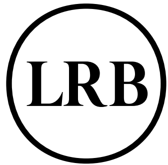

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The Last Witness

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On 1 February 2001 eight writers came to pay homage to James Baldwin in the Lincoln Center in New York. The event was booked out and there were people standing outside desperately looking for tickets. The audience was strange; in general in New York an audience is either young or old (in the Lincoln Center, mainly old), black or white (in the Lincoln Center, almost exclusively white), gay or straight (in the Lincoln Center it is often hard to tell). The audience for James Baldwin that evening could not be so easily categorised: it was, I suppose, half black, half white; half young, half old; three-quarters straight, a quarter gay. Also, there were a large number of young black men who had come alone, who carried a book and an aura of seriousness and intensity. There were a good number of writers. Some of Baldwin's family was there.

The speeches made it clear that James Baldwin's legacy is both powerful and fluid, allowing it to fit whatever category each reader requires, allowing it to influence each reader in a way that tells us as much about the reader as it does about Baldwin.

And what it tells us about Baldwin has to do with his contradictions, the large set of opposites which made up his personality. He was, for some of his life, a pure artist, using Jamesian techniques and cadences. He was also an agitator and a propagandist, political and engaged. He was steeped in the world of his Harlem childhood. He also loved the bohemian world of Greenwich Village and Paris. He was a loner. He was also a deeply gregarious and social being. He was the most eloquent man in the America of his time. His legacy is also one of failure. It is hard to decide what part of him came first. Was the colour of his skin more important than his sexuality? Was his religious upbringing more important than his reading of the American masters? Were his sadness and anger more important than his love of laughter, his delight in the world? Did his prose style, as the novelist Russell Banks claimed that evening, take its bearings from Emerson, or was it, as the writer Hilton Als put it, 'a high-faggot style', or did it originate, as John Edgar Wideman claimed, from a mixture of the King James Bible and African American speech? Was it full of the clarity, eloquence and intelligence that Chinua Achebe suggested? And was Baldwin's involvement with the Civil Rights Movement a cautionary tale for other writers, as Hilton Als insisted, or one of the things we should most admire him for, as Amiri Baraka argued? Is his best book the book that hasn't yet appeared – a volume of his letters – as Hilton Als proposed? Are his essays his finest work, as many now believe? Are his early novels his enduring legacy, books which 'blew my mind', as Chinua Achebe said that evening?

The relationship of all the speakers, and indeed of the audience, to Baldwin's work remains intense. The complexity of his character, the power of his prose and the abiding importance of his subjects make him a writer to argue with and confront as well as to admire. He made his

essays out of his arguments with himself, and this gives them a compelling honesty and edge. In his novels, he sought to explore the parts of the self which most of us seek to conceal. He was also concerned with style, with how you write a sentence, how you control the music and rhythms of prose.

Baldwin was born in Harlem in 1924, the eldest of a large family. His father died when he was 19. 'On the same day,' Baldwin wrote in *Notes of a Native Son* (1955),

> a few hours later, his last child was born. Over a month before this, while all our energies were concentrated in waiting for these events, there had been, in Detroit, one of the bloodiest race riots of the century. A few hours after my father's funeral, while he lay in state in the undertaker's chapel, a race riot broke out in Harlem ... As we drove him to the graveyard, the spoils of injustice, anarchy, discontent and hatred were all around us.

Baldwin began with a very great subject: the drama of his own life echoing against the public drama. He also began with certain influences. He listed them in *Notes of a Native Son*: 'the King James Bible, the rhetoric of the store-front church, something ironic and violent and perpetually understated in Negro speech – and something of Dickens's love for bravura'.

However, he added something of his own to his inherited subject and the influences he listed. It was something so all-pervasive in his work, both the essays and the fiction, that he may not have even noticed it, although he was alert to his strange relationship to tradition. He used and adapted the tone of the great masters of English eloquence: Bacon, Sir Thomas Browne, Hazlitt, Emerson and Henry James. He brought, he wrote, 'a special attitude' to

> Shakespeare, Bach, Rembrandt, to the stones of Paris, to the cathedral of Chartres, and to the Empire State Building ... These were not really my creations; they did not contain my history; I might search in vain for ever for any reflection of myself. I was an interloper; this was not my heritage. At the same time I had no other heritage which I could possibly hope to use – I had certainly been unfitted for the jungle and the tribe. I would have to appropriate those white centuries, I would have to make them mine.

By appropriating the heritage of English prose, Baldwin learned not only a style but also a cast of mind. The cast of mind used qualification, the aside and the further sub-clauses as a way to suggest that the truth was brittle and easily undermined. His prose played with the explicit and the implicit, the bald statement and the sceptical gloss. His style could be high and grave and reflect the glittering mind; his thought was embodied beautifully in his style, as though fresh language had led him to fresh thought. From Henry James, he also learned a great deal about character and consciousness in fiction, the use of the single point of view, and of nuance and shade.

Early in his career, he had what Eliot said of James, 'a mind so fine that it could not be penetrated by an idea'; but later on public events, and indeed private ones, pressed in on his imagination, and forbade him the sort of freedom he naturally sought. His own heritage both freed and cornered him, freed him from being a dandy and freed him into finding a subject, and then cornered him into being a spokesman or an exile, cornered him into anger.

In his speech that evening in the Lincoln Center, Achebe spoke of an uncanny connection between his own work and Baldwin's. In *Things Fall Apart*, the portrait of the father's anger and

powerlessness is very close to the portrait of the father in Baldwin's essays and his fiction. That this father, who died when Baldwin was 19, was not really his father – he never knew the name of his real father – made his regret at not knowing him and not liking him all the greater.

> Handsome, proud and ingrown, 'like a toenail', somebody said. But he looked to me, as I grew older, like pictures I had seen of African tribal chieftains: he really should have been naked, with war paint on and barbaric mementos, standing among spears. He could be chilling in the pulpit and indescribably cruel in his personal life and he was certainly the most bitter man I have ever met ... When he died I had been away from home for a little over a year ... I had discovered the weight of white people in the world. I saw that this had been for my ancestors and now would be for me an awful thing to live with and that the bitterness which had helped to kill my father could also kill me.

Baldwin's bitterness was fired by working in a defence plant in New Jersey during the war, and learning that 'bars, bowling alleys, diners, places to live' were closed to him. There was something about him that made him insist on going into these places, suffering rejection, forcing them to refuse to serve him. He described his last night there when, having been refused in a diner, he went into 'an enormous, glittering and fashionable restaurant in which I knew not even the intercession of the Virgin would cause me to be served'. He sat at a table until a waitress came and said: 'We don't serve Negroes here.' He noted the fear and the apology in her voice. 'I wanted her to come close enough for me to get her neck between my hands.' Instead, he threw a half-full mug of water at her, missed and ran. Later, he realised that he 'had been ready to commit murder. I saw nothing very clearly, but I did see this: that my life, my *real* life, was in danger, and not from anything other people might do but from the hatred I carried in my own heart.'

Baldwin's tone in these early essays was not simply political; he was not demanding legislation or urgent government action. He did not present himself as innocent and the others as guilty. He sought to do something more truthful and difficult. He sought to show that the damage had entered his soul and could not be easily dislodged, and he sought also to show that the soul of America itself was a great stained soul. He shook his head at the possibility that anything other than mass conversion could change things. He had not been a child preacher for nothing.

How from this raw anger one of the finest prose stylists of the age emerged remains fascinating. He moved downtown after his father died and began to hang out in Greenwich Village. 'There were very few black people in the Village in those years,' he wrote in 1985, 'and of that handful, I was decidedly the most improbable ... I was eager, vulnerable and lonely ... I am sure that I was afraid that I already seemed and sounded too much like a woman. In my childhood, at least until my adolescence, my playmates had called me a sissy ... On every street corner, I was called a faggot.' He found odd jobs and then lost them, washing dishes, working as an elevator boy. He drank, he had casual affairs, he suffered a number of nervous crises. The five years between the death of his father and his leaving New York remained for him nightmare years during which he came within a breath of self-destruction.

The colour of his skin caused him, in both his essays and his fiction, to create a version of America which was passionate and original; his homosexuality caused a similar attempt to describe and dramatise the sexual politics of his time. 'The American *ideal*, then, of sexuality appears to be rooted in the American idea of masculinity,' he wrote in 1985. 'This ideal has created cowboys and Indians, good guys and bad guys, punks and studs, tough guys and softies,

butch and faggot, black and white. It is an ideal so paralytically infantile that it is virtually forbidden – as an unpatriotic act – that the American boy evolve into the complexity of manhood.'

In an essay on Richard Wright, published in 1951, he wrote:

> And there is, I should think, no Negro living in America who has not felt briefly and for long periods, with anguish sharp or dull, in varying degrees or to varying effect, simple, naked and unanswerable hatred; who has not wanted to smash any white face he may encounter in a day, to violate, out of motives of the cruellest vengeance, their women, to break the bodies of all white people and bring them low, as low as that dust into which he himself has been and is being trampled.

In 1962, Baldwin published *Another Country*, which dealt with masculinity and race and rage and the fate of a young musician from Harlem who had dared to live in Greenwich Village. Rufus, the central character, has felt hatred and been brushed by its wings, but Baldwin was alert to the danger of making him merely an angry black man, or a victim. In 'Notes for a Hypothetical Novel' (1960) he had mused on the white people he had met in downtown New York in his early twenties:

> In the beginning, I thought that the white world was very different from the world I was moving out of and I turned out to be entirely wrong. It seemed different. It seemed safer, at least the white people seemed safer. It seemed cleaner, it seemed more polite, and, of course, it seemed much richer from the material point of view. But I didn't meet anyone in that world who didn't suffer from the same affliction that all the people I had fled from suffered from and that was that they didn't know who they were. They wanted to be someone that they were not.

Baldwin knew to make his hero bad as well as brilliant, to place a violent and self-destructive charm at his core and to make his white friends uneasy and complex figures too, unable to protect themselves. The first eighty pages of the book are astonishing as we watch Rufus move towards his doom. In a second essay about Richard Wright, Baldwin had alluded to the 'body of sexual myths … around the figure of the American Negro' who 'is penalised for the guilty imagination of the white people who invest him with their hates and longings, and is the principal target of their sexual longings'. Rufus is aware of this and suspicious of his own attractions. He will grow to hate the white woman who wants him. He will grow to despise and distrust his white friends. He will walk the city, destitute and forlorn. He will do what Baldwin's friend Eugene Worth did in 1946: he will finally jump to his death off the George Washington Bridge. Baldwin later said that there were no fictional antecedents for Rufus: 'He was in the novel because I don't think anyone had ever watched the disintegration of a black boy from that particular point of view. Rufus was partly responsible for his doom, and in presenting him as partly responsible, I was attempting to break out of the whole sentimental image of the afflicted nigger driven that way' – i.e. to suicide – 'by white people.'

Rufus is a tragic hero caught between the time when men such as him had no freedom and the time to come. The city has opened its doors to him, but only enough for him to feel danger and threat. He is like someone who has been released from solitary confinement into the wider prison.

Two years after the suicide of Eugene Worth, Baldwin left New York and moved to Paris. 'I didn't know what was going to happen to me in Paris,' he told the *Paris Review* in 1984, 'but I knew what was going to happen to me in New York. If I had stayed there, I would have gone under, like my friend on the George Washington Bridge.'

'I left America,' Baldwin wrote in 1959, 'because I doubted my ability to survive the fury of the colour problem here ... I wanted to prevent myself from becoming *merely* a Negro; or even merely a Negro writer.' The fate of Eugene Worth continued to haunt him. 'I felt then, and, to tell the truth, I feel now that he would not have died in such a way and certainly not so soon, if he had not been black,' he said of Worth in 1961. In that year he also wrote: 'My revenge, I decided very early, would be to achieve a power which outlasts kingdoms ... To become a Negro man, let alone a Negro artist, one had to make oneself up as one went along.'

He invented two role models for himself. One was the painter Beauford Delaney, whom he first visited in his studio in Greenwich Village when he was 16 and still a child preacher. 'Beauford was the first walking, living proof, for me, that a black man could be an artist.' Four years later, Baldwin met Richard Wright, who was 16 years older than him and, at that time, the most famous black writer in America. Wright encouraged Baldwin, read his work and recommended him for a grant. And, just as important, Wright offered him an example by going to live in Paris in 1946. (In 1952 Beauford Delaney, too, moved there.) When Baldwin arrived in November 1948, he found Wright sitting at a table in St-Germain. Wright introduced him to the world of expatriate bohemia.

Over the next six years, which were spent mostly in Paris, Baldwin produced two novels, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Giovanni's Room*, some of his best stories, and his first book of essays, *Notes of a Native Son*, made up of pieces published mainly in *Partisan Review*, *Commentary* and *Harper's*.

It would be easy to argue that *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Giovanni's Room* were written by different people. The author of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* was the young writer whose imagination was fired by his childhood and its trials, who had observed the older generation in his family, and had come to understand them better than he understood himself. He was concerned with their sensuality, their flesh as both a badge of glorious self and a source of shame and sinfulness. He tried to capture all this in the most beautiful sentences, and to fill their relationships, their privacies, their motives and their thought processes with nuance and qualification, and to note it down in well-wrought cadences. Henry James had come to Harlem. The novel was finished in 1952, accepted by Knopf and published the following year.

The arrival of Baldwin the essayist and novelist was greeted with joy by the New York editors he wrote for. Someone had emerged who could write wonderful prose, who had a sense of politics and the destiny of his people, who was wise and smart, who was from Harlem but had developed other perspectives, and whose first novel, in its treatment of religion and a Harlem only barely understood south of 125th Street, was compared to William James and William Faulkner. In Paris in 1950 Baldwin had read *A Portrait of the Artist* and its hero's story was not lost on him. The need to do battle with religion and his own oppressed nation, some of whose members were unhappy with his novel and his attitudes; the need to go into exile; the need to create a voice and mode of perception for a sensitive, literary young man: these became Baldwin's needs as they had been Joyce's. What he mainly learned in France, he later said, 'was about my own country, my own past, and about my own language. Joyce accepted silence, exile and cunning as a system

which would sustain his life, and I've had to accept it too – incidentally, silence is the hardest part to understand.'

Baldwin's editors and reviewers would have been happy had he gone on to re-create the conscience of his race in book after book. But two things were to interrupt what in 1955, with the publication of *Notes of a Native Son*, seemed to be a brilliant career. The first was his homosexuality and the second was the Civil Rights Movement.

In 1951 Baldwin had published 'The Outing', which is still one of his best stories. The church community who appear in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* go on an outing on a boat up the Hudson River. The story concentrates on a number of adolescent boys who are part of the church. It ends as follows:

> All during the trip home David seemed preoccupied. When he finally sought out Johnnie he found him sitting by himself on the top deck, shivering a little in the night air. He sat down beside him. After a moment Johnnie moved and put his head on David's shoulder. David put his arms around him. But now where there had been peace there was only panic and where there had been safety, danger, like a flower, opened.

This was dangerous territory in 1951. Baldwin had by now fallen in love with a Swiss man living in Paris, Lucien Happersberger, and despite the fact that Happersberger soon got married, Baldwin would remain involved with him, in various ways, for the rest of his life. The relationship between the two men and between Baldwin and a number of close women friends, and the general air of sexual ambivalence and dishonesty in Greenwich Village and Paris gave Baldwin the atmosphere for *Giovanni's Room*. 'Specifically,' David Leeming wrote in his 1994 biography of Baldwin, 'it reflects his own wrestling with sexual ambivalence.' Like David in the novel, Baldwin

> had been engaged or nearly engaged. He, too … had tried to convince himself of his essential heterosexuality. But unlike David, he had willingly accepted the reality represented by Giovanni's room when it came to him in the person of Lucien, to whom he dedicated the novel. Ironically, it was Lucien who married and who, several times over the years, rejected the room to which Jimmy called him and who, in Jimmy's eyes, became David to his Giovanni.

For his editors in New York, publishing a black writer was fascinating, but publishing a black homosexual writer was impossible. And there were no black characters at all in Baldwin's second novel. There was nothing about 'the Negro problem'. Thirty years later, in the *Paris Review* interview, Baldwin said: 'The sexual-moral light was a hard thing to deal with. I could not handle both propositions in the same book.' Knopf turned the book down. Baldwin's agent advised him to burn it. 'When I turned the book in,' Baldwin later said, 'I was told I shouldn't have written it. I was told to bear in mind that I was a young Negro writer with a certain audience and I wasn't supposed to alienate that audience. And if I published the book, it would wreck my career. They wouldn't publish the book, they said, as a favour to me.' In London, however, Michael Joseph agreed to publish *Giovanni's Room* and, later, in New York, a small publisher, the Dial Press, offered to bring the book out. It first appeared in 1956.

Both *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Giovanni's Room* were declarations of independence for Baldwin. In the first, he dramatised the destiny of a black family in Harlem, but refused to allow that destiny to be shaped by a plot in which being black could only lead to mayhem and tragedy. In

that sense it is as much a landmark in American writing as *Dubliners* was in Ireland. *Dubliners* refused to allow its characters to have their destiny shaped directly by Irish history, by the land wars or the British presence. Both Joyce's characters and Baldwin's characters suffer because of what is inside them.

In effect, Baldwin was refusing to write a parable of race relations. A few years before *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, he had published two essays, 'Everybody's Protest Novel' (1949) and 'Many Thousands Gone' (1951), which were essentially attacks on Richard Wright's novel *Native Son* and the fact that the life of its hero, Biggar, 'is controlled, defined by his hatred and his fear', that 'his fear drives him to murder and his hatred to rape', and that below 'the surface of the novel there lies … a continuation, a complement of that monstrous legend it was written to destroy'. In rich, allusive prose, Baldwin described *Native Son* as a protest novel whose 'climate of anarchy and unmotivated and unapprehended disaster … has led us all to believe that in Negro life there exists no tradition, no field of manners, no possibility of ritual and intercourse … But the fact is not that the Negro has no tradition but that there has as yet arrived no sensibility sufficiently profound and tough to make this tradition articulate.'

In writing *Giovanni's Room*, Baldwin made it plain that he was profound and tough enough to declare his independence from what others might have called his heritage, his natural subject-matter. For a black man to decide to write a novel with mainly gay white characters, set in France, was a brave political act. However, to place a murder at the centre of his gay plot was to do to homosexuals what he had attacked Wright for doing to black people – adding impetus to the popular notion that they were alarming. Needless to say, there was no one to point this out at the time.

Baldwin at his best has two voices. One is the third-person narrative of his first novel and the opening chapters of *Another Country*. The prose is dense; there is a fierce concentration on the single consciousness; the tone is relentless. The other is his own first-person voice, the voice of his essays. This voice is earnest, it deals in difficult truths and it has an urgent edge to it, but it is also personal and private, written in a tone which whispers and insinuates rather than hectors.

The power of the voice in the essays makes the first-person voices Baldwin created for his fictional characters in *Giovanni's Room*, *Tell Me how Long the Train's Been Gone* (1968), *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974), *Just above My Head* (1979) and some of the stories in *Going to Meet the Man* (1964) seem paler, less urgent and less complex. In spite of this, *Giovanni's Room* remains a powerful book because of the simplicity of its drama and the intensity of its vision. It deals, in the end, with the same subject as *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and deals with it at the same level of seriousness. The subject is the flesh and sexual longing, and the closeness of treachery to desire, and the way the truth of the body differs from the lies of the mind. Like other gay writers, Baldwin could take nothing for granted. The colour of his skin had made it necessary for him to watch every word. Then sexual desire led to his being told that he should burn his book. His intelligence, the energy of his wit and his longing for love ran up against history and the hardness of the world, against the prejudices which people had about a man who was black and gay. Everything in his fiction is bathed in the sadness which resulted.

His religious background and his own sexuality gave him the flesh and the devil as a great subject. His position as the eldest of his family, the surrogate father to his siblings, his position as the outsider – the writer, the homosexual, the one with the missing father – may explain his other great subject: the love between siblings. This love in his fiction is all the more fierce and

concentrated because it involves the sibling as witness to the other's self-destruction, the other's pain.

In his *Paris Review* interview he said:

> My family saved me ... I mean that they kept me so busy caring for them, keeping them from the rats, roaches, falling plaster, and all the banality of poverty that I had no time to go jumping off the roof, or to become a junkie or an alcoholic. It's either/or in the ghetto ... The welfare of my family has always driven me, always controlled me. I wanted to become rich and famous so no one could ever evict my family again ... The greatest things in my life are my brothers and sisters, and my nieces and nephews.

From his first story, 'The Rockpile', in which the brothers John and Roy appear, to *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, from the story 'Sonny's Blues' to *Tell Me how Long the Train's Been Gone*, the love between brothers in Baldwin is elemental, like Greek tragedy in its sense of foreboding. In 'Sonny's Blues', one brother is weak and the other strong enough merely to suffer the powerlessness of the person who is forced to look on. Caleb in *Tell Me how Long the Train's Been Gone* is doomed, but the drama enacted in the novel is the drama of his doom as witnessed by his younger brother, the narrator, who feels for him an attachment which is fiercer than love because it knows that loss and the possibility of a tragic fate are included in the bargain. So, too, in *Another Country*, Ida, one of Baldwin's greatest creations, enters the novel, as Antigone enters the play, because of her love for her brother Rufus. She, too, becomes a witness to a sibling's doom. The emotion surrounding family attachment in Baldwin's fiction is so deeply felt and, in much of the fiction (including books which fail in other ways), so carefully manipulated and controlled that it is central to his achievement, one of the reasons he continues to be read with such intensity.

Soon after the publication of *Giovanni's Room* in 1956, James Baldwin travelled to the South to write about race. In the winter of 1959 his essay 'Nobody Knows My Name' appeared in *Partisan Review*. 'In the fall of last year,' he wrote,

> my plane hovered over the rust-red earth of Georgia. I was past thirty, and I had never seen this land before. I pressed my face against the window, watching the earth come closer; soon we were just above the tops of trees. I could not suppress the thought that this earth had acquired its colour from the blood that had dripped down from these trees. My mind was filled with the image of a black man, younger than I, perhaps, or my own age, hanging from a tree, while white men watched and cut his sex from him with a knife.

Baldwin had written that his influences included 'something ironic and violent and perpetually understated in Negro speech'. Now the irony and the understatement were gone. In the essays of these years Baldwin moved between the language of reportage and the language of the novelist and the preacher:

It was on the outskirts of Atlanta that I first felt how the Southern landscape – the trees, the silence, the liquid heat, and the fact that one always seems to be travelling great distances – seems designed for violence, seems almost to demand it. What passions cannot be unleashed on a dark road on a Southern night! Everything seems so sensual, so languid, and so private. Desire can be acted out here; over this fence, behind that tree, in the darkness, there; and no one will see, no one will ever know. Only the night is watching and the night was made for desire.

It is important to imagine the impact this first journey had on Baldwin, the terror he felt and the dread, and the sense, too, that, no matter how freely he lived in Paris and New York, his destiny and the destiny of his country were being worked out in bitter confrontation in the South. Something in his own personality, a crucial aspect of his own talent for the darkly dramatic and the histrionic, met its match in the South.

As a novelist, he should have turned and run, because over ten years and more a large amount of serious imaginative energy was about to be taken up by the Civil Rights Movement. He never again wrote a fully successful novel. There may have been other reasons for that: the fame and money which his early writing brought him allowed him to spend time in places other than a solitary room. Also, he experimented with the form in his next novel, *Another Country* (1962), by killing off his main character after 80 pages. The novel bears all the marks of a book written sporadically over a long period of time in many different places. It begins by showing us Baldwin the novelist at his most focused and intense, and ends by suggesting that his mind was elsewhere.

> It is hard now to avoid the thought that he should have gone back to Paris and spent the rest of his life creating fictions in a peaceful environment, following events as they unfolded by reading about them in the *Herald Tribune*. Richard Wright remained in Paris. Neither Ralph Ellison nor Langston Hughes took part in the Civil Rights Movement (and Ellison took a dim view of Baldwin's involvement), just as writers like Brian Friel and Seamus Heaney avoided active involvement in the public life of Northern Ireland after 1972. ('Forgive my timid, circumspect involvement,' Heaney was later to write.) But Baldwin's imagination remained passionately connected to the world of his family and the destiny of his country. He lacked guile and watchfulness; the ruthlessness he had displayed in going to live in Paris and publishing *Giovanni's Room* was no use to him now. It was inevitable that someone with his curiosity and moral seriousness would want to become involved; and inevitable that someone with his sensitivity and temperament would find what was happening absorbing and frightening and, finally, disabling.

Also, he was younger than W.E.B. Du Bois, Hughes, Wright and Ellison, all of whom had been involved with left-wing movements and been damaged and disillusioned by politics. Baldwin, as he later said, was 'just a shade too young to have any legally recognisable political history' when McCarthy was on the rampage. For the editors in New York who published his early work, he was 'politically nearly a blank slate', as Carol Polsgrove says in *Divided Minds: Intellectuals and the Civil Rights Movement*.*

Baldwin's passionate involvement in the Civil Rights Movement did not make him feel at home and easy among his own people. The Civil Rights Movement was even more hostile to homosexuals than the wider society. Among its leaders there were two men who were clearly (as opposed to openly) gay. One was Baldwin; the other was Bayard Rustin, who was more than ten years older than Baldwin – a Communist until 1941 and thereafter a Quaker. In the war, he was imprisoned as a conscientious objector. As early as 1942 he was beaten up by the police for refusing to comply with segregation laws. He served 22 days on a chain gang in North Carolina in 1947 for his part in the first Freedom Ride organised by the Congress of Racial Equality and wrote a chilling account of the experience. Altogether, he was arrested 24 times. He adhered always to the principle of non-violence and this brought him close to Martin Luther King. He was well-read and funny and King came to enjoy his company. Rustin helped organise the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955.

In 1960, Adam Clayton Powell, the black Congressman for Harlem, tried to blackmail King after King threatened to picket the Democratic Convention. Powell told him that if he didn't call off the picket, he would tell the press that King and Rustin were having an affair. Rustin was at that time King's special assistant and director of the New York Office of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. King did not stand up for Rustin. Instead, he distanced himself from him until eventually Rustin resigned.

Three years later, when Rustin was deputy director of the March on Washington, he was denounced in the Senate by Strom Thurmond for being a Communist, a draft dodger and a homosexual. Thurmond inserted a copy of Rustin's police booking in the 1950s for indecent behaviour with other men into the Senate record. The FBI put a wire tap on King before the march. Among the things they heard was the following exchange. 'I hope Bayard don't take a drink before the march,' someone said and Dr King replied: 'Yes, and grab one little brother. 'Cause he will grab one when he has a drink.' Rustin received much of the credit for the success of the March on Washington. In *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years 1963-65*, Taylor Branch wrote: 'Overnight, Rustin became if not a household name at least a quotable and respectable source for racial journalism, his former defects as a vagabond ex-Communist homosexual overlooked or forgotten.' But his 'defects' continued to interest both King, who was worried about the damage they could do to the Movement, and the FBI.

The extensive FBI file on James Baldwin includes the sentence: 'It has been heard that Baldwin may be a homosexual and he appeared as if he may be one.' Neither Rustin nor Baldwin was invited to speak at the end of the March on Washington. Religious elements in the Movement were deeply suspicious of them. King was not personally bothered by Rustin's homosexuality, but some of his colleagues were. One of them, Stanley Levinson, suggested that Baldwin and Bayard 'were better qualified to lead a homosexual movement than a civil rights movement'.

This was a period of travelling and lecturing, making speeches, giving interviews and going on television. In May 1963 came the much publicised and stormy meeting with Robert Kennedy, in which Baldwin and a number of activists tried to explain the extent of black alienation, and Baldwin's appearance on the cover of *Time* magazine the following day. He was not part of the organised leadership of the Civil Rights Movement and thus was unable to contribute directly to plans or strategies; nor was he subject to the Movement's discipline. *Time* magazine wrote that Baldwin was 'not, by any stretch of the imagination, a Negro leader. He tries no civil rights cases in the courts, preaches from no pulpit, devises no strategems for sit-ins, Freedom Riders or street marchers.' But he was in the public eye and his journalism was very influential in these years, especially among white intellectuals.

He was deeply affected by some of the things he saw at the time. In 1963 he travelled in the back country of Mississippi with the Civil Rights leader Medgar Evers, who would be murdered a few months later. Evers was seeking to establish that the death of a black man in a remote area was a racially motivated killing, and therefore subject to Federal rather than local jurisdiction. He and Baldwin visited people mostly at night 'behind locked doors, lights down' and the atmosphere of these visits gave Baldwin the background for his play *Blues for Mister Charlie*. Then, in October, he went with his brother David to Selma, Alabama to work on voter registration. Here he learned something about the South and something also about the quality of his own rage.

Two days a year were allotted to the registration of black voters, and registration could take one hour per person: the police were quite right to see the long line of those wanting to register as a protest. 'The experience made a powerful impression on Baldwin,' Carol Polsgrove writes. 'His indignation poured out with all the vigour of a new, calamitous understanding. That morning, coming to the courthouse, he had been scared, but his fear had soon turned to rage. He felt himself wanting to kill those men who, like parrots, told him and the others to "move along".' He became a regular visitor to Selma, trying to remain in the background, according to J.L. Chestnut, Selma's only black lawyer, as he 'did not want his notoriety to be in competition with the struggle for liberty, as he put it, that was going on here'.

He was 'shrewd enough and intellectual enough', Chestnut told Posgrove,

> to know exactly where his talents and skills would fit … He was also one of those rare individuals who objectively looks at his own limitations and then operates accordingly. He knew he was not non-violent, and so he didn't get in a position where he would do something that would undermine what Martin and all the rest of them were trying to do.

He wrote almost nothing. The one play and one story he produced both seem to have been written in the white heat of the violence of those years. He was not writing the protest work for which he had attacked Wright: he was going further. His work was directly political and, in the case of 'Going to Meet the Man', almost inflammatory. The story is written from the point of view of a white sheriff who in the first lines makes his sexual interest in black women clear. He goes on to muse on the black boy he has arrested, and the lynching, described in lengthy and unbearable detail, which his father took him to when he was a child. The memory of the lynching excites him and he wakes his wife and says: 'Come on, sugar, I'm going to do you like a nigger, just like a nigger, come on, sugar, and love me like you'd love a nigger.'

The story contained everything that Baldwin had so passionately preached against; it offered us the sheriff's humanity as a pure racial cliché, a demonstration of Baldwin's views on race and sex and the South and violence. Clearly, this was not a time for Jamesian distance from the burning world.

Baldwin was under pressure. He was not a Civil Rights strategist in daily contact with the organisation. He did not have roots in any special faction. And slowly, the brotherhood was absorbing the implications not only of *Giovanni's Room*, but also of *Another Country*, which had been a bestseller, and had shown Rufus, its black hero, as violent and self-destructive – in the words of the Black Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver, 'a pathetic wretch who indulged in the white man's pastime of committing suicide, who let a white bisexual homosexual fuck him in the ass, and who took a Southern Jezebel for his woman.'

For the young men who were ready to join the Black Panthers, Baldwin was as much a part of the problem as King. Cleaver wasn't slow to point out what he saw as Baldwin's difficulties: 'It seems that many Negro homosexuals … are outraged and frustrated because in their sickness they are unable to have a baby by a white man,' he wrote in *Soul on Ice* (1968). 'The cross they have to bear is that, already bending over and touching their toes for the white man, the fruit of their miscegenation is not the little half-white offspring of their dreams but an increase in the unwinding of their nerves – though they redouble their efforts and intake of the white man's sperm.' Having praised Richard Wright and Norman Mailer, Cleaver went on to say: 'I, for one,

do not think homosexuality is the latest advance over heterosexuality on the scale of human evolution. Homosexuality is a sickness, just as are baby-rape or wanting to become the head of General Motors.'

The language and tone of 'Going to Meet the Man' and *Soul on Ice* are part of the frenzy of the time. Baldwin and Cleaver were merely two of the many raised voices. The surprising thing is how warmly and wisely Baldwin spoke about Cleaver in *No Name in the Street*, written between 1967 and 1971:

> I was very much impressed by Eldridge … I knew he'd written about me in *Soul on Ice*, but I hadn't yet read it. Naturally, when I did read it, I didn't like what he had to say about me at all. But, eventually – especially as I admired the book and felt him to be valuable and rare – I thought I could see why he felt impelled to issue what was in fact a warning: he was being a zealous watchman on the city wall, and I do not say that with a sneer. He seemed to feel that I was a dangerously odd, badly twisted, and fragile reed, of too much use to the establishment to be trusted by blacks … Well, I certainly hope I know more about myself, and the intention of my work than that, but I *am* an odd quantity. So is Eldridge; so are we all.

However, in the *Paris Review* interview Baldwin said: 'My real difficulty with Cleaver, sadly, was visited on me by the kids who were following him, while he was calling me a faggot and the rest of it.'

Even so, he became friends with various members of the Black Panthers. And part of the reason for his refusal to trade insults with Eldridge Cleaver may be that from the late 1960s Baldwin lived mostly in Istanbul or St Paul-de-Vence, where he bought a large house on ten acres. Much of *No Name in the Street* was written away from the struggle, and this may explain both the tolerance and the rambling, undisciplined tone.

In the autumn of 1960, William Styron invited Baldwin, who was working on *Another Country*, to move into the cottage beside his house in Connecticut. Baldwin, as Styron later wrote, was the grandson of a slave: Styron was the grandson of a slave-owner. Obviously, there was a great deal to discuss. 'Night after night, Jimmy and I talked, drinking whisky through the hours until the chill dawn, and I understood that I was in the company of as marvellous an intelligence as I was ever likely to encounter … Jimmy was a social animal of nearly manic gusto and there were some loud and festive times.' If Styron's white liberal friends expressed incredulity when Baldwin told them what was going to happen, 'Jimmy's face would become a mask of imperturbable certitude. "Baby," he would say softly and glare back with vast glowering eyes, "yes, baby. I mean *burn*. We will *burn your cities down*."'

Baldwin and Styron agreed that 'the writer should be free to demolish the barrier of colour, to cross the forbidden line and write from the point of view of someone with a different skin.' Baldwin had already published *Giovanni's Room*: now it was Styron's turn. *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967), which was written in the first person by a black slave, was greeted with rage and indignation by most black writers and intellectuals. Baldwin supported him, however. 'He has begun the common history – *ours*,' Baldwin said, which was unlikely to win him plaudits from the Black Panthers.

Baldwin remained independent in these difficult years, toeing no party line. Although there were long nights spent drinking whisky and 'being a social animal of nearly manic gusto', what

he chiefly remembered from his time in America in the 1960s were the murders of people he knew, people he had marched with and worked with. These years for him were punctuated not as much by the publication of his books as by the terrible toll which those who led the Movement had to pay. The long period of dullness and quietness required to write a novel had no chance against the heart-breaking urgency of the daily news. Not long after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Baldwin was sent the proofs of *Tell Me how Long the Train's Been Gone* but, according to James Campbell's 1991 biography, failed to return them. When the head of the Dial Press went to Baldwin's house to discuss changes, 'Jimmy said: "Do what you like."'

Baldwin spent much of the last twenty years of his life in France, where he died in 1987 with his brother David and Lucien Happersberger at his bedside. 'To save myself,' he had said in 1970,

> I finally had to leave for good ... One makes decisions in funny ways; you make a decision without knowing you've made it. I suppose my decision was made when Malcolm X was killed, when Martin Luther King was killed, when Medgar Evers and John and Bobby and Fred Hampton were killed. I loved Medgar. I loved Martin and Malcolm. We all worked together and kept the faith together. Now they are all dead. When you think about it, it is incredible. I'm the last witness – everybody else is dead. I couldn't stay in America. I had to leave.

Baldwin wasn't really a political thinker, or even a novelist like Styron or Mailer whose work was fired by politics. He was interested in the soul's dark intimate spaces much more than in the body politic. He was closer as an artist to Ingmar Bergman, whom he admired and wrote about, than to any of his American contemporaries. What makes his essays so compelling is that he insists on being personal, on forcing the public and the political to submit to his voice and the test of his experience and his observation. In the fiction, he drew on the hidden and dramatic areas in his own being and was prepared to explore difficult truths about himself. Because he was black, he had to battle for the right of his protagonists to choose, or half-choose, their destinies. He knew about guilt and rage and bitter privacies in a way that none of his American novelist contemporaries did. And this was not simply because he was black and homosexual. It also had to do with the nature of his talent and his sensibility. 'All art,' he wrote, 'is a kind of confession, more or less oblique. All artists, if they are to survive, are forced, at last, to tell the whole story, to vomit the anguish up.'

Letters

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Cólm Tóibín (*LRB*, 20 September) wrote that Bayard Rustin wasn't invited to speak at the March on Washington in 1963. But I was present and heard him outline the 14 points or demands which were being made to Congress. His speech followed Martin Luther King's 'I have a dream' oration.

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