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# James Baldwin

## A Voice in The Wilderness

28

By Jennifer Jordan

It is written that a prophet has no honor in his own country. In America this maxim applies only to living prophets. Dead ones are much admired. So when James Baldwin succumbed to stomach cancer on December 1, 1987, the litanies of praise resounded over the land. While he was alive, his voice was heard primarily on National Public Radio; his face seen mainly at odd hours on PBS. But in death Jimmy Baldwin made the national evening news on ABC, NBC and CBS. At his memorial service he was mourned by the superstars of the Black literary community — writers like Toni Morrison and Amiri Baraka.

It is fitting that Establishment America should honor James Baldwin in death. For he spent his life trying to awaken European Americans to the reality of Black existence and confronting them with their failure to deal with that reality candidly and ethically. And although Baldwin felt Black Americans were more willing to look at life without blinking, he often had to make them admit their denials and to shore them up when they lacked the courage to do what they knew had to be done.

James Baldwin was a valuable guide to us all because he was one of those rare realists in Afro-American literature who saw life very clearly and called it as he saw it. Unfortunately, Americans have never been very fond of realism. They prefer the bang and crash of romanticism — weird whale captains, flying Africans, wild rebels giving the high sign to life and winning against all odds. Occasionally, the American literary scene will give the nod to a so-called naturalist like Theodore Dreiser and Richard Wright. But often that naturalist is merely a romanticist turned inside out and is fond of the super-crazed, the down and out struggling mightily yet losing to an

insuperable universe, the psychotic Negro shoving white girls into furnaces.

Realism avoids hyperbole and instead examines the typical with an intimate particularity. Characters exist in a specific social framework, a particular time and place that can both destroy and nurture. They are surrounded by other people whose relationships with them are clear. Sometimes these characters perform heroically, but generally they are not larger than life. The object of realism is to make them the same size as life, a job which demands above all balance and a realization that, although people can be as wretched as Bigger Thomas in Wright's *Native Son* and as magical as Pilate in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, they usually fall somewhere in between.

Baldwin gave us a look at the ordinary and the human. His best fiction, *Go Tell It On The Mountain* (1953) and *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974), focuses on the people he knew the best — Black people living in what we like to call the ghetto. But it is obvious that Baldwin approaches that place with the same kind of emotions that Lucille Clifton expresses in her 1969 book of poems, *Good Times*: "We hang on to our place/happy to be alive/and in the inner city/or/like we call it/home." And when one is at home, one can be brutally but mercifully frank about the flaws of the homefolk. One also knows what one can be honestly proud of.

Baldwin never shrank from the depravity in Black life. He acknowledged that the terror around him as a child in Harlem forced him to seek sanctuary in the church, "for the wages of sin were visible everywhere, in every wine-stained and urine-splashed hallway, in every clanging ambulance bell, in every scar on the faces of the pimps and their whores, . . . in every knife and pistol fight on the Avenue, and in every disastrous bulletin." (*The Fire Next Time* 1963.) It is the hell around the saints of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* that makes them so hysterical in their struggle for exclusivity and isolation. Those who find no protection soon find themselves victims of the environment around them. Heroin destroys Red in *Just Above My Head* (1979) and captures Sonny in "Sonny's Blues." Julia, the child evangelist in *Just Above My Head*, is forced into an incestuous relationship with her father, who beats her until she miscarries the child that may be his own.

But for Baldwin those Blacks who suc-



. . . Baldwin was a man of tremendous talent, honesty and intellect, who created enduring works of art . . .

cumb to the traps that life sets for everyone, but especially for dark people in America, do so not because of the inherent insufficiencies of their blackness or the omnipotence of racist America. They merely share in a human frailty that is Baldwin's secular notion of a kind of original sin. Every living soul has within himself or herself this imperfection. Sometimes it is a flaw so grievous that it leads to self-destruction and rains down misery on the heads of others.

Baldwin, however, was no Calvinist ready to condemn the fallen to hell fire. There is a tolerance for the most flawed of men. Gabriel in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* is miserly of heart, unable to love his step-child, John. His hypocrisy allows him to pretend to sainthood as he hides a past life of failed responsibility. He is capable of brutalizing his family while praying fervently for its salvation. Yet we never forget Gabriel's humanity and understand him as a man driven by a desire to deny his own inadequacy and to protect his family from a hostile world that terrifies him.



Baldwin created men like Gabriel because he was guided by the conviction that "most people are not, in action, worth very much; and yet, every human being is an unprecedented miracle." (*No Name in the Street*, 1972.) He, thus, presented Black life with all its sins but refused to succumb to the assumptions that he believed marred Richard Wright's *Native Son*; the beliefs that "black is the color of damnation" and that "Negro life is . . . as debased and impoverished as our theology claims." (*Notes of a Native Son*, 1955.)

According to Baldwin, the greatest limitation of a protest novel like *Native Son* is that it leads "us to believe that in Negro life there exists no tradition, no field of manners, no possibility of ritual or intercourse." (*Notes*.) The strength of that tradition was obvious to him; it was those talents, institutions, and powers that made it possible for us to survive despite the brutalization, deprivation and rejection. So without avoiding the debilitating legacies of our past, Baldwin also set for himself the task of looking at what is wondrous in Black life. The entire corpus of his work celebrates the power that is Black culture, especially the music; the bridge over troubled water that is the Black family; and the salvation that is love.

Baldwin made the mistake in the early 1950s of admitting that he had once "despised" Black people "because they failed to produce Rembrandt." (*Notes*.)

Despite the fact that Black people as a group were a bit confused in the '50s about the notion of self-hatred and the question of cultural identity, Addison Gayle, in *We Walk the Way of the New World* (1975) — on the basis of this remark and a myopic reading of Baldwin's *Another Country* (1962) — cast the first stone and condemned Baldwin as a lap dog of the whites, a sycophant who treasured all things white and hated all that was Black. Such a conclusion makes one suspect Gayle of a cursory reading of Baldwin before 1962 and a refusal to read him afterwards.

Baldwin, like Langston Hughes before him, had his hand on the pulse of Black culture. Despite his condemnation of the Black church as a "racket" feeding off the "Blindness, Loneliness, and Terror" of its people, Baldwin recognized in *The Fire Next Time* its excitement, "power and glory": "There is no music like that music, no drama like the drama of the saints rejoicing, the sinners moaning, the tambores racing, and all those voices coming

together and crying holy unto the Lord."

*Just Above My Head*, despite its other flaws, is a moving tribute to the spiritual and to gospel music. "Sonny's Blues," in *Going to Meet the Man* (1965), includes one of the most effective descriptions of the jazz musician at work and commemorates the blues as "the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph."

Despite Baldwin's obvious love of Afro-American culture, critics like Addison Gayle are greatly offended by his refusal to recognize the significance of Africa in the diaspora (Gayle). And indeed, Baldwin revealed a serious ignorance of African traditions and their resilient survival in Afro-American life. He assumed that the African past was irrecoverable and that Black Americans were *tabulae rasae* writ upon by only their 350 years in America. His prose revealed a continual grappling question of Blacks' relationship with Africa, but even as he learned more about African culture and politics (see "Princes and Power" in *Nobody Knows My Name* — 1960), he insisted that Black Americans were aliens who had no choice but America. That choice was a cross to bear, according to Baldwin, who coveted Africans' firmly rooted identities and their enviably clear destiny — the wresting of their lands from European hands. But Baldwin was convinced that the African past could not change the Afro-American present. He saw Black Americans as condemned to a torturous but indestructible link to America and implied that we must save white Americans — and thus ourselves — by aiding them to become like us. (*The Fire Next Time*.)

The culture with the survival techniques which ensured America's salvation resided for Baldwin in the traditional Black family. Although his portrayal of this family may have conflicted greatly with the sociological projections of the last 20 years, Baldwin wrote of the Black family as he knew it: a source of a great deal of pain but ultimately the lifeline which anchors those who are to survive. Without the family there is no future for John in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, no life for Tish and her baby in *If Beale Street Could Talk*, no witness for Rufus in *Another Country*, and no prop for Arthur Montana in *Just Above My Head*. There is a description in "Sonny's Blues" of a Black family quietly enjoying a Sunday in the slums of New York that conveyed perfectly what the family meant to James Baldwin:

*Maybe somebody's got a kid in his lap and*

*is absent-mindedly stroking the kid's head. . . . The silence, the darkness coming, and the darkness in the faces frightens [sic] the child obscurely. He hopes that the hand which strokes his forehead will never stop — will never die. He hopes that there will never come a time when the old folks won't be sitting around the living room, talking about where they've come from, and what they've seen. . . ."*

Of course, in "Sonny's Blues" the old folks have to die eventually, but not before they leave behind maps for those who follow. In the '80s we hear that there is no longer a connection between the elders and the young, that the Black family has disintegrated under the force of unemployment, drugs, and crime. If this is so, we must appreciate Baldwin for having recorded the poor, Black, urban family at its best and wait for another chronicler to come along to document the present desolation.

For Baldwin, it was love that held the family together, and love that made life possible. On first glance it seems to be the one thing about which he was an incurable romantic. In *Just Above My Head*, he spoke of an ideal love which provides support when it is needed and which allows others to be themselves by repudiating judgment and possessiveness. It is the kind of love that Hall Montana feels for his brother Arthur and for Julia, his former lover. It is a kind of spiritual bond that exists between Arthur and his male lovers, Crunch and Jimmy.

It is, however, no panacea. Happiness, especially happiness which is the result of romantic love, is transient. Baldwin compared it to the joy of being given someone else's lost "wallet containing a fortune." You know you don't deserve it, but you claim it anyway. Unfortunately, "the wallet will, one day, be empty, and money spent. God knows where happiness goes." (*Just Above My Head*.)

Love also is helpless against the internal demons that plague every living soul. Hall Montana's love, despite its intensity and unselfishness, can not save Arthur from his self-doubt and excesses.

Of course, Baldwin's notion of love grows far more complicated when sex is added, and his novels add a great deal of graphic sex, at least when compared to other Black fiction. Baldwin presented sex as something both powerful and mundane. It is also obvious that he thought it important to make homosexual love something real for the heterosexual, who usually peers at it



with a mixture of revulsion and prurient fascination.

Baldwin spent a great deal of energy trying to evoke empathy from a sometimes hostile reader by focusing on the human emotions of homosexual love and sex. Arthur Hall is an especially sensitive lover who is concerned that he never use another and who, in his lack of cynicism about both sex and love, seems the eternal naif. Arthur, in effect, is the very opposite of the indiscriminate, phallic-centered stereotype of the homosexual.

Despite the emphasis that Baldwin placed on sexuality — whether heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual — his portrayal of sex was not without ambivalence. At times he wrote about sexual encounters with the kind of breathless purple prose one might expect from a long reluctant virgin discovering the miracle of orgasm or from a writer spewing out another one of those bad drugstore romances. At other moments sex was viewed with a tremendous casualness, which allowed for a free-wheeling exchange of partners and disregarded the little differences of sex and race.

At one point in *Just Above My Head*, Arthur's lover, Crunch, explains why he has slept with Julia: "Sometimes a person just needs somebody's arms around them, then anything can happen. . . . That's life." But ultimately sex is merely an exchange of bodily fluids if there is no love.

Hall Montana reaches manhood when he arrives at the understanding that he must be able "to accept my nakedness as sacred, and to hold sacred the nakedness of another. . . . There must be a soul within the body you are holding, a soul which you are striving to meet, a soul which is striving to meet you."

Love is also the corrective which Baldwin offered to an America drowning in a sea of racial conflict. Before the death of Dr. Martin Luther King he honestly felt that Black people must relinquish their justifiable fury and forgive white Americans, whom he perceived as highly destructive toddlers unable to grasp the magnitude of the devastation they wreak on the rest of the world. He writes his nephew in *The Fire Next Time*: "You must accept them with love. For these innocent people have no other hope. They are, in effect, still trapped in a history which they do not understand; and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it."

Even when Baldwin grew tired of trying to pierce the impenetrable and purposeful

ignorance of white Americans, he still maintained a reluctant sympathy. The long trail of bodies left by the civil rights struggle and the multitude of imprisoned and murdered radicals of the '60s' rebellion led Baldwin to a sad recognition of "the fraudulent and expedient nature of the American innocence which has always been able to persuade itself that it does not know what it knows too well." (*No Name in the Street*.)

But even when he began to feel he had been duped, perhaps by his own generosity, he insisted that to be a Black American is to condemn America "out of the most passionate love, hoping to make the kingdom new . . . honorable and worthy of life." (*No Name*.)

Despite all the talk of love, Baldwin was a man who knew, with a great deal of intimacy and intensity, the reality of rage. In 1955, in his first book of essays *Notes of a Native Son*, he wrote: "There is . . . no Negro living in America who has not felt . . . simple, naked and unanswerable hatred, who has not wanted to smash any white face he may encounter in a day, . . . 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."

Baldwin never spoke of this rage as anything other than a natural and vindicable response to American racism. But he rejected it and the violence it demands, not only because he insisted on trying to save America from itself, but also because he felt that such anger acted out would destroy Black people psychologically and morally. In *The Fire Next Time*, he wrote: "I am very much concerned that American Negroes achieve their freedom. . . . But I am also concerned for their dignity, for the health of their souls, and must oppose any attempt that Negroes may make to do to others what has been done to them."

Despite his refusal to embrace violence, Baldwin at the end seemed to think it inevitable. America would not listen; America would not change. The result, according to Baldwin, would be a violent struggle on the part of the world's non-white people to effect a new order: "There will be bloody holding actions all over the world, for years to come: but the Western party is over, and the white man's sun has set. Period." (*No Name*.)

Despite, or maybe because of, this frightening message, it is fitting that white America commemorate the passing of this man of large spirit and vision.

On one level white Americans send him

away with loud hosannas because they are glad to have him gone. No longer do they have to hear that unrelenting voice, crying out of the wilderness, warning them to repent and enter into fellowship with the rest of mankind.

On a deeper, subconscious level, however, they understand they have lost an invaluable ally, for James Baldwin belonged to an almost extinct breed: a Black articulate voice who still had credibility with other Blacks and who still felt for white America a kind of love that survived the palpable pity and contempt he struggled vainly to contain. He was among those Blacks who achieved adulthood in the '50s and felt they had formed sincere relationships with a tiny but significant group of whites, who in their youth, rushed madly away from their own whiteness. The Blacks of that generation became quite ironic and sometimes quite bitter trying to balance the love and the hatred that white America elicited from them.

White America must be grateful for Baldwin and the others like him, for the next generation — the one of the '60s — had no patience for the balancing act and reached out for the rage. Of course, the ones from the '60s are quite calm these days and struggle like the rest of America to feed the children and pay the mortgage. But white America remembers and fears they can not be trusted. The children of the late '70s and '80s elicit even greater discomfort. How can white Americans turn their backs on a group that shows signs of becoming too much like them and thus capable of terrible things in the struggle for money and power?

Black Americans are still uncertain about what Baldwin had to offer them. They too came to praise him in death. But many Blacks, fearful and hypocritical, despise him for talking about the rage; and a significant group, insisting on the need for retribution, reject the message of love. And an alarming number, especially males, can not see past the homosexuality.

Whatever one's position, one must admit that Baldwin was a man of tremendous talent, honesty and intellect, who created enduring works of art and brought his genius to a lifelong consideration of problems that will carry us well into the next century. We do well to heed him. □

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