DISPATCH

James Baldwin: Voyages in Search of Love

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Abstract

From the time of his early adolescence until his death, traveling was one of, if not the, driving force of James Baldwin's life. He traveled to escape, he traveled to discover, and he traveled because traveling was a way of knowing himself, of realizing his vocation.

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From the time of his early adolescence until his death, traveling was one of, if not the, driving force of James Baldwin's life. He traveled to escape, he traveled to discover, he traveled because traveling was a way of knowing himself, of realizing his vocation.

Baldwin's first tentative traveling was from the confines of his church-based home and his racial confinement in Harlem. As a thirteen year old child, encouraged by teachers like Countee Cullen and a young Midwestern woman named Orilla Miller—he called her “Bill”—he began to stray. He would wander after school to the Public Library downtown and would often be confronted there by policemen who would order him to go back up town “where he belonged.” But Jimmy had already seen the possibility of escape and he was determined that in some way he must travel more definitively and that through such travel he would achieve whatever it was he felt stirring within him. In *Go Tell it on the Mountain* that determination is reflected in young John Grimes, who climbs a hill in Central Park—his mountain—and looks out on the world below and feels the pull of a messianic future:

He felt like a long-awaited conqueror at whose feet flowers would be strewn, and before whom multitudes cried, Hosanna! He would be, of all, the mightiest, the most beloved, the Lord's anointed; and he would live in this shining city which his ancestors had seen with longing from far away.¹

Young Jimmy, like young John, had recently been saved in the Pentecostal church. "Go tell it on the Mountain" is an old song that celebrates the birth of their messiah: "Go tell it on the mountain that Jesus Christ is born." The traveling had begun.

Jimmy spent his high school years way across town at Dewitt Clinton High School in the Bronx—a school populated mostly by the Jewish children of the nearby apartment complex built for the Amalgamated Garment Workers. For a church-trained Harlem boy this was a long voyage into dangerous waters. And inevitably those waters carried him definitively away from Harlem, away from what for him had become the imprisonment represented by his church, his father's home, and his ghetto. To make that new journey he wore the armor of the word, the power of which and the beauty of which he had learned in his church and in his schooling. In his early play, *The Amen Corner*, Baldwin's persona, David, leaves the "safety" of his mother's home and church and makes his way as a musician downtown. Jimmy Baldwin would make the same journey, heading downtown into that "shining city"—or at least the Bohemian section of it, Greenwich Village. There he wrote articles and preached his "gospel"—he said he had left the church to preach the gospel—to those fellow Bohemians who would listen. And he experimented with sexuality. But the shining city was not yet ready to be conquered. Flowers were not thrown at his feet. Instead his closest friend, Eugene Worth, who became Rufus Scott in the later novel, *Another Country*, threw himself off the George Washington Bridge and became for Jimmy "the black corpse floating in the national psyche." Jimmy was not yet ready to follow Eugene, to be the sacrificial victim of his gospel. And, as he explains in his great essay, "Notes of a Native Son," he was not about to follow his embittered father, whose sanity and life had been destroyed by hatred. He realized in 1948 that as the shining city was not ready for his triumphal entry he would have to make a major detour. He would follow the multitude of African-American writers, musicians, and painters who had fled the reality of America and its broken promises of freedom and equality for the mythical land of *liberté, égalité, and fraternité*—the land that had provided a home for Josephine Baker, for Bricktop, for Sidney Bechet, and for his sometimes mentor Richard Wright. In Paris he could concentrate on being a writer rather than just a survivor; he could concentrate on who he was as an individual rather than as the representative of a category. Or so he hoped.

In the Paris of Josephine Baker poverty undermined the mythology. So did the presence of maligned Algerians—the French niggers. When, as described in the essay "Equal in Paris," he was arrested and mistreated for the theft of a sheet, he was apparently still a nigger, too—even in mythical Paris. And when he went to a Swiss village with a lover he was a "Stranger in the Village," an example of the "other" categorized and dehumanized not only in America but seemingly in western civilization as a whole. And speaking of lovers, the former preacher still had difficulty with the now urgent demands of his sexuality. There were women, white women with whom he made love, and he had even

considered marriage with one, but the real demand was more frightening—the demand represented by Giovanni in *Giovanni's Room* and expressed somewhat in his essay on André Gide, the “Male Prison.” Jimmy experienced a non Hall-mark card kind of love in his experience with his Giovannis—he experienced the overwhelming power of what he would call “the stink of love,” its messiness. Love was hard work and required a kind of vulnerability his experience with American racism had taught him to avoid. Jimmy worried that maybe inside he was David, the young American who chose safety over love. Was Giovanni speaking to him when he had him say these words to David?

You are not leaving me for a *woman*. If you were really in love with this little girl, you would not have had to be so cruel to me. . . You do not love anyone! You have never loved anyone, I'm sure you never will! You love purity, you love your mirror—you are just like a little virgin. . . You will never let anyone *touch* it—man or woman. You want to be *clean*. You think you came here covered with soap—and you do not want to *stink*. . . You want to leave Giovanni because he makes you stink. You want to despise Giovanni because he is not afraid of the stink of love. You want to kill him in the name of all your lying little moralities. And you—you are *immoral*. . . Look, *look* what you have done to me. Do you think you could have done this if I did not love you? Is this what you should do to love?²

This could, of course, be a metaphorical version of black America speaking to white America. But it was also a comment on Baldwin's own experience in Paris. Was his expatriate experience merely a bubble bath in myth, an escape from the reality that beckoned him home? Could he realize the prophetic drive that had motivated his earlier travels if he remained in Paris? In the story “Sonny's Blues” we find the reason for his return to America. Sonny's brother was living a “safe” life doing middle class things, whereas Sonny was a later incarnation of David in the *Amen Corner*—the artist prophet who had no choice but to play his demons. He was the image of the blues, the creative celebration of a people's pain. His was a form of love, he represented the stink of love, the hard work of love.

[His brother] seemed to hear with what burning he had made [the song] his, with what burning we had yet to make it ours, how we could cease lamenting. Freedom lurked around us and I understood, at last, that he could help us to be free if we would listen, that he would never be free until we *did*.³

James Baldwin could have chosen to remain safely in Paris as Richard Wright chose to do. He could have said to his country; keep your hypocrisy, your racism; I will have nothing more to do with you. But living in Paris he had begun to see his country in a different way. It was his country as much as anyone else's. “You can't have your history without me,” he, in effect, said. “I'm only black because you *think* you're white.” “We have to live together as lovers, whatever stink

that involves.” And he left for home, to demand his birthright. Back across the Atlantic, which was no great feat, after all; he came back with a reputation as a “promising negro writer.” But he knew there was a much more difficult journey he would have to make. The great black migration from the south and Jim Crow that had included his former slave grandmother and his parents demanded now, in this time of protest—this time of white spit dripping off the black faces of little girls trying to go to school—a return to the South. To have a chance of entering the “shining city” of the American Dream, he would have to journey into the mythologized world of the Old wisteria-laced South, the world of Scarlett O’Hara, Rhett Butler, and Mammy, a world which was also that of black lynchings, the Klan, and “colored” restrooms and restaurants for “whites only.” For an African-American who had grown up in the North only hearing of these things, the journey to the South was a descent into Hell. Before leaving he had a conversation with a friend, noting that he was almost 33, the age at which Jesus had been crucified. He was well aware of his role as a voyager. This was the journey into the unknown of an invisible individual who by definition could only be seen as a category. The essays that came out of it were entitled *Nobody Knows my Name*.

Sexuality continued to play a role in the journey south. How could it not? As his plane “hovered over the rust-red earth of Georgia..[his mind] was filled with the image of a black man. . .hanging from a tree, while white men watched him and cut his sex from him with a knife”—the sex that was a threat to their women.⁴ The men and the man on the tree in Baldwin’s mental image were all descendants of the slave owners who regularly violated their slave women. The image of the castrated black man was an ominous one for a black homosexual whose very existence made him a potential victim. When one night a white man made sexual advances towards him he realized the “we were both, abruptly, in history’s ass-pocket.”⁵

In Atlanta on a September day in 1957 Baldwin met Martin Luther King, the young preacher who with his marches and bus boycotts was leading the fight that was already called the “Civil Rights Movement. The former boy preacher saw in King a new kind of preaching, not energized like his father’s with hatred, but based firmly in some kind of miraculous love even when challenged by the worst kind of abuse.

King, as a southerner, seemed to know something of the suffering of the racist as well as that of the victim. Baldwin would keep this in mind when several years later we would travel together from Manhattan to Fire Island off Long Island and he would write the short story “Going to Meet the Man” essentially about the damage—sexual and psychological—done to a white sheriff who had watched a lynching as a child.

After the trip South Baldwin was a confirmed witness. Perhaps his Paris life had been a Jonah’s escape, he thought. In any case, he knew now that he had been brought back to his mission—his necessary vocation “from a long ways off.” The next years involved many travels back into the now de-mythologized South to work for organizations like CORE and SNCC.

In 1961, after a return to Paris, Baldwin took a trip to Israel that was supposed to include a tour of Africa and result in an essay for the *New Yorker* but which became instead “Letters from a Journey,” published later in *Harper’s*. Baldwin’s church-oriented childhood had, of course, been steeped in the mythology of the Bible. The River Jordan, the Promised Land, Jerusalem were all associated in his mind with the aspirations and longings of African-Americans. He thought of the old songs, “*Go Down Moses, Let my people go*” and “I want to be ready to walk in Jerusalem/Just like John.” He was in the “Promised Land” itself. But once again, mythology had to give way to reality. If the meaning of being a Jew was somehow connected with the meaning of being a black man, the plight of the Palestinians who saw Israel as a catastrophe made him feel his own “homelessness” as an African-American.

James Baldwin delayed his planned African trip by taking one to Istanbul to visit an old friend. I met him in the kitchen of that old friend’s sister on 10 December 1961. I too was a traveler, having left America immediately after graduating from college, to teach in Istanbul. When I came into the kitchen I watched as a man who would change my life scribbled on a yellow pad the last words of the novel *Another Country*. He asked who I was, I said “David.” He said “I like that name.” That night I showed him some of the more questionable parts of Istanbul and we discussed literature, centering finally on a mutual favorite, Henry James. He was writing an essay on his favorite James novel, *The Ambassadors*, an essay he never finished. The real problem with American literature, he said, was the conflict in America itself between reality and an Edenic mythology of innocence. In the *Ambassadors*, Baldwin suggested, James saw through our myths to reality. The hero of the novel is Lambert Strether—a traveler who crossed the Atlantic on a mission, to rescue an American boy named Chad Newsome from what turns out to be a French married aristocrat. Strether is an innocent—he cannot see reality, and innocence in Baldwin’s gospel is dangerous. Upon discovering that Chad is a better person in Paris than he was at home, Strether, who cannot believe that sex could improve anyone, decides that the relationship in question is innocent, that is sexless. When, in one of the great scenes in literature Strether discovers his mistake, he realizes he must put aside his American innocence and accept the fact that sex—love—between even a married French aristocratic woman and a younger American man might be a positive thing. Innocence, he realizes, sees categories and labels rather than people.

Jimmy taught several classes on Henry James for me during the several trips he took to Turkey during the next few years. In July of 1962 Baldwin finally made his first trip to Africa. He had long since in an essay called “Princes and Powers” rejected the pan-Africanism of Richard Wright, and the *négritude* movement of Léopold Senghor and Aimé Césaire. Baldwin felt strongly that he had more in common even with white Americans than with black Africans. He was a significant player in American history. Like it or not America was his country, his heritage. He enjoyed the trip to Africa, a visit to his ancient past,

but his eyes were focused on America. He did not write the assigned essay on Israel and Africa for the *New Yorker*, he gave them instead, an essay which was later published as “Down at the Cross: Letter from a Region of My Mind,” the main section of *The Fire Next Time*, which also included “My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation.” This was the book that propelled James Baldwin to fame, led to his picture on the cover of *Time Magazine* and finally gave him full entrance to the “shining city” he had gazed at all those years before from the Central Park hill. When friends and enemies complained that he had given his work to a publication full of elitist ads and ideas, he typically responded that his audience was made up of “publicans and tax collectors as well as the righteous.”

In the letter to his nephew he reminds black youth that the greatest danger facing them is “believing that you really are what the white world calls a *nigger*.” The greatest sin of the white world is its “innocence,” its failure to see. We must “with love, . . . 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.”⁶

In “Down at the Cross” he traces his passage from boy preacher to challenger of the hypocrisies of the Christian world. Wanting to examine an alternative, he had taken a trip to Chicago to interview the Black Muslim leader, Elijah Muhammad. But with Elijah he soon felt he was back in his father’s unforgiving, loveless house. The nation of Islam’s call for a separate nation was as bad as the segregated power structure created by white America. Baldwin turned back to the question of love, and in the most often-quoted passage from the *Fire Next time*, applied it to messy but necessary love between Black America and White America.

If we—and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create the consciousness of the others—do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world. If we do not now dare everything, the fulfillment of that prophecy, re-created from the Bible in a song by a slave, is upon us: *God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time!*⁷

Baldwin’s novel, *Another Country* was published in the same year as *Fire* and can best be read as a parable which illustrates his gospel of love and his understanding of the necessity of what we can metaphorically call transatlantic crossings—the Atlantic being the perilous distance between arbitrary categories and individuals, between innocence and reality. In this other “country” set in the shining city’s Greenwich Village, which Baldwin knew well, characters wrestle with their defining categories and attempt desperately to use love to reach each other, to achieve the love that can hold off the “fire.” Eric sleeps with Cass but also with Vivaldo. Vivaldo sleeps with Ida. Eric is in love with Yves who, when he finally makes the actual voyage from France to New York feels he has

reached the New Jerusalem, “the city which the people from heaven had made their home.”⁸ This is Henry James in reverse. Yves, said Baldwin, represents “all the innocent Europeans [who] came seeking another country.” But Baldwin knew his religion. The “people from heaven” could also be those fallen angels led by Lucifer and their city could be Hell. Cass says, “This isn’t a country at all . . . it’s a collection of football players and eagle scouts.” That is, a country of dangerous “innocents.”⁹

It is Ida who understands this best, the black woman whose brother Rufus had jumped, like Baldwin’s friend, off the George Washington Bridge. She understands that “the black corpse [of her brother] floating in the national psyche,” as Baldwin himself put it, must be squarely faced if we are to find peace in ourselves and our country. Vivaldo can say to Ida, “I am in love with you” but that is not enough. Before Ida can return his love and free him to *really* love he must break through the mask placed on her by society. He must, like Lambert Strether, learn to “see.” He must complete the transatlantic journey.

Now James Baldwin was a bona fide activist and prophet preaching his gospel to the nation. “I’ve been here 350 years,” he told Robert Kennedy in a tense meeting, “but you’ve never seen me.” He wrote *Blues for Mr. Charlie*, a play based loosely on the Emmet Till murder, one that reflected his sense that the time of fire was imminent. Would we go Malcolm’s way with the gun or Martin’s way with the Bible? He traveled with NAACP officer Medgar Evers around Mississippi trying to decide which it should be, and he met James Meredith in Jackson. Medgar Evers would be shot in front of his children on his front porch in 1963. This would be the first of the assassinations of those years—Malcolm, Martin, and, of course, the Kennedys.

I worked in Baldwin’s office on West End Avenue during my graduate school years between 1964 and 66. The assassinations and accusations that he was not radical enough led him into a period of deep disillusionment. In the fall of 1965 he left again for Istanbul to escape the sense that in spite of his fame he was still, like Ralph Ellison’s man, invisible. He would come back home briefly in the spring of 1966, and he asked me to return again to Istanbul with him. We lived in modest but beautiful house on a cliff overlooking the Bosphorus and he wrote the novel *Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone*, a novel about a famous performer plagued by ill health, a sense of loneliness, and a loss of his powers. This was, of course, an autobiographical work. There were many adventures during our stay in Turkey, and Baldwin would return there several times in the years to come—both to escape the turmoil at home and the pain of his personal life. For all his talk of love, it had a way of passing over him in the personal, domestic sense. In one of his last visits to Turkey he lived in another house near the Bosphorus, this time with a young temporary lover and with his old friend and one time mentor, the very philosophical, psychologically damaged and much-loved Beauford Delaney. Jimmy was fond of saying the situation reminded him of Voltaire’s *Candide*, Pangloss, and Cunegonde cultivating their garden along the Bosphorus.

In the 1970s and 1980s Baldwin was, in effect, a transatlantic commuter. For the last 15 years of his life he essentially lived half of each year in France in St Paul de Vence, where he eventually bought a house, and half in the States, where he taught at various universities, always preaching his gospel. The disillusionment never left him. He wrote a memoir of sorts and gave it the appropriate title for his mood: *No Name in the Street*; and he wrote two important new novels. *If Beale Street Could Talk* was a parable of his concerns about personal and public imprisonment—sexual, intellectual, racial. He took the title from an old W. C. Handy song he saw as containing a kind of ironic portrait of himself: “the blind man on the corner who sings the Beale Street Blues.” *Just Above My Head* was a complex and experimental return to the brother theme of “Sonny’s Blues,” in which Baldwin again metaphorically examined his own life and career as an artist and witness. James Baldwin’s middle name was Arthur. The main character of the novel is a musician named Arthur, a perennial transatlantic traveler in all senses of that phrase, who dies on a London rest room floor.

Two works of the late years took Baldwin on tangential travels. In Hollywood he tried unsuccessfully to convince a major studio to use his screenplay for the Malcolm X film later directed by Spike Lee, who in fact did use much of Baldwin’s work. Baldwin later published his scenario, giving it a title that reflected the now weary traveler’s dilemma: *One Day When I was Lost*. Later, in Atlanta he examined the evidence surrounding the murders of several black children there. The evidence, recorded in *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, indicated a failed faith, a national dream that had died. The title is taken from St. Paul’s statement that “Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”¹⁰

During the last two years of his life Jimmy traveled back and forth between New York, London, and St. Paul de Vence, but it was St. Paul de Vence that was now home. He loved entertaining there, especially around the lunch table in the garden, the table he called the Welcome Table after the old song: “I’m going to sit at the Welcome Table/I’m going to feast on milk and honey/One of these days.” He was working on a play called, in fact, *The Welcome Table*, in which a famous aging singer entertains in her house in the south of France. Edith is based on Josephine Baker, and, of course, James Baldwin. Jimmy always loved pointing out that Josephine’s initials were the same as his.

During the last week of his life I helped Jimmy’s brother David and his friends Bernard and Lucien care for him. During the night when it was my turn to watch, we would talk of many things, but travel was always a theme. He would someday return to America to do a film. We talked of a visit to Indian country in the American southwest; he had never been there—another ocean to cross.

To quote from the biography I eventually wrote:

There had always been an unwritten law in Jimmy’s households that people greet each other with a kiss on each cheek at the first encounter of the day. [This as a

ritual learned in France]. . . Caring for Jimmy in his sickness was a logical extension of [the] ritual. He was insistent on not going to a hospital or having a nurse. He wanted men to take care of him—not, I was sure, because he disliked or mistrusted women, but because it was important to him that men express the feminine within themselves, that they adopt the kind of tender nurturing usually associated with women. We [David, Bernard, Lucien, and I] became “disciples” of his gospel, “gentle” men of the Welcome Table. To put it another way, we ritually experienced the ‘stink of love’ in Giovanni’s room. Even as he lay dying Jimmy insisted on his role as a witness and lived his prophecy.¹¹

James Baldwin’s last transatlantic crossing was from Nice to New York in a French coffin. His funeral was at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine where in 1974 he had come from St. Paul to be honored with a medal in recognition of “the artist as prophet.” From the pulpit he had lashed out against war and called Richard Nixon a “motherfucker.” “It’s time to think about the Messiah in a new way,” he preached. “It’s time to learn to love each other. The love of God means responsibility to each other.” At the funeral Amiri Baraka called James Baldwin “God’s black revolutionary mouth.”

Notes

- 1 James Baldwin, *Go Tell it on the Mountain* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), p. 33.
- 2 James Baldwin, *Giovanni’s Room* (New York, Dial Press, 1956), p. 120.
- 3 James Baldwin, “Sonny’s Blues,” (1957) in *Going to Meet the Man* (New York, Vintage, 1995), p. 140.
- 4 James Baldwin, “Nobody Knows My Name,” (1961) in *Nobody Knows My Name* (New York, Vintage, 1993), pp. 99–100.
- 5 James Baldwin, *No Name in the Street* (New York, Dial, 1972), p. 61.
- 6 James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (1962), (New York, Vintage, 1993), p. 10.
- 7 *Ibid.*, pp. 9, 105–6.
- 8 James Baldwin, *Another Country* (1962), (New York, Vintage, 1993), p. 436.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 406.
- 10 Hebrews, 11:1.
- 11 David Leeming, *James Baldwin: A Biography* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), p. 382.

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Contributor’s Biography

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