

*Modern Critical Views*

# JAMES BALDWIN

Edited and with an Introduction by  
**HAROLD BLOOM**



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Harold Bloom

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藏书章

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## *Editor's Note*

This volume gathers together what its editor considers to be the most useful criticism yet devoted to the writings of James Baldwin, reprinted here in the chronological order of its original publication. I am indebted to Henry Finder and Susan Laity for their invaluable assistance in researching and editing this book.

The editor's introduction analyzes Baldwin's rhetorical stance in his nonfictional prose, which I take to be his major achievement, both morally and aesthetically. F. W. Dupee begins the chronological sequence of criticism with his tribute to Baldwin as a polemical essayist, a tribute severely qualified by his awareness that: "When Baldwin replaces criticism with prophecy, he manifestly weakens his grasp of his role, his style, and his great theme itself." In a related critique, Marcus Klein notes Baldwin's "rhetoric of privileged alienation," which sorts oddly with fictions whose heroes are always pre-moral, as it were.

In an astute review of Baldwin's play *Blues for Mr. Charlie*, the novelist Philip Roth grimly observes that making a hero of blackness, and sentimentalizing masculinity, are not in themselves sufficient to create drama. Considering *Another Country*, Charles Newman discovers Baldwin's precursor not in Richard Wright, but in Henry James. Dangerous as the comparison was, Newman intended it as a tribute to the potential revealed by *Another Country*, but twenty years later we have to read Newman with a certain melancholy nostalgia, since *Another Country* is unmatched by Baldwin's later fictions.

In another essay that contextualizes Baldwin, this time in the Church of his origins, Edward Margolies broods on the problematics of Baldwin's rage, with its perpetual capacity to flood both his novels and his essays. Roger Rosenblatt, in an analysis of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Another Country*, traces how intricately sexuality and faith are interlaced throughout Baldwin's early novels.

A constant polemic against Baldwin, to the effect that he is far too

contaminated by Western culture to be a true champion of the Black literature of liberation, is reflected in Marion Berghahn's survey of the images of Africa in Baldwin's writings. Pearl K. Bell, comparing Baldwin's difficulties with blacks to Philip Roth's parallel agon with Jewish critics, sadly concludes that *Just Above My Head* fails as a novel precisely because Baldwin has so uncertain a relation to his own people.

The British critic C. W. E. Bigsby, in a dispassionate overview of all of Baldwin's work, decides that the novelist-essayist's divided sensibility is finally his catastrophe, since his terrible ambivalences are never resolved by any intellectual synthesis. One aspect of those ambivalences is discussed by Stephen Adams, who considers *Giovanni's Room* as a lament for the unrealized possibilities of homosexual love, while it nevertheless seeks to present the homosexual as hero.

In a final estimate of Baldwin, James Snead reviews *The Price of the Ticket* and *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, and honors the author as the most prolific and most durable American essayist of the last forty years. Snead's moving and careful tribute returns this volume full-circle to its editor's introduction, where the strengths and the opacities of Baldwin's essays are balanced against one another.

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## Introduction

### I

Whatever the ultimate canonical judgment upon James Baldwin's fiction may prove to be, his nonfictional work clearly has permanent status in American literature. Baldwin seems to me the most considerable moral essayist now writing in the United States, and is comparable to George Orwell as a prose Protestant in stance. The evangelical heritage never has abandoned the author of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, and Baldwin, like so many American essayists since Emerson, possesses the fervor of a preacher. Unlike Emerson, Baldwin lacks the luxury of detachment, since he speaks, not for a displaced Yankee majority, but for a sexual minority within a racial minority, indeed for an aesthetic minority among black homosexuals.

Ultimately, Baldwin's dilemma as a writer compelled to address social torments and injustices is that he is a minority of one, a solitary voice breaking forth against himself (and all others) from within himself. Like Carlyle (and a single aspect of the perspectivizing Nietzsche), Baldwin is of the authentic lineage of Jeremiah, most inward of prophets. What Baldwin opposes is what might be called, in Jeremiah's language, the injustice of outwardness, which means that Baldwin always must protest, even in the rather unlikely event that his country ever were to turn from selfishness and cruelty to justice and compassion in confronting its underclass of the exploited poor, whether blacks, Hispanics, or others cast out by the Reagan Revolution.

It seems accurate to observe that we remember Jeremiah, unlike Amos or Micah, for his individuation of his own suffering, rather than for his social vision, such as it was. Baldwin might prefer to have been an Amos or a Micah, forerunners of Isaiah, rather than a Jeremiah, but like Jeremiah he is vivid as a rhetorician of his own psychic anguish and perplexities, and most memorable as a visionary of a certain involuntary isolation, an election that requires a dreadful cost of confirmation. As Baldwin puts it, the price of the ticket is to accept the real reasons for the human journey:



The price the white American paid for his ticket was to become white—: and, in the main, nothing more than that, or, as he was to insist, nothing less. This incredibly limited not to say dimwitted ambition has choked many a human being to death here: and this, I contend, is because the white American has never accepted the real reasons for his journey. I know very well that my ancestors had no desire to come to this place: but neither did the ancestors of the people who became white and who require of my captivity a song. They require of me a song less to celebrate my captivity than to justify their own.

The Biblical text that Baldwin alludes to here, Psalm 137, does begin with the song of the exiles from Zion (“and they that wasted us required of us mirth”) but ends with a ferocious prophecy against the wasters, ourselves. No writer—black or white—warns us so urgently of “the fire next time” as Baldwin and Jeremiah do, but I hear always in both prophets the terrible pathos of origins:

Then the word of the Lord came unto me, saying,

Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations.

Then said I, Ah, Lord God! behold, I cannot speak: for I am a child.

*We*: my family, the living and the dead, and the children coming along behind us. This was a complex matter, for I was not living with my family in Harlem, after all, but “down-town,” in the “white world,” in alien and mainly hostile territory. On the other hand, for me, then, Harlem was almost as alien and in a yet more intimidating way and risked being equally hostile, although for very different reasons. This truth cost me something in guilt and confusion, but it was the truth. It had something to do with my being the son of an evangelist and having been a child evangelist, but this is not all there was to it—that is, guilt is not all there was to it.

The fact that this particular child had been born when and where he was born had dictated certain expectations. The child does not really know what these expectations are—does not know how real they are—until he begins to fail, challenge, or defeat them. When it was clear, for example, that the pulpit, where I had made so promising a beginning, would not be my career, it was hoped that

I would go on to college. This was never a very realistic hope and—perhaps because I knew this—I don't seem to have felt very strongly about it. In any case, this hope was dashed by the death of my father.

Once I had left the pulpit, I had abandoned or betrayed my role in the community—indeed, my departure from the pulpit and my leaving home were almost simultaneous. (I had abandoned the ministry in order not to betray myself by betraying the ministry.)

Reluctant prophets are in the position of Jonah; they provide texts for the Day of Atonement. Baldwin is always at work reexamining everything, doing his first works over; as he says: "Sing or shout or testify or keep it to yourself: but *know whence you came*." We came crying hither because we came to this great stage of fools, but Baldwin, like Jeremiah and unlike Shakespeare, demands a theology of origins. He finds it in self-hatred, which he rightly insists is universal, though he seems to reject or just not be interested in the Freudian account of our moral masochism, our need for punishment. The evangelical sense of conscious sin remains strong in Baldwin. Yet, as a moral essayist, he is post-Christian, and persuades us that his prophetic stance is not so much religious as aesthetic. A kind of aesthetic of the moral life governs his vision, even in the turbulence of *The Fire Next Time* and *No Name in the Street*, and helps make them his finest achievements so far.

## II

The center of Baldwin's prophecy can be located in one long, powerful paragraph of *The Fire Next Time*:

"The white man's Heaven," sings a Black Muslim minister, "is the black man's Hell." One may object—possibly—that this puts the matter somewhat too simply, but the song is true, and it has been true for as long as white men have ruled the world. The Africans put it another way: When the white man came to Africa, the white man had the Bible and the African had the land, but now it is the white man who is being, reluctantly and bloodily, separated from the land, and the African who is still attempting to digest or to vomit up the Bible. The struggle, therefore, that now begins in the world is extremely complex, involving the historical role of Christianity in the realm of power—that is, politics—and in the realm of morals. In the realm of power, Christianity has operated with an unmitigated arrogance and cruelty—necessarily, since a religion ordinarily imposes on those who have

discovered the true faith the spiritual duty of liberating the infidels. This particular true faith, moreover, is more deeply concerned about the soul than it is about the body, to which fact the flesh (and the corpses) of countless infidels bears witness. It goes without saying, then, that whoever questions the authority of the true faith also contests the right of the nations that hold this faith to rule over him—contests, in short, their title to his land. The spreading of the Gospel, regardless of the motives or the integrity or the heroism of some of the missionaries, was an absolutely indispensable justification for the planting of the flag. Priests and nuns and schoolteachers helped to protect and sanctify the power that was so ruthlessly being used by people who were indeed seeking a city, but not one in the heavens, and one to be made, very definitely, by captive hands. The Christian church itself—again, as distinguished from some of its ministers—sanctified and rejoiced in the conquests of the flag, and encouraged, if it did not formulate, the belief that conquest, with the resulting relative well-being of the Western populations, was proof of the favor of God. God had come a long way from the desert—but then so had Allah, though in a very different direction. God, going north, and rising on the wings of power, had become white, and Allah, out of power, and on the dark side of Heaven, had become—for all practical purposes, anyway—black. Thus, in the realm of morals the role of Christianity has been, at best, ambivalent. Even leaving out of account the remarkable arrogance that assumed that the ways and morals of others were inferior to those of Christians, and that they therefore had every right, and could use any means, to change them, the collision between cultures—and the schizophrenia in the mind of Christendom—had rendered the domain of morals as chartless as the sea once was, and as treacherous as the sea still is. It is not too much to say that whoever wishes to become a truly moral human being (and let us not ask whether or not this is possible; I think we must *believe* that it is possible) must first divorce himself from all the prohibitions, crimes, and hypocrisies of the Christian church. If the concept of God has any validity or any use, it can only be to make us larger, freer, and more loving. If God cannot do this, then it is time we got rid of Him.

This superb instance of Baldwin's stance and style as a moral essayist depends for its rhetorical power upon a judicious blend of excess and restraint. Its crucial sentence achieves prophetic authority:

It is not too much to say that whoever wishes to become a truly moral human being (and let us not ask whether or not this is possible; I think we must *believe* that it is possible) must first divorce himself from all the prohibitions, crimes, and hypocrisies of the Christian church.

The parenthesis, nobly skeptical, is the trope of a master rhetorician, and placing “believe” in italics nicely puts into question the problematics of faith. “Divorce,” denounced by St. Paul as having been introduced because of our hardness of hearts, acquires the antithetical aura of the Church itself, while Christian prohibitions are assimilated (rather wickedly) to Christian crimes and hypocrisies. This is, rhetorically considered, good, unclean fun, but the burden is savage, and steeped in moral high seriousness. The strength of *The Fire Next Time* comes to rest in its final paragraph, with the interplay between two italicized rhetorical questions, an interplay kindled when “*then*” is added to the second question:

When I was very young, and was dealing with my buddies in those wine- and urine-stained hallways, something in me wondered, *What will happen to all that beauty?* For black people, though I am aware that some of us, black and white, do not know it yet, are very beautiful. And when I sat at Elijah’s table and watched the baby, the women, and the men, and we talked about God’s—or Allah’s—vengeance, I wondered, when that vengeance was achieved, *What will happen to all that beauty then?* I could also see that the intransigence and ignorance of the white world might make that vengeance inevitable—a vengeance that does not really depend on, and cannot really be executed by, any person or organization, and that cannot be prevented by any police force or army: historical vengeance, a cosmic vengeance, based on the law that we recognize when we say, “Whatever goes up must come down.” And here we are, at the center of the arc, trapped in the gaudiest, most valuable, and most improbable water wheel the world has ever seen. Everything now, we must assume, is in our hands; we have no right to assume otherwise. If we—and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others—do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world. If we do not now dare everything, the fulfillment of that prophecy, recreated from the Bible in song by

a slave, is upon us: "God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time!"

The shrewd rhetorical movement here is from the waterwheel to the ambivalent divine promise of no second flood, the promise of covenant with its dialectical countersong of the conflagration ensuing from our violation of covenant. That vision of impending fire re-illuminates the poignant question: "*What will happen to all that beauty then?*" All that beauty that is in jeopardy transcends even the beauty of black people, and extends to everything human, and to bird, beast, and flower.

*No Name in the Street* takes its fierce title from Job 18:16-19, where it is spoken to Job by Bildad the Shuhite, concerning the fate of the wicked:

His roots shall be dried up beneath,  
and above shall his branch be cut off.  
His remembrance shall perish from the earth,  
and he shall have no name in the street.  
He shall be driven from light into darkness,  
and chased out of the world.  
He shall neither have son nor nephew among  
his people, nor any remaining in his dwellings.  
They that come after him shall be astonished  
at his day, as they that went before were  
affrighted.

I have to admit, having just read (and re-read) my way through the 690 pages of *The Price of the Ticket*, that frequently I am tempted to reply to Baldwin with Job's response to Bildad:

How long will ye vex my soul, and break me in  
pieces with words?  
These ten times have ye reproached me: ye are  
not ashamed that ye make yourselves strange to me.  
And be it indeed that I have erred, mine  
error remaineth with myself.  
If indeed ye will magnify yourselves against  
me, and plead against me my reproach.

Baldwin's rhetorical authority as prophet would be seriously impaired if he were merely a Job's comforter, Bildad rather than Jeremiah. *No Name in the Street* cunningly evades the risk that Baldwin will magnify himself against the reader, partly by the book's adroitness at stationing the author himself in

the vulnerable contexts of his own existence, both in New York and in Paris. By not allowing himself (or his readers) to forget how perpetually a black homosexual aesthete and moralist, writer and preacher, must fight for his life, Baldwin earns the pathos of the prophetic predicament:

I made such motions as I could to understand what was happening, and to keep myself afloat. But I had been away too long. It was not only that I *could* not readjust myself to life in New York—it was also that I *would* not: I was never going to be anybody's nigger again. But I was now to discover that the world has more than one way of keeping you a nigger, has evolved more than one way of skinning the cat; if the hand slips here, it tightens there, and now I was offered, gracefully indeed: membership in the club. I had lunch at some elegant bistros, dinner at some exclusive clubs. I tried to be understanding about my countrymen's concern for difficult me, and unruly mine—and I really *was* trying to be understanding, though not without some bewilderment, and, eventually, some malice. I began to be profoundly uncomfortable. It was a strange kind of discomfort, a terrified apprehension that I had lost my bearings. I did not altogether understand what I was hearing. I did not trust what I heard myself saying. In very little that I heard did I hear anything that reflected anything which I knew, or had endured, of life. My mother and my father, my brothers and my sisters were not present at the tables at which I sat down, and no one in the company had ever heard of them. My own beginnings, or instincts, began to shift as nervously as the cigarette smoke that wavered around my head. I was not trying to hold on to my wretchedness. On the contrary, if my poverty was coming, at last, to an end, so much the better, and it wasn't happening a moment too soon—and yet, I felt an increasing chill, as though the rest of my life would have to be lived in silence.

The discomfort of having lost bearings is itself a prophetic trope, and comes to its fruition in the book's searing final paragraph:

To be an Afro-American, or an American black, is to be in the situation, intolerably exaggerated, of all those who have ever found themselves part of a civilization which they could in no wise honorably defend—which they were compelled, indeed, endlessly to attack and condemn—and who yet spoke out of the most passionate love, hoping to make the kingdom new, to make it

honorable and worthy of life. Whoever is part of whatever civilization helplessly loves some aspects of it, and some of the people in it. A person does not lightly elect to oppose his society. One would much rather be at home among one's compatriots than be mocked and detested by them. And there is a level on which the mockery of the people, even their hatred, is moving because it is so blind: it is terrible to watch people cling to their captivity and insist on their own destruction. I think black people have always felt this about America, and Americans, and have always seen, spinning above the thoughtless American head, the shape of the wrath to come.

Not to be at home among one's compatriots is to avoid the catastrophe of being at ease in the new Zion that is America. A reader, however moved by Baldwin's rhetorical authority, can be disturbed here by the implication that all blacks are prophets, at least in our society. Would to God indeed that all the Lord's people were prophets, but they are not, and cannot be. Fourteen years after the original publication of *No Name in the Street*, I am confronted by polls indicating that the President of the United States, currently enjoying a sixty-eight percent approval rating among all his constituents, also possesses a rather surprising fifty percent endorsement from my black fellow citizens. Whatever the President's place in history may prove to be, time has darkened Baldwin's temporal prophecy that his own people could remain an undivided witness against our civilization.

### III

Like every true prophet, Baldwin passionately would prefer the fate of Jonah to that of Jeremiah, but I do not doubt that his authentic descent from Jeremiah will continue to be valid until the end of his life (and mine). The final utterance in *The Price of the Ticket* seems to me Baldwin's most poignant, ever:

Freaks are called freaks and are treated as they are treated—in the main, abominably—because they are human beings who cause to echo, deep within us, our most profound terrors and desires.

Most of us, however, do not appear to be freaks—though we are rarely what we appear to be. We are, for the most part, visibly male or female, our social roles defined by our sexual equipment.

But we are all androgynous, not only because we are all born of a woman impregnated by the seed of a man but because each

of us, helplessly and forever, contains the other—male in female, female in male, white in black and black in white. We are a part of each other. Many of my countrymen appear to find this fact exceedingly inconvenient and even unfair, and so, very often, do I. But none of us can do anything about it.

Baldwin is most prophetic, and most persuasive, when his voice is as subdued as it is here. What gives the rhetorical effect of self-subdual is the precise use of plural pronouns throughout. Moving from his own predicament to the universal, the prophet achieves an effect directly counter to Jeremiah's pervasive trope of individualizing the prophetic alternative. The ultimate tribute that Baldwin has earned is his authentic share in Jeremiah's most terrible utterance:

O Lord, thou has deceived me, and I was deceived: thou art stronger than I, and hast prevailed: I am in derision daily, every one mocketh me.

For since I spake, I cried out, I cried violence and spoil; because the word of the Lord was made a reproach unto me, and a derision, daily.

Then I said, I will not make mention of him, nor speak any more in his name. But his word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not stay.



