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Self-Identity Through Struggle

*In this passage from *The Fire Next Time* (1963), James Baldwin discusses the ultimate good that can be realized from living a life of “endless struggle”: autonomy, certainty, and a knowingness “that is unshakable.”*

It is entirely unacceptable that I should have no voice in the political affairs of my own country, for I am not a ward of America; I am one of the first Americans to arrive on these shores.

This past, the Negro's past, of rope, fire, torture, castration, infanticide, rape; death and humiliation; fear by day and night, fear as deep as the marrow of the bone; doubt that he was worthy of life, since everyone around him denied it; sorrow for his women, for his kinfolk, for his children, who needed his protection, and whom he could not protect; rage, hatred, and murder, hatred for white men so deep that it often turned against him and his own, and made all love, all trust, all joy impossible—this past, this endless

Civil Disobedience, Social Justice, Nationalism & Populism, Violent Demonstrations and Race Relations

Baldwin Voices Black Rage in *The Fire Next Time*

by Thomas J. Cassidy

DATE 1963

Reflecting on his youth and the growing popularity of the Black Muslim movement, James Baldwin wrote a thoughtful, prophetic statement on race in America.

LOCALE New York, New York

CATEGORIES Literature; social issues and reform

Summary of Event

James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* (1963) created a stir even before the book was published. By 1962, Baldwin had delayed for three years writing an article on Africa that *The New Yorker*, perhaps the most influential popular literary magazine in the United States, had commissioned. Baldwin received an advance from the magazine and did in fact travel to Africa, but he never finished the series of articles that he had promised. He did, however, finish an article suggested by Norman Podhoretz, then the new editor of *Commentary*, called “Down at the Cross,” based on Baldwin's meeting with Elijah Muhammad, leader of the Black Muslims.

With William Shawn, the editor of *The New Yorker*, growing impatient to receive a finished article, Baldwin sent him the article that had originally been intended for *Commentary* but that had grown in scope well beyond its original conception. Undismayed that the article Baldwin was submitting was quite unlike the article *The New Yorker* had commissioned, William Shawn retitled the essay “Letter from a Region of My Mind” and published it in the November 17, 1962, issue of *The New Yorker*. The essay caused an immediate stir and formed the bulk of *The Fire Next Time*, which was published in 1963.

The Fire Next Time actually begins with a short piece entitled “My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation,” written to Baldwin's fourteen-year-old namesake, his brother's son, whom Baldwin at one point refers to affectionately as “Big James.” The piece was originally published in *The Progressive* in December, 1962; in *The Fire Next Time*, it serves largely as a prologue to the themes that the longer essay treats in greater length.

As an essay, “My Dungeon Shook” suffers from some of the cumbersome demands of the form of the public epistle, particularly the need to focus on an audience of one while addressing a much larger audience. Thus, when Baldwin tells his nephew that he—Big James—was born in conditions similar to those of Charles Dickens's London, he interrupts himself to say, a bit too coyly, “I hear the chorus . . . screaming, ‘No! This is not true!’ . . . —but I am writing this letter to you.” Clearly, Baldwin is not, in fact, writing this letter to his nephew. The essay, however, is not without the characteristic insight and rhetorical zest of much of Baldwin's work. Such lines from the essay's final paragraph as “You know, and I know, that the country is celebrating one hundred years of freedom one hundred years too soon. We cannot be free until they are free” neatly introduce some of the major ideas discussed in his longer essay: that freedom has not been achieved for either blacks or whites and that, for people of one race to live free, people of all races must live free.

It is the longer piece, later restored to Baldwin's original title, “Down at the Cross” (with *The New Yorker's* title for the essay retained as a subtitle), that constitutes the bulk of *The Fire Next Time*. The essay begins with Baldwin's recollection of a religious crisis of his own that began when he was fourteen, when he began to be afraid of the world of Harlem around him because it seemed that he himself could conceivably become one of the “whores and pimps and racketeers on the avenue.” He sought refuge in the safety of church, becoming a preacher while still a teenager. It was not long, however, before he found himself disappointed by the hypocrisy of the church.

The command to love everybody, he found, was supposed to apply “only to those who believed as we did, and it did not apply to white people at all”—and it certainly did not apply to such people as Baldwin's Jewish school friends. These autobiographical reflections constitute the first third of the essay and are compelling in their own right. In addition, they provide the basis for Baldwin's understanding of both the attractions and limitations of a religion, such as that of the Black Muslims, that preaches racial separation, the main topic of the second section.

struggle to achieve and reveal and confirm a human identity, human authority, yet contains, for all its horror, something very beautiful. I do not mean to be sentimental about suffering—enough is certainly as good as a feast—but people who cannot suffer can never grow up, can never discover who they are. That man who is forced each day to snatch his manhood, his identity, out of the fire of human cruelty that rages to destroy it knows, if he survives his effort, and even if he does not survive it, something about himself and human life that no school on earth—and, indeed, no church—can teach. He achieves his own authority, and that is unshakable.

See Also

Faulkner Publishes *Go Down, Moses*

Paton Explores South Africa's Racial Divide in *Cry, the Beloved Country*

Ellison's *Invisible Man* Is Published

Things Fall Apart Depicts the Destruction of Ibo Culture

Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* Calls for Social Justice

The Autobiography of Malcolm X Is Published

The middle third of the essay describes a meeting Baldwin had in Chicago with Elijah Muhammad, the head of the Nation of Islam (or Black Muslims), a black separatist religion that maintains that God—or Allah—is black, that blacks are the chosen people of Allah, and that a separate Black Muslim country must be founded on American soil if American blacks are to control their own destiny. Further, the Nation of Islam movement sanctions violence when necessary as a legitimate means not only of self-defense but also of self-assertion. Baldwin found himself in the position of being attracted to Elijah Muhammad and defending many of the positions taken by the Nation of Islam while disagreeing sharply with the racially separatist perspective held by Muhammad and his followers. Nevertheless, Baldwin and Muhammad parted on friendly terms, and Muhammad and his followers seemed to accept Baldwin as a likely future convert to their cause.

The third part of the essay is an intellectual and rhetorical tour de force that uses ideas—without acknowledgment—from sources as diverse as the French existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre and the American civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. On a very deep level, Baldwin says, Americans refuse to accept the inevitability of death and the essentially tragic nature of the human condition. As a result, there is something immature within the American psyche. Mature consideration would show that black and white Americans need each other—a separate black nation would be doomed to economic failure—and need to accept one another as fully equal partners whose identities inevitably depend upon one another.

The only option left, Baldwin says, is for Americans, black and white, to love one another—not with what he calls the “infantile” type of love that demands its own gratification, but in a tougher sense of the word that demands that one be willing to grow to be worthy of love. Baldwin concedes that what he is asking may be impossible, but surely, “the impossible is the least that one can demand.” Baldwin ends his essay by warning that if blacks and whites fail in the task of re-creating America, a prophecy from the Bible, re-created in a slave song, would be fulfilled: “God gave Noah the rainbow sign; No more water, but fire next time.”

Though many aspects of Baldwin's essay actively condemn the roles that organized religions have played in the history of American race relations, and though he invites his reader to dispense with a belief in God if necessary, the end and the title of the book both seem to place the essay into a Christian context. Baldwin's message is not essentially religious, however; rather, his essay uses a religious context to add a sense of urgency to his prophecy. The reference to fire surely is a warning that the racial violence and rioting that have marked American society will destroy it if the deep underlying causes are not treated.

Significance

The immediate impact of the publication of “Letter from a Region of My Mind” in *The New Yorker* and republication by Dial Press of the same essay under the title “Down at the Cross” in *The Fire Next Time* was that James Baldwin found himself a leading spokesman for American Negroes (Baldwin's preferred term for African Americans). The situation was somewhat ironic, since Baldwin had for most of his career resisted being labeled a “Negro writer,” preferring to consider himself simply a writer. Nevertheless, during the civil rights struggles of the 1960's, Baldwin was aware that he had an important voice to add to the ongoing national dialogue.

By the time *The Fire Next Time* was published, Baldwin had already established himself as an important novelist, having published *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), *Giovanni's Room* (1956), and *Another Country* (1962). After *The Fire Next Time*, however, he was often treated by the press as a celebrity intellectual. For example, in its January 4, 1963, issue, *Time* magazine ran a short article about the importance of Baldwin's *The New Yorker* piece as a news story under the headline “Races,” rather than reviewing the essay as a literary event.

Similarly, for its May 17, 1963, issue, shortly after the release of *The Fire Next Time*, *Time* used Baldwin's face on its cover; again, though, the magazine discussed the publication of his most recent book as a political event rather than a literary one. Similarly, the May 24, 1963, issue of *Life* magazine ran a feature on Baldwin that treated him as a celebrity and proclaimed that “in today's literary circles it is a sign of considerable chic to know James Baldwin well enough to refer to him as Jimmy.”

Baldwin tried his best to use his newfound celebrity to promote the cause of racial integration. He traveled the South, meeting James Meredith, the first black student to be enrolled at the University of Mississippi, and Medgar Evers, the chief legal counsel for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in Mississippi, among other civil rights leaders. He also set up a series of meetings with Robert F. Kennedy, then the attorney general of the United States, to discuss the problems of racial segregation in the urban North.

By most accounts, the meetings with Robert Kennedy ended disastrously. Baldwin had assembled a group of friends, including playwright Lorraine Hansberry, singer and actor Lena Horne, singer Harry Belafonte, and many others. Kennedy arrived apparently expecting a businesslike discussion of proposals and priorities to ease the racial unrest brewing in America's cities. What Baldwin wanted to offer was a crash course in understanding what it felt like to be black in America. The two camps quickly grew impatient with each other, and the meeting ended in frustration and exhaustion, leaving Baldwin feeling bitter toward both Robert Kennedy and his brother, President John F. Kennedy. This bitterness lasted even beyond President Kennedy's assassination and was recorded in Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) files, as Baldwin was now suspected of being a revolutionary.

If Baldwin's emotional relationship to ideas compromised his ability to be a cool political leader, his relatively moderate integrationist views, as well as his homosexuality, made him a favorite target of younger, more revolutionary blacks such as Eldridge Cleaver, who attacked Baldwin in *Soul on Ice* (1968). Though personally wounded by such attacks, Baldwin refused to engage in tabloid squabbling. In fact, he remained something of an apologist for black revolutionaries, even those who had attacked him in public. Seven years after the publication of *The Fire Next Time*, in an open letter to Angela Davis printed in the *Manchester Guardian* on December 12, 1970, he seemed on the verge of despairing that white America would ever come to the awakening that in *The Fire Next Time* he had insisted was necessary.

The long-term impact of *The Fire Next Time* on Baldwin's literary reputation was to convince many readers and reviewers that Baldwin's foremost gift as a writer was his talent as an essayist. Baldwin found this perception frustrating, but he unwillingly contributed to it during the 1960's by publishing works of fiction that many readers found disappointing while at the same time continuing to publish much top-quality nonfiction. This is not to suggest that *The Fire Next Time* was universally well received, either; F. W. Dupee, for example, though applauding the autobiographical section of "Down at the Cross," wondered why Baldwin had not done more research into the Black Muslim movement before publishing. Hannah Arendt, in a letter to Baldwin, wondered if love could ever serve as a panacea for society's ills. The consensus that has emerged over the course of time, however, is that Baldwin's nonfiction certainly demands a permanent place in American literature, and that *The Fire Next Time* is one of his most powerfully written and most comprehensive statements on race in America.

Further Reading

- 1 Baldwin, James. *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Non-Fiction, 1948-1985*. New York: St. Martin's/Marek, 1985. Reprints all of *The Fire Next Time* and many other of Baldwin's essays, including "Stranger in the Village" and "No Name in the Street." Allows the reader to trace Baldwin's changing views on race and identity.
- 2 Bloom, Harold, ed. *James Baldwin*. Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2006. A collection of critical essays assembled prior to Baldwin's death in 1987. Harold Bloom's introduction, as well as the essays focusing on Baldwin's nonfiction by F. W. Dupee, Marcus Klein, and James A. Snead, will be of particular interest to readers of *The Fire Next Time*. Contains a chronology of Baldwin's life, a bibliography of secondary sources, and an index.
- 3 Campbell, James. *Talking at the Gates: A Life of James Baldwin*. New York: Viking Press, 1991. A well-written, critically distant but intellectually engaged biography of James Baldwin. Of particular interest to readers of *The Fire Next Time* will be the section "A Severe Cross." Includes a bibliography of writings by Baldwin and an index.
- 4 Porter, Horace A. *Stealing the Fire: The Art and Protest of James Baldwin*. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1989. A full-length study of Baldwin's writing that emphasizes the importance of Baldwin's nonfiction. A chapter entitled "This Web of Lust and Fury" analyzes the importance of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin: Or, Life Among the Lowly* (1851) to Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*. Includes chronology, bibliography, and index.
- 5 Relyea, Sarah. *Outsider Citizens: The Remaking of Postwar Identity in Wright, Beauvoir, and Baldwin*. New York: Routledge, 2006. Study comparing Baldwin to fellow African American novelist and activist Richard Wright, as well as to French feminist existentialist Simone de Beauvoir. Bibliographic references and index.
- 6 Weatherby, W. J. *James Baldwin: Artist on Fire*. New York: Dell Books, 1989. A biography written by a friend of Baldwin. Occasionally suffers from a lack of critical distance, but benefits from the author's close knowledge of his subject. Includes a chapter on *The Fire Next Time*. Index and bibliography.

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