



James Baldwin

JAMES BALDWIN, THE AUTHOR

Strolling down a quiet street in a small town, James Baldwin—according to "Time"—came upon a scene that has since haunted his dreams.

From a sunlit patch of grass came the lingering laughter of a child. Baldwin looked—and saw a white man swinging his little daughter in the air. "It didn't last for more than a second," recalls Baldwin, "but it was an unforgettable touch of beauty, a glimpse of another world. Then I looked down and saw a shadow. The shadow was a nigger—me!"

To author Baldwin, 39, this parable reveals everything worth knowing about the black man's view of himself in 20th century white America. It also reveals a lot about James Baldwin himself.

He is not, by any stretch of the imagination a Negro leader. He tries no civil-rights cases in the courts, preaches from no pulpit, devises no strategies for sit-ins, Freedom Riders or street marches.

He published a short essay called "Everybody's Protest Novel" followed in 1952 by a novel "Go Tell It on the Mountain" (in 1959 he published the essay, called "Nobody knows My Name," later followed by "The Fire Next Time," and "Another Country").

And still, five years later in Birmingham and Harlem, and in all the Birminghams and Harlems in the world, most Negroes still do not know his name.

He is a nervous, slight, almost fragile figure, filled with frets and fears. He is effeminate in manner, drinks considerably, smokes cigarettes in chains and he often loses his audience in overblown arguments.

Nevertheless, in the U.S. today, there is not another writer—white or black—who expresses with such poignancy and abrasiveness the dark realities of the racial ferment.

Whenever he walks on stage to address a crowd of blacks or whites James Baldwin takes the microphone and cries: "Can you hear me? Can you hear me?"

If he can make himself heard—in degrees far beyond the capacity of the human ear, everybody will know his name. And it won't be "Boy," and it won't be "Nigger."

JAMES BALDWIN AND THE AMERICAN RACE ISSUE

by SYTZE VAN DER WERF

Only a white problem

"There is no Negro problem in the United States", says James Baldwin. "There is only a white problem. It is the whites who have to revise their attitude. It is they who have to realize how stupid and criminal their self-conceit is."

Of course there exists a Negro problem. Call it a problem produced by a 'reaction', but still the problem is there, at least for the Negro. He has to define his attitude as an answer to the white civilization—including white pride, cruelty, etc. To define this attitude is extremely difficult for him. It is even more difficult for the American Negro than for any other group in the world.

We could formulate it as follows. The Negro is not a problem (that is only the imagination of white people) but he has a problem in the white world around him, to which he belongs and does not belong. He finds himself in an awful dilemma. The Negro writer experiences this dilemma in its most severe form. The alienation which any Negro experiences, the Negro writer experiences twice: first as a Negro and then as a writer in a modern world. For him there are two problems instead of one. First he finds himself, as do all his companions of the same colour, caught between the eternal extremes of Africa and America. Secondly he feels the tension between being a Negro and being an author, that is to say between his involvement and his objectivity.

The dilemma

Africa and America: a dilemma which has not yet been solved for the American Negro.

The former slave may have lost, during the notorious "Middle Passage", the cruel passage to the New World, many values which defined and gave meaning to his life, his language, his culture, his religion. Nevertheless, because he was a slave, he never became an American.

In other words, the Negro did not manage, either during the period of slavery or during the continuous blasphemous period of alienation of rights which followed, to develop an identity of his own. He accepted the forms of white civilization, he took an active part in the dynamic world of technology, he even participated in everything that makes America what it is: its brutality, its violence, its pragmatism.

He shared also its morality, its dream, its idealism, in short every uncertainty which affects the country as a whole. But with all this he did not become an American, because he was not accepted as one.

He does not really belong to the famous "melting pot". More and more deeply than any other ethnic group in the United States, he is compelled to return to the background of his old world, because he has another colour.

But just in trying to do this, his dilemma becomes even more tragic because the big question remains: Can he still do this? Just make a comparison between his position and that of the African Negro. In 1948 was published the famous anthology of African poetry collected by Léopold Sédar Senghor and prefaced by Sartre with the classic essay entitled "Orphée Noir". The philosopher stated that the African had to rediscover, to trace back his "négritude", to become once more—after centuries of colonial alienation of rights—consciously human.

He also pointed out how difficult that is, because even in imagery white prevails over black.

This colour symbolism was movingly expressed by David Diop:

Souffre pauvre nègre !
Nègre, noir comme la misère !

But the African can rediscover his identity. The sudden rapid process of African independence has given him self-confidence and power. Poets, once exiled, like Senghor himself are being called to the highest posts. How many problems still remained, how many new ones arose, the heart of the matter was that the African could go his own way, rediscover his "Négritude". He could breathe in liberty. He is sure of himself.

The American Negro does not have this chance. While he seemed — for a long time — to be more advanced than his brothers in the old motherland, he has now fallen behind. As far as one can judge it does not seem, for the time being, that he is able to catch up. For him, self-determination is excluded not only because the whites would not grant it to him, but also what is more, because to grant the American Negro self-determination would be an over-simplification and an unrealistic approach to the American situation.

With all the roots of their being, the American Negroes are bound up with the land and the people around them, for better or for worse; for the time being, mostly for the latter.

Only people who over-simplify the situation, groups such as the American Communist Party in the 1920s and the extreme right racist group of the Black Muslims today, are asking for 'apartheid', which, if ever effected, would have the same foolish, criminal results as Verwoerd's 'Apartheid' in South Africa.

"The American dream" : An Illusion ?

On the other hand, the breath-taking feature of the American scene is the attempt to reach a much more radical, but at the same time much more impossible solution, namely to allow peoples of the most diversifying backgrounds, civilizations, colours, religions and so on, to live together in a brotherhood of liberty and equality. The words one has to use to express this American dream seem to be platitudes, after all the reality which followed the idealism of Lincoln and Jefferson.

Full of bitter hope, Robert Frost described this American dream as "an irresistible impossibility".

The American Negro knows how 'impossible' it is, and yet there is nobody who appeals to this dream as strongly as he does.

He has in mind the idealistic, let us say Platonic idea, of an America, that will be "a brotherhood, from sea to shining sea" and he appeals to it in his struggle.

As the poet Langston Hughes puts it :

Let America be America again
Let it be the dream it used to be
The land that never has been yet
And yet must be
The land where every man is free

As the political leader, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King has said :
"I have a dream that once this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed : 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.'"

Only during recent years does an increasing note of hesitation appear. At the congress of American Negro Writers held in 1959 in New York one of the speakers called the American dream one big illusion and disillusion :

"Just as an insurance company will not issue a policy without determining the life expectancy of the buyer, neither should the Negro — in this case the buyer — accept the policy before he determines if the company is solvent. If the dream he has chased for three centuries is now dying even for white Americans, he would be wiser to consider alternative objectives."

During the period of the 'Harlem Renaissance' (1925), the American Negro could speak loudly, could fight, could protest, could write, because he **believed** in a future. A generation of great talent was born. We think of such unforgettable names as : Alain Locke, James Weldon Johnson, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Jean Toomer. The blossom-time went on. During the Second World War one can distinguish a second generation, who following the footsteps of the first, joined the struggle, the protest against injustice. Names like Margaret Walker, Gwendolyn Brooks, Richard Wright and Chester Himes, became known.

The bottom falls out

But in the years after World War II, the bottom fell out of this movement. It is difficult to say exactly why.

There are of course some factors to be taken into account. In the first place the quickly increasing prosperity transformed also the upper level of the Negro community. Giving it more satisfaction, more self-confidence, but at the same time increasing the difference of opinion among them about the tactics to follow.

In the second place, there was the growing integration, supported strongly by the Federal Government, which surely did not eradicate the race-problem, but made it obscure, more intricate, less easy to grasp.

The fight between justice and injustice now became one of legal (and illegal) intricacies, of state laws against federal laws. The Southern tactics changed : lynching disappeared and gave

place to economic boycott. This was no doubt horrible, but it made less appeal to the imagination of both author and reader.

In short, what happened to the American dream during the calm Eisenhower period, happened also to the Negro protest and the Negro struggle. A certain malaise set in.

During this period one could hardly expect writers of fame to develop and one can speak of a gap between 1945 and 1960 — a gap which could not be filled by second-rate talents such as William Gardner Smith, Ann Petry and Williard Motley.

The Question of Identity Reappears

It was at this point that James Baldwin wrote his first essay, "Everybody's Protest Novel", as a protest against the protest, (in which he worked out a personal grievance against his older friend, teacher and later enemy, Richard Wright, the author of so much outstanding protest literature).

Baldwin's first novel, "Go tell it on the Mountain", was a book without race problems. Instead of whites, only blacks figured in it. It was based on Baldwin's memories of his youth. It was lively, lyrical and direct.

In this work Baldwin goes back to the question, which had been almost suppressed by the stream of protest literature: Who are we Negroes? What are our roots? How do we live together in this white, hostile world — a world with patterns, especially religious patterns which the white man laid down on us?

The question of identity was raised again: Who is the Negro? It became clear that Baldwin could find in his own past a rich inspiration, richer than that of others who tried to describe the white world.

But to do this he had to dissociate himself finally and absolutely from the protest generation.

He stood for a new objectivity, and in doing so became an outstanding renewer of Negro literature.

The Wrong Image

It was time to paint a new picture of the American Negro. It is strange to recall, but nevertheless true, that not only the unsympathetic picture, which a lot of white people have received of the Negro from much of the Southern literature, but also the sympathetic picture, was drawn by white authors.

Negro writers from Richard Wright to James Weldon Johnson have not contributed as much to the white image of the American Negro as a series of white writers beginning with Harriet Beecher Stowe and her "Uncle Tom's Cabin", through O'Neill's "Emperor Jones", Lillian Smith's "Strange Fruit", Marc Connelly's "The Green Pastures" down to Du Bose Heyward's "Porgy and Bess".

However you try to evaluate all these white descriptions (and even among Negroes the result of this evaluation is different) the plain fact remains. This seems to be an accusation against the Negro writer. It also witnesses to the overwhelming power of white publication media.

The Negro has to rediscover his identity and he has to write about it. The picture given by whites might be often sympathetic and pleasant, it just cannot be good enough. It is too superficial, too external.

But it is precisely at this point that we find the question with which we started, the tragic question: Is there something like a Negro Identity somewhere between the African and American realities? Will the Negro be able to find this identity, alienated as he is from the white world around him, and often just as much from his own people?

It is the greatness of James Baldwin, that he at least tries, that he takes the strain, indeed, that he writes out of that strain. He doesn't make a choice between Africa and America, between the old and the new world, between black and white. He thinks that one should complement the other, at least in the American situation. "In short, we, the black and white, deeply need each other here, if we are really, that is to achieve our identity, our maturity, as men and women."

The black, the Negro, contributes to America an emotional life with African roots, however much it seems to be scorched and shriveled up in the hard white civilization.

Baldwin answers Countee Cullen's "What is Africa to me?" with a positive tension: "Africa is warmth, sensuality, life itself." The Negro is not what he has been for centuries to the white man. The classic expression of the white idea of the Negro is found in no less a writer than William Blake. It is that of a black human with a white soul ("And I'm black, but O, my soul is white" — The Little Black Boy.)

On the contrary, when the Negro rediscovers his identity (and once again: he will only be able to achieve that — in a

community which expels him — by returning to his African roots) it will be exactly the reverse.

It will be like the small Negro girl, in *One hundred dollar misunderstanding* of Robert Grover (a white) who as a prostitute says about the only white man she loves: "But I never knowed no other white man sep Harry, kin unnerstan what bein Black is. I spect Harry white outside, he got him a nice soft warm color heart inside. I spect tha's how he kin unerstan." Grover's book is a not-too-bad illustration of Baldwin's essay. Grover understands the Negro, because (as a writer, as a man-in-the-street) he is open to the warmth of life.

That is exactly what, according to most whites, Baldwin doesn't do any more — to throw himself open to all that gives meaning and warmth to life, the earthliness, the sensitivity, the warmth of the human who knows he is mortal.

That is what counts, death gives meaning to life.

But the white man in his antiseptic, plastic world is afraid of the reality, the full black reality, against which life will be in meaningful contrast. The average white denies his own deep self, the power of his soul, he lives superficially, he wants to have, instead of to be.

Black scares him, and in acting so he excludes life itself, and ends by destroying it, because there is no spirit or soul left, with which he can master his machines.

"Should the Negro really," asks Baldwin, "take an example from such a white civilization?"

Is such a technical community superior? Isn't it just the contrary?

Should not the white man learn from the Negro to live again: a warm, meaningful and inspired life?

The outstanding quality of Baldwin as an essayist is his originality. He knows how to use in his essays the results of studies in culture, the experiences of history and the spirit of the Negro protest movement. His romanticism is radical and yet mild at the same time.

What he writes is revealing and has been felt to be so in America. His great essay, "Down at the Cross" which forms the backbone of his book, *The Fire Next Time*, was published in 'The New Yorker' of 17 November 1962 and made an enormous future. The weekly was sold out within a couple of days and Baldwin's ideas became the subject of discussion everywhere.

Renewer of Negro Literature

The artist who protested against the protest, who lived in Paris for some time, far from the battle, far from his people, suddenly became a well-known man in America, the leader of the Negroes, at any rate, the man who gave expression to their deepest aim.

This all confronted Baldwin with a new dilemma. How as a writer, could he accept this role without doing harm to his work as a novelist?

His later work after his return to the U. S. A. is of no great literary merit, even if it sells well. Especially "Another country" is a catalogue of different characters and problems: race, authorship, homosexuality, etc., rather than the masterpiece that its outline leads the reader to expect.

There is something sad about this situation. The writer who objectifies in his novels but involves himself with warmth in his essays is bound to fail in one or the other. Baldwin took an active part during this last year in Negro actions against discrimination.

He belonged to the group of Negro intellectuals who informed Robert Kennedy about the situation in the Spring of 1963 and it was again Baldwin who shocked this well-meaning but badly informed statesman by declaring that he didn't see "why a Negro should have to fight for Cuban freedom against Castro, while he does not have that same freedom in his own country."

Hope and Warmth

Baldwin is also engaged in highly successful speaking tours throughout the country.

He is typically a writer who, in the hour of decision, has no time for a great cultural creation, but needs quickness and sharpness and sensitivity to the work of the moment. Among the new group of Negro writers there seems to be others who might produce work of lasting quality; surely Ralph Ellison in his *Invisible Man*, perhaps also Lorraine Hansberry in her play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, or John A. Williams in *Sissie*.

But no one equals the radical, pithy manner in which James Baldwin reduces the most embarrassing problem of the United States of America to its essential elements of human pain and human fear and passion but also of human hope and warmth.

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