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Some Tickets Are Better

The Mixed Achievement of James Baldwin

With the publication of *The Price of the Ticket*,* James Baldwin presents the work on which he wants to be judged and by which he would like to be remembered. The volume contains fifty-one essays, twenty-five of them previously uncollected. The remaining twenty-six represent the entire contents of five previously published books: *The Devil Finds Work*, *No Name in the Street*, *Notes of a Native Son*, *Nobody Knows My Name*, and *The Fire Next Time*.

Arranged chronologically from February 1948 to January 1985, the essays are overpowering in their intensity and brilliance. Particularly in the essays from 1948 to *The Fire Next Time* (1963), Baldwin reveals himself to be a tremendously eloquent humanist.

His is not a romantic humanism, however, but a hard-edged, uninviting, and terrifying one.

But our humanity is our burden, our life; we need not battle for it; we need only to do what is infinitely more difficult—that is, accept it. 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. (“Everybody’s Protest Novel”)

In the essays of the first fifteen years Baldwin writes not only as a black writer pleading the cause of blacks, but as a black pleading the cause of humanity. Baldwin startles one by his use of “we,” because sometimes he speaks not as a black but as an American.

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Our dehumanization of the Negro then is indivisible from our dehumanization of ourselves: the loss of our own identity is the price we pay for our annulment of his. (“Many Thousands Gone”)

Baldwin’s power as a writer lies in his ability to weave the deeply autobiographical with the political and social. There is no separation between Jimmy Baldwin, black child of Harlem, and James Baldwin, American. For him, the personal is never just personal, and the political never just political. Because he perceives himself not only as the individual James Baldwin but also as the black Everyman, his writing has a moral authority that would be dismissed as arrogant if so many had not affirmed what he wrote.

To call Baldwin a black writer, then, is not only to relegate him to a literary ghetto, it is to dismiss his testimony. In these early essays no writer is more American than this tiny black man who first saw light in Harlem in 1924. Despite all he has seen, despite all that has been done to him, his response is not a literature delineating the emptiness and alienation in which so many Americans live. His response is not a literature of smug ridicule or clever satire. He responds with that most intangible, bothersome and intrusive of emotions—love. And the object of his love is not only blacks; its object is the republic itself. If words alone could redeem, Baldwin’s would have placed us all in that “shining city on a hill” to which the current occupant of the White House deludes himself into thinking his presidency shows the way.

From 1948 to 1963 Baldwin's message was more spiritual than political, more psychological than ideological, and it had two central elements: (1) The necessity for blacks to free themselves from white-imposed definitions; and (2) The necessity for whites to free themselves from their own definitions. As long as this mutual interdependence is unrecognized, blacks and whites will be unable to be human to themselves. And if one cannot be human to oneself, it is impossible to be human to another.

By 1960 Baldwin had honed this theme into one well-crafted sentence:

It is a terrible, an inexorable, law that one cannot deny the humanity of another without diminishing one's own: in the face of one's victim, one sees oneself. ("Fifth Avenue Uptown")

Witness. That is how James Baldwin describes himself. Not many writers would be comfortable with that self-definition, or understand it, even. Elie Wiesel is the only one who comes to mind, and perhaps that is not coincidence. Both have dedicated—or is it sacrificed?—themselves to the sacred act of giving testimony to what they have seen. Yet, they write, not as prosecutors of those who inflicted the horrors, but as prophets praying to God to be merciful, a God neither is sure is really there, and if He is, whether He is listening or really cares. But they pray, nonetheless, for humanity to transform itself before God metes out His terrible justice.

Once when I pressed Baldwin to define witness, he said:

I am a witness to whence I came, where I am, witness to what I've seen and the possibilities that I think I see. I began using the word when I began to be called a spokesman. I'm certainly not a spokesman and the only word I could find is that I'm trying to be a witness. A spokesman assumes that he is speaking for others. I never assumed that I could. What I tried to do, or to interpret and make clear was that what the republic was doing to black people it was doing to itself. No society can smash the social contract and be exempt from the consequences and the consequences are chaos for everybody in the society. In the church in which I was raised you were supposed to bear witness to the truth. Now, of course, later on you wonder what in the world the truth is, but you do know what a lie is.

It is this need to "bear witness" that gives Baldwin's writing its urgency and passion, its rhetoric the all-encompassing generalization and the long and, sometimes, too-complex sentences. Baldwin's prophetic voice is a melding of those of the preacher he once was and of the King James version of the Old Testament. The reader is left wondering if he or she is in the presence of a person putting words to paper, or of a force unleashed by history that howls outside our windows.

The publication of *The Fire Next Time* in 1963 was an important event in the history of the civil rights movement and of America. It was the year when Bull Connor unleashed police dogs and fire hoses on blacks demonstrating in Birmingham, Alabama: images that were seen on the nightly news and horrified the nation. *The Fire Next Time* was Baldwin's warning of the black violence that would inevitably come if white America did not confront its racism.

The book became a best-seller and made Baldwin a celebrity, because he was able to combine anger and humanism in such a way that whites could receive the anger, not as an unqualified condemnation of themselves, but as angry tears of righteousness for us all.

... if the word *integration* means anything, this is what it means: that we, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it. ... We cannot be free until they are free.

Yet, in *The Fire Next Time* there is a small, but perceptible shift in Baldwin's humanism that becomes more pronounced and obvious in many of the essays after 1963.

I could not share the white man's vision of himself for the very good reason that white men in America do not behave toward black men the way they behave toward each other. (*The Fire Next Time*)

But is that really true? "One cannot deny the humanity of another without diminishing one's own," Baldwin had written a few years earlier. If that is so (and I believe that it is), then white men in America do "behave toward each other" in the same way they behave toward

blacks, but perhaps the ways are not so evident. Baldwin does not make the effort to get at what is not apparent.

The sweeping generalization has always been a hallmark of Baldwin's essays. He never questions or doubts that what he is witness to represents more than subjective experience. While this is the source of his power in *The Fire Next Time*, it is also the source of a weakness that will become more evident, a weakness wherein Baldwin will see, more and more, only what he wishes to see, and less and less make the effort to see what is.

In *The Fire Next Time* the humanistic Baldwin wrote of his concern for the "dignity" of blacks and for the "health" of their souls, and declared that he

must oppose any attempt that Negroes may make to do to others what has been done to them. . . . It is so simple a fact and one that is so hard, apparently, to grasp: *Whoever debases others is debasing himself*. This is not a mystical statement but a realistic one, which is proved by the eyes of any Alabama sheriff—and I would not like to see Negroes ever arrive at so wretched a condition.

Many of the later essays of *The Price of the Ticket* are evidence that Baldwin has not been a voice of opposition—at least not publicly—when blacks have sought to do to others what has been done to them.

He did not oppose publicly the rhetorical excesses of the Black Power movement in the late 1960s. Nor has he sought to examine the meaning of Louis Farrakhan, the glint of whose eyes bears no small resemblance to those "of any Alabama sheriff."

Baldwin is more than eloquent when articulating that the sole salvation for whites is to take responsibility for the evil they have wrought:

It has always been much easier (because it has always seemed much safer) to give a name to the evil without than to locate the terror within. And yet, the terror within is far truer and far more powerful than any of our labels: the labels change, the terror is constant. ("Nothing Personal")

Yet, he does not take the next step and say that blacks, too, must take responsibility, not only

for the evil they have wrought, but even for the evil they have endured.

What has happened to James Baldwin since *The Fire Next Time* is that a black vision of the world has slowly gained precedence over his humanistic one. The roots of this lie, perhaps, in Baldwin's definition of himself as a witness and the responsibilities of a witness.

In a taped conversation I had with him a year and a half ago, I asked if Richard Wright had had a responsibility to him and did he have a responsibility to younger black writers.

I never felt that Richard had a responsibility for me, and if he had, he'd discharged it. What I was thinking about, though, was the early fifties when the world was breaking up, when the world of white supremacy was breaking up. I'm talking about the revolutions all over the world, specifically since we were in Paris—Tunisia, Algeria, the ferment in Senegal, the French loss of their Indo-Chinese empire. A whole lot of people—darker people for the most part—came from all kinds of places to Richard's door as they do now to my door. And in that sense he had a responsibility which he didn't know—well, who can blame him? A boy from Ethiopia, a boy from Senegal—they all claimed him. They had the right to claim him like they have the right to claim me.

What is that right? I asked. Why did they have a right to claim him? Why do they have the right to claim you?

Well, right or not, there he was to be claimed. He was the most articulate black witness of his moment. . . . Richard was known in Paris and they had a right to claim him, much more right than those who did claim him—Sartre, de Beauvoir, etcetera. . . . I was in a very funny position. The people who knocked on his door ended up sleeping on my floor. I knew something about it which Richard didn't know. . . . someone who is not white and has managed to survive somehow and attempts to be in some way responsible—of course you're going to be claimed by multitudes of black kids. There's no way around it.

But can one be claimed without eventually being enslaved? It would be presumptuous of me to maintain that this is what has happened to Baldwin. Yet, reading *No Name in the Street* (1972) one is stunned by his lack of

insight into the dangers represented by the Black Panther party as well as his sycophantic attitude toward Huey Newton and Eldridge Cleaver. In many of the essays of the 1970s and 1980s, it is not only what Baldwin says that is distressing, but, equally, that he fails to demand that blacks risk the terror and burden of being human as he demands it of whites.

His review of Alex Haley's *Roots* could have been written by any black writer beating the drum of blackness. It is not James Baldwin in fearful pursuit of truth but Baldwin imitating himself poorly. At the end of the review one sees the philosophical consequences of allowing one's self to be claimed: "It [*Roots*] suggests, with great power, how each of us, however unconsciously, can't but be the vehicle of the history which has produced us." This kind of historical determinism is damaging, because it denies human responsibility, not for history itself but for what we do with history.

The most disturbing of the later essays is "An Open Letter to the Born Again." Published in the *Nation* (September 29, 1979), it was written in the bitter aftermath of Andrew Young's resignation as U.N. ambassador, when black leaders excoriated Jews for their perceived role in that resignation. Throughout his career Baldwin has written thoughtfully and insightfully about black-Jewish relations. While he has sometimes come close to what some consider anti-Semitic statements, one always gave him the benefit of the doubt because he was James Baldwin. With "An Open Letter to the Born Again" one can do so no longer.

But the State of Israel was not created for the salvation of the Jews; it was created for the salvation of the Western interest. This is what is becoming clear (I must say that it was always clear to me). The Palestinians have been paying for the British colonial policy of "divide and rule" and for Europe's guilty Christian conscience for more than thirty years.

Regardless of one's views on Israel, Baldwin's assertions have the uninformed certainty of barbershop opinion. His propensity for cosmic generalizations leads him to conclude that:

The Jew, in America, is a white man. He has to be, since I am a black man, and, as he supposes, his only protection against the fate which drove

him to America. But he is still doing the Christian's dirty work, and black men know it.

Yet, in Baldwin's earlier essays there are noble statements which argue against defining others solely on the basis of one's own experience, which challenge us to live on the razor's edge of risk and vulnerability.

As one follows the journey of James Baldwin over the past thirty-seven years, one must wonder if the terror within has worn him down, if he no longer has the strength to throw himself into the abyss to find the tiny nuggets of truth which only he was able to find.

Or, is it that, having permitted himself to be claimed by black people, he has abdicated the lonely responsibility of the artist and intellectual to be claimed by nothing but that futile and beautiful quest for Truth?

It was Baldwin himself who wrote in 1962 that

... the truth, in spite of appearances and all our hopes, is that everything is always changing and the measure of our maturity as nations and as men is how well prepared we are to meet these changes and, further, to use them for our health. ("The Creative Process")

It is not easy to be so critical of Baldwin. That his writings have made a significant difference in the way many of us, black and white, view ourselves and each other is indisputable. Read as a body, the essays of James Baldwin are a sustaining act of love and faith of which America has not been worthy.

Perhaps it is too much to ask that any one writer sustain love and faith throughout a life of terror. Perhaps it is too much to ask him to return again and again to the abyss. The price of such excursions is high and one pays in one's soul and body. Perhaps, then, no one asks another to do more than he or she can, and instead lovingly laments the absence of the growth that we would want for that person—and ourselves.

In the last essay of *The Price of the Ticket* there are these words:

The object of one's hatred is never, alas, conveniently outside but is seated in one's lap, stirring

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lyn's *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (1967) argued that American colonists saw "a comprehensive conspiracy against liberty throughout the English-speaking world" and were especially influenced by a "distinctive ideological strain" of "left" opposition to Walpole in London, an opposition that was heir to 17th-century English republicanism. J. G. A. Pocock's *The Machiavellian Moment* (1975) argued that the revival of republicanism during the Florentine Renaissance (and thus the revival of notions of civic virtue rooted in the conceptions of man as a political animal, in contrast to the Christian whose kingdom is not of this world) eventually traveled to America, via 17th- and 18th-century English republicanism. Among other things, Diggins's book seeks to undermine Pocock's thesis and also various claims about the influence of Scottish ideas in the work of Gary Wills—*Inventing America* (1978) and *Explaining America* (1981).

¹⁵ "The Disaffection from Capitalism," p. 16.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹⁷ Irving Kristol, "When Virtue Loses All Her Loveliness," in *Two Cheers*, p. 242.

¹⁸ —, "The Adversary Culture of Intellectuals," in *Reflections*, p. 37.

¹⁹ —, "The Spiritual Roots of Capitalism and Socialism," Novak, ed., *Capitalism and Socialism*, p. 14.

²⁰ —, "Reforming the Welfare State," in *Two Cheers*, pp. 232–33.

²¹ "The Adversary Culture of Intellectuals," p. 38.

²² "The Disaffection from Capitalism," p. 25.

²³ See "Business and the 'New Class,'" p. 25, and "Corporate Capitalism in America," pp. 14–16, both in *Two Cheers*.

²⁴ Norman Podhoretz, *Making It* (New York: Random House, 1967), p. xi.

²⁵ "The Adversary Culture of Intellectuals," pp. 39–40.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

²⁷ Irving Kristol, "Capitalism, Socialism, and Nihilism," in *Two Cheers*, p. 59.

²⁸ "When Virtue Loses All Her Loveliness," pp. 250–51.

²⁹ Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), pp. xii–xiii, see note. □

TICKETS

(Continued from p. 192)

in one's bowels and dictating the beat of one's heart. And if one does not know this, one risks becoming an imitation—and, therefore, a continuation—of principles one imagines oneself to despise.

If *The Price of the Ticket* is to be the summation of Baldwin's career, then we must be grateful for the wisdom contained in its

early essays and take as a warning the latter ones which are, all too often, "an imitation" and "a continuation of principles" Baldwin taught us to despise. □

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