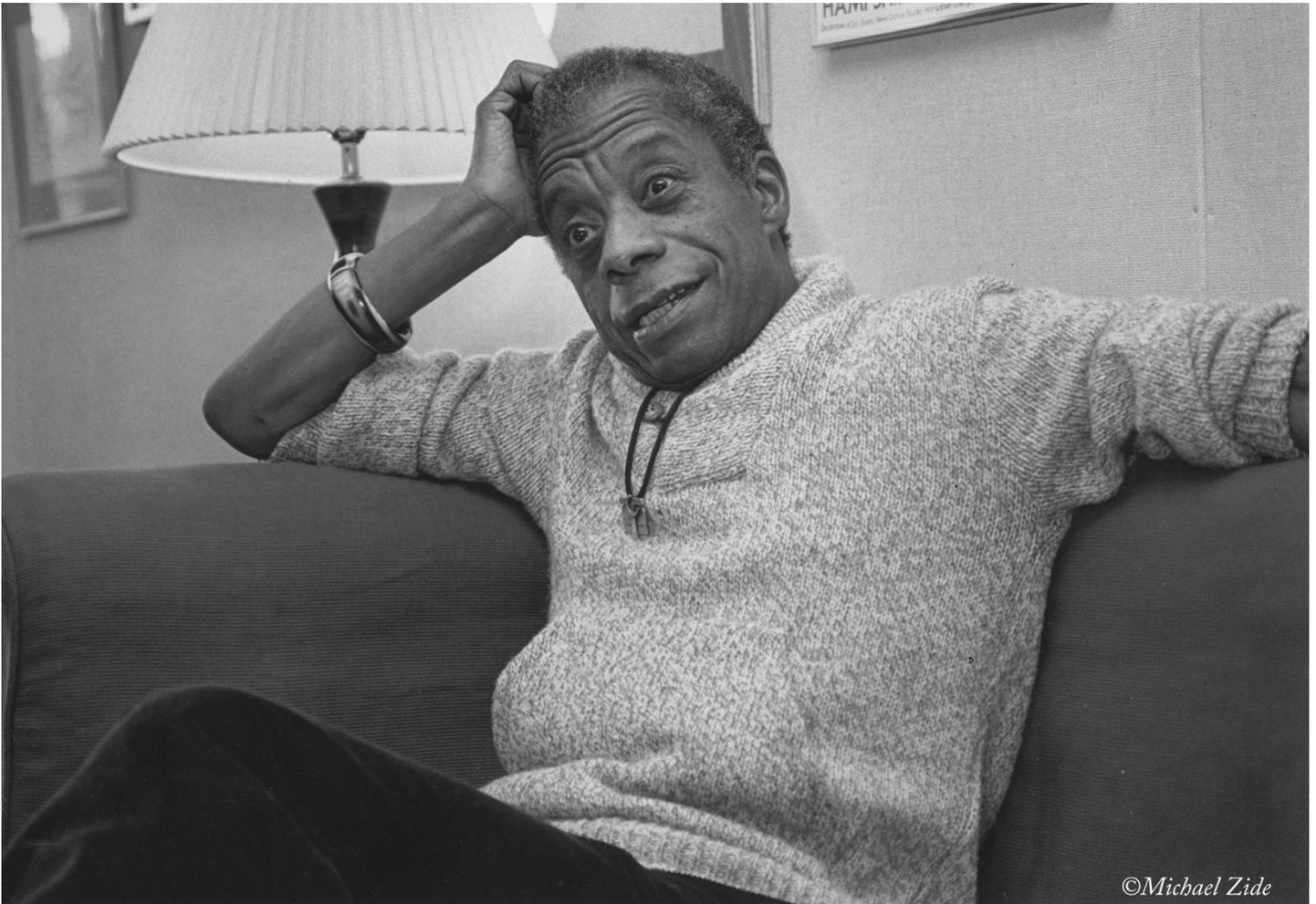


My Interview With James Baldwin

By Russell Steven Powell | December 7, 2014

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This photograph of James Baldwin in his Hampshire College apartment in October 1983 was one of a series taken by Michael Zide to illustrate my interview. (michaelzide.com)

THERE I WAS, drinking Scotch with James Baldwin — drinking Scotch with James Baldwin! — in a modest apartment on the Hampshire College campus on a sunny Saturday in early October 1983.

I was 28 and in my second year as director of public information at Hampshire College, Amherst, Massachusetts. Baldwin, 59, was living on campus during his first semester as a visiting Five College scholar.

For Baldwin, the move to Amherst marked his return to the United States after 12 years in France. In addition to teaching, he was actively involved in a number of projects. A musical adaptation of his first play, *The Amen Corner*, opened on Broadway that November. Production had begun for a video based on Baldwin's 1953 novel, *Go Tell It On The Mountain*; the program eventually aired on PBS's *American Playhouse* series in January 1985.

That fall Baldwin was making final revisions to *Evidence Of Things Not Seen*, a book about the murders of at least 28 African-American children, adolescents, and adults in Atlanta, Georgia, between 1979 and 1981. *Evidence Of Things Not Seen* was published in 1985.

Baldwin was also working on *Remember This House*, a proposed joint biography of Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X. The project was never completed before Baldwin died in 1987 at age 63.

BALDWIN WAS SOMEWHAT isolated at Hampshire at first. Many people did not yet know that he was in the area, or where to find him. Some undoubtedly were respectful of his privacy, or were unsure how to approach him. As editor of *Hampshire Reports*, the college periodical, I had good cause to interview him.

I met Baldwin briefly the night before our October 8 interview while covering his Fall Weekend address for the college newspaper. With us that Saturday was Baldwin's assistant Skip (whose last name I do not recall), a tall, athletic-looking man about 40, genial but protective. He mostly stood on the edge of the room or in the open kitchen watching and listening, refilling our drinks and making the occasional comment to help steer the conversation.

It was the only time I can recall that I ever audiotaped an interview. It allowed us to speak more freely, despite the extra work it meant later for my assistant to transcribe it.

The most challenging aspect of editing the transcription was punctuation. Baldwin made many asides, often within a single sentence. For readability I have added a number of paragraph breaks in this reissued version.

Other than deciding where to place commas and em dashes, colons and semicolons, though, I did only minor editing in 1983. Though he occasionally repeats or even contradicts himself, I decided to print almost all of what he had to say, in the way he said it, then as well as now. I like its fullness, spontaneity, and conversational tone.

Later that October I invited James and Skip to our house for dinner. We had a great evening of food, drink, and conversation, and Baldwin was an entertaining and appreciative guest. He roared with approval when my daughter, age five at the time, introduced herself to him as a fellow writer, and he stood up and blessed everyone at the table immediately after spilling a glass of red wine during dinner.

I saw him only a few times after that, the last one being a crowded premiere of *Go Tell It On The Mountain* in someone else's house. By the 1984 spring semester his presence in the area was widely known within the Five College community, and he became both more popular and more remote, constantly surrounded by students and other admirers.

HERE IS the entire interview as it first appeared in the Winter 1984 *Hampshire Reports*.

You began to talk about this in your Fall Weekend address — why you are here now, both in the United States and in Amherst, teaching at Hampshire.

Well, in my own mind it's fairly simple, but I'm not so sure it's easy to be articulate about. It's simply that when I was working at finishing a book in France — not a very long book but a very difficult book, it took me longer than I thought it would; it's a book about the child murders in Atlanta. It took quite a long time and many journeys to Atlanta and I finally got back to France. I finished the book and I had always intended to get back here, because I was rather curious about what was happening. You can't really know what is happening when you're that far away.

And I also had the feeling — which is an entirely private feeling — quoting my friend Lena Horne, who said once to me, in the very same context in fact, that she felt she had to make herself available to the young. And I felt something like that. It's a little too difficult to describe: the way to teach and confront audiences here, which would not be true if I was doing it in France or England. It's a way of confronting something. I suppose at the bottom I hate the feeling that I'm ducking anything. It's something like that, if you see what I mean. So I'm here for a while.

And what's your reaction to it been so far? Is it what you expected?

Oh no. Nothing ever is. It's both better and worse — which is why I got sick. (Baldwin was hospitalized with an irregular heartbeat for several days at the beginning of the semester.) It's not simply that I've been

pushing myself very hard, but it has something to do with that, I believe. It's a violent change of atmosphere. You have to readjust to it along with that.

The truth, I suppose, about me is that I never adjusted to life in America at all. I refused to be adjusted to it. That's why I left in 1948. And all of my returns here, my stays here, my work here, made that adjustment more and more improbable and now it's simply beyond the pale of possibility.

But that's fine, because you do get older, and the machine you've been pushing up that hill so long is mortal, and lets you know that you have had to deal with it another way than in times past. I feel my age, but my body knows my age. You have to find another way of dealing with it.

Have you been to New England before?

I've been here, lectured at Yale, given a seminar for maybe a week. I never taught in New England on these terms. I've known New England; I have connections and friends here. It's a territory I've known more or less and which I like very much. One of the great places in America, I think, at least physically, and in other ways, too. It's kind of congenial in spite of everything that one knows, but still I like it very much. I have friends in the region.

So hopefully it all works out if I'm doing the job. That's what you're worried about really, that you don't cheat the kids.

What has been your overall impression of your students?

I'm very impressed by them. A little intimidated, but obviously I shouldn't say that. But they're very bright, they're very eager. There's something very moving about it, something very beautiful about it, but very hard to describe. I'm afraid to talk about it, actually.

The books you wrote 20 and 30 years ago were written very much from your own experiences. Yet your new works have to do with external people and events; with the biographies and the Atlanta child murders, you're writing about actual historical events with which you've had less direct involvement.

That's true enough. In the case of the Malcolm, Medgar, Martin book, I knew all three of those men. One of the great difficulties about doing that book is that it's a book that I did know and didn't know that I would have to do someday. My hand was kind of forced by a publisher asking me to do it. And so I could no longer, in a sense, put it off — there was no point in putting it off.

So I'm doing it, with a kind of fear and trembling. I was very close to all three of those men and loved them very much. They represented something enormous — for me, and for this country, and for the world. So I'm speaking as a witness, I draw from a personal point of view.

We will see. The book is now a shambles, a pile of papers partly in France, partly here. I'll have to deal with their children; I want to start the book with the children if I can. So as soon as I am through — I'm starting it in fact at the end of this semester — I'll use this time to interview some of the people, Martin's children and Medgar's children and Malcolm's children.

I hope to have it done by the time I've finished my stint here. I'll be doing that, and I'll be doing the book, and I'll be teaching.

The book seems like a different experience for you as a writer.

It is. That's exactly why I can't talk about it. It's certainly different from anything I've done before, and I'm even afraid of it. But there it is.

In a certain way — I don't know how to put this — one could say in a certain way that I'm the last witness left. I'm older than Malcolm, I'm older than Martin, I'm older than Medgar. I'm not sure you can be absolutely coherent about a book you're working on, because you're afraid of it, you're afraid to talk about it. When the book is over I can talk about it, but I can hardly talk about it now. The events, after all, the assassinations — it's one thing to have a friend die of cancer, its another thing to have a friend murdered. It's something else.

In a way I don't think you ever get over it; you certainly don't get over it soon. I think you don't get over it.

Were you asked to write the Atlanta book?

I was asked to write that, yes. I was asked to write that by *Playboy*, and then it turned into a book. I didn't know quite what would happen. I'm writing it for the last time and retyping it here, now. I guess it's coming out sometime early next year.

How do you feel about having your works made into films?

Well, none of my works has been made into a film. It's only now that *Go Tell It On The Mountain* is, in fact, on the floor to be shot for television. And there a possibility that *Giovanni's Room* is going to be done — I did the screenplay for it — for a German company. It would be an international production. I don't know quite where that is at the moment — there's a mail strike in France, anything could happen, it could be in the middle of the air. But it looks as though they will do it. It may not be for the same company that I thought I would do it with, but it's certainly going to be done.

What level of control will you have over the production?

That's a very difficult question to answer, isn't it? It depends on how you draw up the contract, depends very much upon the producer, depends upon the director, depends on a million imponderables. You can have a great many, say, parts on paper, but when you are actually there on the floor shooting, then that's it. That's something else. You have to exert a maximum amount of control before the cameras start rolling and the actors are speaking their lines.

But it all has to be done. You, the writer, and the producer, you have to agree about something, which happens sometimes, but happens very rarely. At least in the case of *Giovanni*, if I can get the director I want, it shouldn't be terribly problematical. That's the best I can say. But there is very little in general that you can really do.

The development is one of the reasons that I haven't filmed anything, because Hollywood tends to buy a title and if you let them do it God knows what will happen. So I never let it go.

It must be at the same time both intriguing and terrifying.

Well I've seen people go through it; it can be devastating. In some ways, perhaps because I'm a black American writer, there are some chances I cannot take. I don't want to demoralize the young if I can help

it. So my own theory is that one of these days I'm going to be alive or dead. It doesn't make any difference. My own feeling is that I can live with it, I can live without it, you know?

Was Go Tell It On The Mountain the studio's choice, or yours?

Mountain was the brainstorm of a man in Hollywood, a producer who talked about it I think more than five years ago — I'd forgotten all about it — and it took him until just only yesterday, practically, to get the money. It's part of the *American Playhouse* series. I know they've started shooting, and I think Paul Winfield is playing Gabriel. It all sounds very promising. I'm very excited about it. It seemed very harmless, at least. I think that's what makes me so tired, but I'm very excited about it. It's my first book, it's 30 years ago.

How has becoming successful and achieving a certain amount of notoriety and presumably some measure of wealth from your books ...

... presumably indeed ...

... How does that affect your perspective?

I don't know how. I suppose it does, in fact I'm sure it affects my perspective. I think that the fact that I'm 59 years old probably affects my perspective more than my reputation. My reputation certainly in some ways controls a great part of my life, it's one of the facts of my life. It has its ups and downs. Mainly what you have to recognize, or what I have to recognize, is that you have no grounds for complaint.

There's something very difficult about the whole thing, it's true. It's very important to realize that it is cruel. A large part of it has very little to do with you, obviously. It has a great deal to do with the life you lead, the choices you make. And also, finally, what can you say — it's the choice you make. You asked for it, so you can't complain.

I mean it's hard for me to imagine anyone wanting to be famous, but millions of people do want to be famous who now live with it, I suppose. I don't think it's something you can want; it's not something you want, it's something that happens to you.

But has it in any way affected your approach to writing?

I don't think so. The only way it could affect you — well, in my own case; I shouldn't generalize — I think that what it could do is, you could have a hit, right? And you try to repeat it. I think that's death. I think you have to go for broke each time, or somebody's going to put it to you that you're living in the past. As Jean Cocteau said — not to me but I heard it — 'Find out what you can do, and then don't do it.' See what I mean? If it's easy, don't do it.

What do you make of crowd reactions like the one you had at your Fall Weekend lecture, when you just walked into the room and people stood up — a standing ovation before you've even stepped before them, and it's a predominantly wealthy, white audience?

I must admit that years ago it threw me completely. I didn't know what it meant. In a way, I still don't. But there's something very moving about it. Very moving, very beautiful. And you have to accept it. That too comes with the territory. It means they trust you in some way.

That's the most positive way to read it. And that's the way I do read it. It doesn't mean that they agree with you, but it may mean that they have a sense that you haven't lied to them.

You can always be wrong. One makes one's errors. But one's got to try to be responsible. I've got to try to be responsible to my craft, to have tried to make some kind of sense, some kind of moral sense.

It's a very strange, a very beautiful country, full of very strange and bewildered people. And I'm one of them. I'm not French. I'm not English. I'm not Dutch, I'm not even African. I'm an Afro-American. I'm a black Westerner. I'm a black cat born in the West. Born with a double inheritance. And that's great. You've got to learn to live with it.

There are a number of connections that can be made between racism and sexism ...

... Well yes, one can almost call them the same thing ...

... yet you resist making these connections in your work.

It seems to me that the connection between racism and sexism is so obvious it hardly needs to be spoken about. But of course — how will I put this now — all the myths about black men and about black women, created entirely by white people, are both racist and sexist, and so now it's so false it's hard to even discuss it.

It seems to me that the white American male and the white American female, but principally the white American male, is so out of touch with himself — and mainly because of what he calls the 'Negro problem' — that in some ways he's blinded himself to himself. And this has had an effect on his women.

It seems to me, in a generality, neither a man nor a woman is able to recognize where the trouble really is. You simply cannot spend four hundred years pretending that the man you are looking at and eventually castrating is immune, without doing something terrifying to yourself, and if you've done that to yourself, you've done that to your women and children.

That's what they're really talking about when they're talking about racism and sexism. They're talking about American history, the American disease, because they can't confront their history. They're immobilized in it because they're at once guilty about it and proud of it. And that leads to a certain kind of moral paralysis.

It was interesting to note that several phrases in your Fall Weekend address — about being invisible, having fewer choices, needing to be watchful or fearful walking the streets — could just as easily been applied to women as blacks.

Perhaps I should spell it out more. I've lived with it so long that I *know* that; I've known it for years. I've known if for God knows how many years. Maybe I should make more specific comparisons. But I've lived with it so long, it doesn't even occur to me. It seems to me so obvious.

Maybe it has something to do with what I call the failure of the social contract. If I'm not really safe in the society, then nobody is. That's really what it comes to. I'm vulnerable, and so is a woman vulnerable. And the same society will do what it does to the vulnerable because of what it thinks is real.

What advice do you have for people who want to change and are struggling with how to go about it? Eighteen-year-olds are simultaneously passing through adolescence searching for themselves, and in the outside world are being allowed to vote for president for the first time. And they are often appalled by their choices.

I don't know how to answer that. In the first place, you should hardly give children advice. You can suggest this or that, but you can hardly give them advice.

One of the problems that they are facing is by no means their fault. That's the nature of the choices that the country presents them with, and the nature of the choice is really very severe. It means that a white boy or girl is offered a kind of security, is offered in principal the moon, almost literally. There's an American legend that has it that everyone can make it in this country, there's no limit to human ambition or human success — if you're white. And that's putting it very brutally but that's what it is.

Some women would say white men.

They'd be accurate. But of course it has an effect on her. Your choices dictate the life she lives, too. And what are your choices? Your choices are to be successful or a failure. There's nothing in between.

They're absolutely brutal choices, absolutely immoral choices. But those are the choices that the young are faced with. Now in order to be a success you have to give up a great many other things. Principally, your identity, which is the same thing as your honor.

The torment the young go through is recognizing this. And in one way or another they have to come to some kind of terms with the horror of the choice. At some point the black boy has to go because his white friend can't afford him. No matter how it is phrased, no matter how it's acted out, that's what happens.

I know this from my own life; kids I knew when I was very, very young, and you loved each other. With exceptions — there are always exceptions — they had to go their way and had to give up Jimmy in order to go their way. And now they're my age and we've nothing in common, and some of us still see each other, but in the main none of us are friends anymore.

But it's not my fault and it's not, in a way, their fault. That's society. A man has to make concessions, compromises, but this is particularly brutal, a very brutal one, and that process — at least this is what kids suspect — in some senses, is the torment. That is, the choice is either becoming himself or becoming a part of something he really doesn't want to become a part of. And if he doesn't become a part of it, then how is he going to live?

So you get various confusions, you get the Beat Generation all the way to the Weathermen, all the way to Charles Manson's family, who are really kind of abandoned children, monstrous children. You're a child in America; you should be a woman or a man, and you're a monster.

No one can raise a 30-year-old child, no one can correct a 30-year-old child. And this is what happens in this country hour after hour and day after day because of the choices the young are forced to make. And anybody can become president on condition that he accepts the mores and the prohibitions and the terrors of the ruling society. Then he can make a lot of money and lead a life of relative comfort — he can be an astronaut or something — but he's given something up, something which he misses.

The choice should not be that brutal. It should not be necessary to give me up in order to have a viable life in this country. But that is the price demanded of the white man, no matter how it's hidden. And of course you arrive at a place, some people are lucky, some people are devious enough and strong enough to manage both. But that's rare. In the generality, it's either/or and I'm not talking simply about race.

The American ideal is essentially Teutonic — clean, clean living, scrubbed, virtuous, honorable in your dealings with your peers. It has nothing to do, however, with your business life, where honor does not exist, and has nothing to do with political life, where honor does not exist. It has nothing to do with show business, where honor does not exist. It has to do with success, which is a mirage, and finally a lie.

A man named Hearst, the first one, was simply another great pirate. And in what name, what money? He had money. He had the only power the republic recognizes; it doesn't recognize anything else.

That's why we're so badly educated. We must be the most illiterate nation in the world, the most hopelessly illiterate because we think we know how to read. We have a president who can't read a script, or who can only read a script.

That's very sad, and what makes it even sadder is that no one in power wants to ask the enormous question: Just who do these people represent? No one wants to find out how small a percentage of the voting population of America voted in the last election. One in four voters, something like that.

Now something has gone very seriously wrong with a country where this is allowed to happen, where the people allow it to happen. We're all in the same bag. I couldn't go to Carter and I couldn't go to Reagan. What dreadful choices.

This has been going on for quite some time now, at least since Kennedy died. It's very sad. As far as I can tell no one in Washington knows anything about Guatemala, nothing about El Salvador, nothing about Russia, certainly; nothing about China. As I was trying to say at Fall Weekend, one of the reasons for this is that no one in American wants to know anything about black boy.

The black person in this country is the key to the world, really. If you don't understand what's happening in Detroit or Chicago among black people, you don't know what's happening in El Salvador. If you don't know what's happening in Chicago you don't know what's happening in the world. And that's the price Americans are paying for this history and it is very, very dangerous since we're the most powerful nation in the world.

That's what the young are wrestling with. After all, the young have no weapons in terms of power, they have only the power to say 'no,' which brutally penalizes, as every civil rights veteran will tell you, as any Vietnam veteran can tell you. It's a very, very dangerous time, and everyone's in a very dangerous place. That's what is happening to the young, who have been, in a sense, betrayed by their elders for not talking the truth.

Where does a white man go next with this legacy? Guilt is not the answer.

No. Guilt is paralysis.

There are three tiers: how white men have treated blacks, how white men have treated women, and how white men, under the current administration, are intervening in the affairs of the Third World.

There is also something antecedent to all that. It is how white people have treated each other, before they got around to us. People forget that the English allowed the Irish to starve to death in order to fill up the

pockets of the British merchants. And they still mistreat the Irish, as you know, and that bitterness will not end until the British Empire is a remote memory. But as I say this issue is akin to white people, I'm saying something obviously very bitter.

But you see it's not a terrible legacy except in a certain sense that any human legacy is terrible. It is not a shameful legacy, I'm saying; all legacies are on some level shameful. That is not the point. I'm not saying that you are worse than other people, I'm saying that your relationships to yourselves are absolutely disastrous, because you cannot face the truth about yourselves.

It has nothing to do with me; it has everything to do with what you make of me. But what you have made of me, historically and actually in your imagination, has nothing to do with the truth, it has nothing to do with who my father really was. I know that and the people who treated my father like dirt know that, too.

Now, to do one thing and know another is a terrible destiny. But you haven't got a claim on this terrible legacy. All legacies are terrible and you have to take it, use it, and change it.

So you're saying that you have to begin by going to yourself.

Yes, you have to go to yourself and find out what you really want and what you are prepared to pay for it. And I will tell you what you're going to pay for it, you're going to pay for it with your life, you're going to pay for it with your death.

There are two ways to die, and one is to be buried when you die. The other is to earn your death, which you can only pay for by your life. And only you can decide what is important.

And I can tell you one thing: safety does not exist. You can opt for safety, but you're lost.

Do you expect to be in this country through the next election?

God be willing and the creek don't rise, yes. I'll be here. I'll be here for a while.

Do you place much faith in politics?

Well, you see, the political situation has got to be overhauled. There is something very wrong about a political system that depends so heavily on money.

I know Ronald Reagan has been created by a gang of businessmen, you know, who had \$1,000 each to turn him into a candidate. With that much money riding behind you, it's very difficult — if not impossible — for whoever is running against you to match you. He must have at least that much money. Which means, Tweedledum and Tweedledee.

Robert Redford made a very interesting film which I think bombed completely, years ago, called *The Candidate*, which was simply a study of a presidential campaign. And he wins and his last line is 'And now what do we do?' And it's a very frightening film. That's roughly the way it goes. It's a manipulation of the press, which is a manipulation of the people.

The mass media attempts to homogenize everyone who achieves some kind of notoriety for any reason.

That's quite true. I love that, homogenize, nullify. Yeah.

In a way, it's so impersonal: it has nothing to do with you.

Of course — it's totally impersonal. That's why it's so dangerous. If you took it seriously, that would be the end of you. You just have to forget it. You have to endure it and do something that is very dangerous: you have to try to use it. Give them a run for their money.

But it's very difficult because the media has tremendous power. Far more power than I, obviously. They can delete a word, a phrase, they can make you say things you're not saying at all. And there's no way to retract it. There's no way. You never get time to read it. It's too late. It's dead, it's done.

Well, you can get past that, too. But it's a war machine, really. It grinds everything down to hamburger. And you just get through the best you can, from one day to the next, because there's nothing you can do about the media.

What the media makes of — well, not only me, all of us, especially blacks, who are obviously in some way more dangerous; Sidney Poitier is potentially far more dangerous than Marlon Brando, Harry Belafonte is more dangerous in a way than Paul Newman. The black boy is far more dangerous than the white boy, they think — that's due also to their lack of imagination.

These people have never read history, have never read the Bible, you know, Jesse Helms is as Christian as ... well, being aware of the libel laws, I'll leave it at that. But it's incredible. He accused Martin Luther King of being a Marxist, for instance. Now that is criminal ignorance, at best.

And I knew Martin, Martin operated out of the New Testament, so you have to conclude that Jesus Christ was a Marxist. And Martin did what Christ told him to do, which was to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit those in prison. That's what he's supposed to do, right? That's simple enough, no? And it's clear enough. The man is dead because that's what he tried to do.

What do you feel about the technological changes that have happened since your first book came out, particularly as they affect the arts: how much more prominent video and film have become, how the culture tends to partake more and more of visual images?

Yes. It's very frightening. It would be absolutely terrifying if I thought America was the world. But America is not the world. And by the time the world gets around to dealing with it, being able to pay for all this hardware, something else will have happened. That doesn't worry me.

It can't worry me. I've watched this most illiterate country for too long. It's another form of illiteracy. I am going to find a way to use it, and the world will find a way to use it since it's there. But I don't think that people are going to be destroyed by it unless they really want to be. And that again comes down to what people think is real.

American television is the most astute means yet devised to destroy all human history, by making it absolutely inaccessible in a sea of soapsuds. And I mean that, really. People look at that box, and they believe everything they see on it. They don't believe anything, actually. They're too narcotized. They're really in a stupor, and a stupefied population is a very dangerous population.

As Ralph Ellison once said, nothing is more dangerous than sleepwalkers, and this is a nation of sleepwalkers. God know what's going to happen to us, to this country. But what happens to this country is one thing, but human energy in the globe is quite another. This is not the first empire to crumble because

it overextended itself and misunderstood its purpose. The end of an empire is not the end of the world. That's what you have to bear in mind.

As an American, do you feel somehow implicated because of American actions in Central America?

Well, there's nothing I can do about that. I was implicated too in the McCarthy era. I'm an American whether I like it or not and I've got to take responsibility for it, though it's not my doing. What can you do about it except accept that, and then you protest it with all your strength. I'm not responsible for Vietnam, but I had to take responsibility for it, at least to the extent of opposing my government's role in Vietnam. That's really all you can do.

You know, you make useless gestures, like you don't pay this or that tax, which you know is an absolutely futile gesture because they get it from you anyway. But what's in the record book stays in the record book and I want it in the record book, because I think that Vietnam was a crime. Worse than that, it did something fatal to the American Dream.

People don't realize how many millions of people all over the world really believed the American Dream until we sent our bombers in there, until they saw the American face. And that breaks my heart in a way. Even I, after all, expected more from my country than that. I've seen worse than America but I've also seen other things. I've seen not only the worst, I've seen the best, too.

So I believe in America in a way most Americans on the basis of the evidence do not. That's the anguish. I know that they can be better than they are. And it's true whether or not I say it.

It's a line from the New Testament. It comes back to you. Christ said it — not that I'm comparing myself to Christ — but the line is, 'If I hold my peace, the very stones will cry out.' What is altered if I hold my peace? It's still true.

What's coming is on the road, and nothing can stop it. Not Chase Manhattan, not all this hardware, nothing can stop it. It is the end, finally the end of the doctrine of white supremacy. A very important moment in the world's evolution. And it will finally liberate you.

It's easy to be skeptical about how quickly change can happen.

But bear in mind this: don't think about it quickly, don't try to think too far ahead. Everything is changing all the time whether or not it seems to be. There's never change in exactly the way you thought it would, and never in the time you thought it would, and the effect of the changes are never what you thought they would be. In fact with changes always comes a conundrum.

Don't look for resolutions. Be prepared for challenges. The moment is not coming when you are going to get to sit down and say, 'Wow, you did it. It's over. All this fighting ends on Tuesday.' Because when Wednesday morning comes, it will all have to be done again. That's the only optimism. Nothing's going to be resolved in *that* way.

Being a white male is simply not enough, being a black male is not enough, being a woman is not enough. You know, one has to be something more than that. Being an American is not enough, being a Frenchman is not enough. Especially now. We're living through the end of the European legend. Europe is not the center of the world. It never really was, it seemed to be, but it isn't anymore. And most white people all over the world don't realize it, but are simply appalled by it.

The fact is that the world is darker: South Africa is dark and the streets of London are darker than the streets of London 25 years ago. Darker with dark faces. It's altered everyone's identity. It menaces everyone's identity, and the reaction is pure panic. You know, somehow to get rid of it, to get rid of this. London is supposed to be white.

The world will never, never, never be white again. It truth it never was. It was always based on slave labor. First white slavery, children dragging carts through mines long before they got around to me. It's a common history but white people don't want to believe that.

White people don't want to believe why they came to the New World. They didn't come here looking for freedom, they came because they couldn't stay where they were. That's the only reason. Some were simply shanghaied, going to Salt Lake City to find husbands. It was a desperate migratory move, it had nothing to do with the Founding Father and heroes and all that crap.

If that were the truth then I would not have been screwed. The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution — you know, I was once defined by the Constitution as three-fifths of a man. Obviously the Constitution wasn't written a thousand years ago. There was the Fugitive Slave Act. You committed a crime if you helped me to escape from my master. So much for the morality of the Western world, so much for the morality of Manifest Destiny.

Civilization cannot live without morality. This one has none. That would be true even if I didn't say so.

One final question: how do you teach writing?

I'm not sure you do. You try to teach the people in front of you to trust what they see, and then try to articulate it. And you can hardly do more than that. You can't teach them how to write, you have to let them see. They have to face what they see. If they can face it, they can articulate. It.

When I was in trouble years and years and years ago in France, in fact that was the house of *Giovanni's Room* — I had a great time in Paris and in that room, which turned out to be *Giovanni's Room*, by myself in fact — and somebody said to me, 'Describe it.' If you can describe it, you can change it. Describe it, and you can get out of it. And actually the first thing I wrote in *Giovanni's Room* was a description of the room. Somebody said to me, 'Describe it.' And I was doing it because I knew I couldn't stay in that room — that had nothing to do with the book I'd written, but that's something else. But describe it.

If you can describe it you can find a way to endure it, then if you can endure it, you can get beyond it. And I think that's true, whether or not one does get beyond it. If you can describe it ... and if you can't describe it, then you might as well be over and done. Now obviously I'm not talking about writing. A man says it very well in that song: 'The very day I thought I was lost/My dungeon shook and my chains fell off.'

But you've got to drive yourself to that point, because you are it, and you're going to die, brother, anyway. The trick is not to surrender.

Teaching writing is really involved in asking a person to find and trust his or her stamina, describe the world they see, describe the world they are in, and trust it, no matter the price, because the other price is higher.

Everybody was born to live, everyone was born to die, basically born to live, and no state nor church, no pope nor president nor king nor dictator has the right, has the power, to interfere with your only journey, your only destiny.