

edited by D. Quentin Miller

RE-VIEWING JAMES BALDWIN THINGS NOT SEEN

Foreword by David Adams Leeming

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t h i n g s n o t s e e n

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D. Quentin Miller

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RE-VIEWING JAMES BALDWIN

things not seen



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



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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