discover who they were, whence they came, and bring us to where we are now.

I suggest that that is an unprecedented journey, and it says everything about America; and the question before this country, not only in the cities, is whether you will find in yourselves, whether we will find in ourselves, the courage and the moral passion to accept this miracle, which is really the miracle of our brotherhood, or perish.

Note

1. Stevie Wonder, "Living for the City," from *Innervisions* (New York: Black Bull Music Inc., 1973; and Hollywood, Calif.: Motown Record Corporation, 1973).