

RE-VIEWING JAMES BALDWIN

things not seen

Edited by

D. Quentin Miller

Foreword by **David Adams Leeming**



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foreword

DAVID ADAMS LEEMING

In *Re-Viewing James Baldwin*, Quentin Miller and his contributors provide us with a much needed assessment of the late works of James Baldwin. For too many readers of Baldwin, the interest in his work stops with *The Fire Next Time*. To a great extent, the unawareness of the late work and the gradual obscurity of some of the early work can be attributed to the critical establishment's resentment of Baldwin's apparent change of attitude in the mid-sixties.

The author of the autobiographical first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, met the liberal need to sympathize with the plight of a sensitive youth and his tortured family hidden away in that foreign country called Harlem. The first two books of essays, *Notes of a Native Son* and *Nobody Knows My Name*, although strong in their protest against racial injustice in America, were not antagonistic toward whites. The reader of "Equal in Paris" or "Stranger in the Village" or even the essay "Notes of a Native Son" itself, were exposed in no uncertain terms to the horrors of racism from the point of view of an African American man. But this black man's style was reminiscent of Henry James rather than of Bigger Thomas. And the author seemed to be holding our hands, promising that nothing bad would happen to us if we went with him to the Paris jail, the streets of Harlem, or the restaurant in New Jersey where he threw a glass at the waitress who refused to serve him. We were enlightened by the early James Baldwin, but we were safe with

him. The same could be said of the great “homosexual novel,” *Giovanni’s Room* or the bisexual epic, *Another Country*. These novels were upsetting, but we were liberal enough in the late fifties and early sixties to accept with minimal discomfort the message that sexual honesty was important and that sexual honesty was inevitably related to honesty about other issues—art, race, politics. As to *The Fire Next Time*, it was, after all, first published in *The New Yorker*, and although Baldwin was fascinated by Elijah Muhammad, he did not come down on the side of the Muslims. Instead, speaking right out of the tradition of Martin Luther King, Jr., perhaps flavored by a bit of Malcolm X, he warned us that those of us—black and white—who were liberal enough could prevent the fire by working together for justice.

But then came the terrifying short story, “Going to Meet the Man,” in which a lynching is somehow associated with the sexual problems of a white sheriff, and the even more bothersome play, *Blues for Mr. Charlie*, in which there seems to be an almost insurmountable barrier between Black Town and White Town and the black preacher at the end of the play, Malcolm X style, has a gun in his Bible. People—especially white people—were made uncomfortable by those works and they found it convenient to blame the discomfort on the author’s failing powers rather than on the real problem that faced us in the mid-sixties. People with Baldwin’s prophetic understanding already were beginning to see by that time that those whites who had linked arms to overcome racism in the “movement” were not willing or able to open the collective pocketbook or the collective neighborhood of white America in any significant way to alleviate inequality. They were willing to march in the nonviolent safety of Martin’s shadow but were not in the sunlight of Malcolm’s or Stokely Carmichael’s early calls to battle.

So Baldwin became disillusioned, and he expressed that disillusionment in the words of characters that included Tish in *If Beale Street Could Talk*, Black Christopher in the autobiographical *Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone*, in the tragic lives of Arthur, Jimmy, and Julia in the much underrated—in fact, ignored—family blues epic, *Just Above My Head*, and in the moving and sometimes powerful poetry of *Jimmy’s Blues*. And he expresses it in the late prose works, in which critics almost uniformly have been bothered by his “unreasonable bitterness.” In fact, Baldwin was never bitter; he was, as Maya Angelou has reminded us, just angry—angry about the plight of the inner-city black, angry about the sacrifice of so many modern “buffalo soldiers” in the Vietnam War and black children in the drug war, and angry about a “new South” that masked old injustices with architectural and economic glitz. He

expressed his anger in several late works of nonfiction—*The Devil Finds Work*, *No Name in the Street*, and *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, all segments of an autobiography that began with the first two books of essays and *The Fire Next Time*.

In this much-needed collection we finally find a serious consideration of this late, angry, and still articulate James Baldwin, who understands that the fire is smoldering under the brush of complacency, who knows that “he who collaborates is doomed, bound forever in the unimaginable and yet very common condition which we weakly suggest as *Hell*.”¹

NOTE

1. James Baldwin, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1985), 125.

RE-VIEWING JAMES BALDWIN

things not seen



introduction

D. QUENTIN MILLER

In her posthumous tribute to James Baldwin, Toni Morrison writes, "You are an artist after all and an artist is forbidden a career in this place; an artist is permitted only a commercial hit" (Troupe 76). In the same volume of essays, another artist, Mary McCarthy, reluctantly admits, "After [reading *Go Tell It on the Mountain*], I read *The Fire Next Time* and was moved, maybe shaken a little by it. And, after that, I'm sorry to say, I read no more of Jimmy. The reason was simple: I was afraid to. From what I heard, I did not think I would like *Giovanni's Room* or the books that followed and I preferred to keep my sense of Jimmy's gift pure and intact in my mind. (When we stop reading an author we like, that is usually why, I imagine: we do not want to change the idea we have of him)" (Troupe 48). From different viewpoints, these two novelists approach the same question: What is behind the tendency to limit our reading of an author's works? Morrison, who claims to have "pored again through the 6,895 pages of [Baldwin's] published work" (Troupe 76) before writing her tribute, clearly believes that true artists like Baldwin are underappreciated, and that their careers are often reduced to the legacy of their one commercial success, if they even have one. McCarthy expresses a different anxiety: She can't imagine an author has transcended the perfection of that one commercial success, and she doesn't want that perfection compromised by other works that might not measure up. For better or worse, more of Baldwin's readers are like

McCarthy than Morrison, largely because he was an artist who refused to stand for any one single thing or to write in any one single voice.

An author's reputation rarely should, but too often does, rest on the reputation of one or two books. It is impossible, of course, to have read all the works by every author we have ever dipped into; time constraints and an appetite for variety prevent us from fully absorbing one author before moving on to another. We are often introduced to an author by forces beyond our control—forces dictated by the sometimes-whimsical taste of anonymous critics or by the marketing strategists of publishers. The recent list of the one hundred “best” novels of the past century—a shameless marketing ploy of the Modern Library—caused as much flak as Harold Bloom's top one hundred list in *The Western Canon* did five years ago; yet sales of the books that appeared on these lists jumped instantly. If the judges of the National Book Award select an unknown author, sales of that author's book also will increase; and if Oprah Winfrey selects that author for her televised book club, sales will go through the roof (for example, Wally Lamb hit the jackpot with his first novel *She's Come Undone*, which Oprah promoted). An individual publisher might decide to market one of its authors aggressively—as Cormac McCarthy happily discovered—and readers reach for their wallets.

Lists, prizes, and publishers aside, the reading public is frequently introduced to an author in a college literature course, and the “representative” work by that author may be selected for any number of reasons: it is that author's best work, the work that best represents a certain category, or the one that coincides best with the other works in the course. Rarely is it the author's *only* work. Yet when professors consistently teach the same work by an author, the association becomes so strong that the writer's other works are obscured, and eventually obscure. Anyone familiar with, say, all of the works by James Joyce from *Dubliners* through *Finnegans Wake*, no doubt has felt the frustration of speaking with someone who has read only *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and has claimed to have “gotten” Joyce. Similarly, the devotee of Jane Austen's novels has no doubt said something like, “But she was so much *more* than *Pride and Prejudice*.” Something has been lost when a writer's reputation has been so reduced.

In the case of James Baldwin, what has been lost is a complete portrait of his tremendously rich intellectual journey that illustrates the direction of African American thought and culture in the late twentieth century. Also lost has been a widely varied oeuvre of an experimental writer who never was content with retelling the same story,

using the same voice, or speaking to the same audience. Lost, too, is the legacy of Baldwin's considerable influence: as one strong yet invisible presence informing the majestic novels of Toni Morrison, the screenplay for Spike Lee's influential film *Malcolm X* (based upon a screenplay that Baldwin had published in 1973 as *One Day When I Was Lost*), or the recent debates over the curricular uses of black English.

Baldwin himself seems to have gotten lost, or, at least, misplaced. To some degree, he has realized the anxious prophecy evident in his book titles *No Name in the Street* or *Nobody Knows My Name*. Ironically, his own tireless refusal to allow himself to be labeled probably has led to his uncertain place in the annals of literary history. Throughout his career he took pains to remind friends and interviewers that he was Jimmy Baldwin rather than the representative of some group. He repeatedly echoes Emersonian ideals of individualism even as he attempts to define for his readers what it means to be an American. In a 1960 address at San Francisco State College, he proclaimed, “A country is only as strong as the people who make it up and the country turns into what the people want it to become. Now, this country is going to be transformed. It will not be transformed by an act of God, but by all of us, by you and me” (*Nobody* 126). This rhetorical move from an external authority (God) to a group consensus (all of us) to the individual (you and me) underscores the supreme importance of the individual, especially in terms of the individual's need to escape the labels that imprison him or her. In his final interview he tells Quincy Troupe, “I was not born to be defined by someone else, but by myself, and myself only” (Troupe 193). But writers rarely are remembered as individuals. If they are to be remembered, they are subject to classification, and it remains unclear a decade after his death what Baldwin's legacy will be. On one level—the level of popularity or fame—he seems to have “arrived”: the austere Library of America recently issued a two-volume set of his works, edited by Toni Morrison, and Quincy Troupe's collection of essays by famous people and literary luminaries, though anecdotal, attests to Baldwin's fame as a public figure as well as author. Karen Thorsen's acclaimed documentary of Baldwin's life, *The Price of the Ticket* (1989), is a magnificent portrait of his life and contributions, while the positive reception of David Leeming's biography *James Baldwin* (1994) is testimony to Baldwin's enduring legacy as an author of merit.

Yet when it comes to literary history, Baldwin seems to have been overlooked, or unjustly reduced. Despite the fact that his influence is so wide and varied, and that there is so much to say about the impact of his art and his vision, critics, scholars, and teachers tend to skip over

his works quickly. Although Hilton Als recently proclaimed him “the greatest Negro writer of his generation” (72), Baldwin’s novels are certainly less likely to be included in American literature courses than novels by the three most prominent African American novelists of the past half-century: Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and Toni Morrison. The argument may go that—as Thomas Cooley has summarized the critical response to Mark Twain—Baldwin “is a great writer who never wrote a great book” (ix). But I believe that Baldwin’s fate in literary history is more complex, and that it rests upon his refusal to attach himself to any single ideology, literary form, or vision. Because he never let himself be labeled as a gay writer, a black writer, a protest writer, a modern writer, a fiction writer, an essay writer, or a prophetic writer, his legacy is not entirely stable. Perhaps he achieved his succinct goal as stated at the beginning of his career: “I want to be an honest man and a good writer” (*Notes* 9). Honesty and goodness may describe Baldwin, but they are not useful categories for the literary historian.

Critics and anthology compilers generally have focused on three of Baldwin’s works to represent his achievement: his first collection of essays, *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), his first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), and a short story from his first collection, “Sonny’s Blues” (1957).¹ Without calling into question the merit of these works—all of which regularly appear on my own syllabi—I took it upon myself to discover what (if anything) was being done with Baldwin’s other works, the less visible ones: books that I loved, yet which I did not hear as much about. Through contact at conferences and a few informal solicitations, I discovered that there is an active subculture in literary studies currently unearthing and examining evidence of things not seen, to borrow Baldwin’s final book title. His three “representative” works actually have served as starting points for these scholars and readers rather than end points. Baldwin’s reputation is not fixed; it is in flux now, as it always has been, and future generations of Baldwin readers may be exposed to *Jimmy’s Blues* or *Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone* before they read his earliest books. I hope that this collection will contribute to the process of revision that might (or might not) result in such a change. First, however, I would like to consider why Baldwin’s reputation currently rests as it does largely on the three aforementioned works by tracing some significant patterns in Baldwin scholarship.

The most recent volume of scholarship devoted to Baldwin is Trudier Harris’s edited collection *New Essays on Go Tell It On the Mountain* (1996). In her introduction, Harris points out that “*Go Tell It on the Mountain* has remained the primary novel through which readers come

to Baldwin’s works” (22). She attributes the novel’s relative endurance to the power of its language—“its repetitious constructions, its realism, its evocative force, its almost hypnotic effect” (22)—as well as to its inventive use of church traditions, its autobiographical value, its place in the tradition of the *bildungsroman*, its portrayal of female characters, and its subtle (nearly invisible) treatment of race relations and homosexuality, which become overt topics in later works. These qualities do summarize the novel’s appeal for critics, but they don’t necessarily explain why it enjoys a greater reputation than subsequent works. Considering his novels alone for now, there are six to choose from; each is daring, inventive, and experimental, and each engages with the power of language in a fresh way.

Since it is rare that writers completely lose their talents over the course of a career, other forces must be at work in the selection of *Go Tell It* as Baldwin’s finest novel. Writer and editor Mel Watkins claims,

Among his fictional works—although he never wrote the great book that critics predicted he would—Baldwin’s first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), remains his highest achievement. . . . Baldwin’s next novel, *Giovanni’s Room* (1955), was a sketchy, tentatively drawn tale of a triangular love affair set in Paris. . . . Baldwin’s next novel, *Another Country* (1962)—perhaps his most ambitious and controversial—and his last two, *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974) and *Just Above My Head* (1979), like *Giovanni’s Room*, were greeted with either mixed or less than enthusiastic critical response. Although these books seemed to strive for the large-scale social statement that his critics had demanded of him, they were not able to overcome blatant structural flaws and the Achilles’ heel that plagued his fiction from the outset—a penchant for excessive rhetoric. (Troupe 113–14)

It will come as no surprise to the Baldwin scholar that Watkins neglects to mention *Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone* (1968) since it has been completely overlooked (and, alas, continues to be overlooked in this collection despite my efforts to find someone to write about it). More important is Watkins’s accurate summary of the reception of Baldwin’s novels: critics wanted a “large-scale social statement,” yet they were put off by “excessive rhetoric.” Driven by their expectations of a black writer, in other words, Baldwin’s readers wanted him to be something he was not, some perfect hybrid of Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright. What these readers would term as Baldwin’s failure to write “the great book that critics predicted he would,” Baldwin would

view as his own triumph as an individual, to have defined himself rather than allowed others to define him. These critics need only return to the conclusion of "Everybody's Protest Novel," the second essay in *Notes of a Native Son*, which speaks directly to their criticism: "The failure of the protest novel lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended" (23).

But the fact remains that *Go Tell It* is widely seen as the closest Baldwin came to a great novel. Hilton Als confidently proclaims *Go Tell It* Baldwin's "first and best novel" (76), preferable to the "melodramatic plot" of *Giovanni's Room* that sets up "the sentimental, histrionic tone of Baldwin's later, unwieldy novels, notably *Another Country*," which he deems "an artistic disaster" (77).² Certain questions should plague us: Are we still judging novels on the same scales of "greatness" that Baldwin's contemporary critics and reviewers used? Are we still reading or studying novels only because of their intrinsic greatness? And are we still trying to make Baldwin conform to our expectations, whether they are based on assumptions about aesthetics, race, or homosexuality?

Only half of Baldwin's critics regard him primarily as a novelist, though; the other half regard him as an essayist. Reflecting upon his first meeting with Baldwin, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. writes, "James Baldwin was literature for me, especially the essay" (Troupe 163), and in co-editing *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* with Nellie McKay, Gates selected four of Baldwin's essays to represent him (all from *Notes of a Native Son*) along with one story ("Sonny's Blues"). Editors of essay collections have tried to claim Baldwin for their own; Gilbert H. Muller, for instance, describes Baldwin as a "novelist, short story writer, dramatist and, above all essayist" (166) whose job was to probe the American consciousness of race. (I take on the absence of "poet" from Mueller's list in my essay at the end of this volume.) After dismissing all of Baldwin's novels after *Go Tell It* and before calling his plays "ill-conceived and poorly written" (79), Hilton Als asserts, "It was in Baldwin's essays, unencumbered by the requirements of narrative form, character, and incident, that his voice was most fully realized" (77). Baldwin himself declared in the 1984 preface to *Notes of a Native Son*, "I had never thought of myself as an essayist: the idea had never entered my mind" (xi). When David Estes followed up on that statement in a 1986 interview, asking Baldwin if he considered either his fiction or his essays more important, Baldwin responded, "No, as a matter of fact I didn't. I thought of myself as a writer. I didn't want to get trapped in any particular form. I wanted to try them all" (Standley and

Pratt 276). Yet there is no question that he became famous in his own lifetime as a result of his powerful essays in addition to his fiction.

After *Notes of a Native Son* (and, to a lesser degree, *Nobody Knows My Name*) Baldwin's nonfiction, like his fiction, became more experimental. Essays from these first two collections are brilliant for their rhetoric, their topicality, and their undeniable beauty: in short, they are perfect examples of the genre. Critics have had a much harder time characterizing a book like *The Devil Finds Work* (1976), an extended meditation on American film, or *Nobody Knows My Name*, something between a memoir and an essay. In the final years of an extraordinary career Baldwin had to take his manuscript for *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* (1985) to a publisher he had not worked with before, a fact that reflects not only the book's controversial subject matter but also how far he had departed from his early successes. Baldwin's extended essay on race relations, *The Fire Next Time* (1963), was the piece that truly made him a superstar; but it also sealed off the early part of his career. It can only get worse now that it's gotten so good, to paraphrase Mary McCarthy's apology for not having read more of Baldwin's writings. Horace Porter, in the introduction to his acclaimed study of Baldwin's oeuvre, *Stealing the Fire* (1989), writes without apology or explanation, "My perceptions and insights are drawn from the body of Baldwin's work, ranging from his earliest essays and reviews published during the late 1940s to an address delivered to the National Press Club in December 1986, but, except by implication and in brief allusions, I do not go beyond *The Fire Next Time* published in 1963" (xii). By 1963, it seems, readers felt that the news was all in on Baldwin. We can stop reading him now; he's just going to try our patience, like Joyce did with *Finnegans Wake*, or like the Beatles did with *The White Album*. Apparently, artists risk the favor of critics and readers when they deviate too far from their early successes. But the fact that they take such risks may make them "true artists," to recall Morrison's assessment of Baldwin.

The time has come to reconsider some of Baldwin's lesser-known and later writings. This collection is not the first book to suggest that some of his work has been overlooked or undervalued critically. Louis H. Pratt in his 1978 study *James Baldwin* attempts to address "the compelling need for a more thorough assessment of Baldwin's writings," including "several of the virtually unexamined aspects of Baldwin's art" (9). Yet written as it was before the publication of *Just Above My Head*, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, and *Jimmy's Blues*, Pratt's effort cannot be comprehensive, and it also predates two decades of development in literary theory and the methods of interpretation that have shaped the

way we think about literature. A more recent study like Trudier Harris's *Black Women in the Fiction of James Baldwin* (1985) is admirable both for its feminist approach and for its engagement with all of Baldwin's fiction; still, it is of necessity limited to a single approach to his work, and it examines only his fiction.

The chapters in this volume examine works by Baldwin that have not received much critical attention in the past, approach some of his more canonical works from fresh critical perspectives, or both. Although many of the chapters refer to the three widely read works, none focuses on these early works. David Leeming asserts that "*The Amen Corner* stands with *Notes of a Native Son* as a continuation of the story of the Baldwin hero begun in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*" (107), yet the play—originally produced in 1955 and published in 1968—has received little critical attention, either as a companion piece to Baldwin's famous works or on its own. Saadi Simawe's chapter "What Is in a Sound? The Metaphysics and Politics of Music in *The Amen Corner*" casts the play in terms of a broad discussion of music and its relationship to philosophy and ideology. Music, particularly the blues, is a touchstone of Baldwin criticism, and it clearly is essential to even a surface understanding of all of Baldwin's fiction from *Go Tell It* through *Just Above My Head*. Simawe's chapter fills in this context considerably with an expansive consideration of music in terms of Baldwin as well as the philosophical underpinnings of music. In "Staying Out of the Temple: Baldwin, the African American Church, and *The Amen Corner*," Michael Lynch considers the impact of Baldwin's relationship with the church as it develops out of *Go Tell It* and into *The Amen Corner*, and he also addresses why the play is overlooked in favor of the novel.

Baldwin's second novel, *Giovanni's Room*, is an excellent example of how the widespread desire to label his works has affected their reputation. As one of the first American novels to discuss homosexuality overtly, and as one of the most honest and enduring engagements with the topic, *Giovanni's Room* has the dubious distinction of being Baldwin's "gay novel" even though Baldwin claimed that "*Giovanni's Room* is not really about homosexuality. It's the vehicle through which the book moves" (Troupe 176). Kathleen Drowne's chapter "'An Irrevocable Condition': Constructions of Home and the Writing of Place in *Giovanni's Room*" departs from the critical trend of considering this novel strictly in terms of its treatment of homosexuality and explores the moral significance Baldwin attaches to landscape, both in terms of actual space and psychological placement. Taking a psychological approach to Baldwin's novel, Susan Feldman addresses normative read-

ings of *Another Country* and offers a fresh counterreading that considers how Baldwin's representation of love and sexuality in that novel seeks to overcome false oppositions between private and social realms in America more generally. In her chapter "Another Look at *Another Country*: Reconciling Baldwin's Racial and Sexual Politics," Feldman explores bisexuality as a quintessential Baldwinian motif, analyzing it through both psychological and historical lenses. Charles Toombs's chapter "Black-Gay-Man Chaos in *Another Country*" focuses on the three intertwined facets of Rufus Scott's identity in the novel—race, repressed homosexuality, and masculinity—to discuss Baldwin's chaotic and complex aesthetic. No single facet of Rufus's personality explains the novel's themes adequately; the key, according to Toombs, is to examine their interaction.

Masculinity, homosexuality, and race are three of the aspects of identity construction that Baldwin bifurcates and then deconstructs throughout his career, according to Yasmin DeGout. In "Masculinity and (Im)maturity: 'The Man Child' and Other Stories in Baldwin's Gender Studies Enterprise," DeGout argues that Baldwin's theories prefigured current trends in gender studies theory, and she illustrates her argument through some of the critically overlooked stories in *Going to Meet the Man*. Joshua Miller, in his chapter "'A Striking Addiction to Irreality': *Nothing Personal* and the Legacy of the Photo-Text Genre," examines a book that has become his most obscure: his 1964 collaboration with photographer Richard Avedon, *Nothing Personal*. Miller contextualizes this book within the genre's development, then considers African American variations on the genre, and departs from there to arrive at an understanding of the ultimate impact and purpose of Baldwin and Avedon's book. Cassandra Ellis also engages with one of Baldwin's undervalued works, *The Devil Finds Work*, in "The Black Boy Looks at the Silver Screen: Baldwin as Moviegoer." Analyzing this book and many of Baldwin's others with an approach that borrows from film studies, literary theory, and history, Ellis casts Baldwin in the familiar role of witness, but a witness of American cinema in particular rather than of America more generally.

In the final years of his career Baldwin continued to experiment and attempted a number of ambitious works, refusing to repeat the styles and modes of inquiry that garnered critical acclaim for his early successes. Warren Carson's chapter on Baldwin's final novel, "Manhood, Musicality, and Male Bonding in *Just Above My Head*" studies the importance of music to the novel, but moves into a consideration of male relationships as they are expressed in the book. The final chapter is my

own contribution, "James Baldwin, Poet," in which I analyze the critical abandonment of Baldwin's only commercially published book of poetry, *Jimmy's Blues*, and discuss how his spare, lucid presentation of his lifelong themes earn Baldwin the title of poet, even though he never has been regarded as one. I realize that the title labels Baldwin, even though my intention is to correct for other generic labels that have been applied to him. By calling Baldwin a poet, I hope to encourage readers to rethink him, to see the aspects of his career which have gone unseen.

As all of the chapters show, there is ample evidence to make the case for Baldwin as a true artist with far more breadth and scope than his few early commercial successes would indicate. Just three years before his death, in an interview in *The Paris Review*, Baldwin stated, "I hope, certainly, that my best work is before me. . . . I certainly have not told my story yet" (Standley and Pratt 242). Literary critics are still telling Baldwin's story, too; and it turns out that it has more than one version.

NOTES

1. "Sonny's Blues" has long been the story included in both the *Heath Anthology of American Literature*, McGraw Hill's *The American Tradition in Literature*, and the *Prentice-Hall Anthology of American Literature* as well as the recently published *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. In its new fifth edition, the *Norton Anthology of American Literature* substituted "Going to Meet the Man" for "The Fire Next Time."

2. Reflecting the common trend in appraisals of Baldwin's work, Hilton Als fails to even mention *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, and *Just Above My Head* in his article.

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1

what is in a sound?

the metaphysics and politics of music in The Amen Corner

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This ferment, this disturbance, is the responsibility and the necessity, of writers. It is, alas, the truth that to be an American writer today means mounting an unending attack on all that Americans believe themselves to hold sacred. It means fighting an astute and agile guerrilla warfare with that American complacency which so inadequately masks the American panic. —James Baldwin

My models—my private models—are not Hemingway, not Faulkner, not Dos Passos, or indeed any American writer. I model myself on jazz musicians, dancers, a couple of whores and a few junkies. —James Baldwin

"THE BLUES IS MAN"

In almost all his work, James Baldwin aspires to become what he views as the supreme artist, namely, the musician—in particular the blues singer.¹ Further, Baldwin seems to have felt a link between his vision of himself as "the incorrigible disturber of the peace" ("The Creative Process," 316) and music, the medium traditionally perceived as the ideal subversive art, the one that eludes the control of mind and

rationality to appeal directly to passions and emotions, even instincts, in order to liberate them. Baldwin's crusade against the established moral order and the ideological apparatuses that support it, with music as his primary weapon, does not seem a lonely crusade or an isolated incident if examined in the broader context of the traditional hostility between the philosopher, the statesman, the ideologue, or the doctrinaire on the one hand, and the musician, the singer, the dancer, or the artist on the other. This hostility is articulated in Plato's *Republic*, where the philosopher declares his distrust of music, primarily due to its uncontrollable effect on human passions and emotions.

In this chapter, I will examine Baldwin's concept of music and its power, as depicted in his 1955 play *The Amen Corner*, in the broader context of the philosophical debate over the uneasy relationship between music and ideology or religion.² Before discussing the role that African American music plays in *The Amen Corner* in subverting repressive realities and ultimately liberating the major characters, I will situate Baldwin's concept of music in the traditional philosophical battle between music and ideology. Two confluent themes in *The Amen Corner*, white oppression and repressive religious puritanism, seem to make music the only medium that constantly eludes the reach of repression for Baldwin. In this context, it is illuminating to read Baldwin's characterization of music as subversion in the clash between music and proscriptive systems of morality and ideology. At the same time, this broader context will help highlight the universality and existentiality of Baldwin's vision of music as the archetypal medium of boundless humanity.

In his seminal work *The Philosopher and Music: An Historical Outline*, Julius Portnoy concludes his systematic study of traditional philosophical views of music and the musician by emphasizing the moral philosopher's perennial fear of the effect of music:

The philosopher has persistently believed throughout history, with few exceptions, that music without words is inferior to music with words. It is the embodiment of emotion in tone and rhythm that awakens in us feelings that the composer felt to some degree when producing the music. But the philosopher is never sure that feelings can be trusted. He insists that words added to music conceptualize feeling, make the indefinite definite, and move the art of music from the lower level of emotion to the exalted plane of reason. (5)

Moral philosophers, ideologues, religious leaders, and doctrinaires—including Plato, Aristotle, Saint Augustine, Luther, Kant,

Descartes, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Cotton Mather, William James, and Allan Bloom—all rationalize, in distinct ways, their fear and distrust of music and the musician.³ Aware of music's power over humans, Plato in the *Republic* distrusts pure melody, which he sees as lacking specific meaning. According to Plato, the danger of music lies in its very nature. Rhythm and harmony "most of all insinuate themselves into the innermost part of the soul and most vigorously lay hold of it in bringing grace with them; and they make a man graceful if he is correctly reared [in music], if not, the opposite" (80). Significantly, Plato warns the overseers of the Republic of music's decisive political power: "For never are the ways of music moved without the greatest political laws being removed." In order to contain music's unwanted effect, Plato insists on imposing words on music to make it make sense (90; 101–2; 77–78). Naturally, the act of making sense, the choice of words, the very nature of meaning, and the established concept of reason are all symptoms of the dominant ideology that ultimately determine the acceptable discourse. Likewise, Aristotle is keenly aware of the unlimited power of music in his *Politics* and he raises doubts and fears concerning music and its spiritual and educational value. "Music," he says, "has a power of forming the character, and should therefore, be introduced into the education of the young." But because music can affect all human passions, whether noble or ignoble, he distrusts its unrestricted effect in education (1306–12). More significantly, the father of Western theology, Saint Augustine, in his *Confessions* (c. 400), warns the faithful against the inherent sexual and erotic appeal of even religious music and songs (261–62).

In *The Amen Corner*, more than in any other of his works, Baldwin captures this rivalry and hostility between religious leaders and church musicians, let alone secular musicians in the street. As far as I know, no evidence exists that Baldwin was aware of the debate between the moral philosopher and the musician that permeates Western philosophy and culture. But that is not relevant, as many thinkers and critics have shown convincingly that writers are naturally influenced by cultural, historical, and even archetypal forces that they may be unaware of. In this context, Roland Barthes's concept of intertextuality in his *Image, Music, Text* (1977) proves illuminating: "We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing theological meaning (the 'message' of the 'author-God') but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture" (146). Accordingly, Baldwin's quarrel—and that of his musician- or his music-

loving characters—with the established ideology is in fact one battle in the ongoing war between the musician and the ideologue. The clash with the church, reason, mind, conventions, morality, and rationality can be seen as one front in the struggle of the spirit, or the soul, as it is fully reflected in music, against the tyranny of rationality and ideology. Baldwin's well-known experimentation with bluesification or jazzification of fiction and style thus may be understood as genuine and ingenious attempts at liberating the soul from what he views as one of the ideological grids, the prison-house of language.

Baldwin's titles indicate how much his vision is informed by his interest in music, especially African American music. Titles such as *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), *The Amen Corner* (1955), "Sonny's Blues" (1957), *The Fire Next Time* (1963), *Blues for Mister Charlie* (1964), *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (1968), *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974), and *Just Above My Head* (1979) all, with their evident allusions to traditional African American songs, inform the faith and trust Baldwin has put in the subversive, liberatory, and counter-spiritual power of African American music. In many of his essays and interviews, Baldwin underscores the spiritual role that music plays in sustaining and empowering African Americans in their struggle. In the 1951 essay "Many Thousands Gone," Baldwin points to the multifaceted power of music as a mask, as a subversive weapon, as a narrative for a story that language cannot grasp, and as a system of symbols and signs:

It is only in his music, which Americans are able to admire because a protective sentimentality limits their understanding of it, that the Negro in America has been able to tell his story. It is a story which otherwise has yet to be told and which no American is prepared to hear. As is the inevitable result of things unsaid, we find ourselves until today oppressed with a dangerous and reverberating silence; and the story is told, compulsively, in symbols and signs, in hieroglyphics. (*Price of the Ticket* 65)

This masking that music provides—simultaneously a subversive technique and a liberating force for the silenced—later is accentuated by Baldwin in a 1972 interview with Nikki Giovanni:

What we call black literature is really summed up for me by the whole career, let's say, of Bessie Smith, Ray Charles, Aretha Franklin, because that's the way it's been handed down. . . . We had to smuggle information, and we did it through our music and we did it in the church. (Giovanni and Baldwin 75)

Another essential component of the ideal condition of the blues, as Baldwin defines it, is its ability to make people learn, mature, and ultimately gain wisdom from suffering, which may be seen as the blues connection to the Biblical concept of suffering as a way to wisdom. The problem with religion, according to Baldwin, is that it frightens people and forces them to hide in a self-deluding myth of eternal safety. "There is something monstrous about never having been hurt, never having been made to bleed, never having lost anything, never having gained anything because life is beautiful and in order to keep it beautiful you're going to stay just the way you are and you're not going to test your theory against all the possibilities outside" ("The Uses of the Blues" 131–32). By contrast, the blues experience, as Baldwin sees it, is clear-eyed and sardonic in the face of harsh realities. Baldwin's blues artist, in many ways reminiscent of Nietzsche's subversive Dionysian musician,⁴ is not afraid that he has no hopes. "Ray Charles, who is a great tragic artist, makes of a genuinely religious confession something triumphant and liberating. He tells us that he cried so loud he gave the blues to his neighbor next door" ("The Uses of the Blues" 241).

Even before he lost faith in formal religion and left the church in 1942, Baldwin discovered that he was a natural verbal improviser when he gave sermons:

I would improvise from the texts, like a jazz musician improvises from a theme. I never wrote a sermon—I studied the texts. I've never written a speech. I can't read a speech. It's kind of give and take. You have to sense the people you're talking to. You have to respond to what they hear. (Sandley and Pratt 234–35)

Moreover, it was music—not religion or literature or the consolation of philosophy—that helped Baldwin reconcile himself to his African American heritage and eventually inspired him to write his first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*:

There [in Switzerland], in that absolutely alabaster landscape, armed with two Bessie Smith records and a typewriter, I began to try to recreate the life that I had first known as a child and from which I had spent so many years in flight.

It was Bessie Smith, through her tone and her cadence, who helped me to dig back to the way I myself must have spoken when I was a pickaninny, and to remember the things I had heard and seen and felt. I had buried them very deep. I have never listened to Bessie Smith in Amer-

ica (in the same way that, for years I would not touch watermelon), but in Europe she helped to reconcile me to being a "nigger." (*The Price of the Ticket* 172)

On many other occasions, Baldwin describes his performance as a writer of fiction in terms of music, especially African American music. Without claiming any knowledge of music as an art, Baldwin nevertheless continues describing himself as a "blues singer" or "jazz musician" and hopes that readers receive his fiction as they would hear black music. "I would like to think that some of the people who liked it [*Another Country* (1962)] responded to it in the way they respond when Miles [Davis] and Ray [Charles] are blowing" (Campbell 181). With the typical hostility of the musician toward ideology and intellectuality, Baldwin often protests "I am not an intellectual . . . and do not want to be" (Campbell 181). Literary critics, Baldwin once declared, can make sense only "[w]hen I understand that they understand Ray Charles" (Giovanni and Baldwin 84). In an interview with Quincy Troupe a few months before Baldwin died in 1987, he states that in his last novel, *Just Above My Head* (1978), he attempts to face his "own legends," that is, the deep down spaces he has been scared to venture into. And in this Orphic descent into hell, music acts as both his guide and guardian: "The key to one's life is always in a lot of unexpected places. I tried to deal with what I was most afraid of. That's why the vehicle of the book is music. Because music was and is my salvation" (Troupe 26).

In Baldwin's mind, as his statements suggest, music is associated with liberation, security, mystical power, self-reconciliation, a more democratic divine power, unrestricted humanism, and sexuality that is inseparable from spirituality. Early in his life when Baldwin was under his religious father's control, secular African American music seems to have heightened his awareness of his individuality, of the world outside the church and Harlem, and thus legitimized his rebellion against father and church and any stifling ideologies, whether religious or nationalistic (Leeming 18). His new love was art, not religion:

Beauford Delaney's small studio with a black stove and paintings everywhere and music always playing—the kind of music Baldwin's stepfather would never have in the house was part of the Harlem culture—Ma Rainey, Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, all the greats of the twenties and thirties—became a second home for Jimmy Baldwin. (Weatherby 30)

Baldwin embraced the world of art with the same religious passion with which he had earlier embraced the church: as a haven of security and safety. As his biographer James Campbell has noted in *Talking at the Gates: A Life of James Baldwin*, Baldwin rejected the concept of a God that cannot "make us larger, freer, and more loving." Yet to the very end of his career, Baldwin's life

was based on a faith that can only be called religious, just as his thought was infused with religious belief. His scripture was the old black gospel music:

*Just above my head
I hear music in the air
And I really do believe
There's a God somewhere. (281)*

It is very significant that Baldwin, who once found in formal religion a safe haven from both the white world and his tyrannical father, decided later in his uncompromising search for self to replace religion with music. The essential similarity between religion and music, in terms of the appeal each holds, may indicate that Baldwin had not in fact strayed far from religion when he replaced it with music. Both have the power to create a temporary sense of immortality. In music, as Hegel has illustrated, the subjective and the objective momentarily collapse, and a sense of absoluteness takes over the listener (907–8).⁵ In *The Raw and the Cooked: Introduction to a Science of Mythology*, a study of the nature and power of myth, Claude Lévi-Strauss sees surprising similarity in the ways myth (or, by extension, religion,) and music affect humans through a common fundamental characteristic. That is, myth and music

share of both being languages which, in their different ways, transcend articulate expression, while at the same time—like articulate speech, but unlike painting—requiring a temporal dimension in which to unfold. But this relation to time is of a rather special nature: it is as if music and mythology needed time only in order to deny it. Both, indeed, are instruments for the obliteration of time. Below the level of sounds and rhythms, music acts upon a primitive terrain, which is the physiological time of the listener; this time is irreversible and therefore irredeemably diachronic, yet music transmutes the segment devoted to listening to it into a synchronic totality, enclosed within itself. Because of

the internal organization of the musical work, the act of listening to it immobilizes passing time; it catches and enfolds it as one catches and enfolds a cloth flapping in the wind. It follows that by listening to music, and while we are listening to it, we enter into a kind of immortality. (Lévi-Strauss 15–16)

Despite this essential similarity in their functions, music and myth (or religion) differ in their connections to language: while music can achieve its maximum power without language, as Kierkegaard has remarked,⁶ myth is restricted by language and ideology. This purportedly absolute freedom that music promises seems to have fascinated Baldwin, and with almost the same religious passion, he embraced the music of his ancestors. Ralph Ellison, a musician and a writer, articulates what Baldwin and many African American writers seem to perceive as a natural nexus between music and freedom:

As a slave was, to the extent that he was a musician, one who expressed himself in music, a man who realized himself in the world of sound. Thus, while he might stand in awe before the superior technical ability of a white musician, and while he was forced to recognize a superior social status, he would never feel awed before the music which the technique of white musician made available. His attitude as a "musician" would lead him to seek to possess the music expressed through the technique, but until he could do so he would hum, whistle, sing or play the tunes to the best of his ability on any available instrument. And it was indeed out of the tension between desire and ability that the technique of jazz emerged. This was likewise true of American Negro choral singing. *For this, no literary explanation, no cultural analyses, no political slogans—indeed, not even a high degree of social or political freedom—was required. For the art—the blues, the spirituals, the dance—was what we had in place of freedom.* (Ellison 254–55, italics added)

MUSIC AS RELIGION, MUSIC VERSUS ESTABLISHED RELIGION IN *THE AMEN CORNER*

In *The Amen Corner*, Baldwin treats the same haunting themes as he does in his other works: the power of the church and the power of music. The opening stage directions construct in rich symbolism of place and space the major forces of the main dramatic conflict: "Before the curtain rises, we hear street sounds, laughter, cursing, snatches of

someone's radio; and under everything, the piano, which David is playing in the church. . . . The church is on a level above the apartment and should give the impression of dominating the family's living quarters" (5). While David's piano is "under everything," the church "should give the impression" of dominating the lives of the major characters. Throughout the play, we gradually become aware of a crucial dramatic irony: What is "under everything," namely music, is what actually dominates and influences the real life of the individuals, whether musicians or not. To further emphasize the role of music in the fate of these characters, Baldwin ends the opening stage directions with:

At rise, there is a kind of subdued roar and humming, out of which is heard the music prologue, "The Blues Is Man," which segues into a steady rollicking beat, and we see the congregation singing. (6)

The general image that emerges from the stage directions is that music—the undercurrent and more genuine life of the characters—is in constant conflict with the powers of religion symbolized by a dominating "pulpit" with an "immense open Bible" (5) and "the congregation singing" (6). Significantly, the pulpit, the Bible, and the singing are all various tools for religious discourse. Of course, of the three, the least discursive and most musical is church singing. In the last section of this chapter, I will examine the expedient, yet uneasy, suspect, and problematic presence of music in the church, as it is dramatically embodied in the character of David.

In *The Amen Corner* there are two major musicians: Luke and his son, David. Luke plays the blues, of course outside the church. Young David plays music in the church under the fanatical instruction of his mother, Sister Margaret, the minister in a Harlem storefront church. After a miscarriage due to malnutrition, Margaret turns to religion and absolutely rejects all worldly desires, especially sexual love. Losing her love, Luke starts to go under, leaving home and immersing himself in drinking. As a homeless vagabond, he plays jazz both to make a living and to sustain his sanity, as he later tells his son. Typical of Baldwin's figure of the artist, Luke is both a powerful jazz musician and an iconoclast, especially against established religion. In his battle against the establishment, his weapon is music and his ultimate desire is love: not Christian love, but unlimited humanistic love. When Luke suddenly reappears after a ten-year absence in downtown New York, his jazz, like a Biblical serpent, starts to penetrate Margaret's religious and ascetic defenses. Despite years of religious instruction against his father's music

and worldliness and against the satanic white world full of movies, alcohol, drugs, and jazz, David is attracted by Luke's music. It emboldens his individuality and rebellion. Like John Grimes in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, who, according to his tyrannical father, is secretly fascinated with the "pleasures" and "sins" of the white world, David starts to visit clandestinely the bar where his father plays jazz with white musicians:

BROTHER BOXER: I got news for you, Sister Odessa, Little David ain't so little no more. I stood right in this very room last Sunday when we found out that boy had been lying to his mother. That's right. He been going out to bars. And just this very evening, not five minutes ago, I seen him down on 125th Street with some white horn-player—the one he say he go to school with—and two other boys and three girls. (*The Amen Corner* 37–38)

After years of absence, Luke comes back to the storefront church to retrieve his wife who has been, according to him, kidnapped by the Lord: She gives all her love to the Lord, not to humans, not even to herself. Like Elisha, the musician in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, the congregation and even his mother view David as vulnerable, a possible backslider, and suspect (23, 38). Actually, it is through David, the weakest member of the church, that Luke comes to invade the church with his jazz and ultimately overcomes the Lord in Margaret's heart. Although he is dying, Luke wins the battle against Margaret's God, shattering the house that she thought for years she had put in order: her favorite Biblical text obsessively has been, "Set thine house in order, for thou shalt die and not live" (8). Ironically, once she rediscovers love, she loses the power to preach. Similarly, when Luke regains love, he dies and all that jazz is stopped. Metaphorically speaking, once his love is requited, Luke the musician dies, for there seems to be no need for music anymore. Actually Luke (or Baldwin) is quite aware of the connection between music and suffering in the hell of the absence of love:⁷

LUKE: When you seen me. And you go to wondering all over again if you wanted to be like your daddy and end up like your daddy. Ain't that right?

DAVID: Yeah, I guess that's right.

LUKE: Well, son, tell you one thing. Wasn't music put me here. The most terrible time in a man's life, David, is when he's done lost everything that held him together—it's just gone and he can't find it. The

whole world just get to be a great big empty basin. And it just as hollow as a basin when you strike it with your fist. Then that man start going down. If don't no hand reach out to help him, that man goes under . . . and, son, I don't believe no man ever got to that without somebody loved him.

DAVID: Daddy—weren't the music enough?

LUKE: The music. The music. Music is a moment. But life's a long time. In that moment, when it's good, when you really swinging—then you joined to everything, to everybody, to skies and stars and every living thing. But music ain't kissing. Kissing's what you want to do. Music's what you got to do, if you got to do it. Question is how long you can keep up with music when you ain't got nobody to kiss. You know, the music don't come out of the air, baby. It comes out of the man who's blowing it. (43–44)

But love, as Baldwin seems to suggest through Luke and Sister Margaret, is the end of suffering and of music and of religion. For it is in the absence of love, when “the whole world just get to be a great big empty basin,” that music and religion seem to be needed most. This absolute emptiness threatens Luke with frightening silence and looming death. Thus, sonority, or just noisemaking, as both Theodor Adorno and Gilles Deleuze expound, negates silence; and music, or human sound in turn, not only negates death but also affirms and celebrates life. In this sense the musician such as Luke, consciously or not, plays to avow life in the face of silence and death. “The song is like a rough sketch of a calming and stabilizing, calm and stable, center in the heart of chaos” (Deleuze 201). To Luke, “music's what you got to do, if you got to do it” primarily because he, lonely in an empty universe, is frightened by the silence, the sure archetypal image of death, and has to play to join, at least momentarily, “to everything, to everybody, to skies and stars and every living thing.” From an existential point of view, Adorno seems to articulate Luke's intuition that human exigencies such as fear, loneliness, and absence of love or meaning compel the musician to play and the listeners to relate:

By circling people, by enveloping them—as inherent in the acoustical phenomenon—and turning them as listeners into participants [and vice versa, by extension], it [music] contributes ideologically to the integration which modern society never tires of achieving in reality. It leaves no room for conceptual reflection between itself and the subject, and

so it creates an illusion of immediacy in the totally mediated world, of proximity between strangers, of warmth for those who come to feel the chill of the unmitigated struggle of all against all. (Adorno 46)

As a musician, Luke, like Adorno, is aware that “music is a moment” of integration, and that life requires more than just music in order to be a happy one. Experience has taught Luke that love does not need music. Rather, music, coming out of that “empty basin,” is a cry for love, and that is what actually happens when the estranged lovers, Luke and Margaret—who took refuge in music and religion, respectively—rediscover that they still love each other: They immediately lose their powers of playing and preaching.

In *The Amen Corner*, the traditional quarrel between music and religion (or the musician and the preacher) is dramatically delineated. Here, more emphatically than in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, the worldly musician is able not only to effectively preach human love and sexuality, but also to ultimately seduce and convert the pastor to the world. Not only an apostle of human love, Luke as a jazz musician, even while dying, teaches his son, like Nietzsche's Dionysian musician, to dance in the face of the hostile world. Luke tells David: “Son—don't try to get away from the things that hurt you—sometimes that's all you got. You got to learn to live with those things—and—use them. I've seen people—put themselves through terrible torture—and die—because they was afraid of getting hurt” (41–42).

In the context of the play, Luke here clearly alludes to his wife, Sister Margaret, who—out of fear of the hostile outside world, with its racism, poverty, sex, drugs, and crime—has for ten years repressed her own worldly desires, denied her husband love when he most needed it, forced her son to play religious music against his will, and enslaved and alienated her congregation. While Luke inspires his son to face up to the hostile world outside the church and to try to make the best out of it by means of will power and music, he forces Sister Margaret, as Darwin Turner observes, to “recall the past and to perceive the truth that her venture into religion was not a response to a call from God but a flight motivated by her own fear of life” (193). In that confessional scene, Luke not only succeeds in making his wife reconcile life and human reality within her and without, he even inspires her to utter the play's most important passage, as identified by Baldwin in his introduction (xv):

MARGARET: All these years I prayed as hard as I knowed how. I tried to put my treasure in heaven where couldn't nothing get at it