

ESSAY

The Devil Finds Work: A Hollywood Love Story (as Written by James Baldwin)

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Abstract

Baldwin's *The Devil Finds Work* (1976) has proven challenging since its publication because readers and critics have trouble classifying it. The challenge may be related to a common feature of Baldwin criticism, namely a tendency to compare late career works to early ones and to find them lacking: the experimental nature of later works of nonfiction like *No Name in the Street* (1972), *The Devil Finds Work*, and *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* (1985) does not square easily with the more conventional essays that made Baldwin famous in his early years. I attempt to reframe *The Devil Finds Work* not through a comparison to other Baldwin essays, but rather through a comparison to his fiction, specifically the novel *Giovanni's Room*. I posit that a greater appreciation for *Devil* can result from thinking of it as a story, specifically the story of a failed love affair.

Keywords: *The Devil Finds Work*, James Baldwin, film, film criticism, history of American cinema, race, love, exile, expatriate

What exactly is *The Devil Finds Work* (1976)? This quirky, late-career book is not in the accepted pantheon of must-read Baldwin works despite recent efforts to excavate, recover, and honor those writings of his that had previously been overlooked or denigrated. Its obscurity has something to do with the fact that it is a genre-obliterating outlier, a work of film criticism, cultural critique, and personal history that is as unique as its creator. It's not a difficult book to read in the sense that it is accessible and firmly grounded, and Baldwin's voice is sharply analytical and, at times, entertainingly arch, but it is a difficult book to interpret because of its slippery context and unpredictable structure. Some critics see it as a precursor to modern film theory: Cassandra Ellis classifies it as a "prophetic text that offers fresh insights for re-imagining the critical dimensions of spectatorship and identification."¹ Others, including Alice Craven, regard it as a "critique" connected to Baldwin's early critiques of literature, and suggest that he applies similar standards to film that he once applied to the novels of Richard Wright and Harriet Beecher Stowe.² Jenny James calls it a "loose-form critical reflection on film, popular culture, and history," and Nicholas Boggs describes it broadly as Baldwin's "meditations on blacks and film."³ William Dow sums up its reception this way: "The eclecticism and experimental form of *The Devil Finds Work*—including Baldwin's conflation of film history and memoir—continues to challenge critics."⁴ I fully agree, and after nearly three decades of studying Baldwin from a number of different angles, I continue to feel challenged by *The Devil Finds Work*.

To be challenged by a Baldwin work, particularly after encountering it repeatedly and through different lenses, is largely the point. In a review of *Devil* in *The Nation*, Jerry H. Bryant arrives at a largely insightful, clear-eyed, and thorough synopsis of the book, but laments, "I should not have had to work as hard as I did."⁵ The review is the very archetype of the response to Baldwin's post-1963 work: it compares *Devil* unfavorably to *The Fire Next Time* (1963), asserts that Baldwin has lost touch with changing times, that his "powers really have declined," and that he relies on his own experience rather than new ideas: "He has taken the old subject of race and made it more personal."⁶ (One can easily picture Baldwin's eyebrows arching at that line.) Despite the fact that the reviewer has developed an "affection for [Baldwin] that [he has] never had before," he is ultimately "disappointed" because *Devil* "fails as a coherent piece."⁷ It's possible that Bryant and other readers do not recognize the essay's structure as "coherence" because they are primarily using Baldwin's early essays as the model for how that word might be understood. Readers of his nonfiction expect him to build outward from personal experience to include observations about American cultural contradictions that lead to a hortatory conclusion about race relations like "This world is white no longer, and it will never be white again" or "No more water, the fire next time!"⁸ Readers of his fiction, though, are much more comfortable with ambiguity and formal experimentation. The challenges of *The Devil Finds Work* may actually be less about formal conventions and more about readerly expectations: even though it is a book that defies classification, readers like Bryant label it an "essay" and, mapping it onto Baldwin's earlier and more "coherent" essays, they find it lacking.

Although I'm certainly not suggesting that the book is fiction, there may be something to gain by thinking of it as a story.

In order to arrive at a fresh reading of it, I tried a radical experiment: namely, I set aside the idea that the book is primarily about American cinema, and considered it rather as being about Baldwin's *relationship* to American cinema. If we regard the subject of *The Devil Finds Work* as James Baldwin, we are perhaps closer to understanding its through-line. As his dedicated readers well know, however, there is no meaningful way to formulate "James Baldwin" as a stable subject: his achievement is his capacity for constant change and expansive growth. If we go a step further and regard *Devil* as a reflection of Baldwin's psychological, intellectual, and emotional state in 1975, we are yet closer to a context that might produce a new reading.⁹ David Leeming leads us in this direction in his biography of Baldwin, but still sees the book as contiguous with Baldwin's essays; he writes, "*Devil* is, in effect, a continuation of a long autobiographical essay, which he had begun with several pieces in *Notes of a Native Son* and in *Nobody Knows My Name*, followed by *The Fire Next Time* and *No Name in the Street* ... [it] is in one sense a fifty-year-old's evaluative reminiscence."¹⁰ Movies are not the true subject of the book, in Leeming's estimation, but are rather "catalysts for an extensive discussion of the American psyche, his own life, and the sociopolitical climate in America."¹¹

Yes, *and*, as I'm exploring here, movies provide the occasion for Baldwin to tell a story. Cinema was Baldwin's first love, and his mood in the mid-1970s is analogous to that of a furious ex-lover. Cinema seduced him when he was a child, disappointed him in young adulthood, and rejected him in middle age. Baldwin regards Hollywood, like America generally, as an entity that has failed to live up to its potential and has become criminally smug about its refusal to change. In 1975, just a decade before his premature death, Baldwin is fed up with his strained relationship with both his country and its most prominent cultural export. *The Devil Finds Work* can be compared to a love affair that follows a narrative arc from infatuation, to disillusionment, to impassioned argument, and finally to the big kiss-off. In this context, though it seems unlikely, the Baldwin text that might be the key to reevaluating *Devil* is *Giovanni's Room* (1956), a tragic tale of two lovers who could have had something great and lasting if one hadn't lacked courage and imagination. Baldwin is Giovanni in this analogy and Hollywood is David. David's realization at the end of that novel, of course, comes too late as he has lost Giovanni and essentially condemned him to death. In *The Devil Finds Work* the outcome is not quite so grim—no one faces the guillotine, although an entire film Baldwin wrote ends up on the cutting room floor—but Baldwin does tell both Hollywood and America in no uncertain terms that he's through with their abuse: if they are willing to change, fine, but he doesn't need them anymore. Once the love affair is over, he claims, "I learned something."¹² So, too, can the readers of this rich, enigmatic text, but a willingness to work at it is, unfortunately for Bryant and others who want a Hollywood ending, a requirement.

Baldwin's Hollywood romance begins in his childhood with a magical fantasy that takes the form of infatuation. Look again at the opening sentences of *The*

Devil Finds Work: “Joan Crawford’s straight, narrow, and lonely back. We are following her through the corridors of a moving train.”¹³ Although the second sentence is meant to mimic the experience of watching a film, it indicates something much more immediate and intimate: Baldwin imagines himself and his fellow viewers as part of the film, actively on the screen along with Joan Crawford, “following her.” He is so eager to connect to the world of the silver screen that he imagines he enters it. He follows Crawford *into* this movie, then he follows her *within* this movie, and despite his rational fears of the situation he finds himself in, he is at least initially unable to confine that experience to moviegoing:

I certainly did not wish to be a fleeing fugitive on a moving train; and, also, with quite another part of my mind, I was aware that Joan Crawford was a white lady. Yet I remember being sent to the store sometime later, and a colored woman, who, to me, looked exactly like Joan Crawford, was buying something ... when she paid the man and started out of the store, I started out behind her.¹⁴

His attraction to the screen starlet is so strong that he translates her racial identity to fit his own circumstances and actually does what he says he is doing while watching *Dance, Fools, Dance* (1931): he follows the woman who is the object of his desire.

The opening montage of *Devil* is a series of transferences that connect Black and white women and that connect the fantasy of the silver screen to the reality of Baldwin’s humble world. The Black woman in the store is twice described as “beautiful” and, since she “looked exactly like Joan Crawford” in the young Baldwin’s mind, the standard of beauty she represents originates in a Hollywood ideal.¹⁵ On the next page he also proclaims the “young white schoolteacher” Orilla “Bill” Miller “a beautiful woman,” and confesses, “I loved her, of course, and absolutely, with a child’s love.”¹⁶ Soon after this proclamation he declares his child’s love for another woman: “I loved my mother, and I knew that she loved me.” This statement acts as a defense against his father, who called the young James “the ugliest boy he had ever seen,” associating his denigrated physical features with his mother’s, especially the shape of their eyes. Baldwin writes, “I thought that he must have been stricken blind ... if he was unable to see that my mother was absolutely beyond any question the most beautiful woman in the world.”¹⁷ Movies help him recognize his father’s insults as a kind of “infirmity” by allowing him to define female beauty and to love beautiful women, not sexually, but “with a child’s love.”¹⁸ He sees Bette Davis onscreen and is astounded that she shares his and his mother’s “pop-eyes” and that she is therefore “ugly” in his father’s assessment, but also “a *movie star*,” and therefore beautiful (emphases original).¹⁹ He concludes that his father must be wrong. Movies represent, essentially, a higher power than the tyrannical David Baldwin. If Hollywood allows the young James Baldwin to love and to appreciate the beauty of five very different women—Joan Crawford, the woman from the grocery store who resembles her, Bill Miller, his mother, and Bette Davis—it also allows him to love himself, even if it is only in a childish way

that enables him to escape his world and his father's oppressive judgment. Thus, the love affair begins.

In fact, in part one of *The Devil Finds Work*, Baldwin is charmed by Hollywood in a way that he would never be again and lured by its power to affect his emotions and his imagination. His resistant readings and glib dismissals from the later sections are almost absent from this first one as he focuses less on the films' content and more on how they made him feel. The film version of *A Tale of Two Cities* (1935) left him "tremendously stirred and frightened."²⁰ The film *They Won't Forget* (1937) is marked by an "icy brutality" that "both scared me and strengthened me."²¹ He recognizes that some white film actresses like Sylvia Sidney "moved" him and that he "identified" with Henry Fonda.²² These strong responses and connections, all of which happen prior to his violent religious conversion, are ways for Baldwin to follow the lead of a powerful and seductive set of narratives that can make him feel more deeply while helping him connect his limited world to a broader one. Significantly, movies can both allow him to escape his world and to interpret it. In the space of a page, Sylvia Sidney "reminded me of a colored girl, or woman," "reminded me of reality," and "reminded me of Bill [Miller]."²³ As the teachings of the church would later do, movies enable him to employ a pre-existing framework to interpret and validate his own experience. Throughout the first section he repeatedly utters variations of a phrase: "I understood *that*," "I had seen *that*," or "I knew something about that" (emphases original).²⁴ As a child, this corroboration is merely exciting. It is only later in life that he will understand "the danger of surrendering to the corroboration of one's fantasies as they are thrown back from the screen."²⁵

The love affair between Giovanni and David in *Giovanni's Room* also begins with a yearning for connection. Though Giovanni is older, he is notably boyish. When he and David are finally fully alone on the morning after the night they meet, David says to him, "You look like a kid about five years old waking up on Christmas morning."²⁶ There is perhaps an echo here of John Grimes in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) who wakes up in that novel's first scene on his fourteenth birthday, and his mother gives him a present quite relevant to this essay: money to go to the movies. Giovanni then tells David how he first met Guillaume: "in a cinema!"—and David again notices a "childlike" note in Giovanni's voice as he describes this initial encounter.²⁷ When they are about to make love for the first time, David describes it this way: "He pulled me against him, putting himself into my arms as though he were giving me himself to carry."²⁸ Giovanni clearly trusts David as a child would and wants his care and his attention. David—cowardly, unimaginative, and self-involved—is no more up to the task than Hollywood is up to the task of sustaining the young James Baldwin's dreams.

The sweet, soft-edged glow of a honeymoon phase of a relationship inevitably leads to stress, strains, and arguments, filmed in a harsher light. Baldwin's perspective in the first section of *Devil* is that of a child, and I have highlighted Giovanni's childlike qualities from the early scenes of *Giovanni's Room*, yet it is important to point out that children in Baldwin's world aren't innocent: they are just more

willing than adults are to believe in magic. In a key scene in the story “Sonny’s Blues” (1957), the narrator recalls how children and family elders sit in a bright living room, keeping the darkness outside at bay. The child “hopes that the hand which strokes his forehead will never stop—will never die ... But something deep and watchful in the child knows that this is bound to end, is already ending.”²⁹ Children know the truth, in short, about the ever-encroaching darkness of their existence. Innocence in Baldwin’s work is a willed condition, one that is antithetical to true love. Even as Giovanni places his absolute trust and faith in David in the early scenes above, he also knows that David is a stereotypical American, innocent and smug, oblivious to “all the serious, dreadful things, like pain and death and love, in which you Americans do not believe.”³⁰ When David replies, “What makes you think we don’t?” Giovanni doesn’t answer, but if he did, the answer could easily be “the movies.” In Giovanni’s linking love to “dreadful things, like pain and death,” we get a glimpse of the Baldwinian definition of love, not as something schmaltzy and artificial, “not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth,” as he says in *The Fire Next Time*, or as something even more grave in *No Name in the Street* (1972): “Love is a battle; love is a war; love is a growing up.”³¹ In the second section of *Devil*, then, Baldwin takes America and Hollywood to task for their refusal to grow up, and thus to love maturely, with all of the pain and awareness of death associated with love. Giovanni memorably tells David that he cannot accept “the stink of love.”³² Baldwin, essentially, says the same thing to Hollywood.

Section two of *The Devil Finds Work* is thus markedly different from section one in that Baldwin does not let his lover off the hook, as he did when he was a child and wanted so badly to believe, to express his “child’s love.” Mid-twentieth-century films that are supposedly liberal when it comes to race relations, almost always starring the magnificent Sidney Poitier, are the recurrent objects of Baldwin’s scrutiny in this section, and he puts them in conversation with *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), an unabashedly racist “fable” from the silent film period that Baldwin acknowledges is regarded as “one of the great classics of American cinema.”³³ The hypocrisy he calls out is essentially that American cinema of the civil rights era purports to show the love that exists between its Black and white citizens, but that what it actually reveals is, as Giovanni would say, a refusal to take a hard, honest look at “all the serious, dreadful things” that love involves. Thus, any supposedly enlightened cinematic Poitier vehicle just glosses over the racial nightmare of *The Birth of a Nation* with a thick layer of “polish.”³⁴ After twice using that word to describe *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* (1967), Baldwin again uses the same word he had used to describe *The Birth of a Nation*, calling *Guess Who* a “light and self-serving ... fable.”³⁵ As any reader of Baldwin’s work knows, he’s only interested in fables when he wants to expose the dangers of mistaking them for reality, and when he sees something that appears polished, his urge is to scratch it to reveal the reality under the surface.

If love is “a growing up,” part two of *Devil* shows Baldwin growing out of his love for movies as pure infatuation and growing into a lover who is secure enough

to recognize shortcomings and to express them honestly. Since love is also a “battle” and a “war,” this expression often takes the form of a lover’s quarrel. One of Baldwin’s frustrated lifelong ambitions was to contribute to the film industry as meaningfully as he contributed to the world of letters, but of course that did not happen, for reasons that will be explored in the next section. He was, after all, a literary writer, and one of his consistent points throughout the first two sections is that novels and plays are always better than films. The claim “the book is better than the movie” is a cliché, but Baldwin’s contribution to this debate is more nuanced and more specific. Though he might believe that books constitute a superior art form, that is not his claim here; instead, he suggests that films refuse to live up to their potential due to a lack of courage and imagination, a tendency to play it safe like David in *Giovanni’s Room*. The section begins with a somewhat lengthy consideration of a now obscure film, *I Shall Spit on Your Graves* (1959), based on a 1946 novel by Boris Vian. One of Baldwin’s critiques of the adaptation is that it does not deal with the complex intersection of sex, social stratification, and existential angst: “This intersection, where life disputes with death, is very vivid in the book: and it does not, of course, exist in the film.”³⁶ This critique sounds remarkably like Giovanni’s accusation that Americans avoid the “serious, dreadful things, like pain and death and love.” The snide “of course” in Baldwin’s statement only makes sense when we understand his evolving perspective: essentially, Hollywood, like America more generally, simply cannot handle the troubling complexity that love involves. Hollywood replaces feeling with action: he describes a typical Hollywood scene that anchors the film version of *I Shall Spit on Your Graves*, complete with a loaded gun, a drunken southerner, and a car escape; he writes, parenthetically, “None of this paranoia is in Vian’s book.”³⁷

The “paranoia” he speaks of is, essentially, Hollywood’s reliance on stock footage that will cause its viewers’ hearts to race, but not to feel. In addition to playing it safe, Hollywood also is guilty of taking shortcuts, and thus shortchanging human experience. Baldwin returns throughout this section to a critique of “plot” v. “story,” which is an important if frequently overlooked dimension of his analysis in this work. It is the only way to make sense of the presence of McCarthyism and the FBI in this section that is otherwise focused on films. The “paranoid” aspects of American public/political life represented by McCarthyist red-baiting and FBI intimidation are also at the mercy of a plot. Here is Baldwin:

A story is impelled by the necessity to reveal: the aim of the story is revelation, which means that a story can have nothing—at least not deliberately—to hide. This also means that a story resolves nothing. The resolution of a story must occur in us, with what we make of the questions with which the story leaves us. A plot, on the other hand, must come to a resolution, prove a point: a plot must answer all the questions which it pretends to pose.³⁸

It is through this critique that Baldwin is able to build his surprising claim that an earnest if flawed civil rights era movie like *In the Heat of the Night* (1967) is the

descendant of an overtly racist spectacle like *The Birth of a Nation*. As Alice Cra-ven and others rightly claim, this rhetorical move is parallel to his critique of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and *Native Son* (1940) along the same lines, but in this context, I would link Hollywood's preference for plot over story—or resolution over revelation—to Baldwin's definition of love. If love is “quest, daring, growth, growing up,” it is never *resolved*: it is always in process. Hollywood's problem, in Baldwin's eyes, is not that it attempts to address America's racial woes, but that it attempts to *solve* them without being honest, nuanced, or bold. The conclusions of Baldwin's stories and novels—features of his fiction which don't get nearly enough attention or praise—are masterpieces of ambiguity: they force the reader to articulate or intuit what might be called the resolution. His emphasis on revelation might be deemed his art, but it also coincides with his understanding of love, which is the driving force behind art.

What bothers Baldwin about movies is parallel to what bothers Giovanni about David: they want everything to be clean. *In the Heat of the Night* leads to a resolution that is analogous, in Baldwin's memorable analysis, to “the obligatory fade-out kiss,” a Hollywood staple that “did not really speak of love, and, still less, of sex: it spoke of reconciliation, of all things now becoming possible.”³⁹ Such happy endings are problematic because of their “appalling distance from reality.”⁴⁰ This particular film fails because it “helplessly conveys—without confronting—the anguish of people trapped in a legend. They cannot live within this legend: neither can they step out of it.”⁴¹ The cardinal American sin in Baldwin's eyes is to replace love with happiness. Happiness is a romantic fantasy whereas actual love is a mess, involving pain and confrontation as well as quest and daring and growth. It's not as though movies can't be messy, but they refuse to.

Enter Giovanni, who tries and fails to explain this principle to David, if only through example. Giovanni's room, the novel's richest symbol from the title on, is characterized by extreme disorder, even chaos. In a moment of clarity, David describes it as “Giovanni's regurgitated life.”⁴² In other words, it is his depth, his soul, his disorganized but ever questing mind. David, occasionally referred to as “monsieur l'américain,” finds the surfaces of things much more captivating, just as Hollywood is reluctant to pursue the messy reality of lived experience, particularly the lived experience of African Americans.⁴³ As part two of *Giovanni's Room* begins, David says, “In the beginning, our life together held a joy and amazement which was newborn every day. Beneath the joy, of course, was anguish and beneath the amazement was fear.”⁴⁴ David is aware of the difference between surface and depth even as he looks on his lover's face, and he is scared of the depth: “the wide and beautiful brow began to suggest the skull beneath. The sensual lips turned inward, busy with the sorrow overflowing from his heart.”⁴⁵ David believes Giovanni's private room and the private sorrows of his heart and soul must be cleaned up or papered over. His personal mission is “to destroy this room and to give Giovanni a new and better life.”⁴⁶ He goes about cleaning the room and disposing of the clutter, but since the room is Giovanni's regurgitated life, he is unconsciously attempting to destroy

Giovanni, or at least the part that disturbs David. This is not love, of course, but an attempt to control and sanitize reality. In contrast to Giovanni's room is the brightly lit and squeaky clean American Express office where David goes to get his mail, and to get away from Giovanni and his filthy room. He notices that the American men gathered there "smelled of soap, which seemed indeed to be their preservative against the dangers and exigencies of any more intimate odor."⁴⁷ Although he distances himself from his countrymen, he is guilty of the exact same thing, which Giovanni states clearly when he tells him he cannot accept "the stink of love."

To return to *Devil*, section two translates the dynamic of a love affair to the state of race relations in the United States. Baldwin has drawn this parallel before, including in the famous conclusion to *The Fire Next Time*: "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 ... to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country" (emphasis mine).⁴⁸ True lovers, in Baldwin's world, have to work hard, and suffer, and commit. In the above passages, David refuses to do so, preferring to cling to the infantile inception of love that is only "joy and amazement which was newborn every day." So too Hollywood. Baldwin writes, "in order for a person to bear his life, he needs a valid re-creation of that life, which is why, as Ray Charles might put it, blacks chose to sing the blues."⁴⁹ Hollywood, in Baldwin's view, doesn't have the courage to produce such a valid recreation and instead produces and reproduces a counter reality, or mythology, or "legend"; he writes, "Even the most thoughtless, even the most deluded black person knows more about his life than the image he is offered as the justification of it."⁵⁰ Whereas the young Baldwin introduced in section one saw things on the screen and claimed, "I knew something about *that*," in this section he discusses what Black men know of reality and how they are disgusted by the distortions as rendered on the screen, distortions born of "cowardice," "sentimentality," "American self-evasion," and ultimately "the brutally limited lexicon of those who think of themselves as white, and imagine, therefore, that they control reality and rule the world."⁵¹ From the time of its publication, readers and critics of *Giovanni's Room* have been puzzled by the fact that it is not about American race relations, and it isn't, but these words make clear that it is about a similar social power dynamic. David doesn't run away from Giovanni just because he is conflicted about his own homosexual desire coupled with his ingrained homophobia: it is because he is cowardly and wants to cling to his facile, immature understanding of love as joyful and beautiful, without any pain, chaos, or "stink." Hollywood similarly constructs plots that resolve the sometimes painful and ugly struggle toward ending the racial nightmare without exploring the true depth of this struggle in the way the blues do.

And so, the lovers fight. Giovanni screams at David, "You do not ... love anyone! You never have loved anyone, I am sure you never will! You love your purity, you love your mirror ... You want to be *clean*."⁵² Baldwin screams a little less loudly, but just as effectively, at the end of his analysis of *In the Heat of the Night*:

nothing, alas, has been made possible by this obligatory, fade-out kiss, this preposterous adventure: except that white Americans have been encouraged to continue dreaming, and black Americans have been alerted to the necessity of waking up ... a black man, in any case, had certainly best not believe everything he sees in the movies.⁵³

The boy had been eager to believe it all; the man cautions about believing everything, but we sense that he is increasingly moving toward not believing anything he sees on the silver screen, not as long as Hollywood's motivations are like David's: self-serving, self-loving, and hopelessly distorted.

When love affairs end in Baldwin's work or his life, they tend to end with a blowout argument followed by permanent and painful separation. The spurned lover suffers and screams at the smug lover who refuses to change, and then he storms away. By 1976 Baldwin had settled into the only house he ever bought for himself, in Saint-Paul de Vence in southeastern France. His critics had long accused him of being out of touch with the volatile cultural changes in America, given his residence in Europe, and although he deflected such charges, his self-described "commutes" across the Atlantic were less frequent during the mid-1970s. He used the Joycean convention of concluding his published works with the cities in which they were composed. 1968's *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* ends "New York, San Francisco, Istanbul." The signature locations from 1972's *No Name in the Street* are "New York, San Francisco, Hollywood, London, Istanbul, St. Paul de Vence." But 1974's *If Beale Street Could Talk* and *The Devil Finds Work* both end with a single location abroad: Saint-Paul de Vence. His later works dispense with this publishing convention, though they were largely written in Saint-Paul. Beginning in the mid-1970s, for better or worse, he is declaring that he is an expatriate, perhaps even going so far as to identify as a European. It was a messy breakup, but he has once and for all left the American cities in which he partly composed his previous works, including one notable non-city, Hollywood, one of the listed locations where he wrote *No Name*.

The reason Baldwin breaks up with Hollywood and America is that he realizes Hollywood is too set in its ways to change even though he fights with all his energy to bring about such a change. He begins the third section of *Devil* by showing what happens when Hollywood attempts "controversial, courageous, revolutionary films" about the underground leaders Che Guevara and Malcolm X, which is an extension of what happens when it attempts films about race relations.⁵⁴ Because these films are "packaged for the consumer society," and thus more concerned with "action" and "entertainment" than with the truth, they lead Baldwin to conclude that he and the filmmaking industry have no future together: "I simply walked out."⁵⁵ Giovanni expresses the same sense of resignation during his final breakup scene with David: "'We will not fight any more,' he said. 'Fighting will not make you stay.'"⁵⁶ David steels himself to return to the heterosexual status quo of his life, and to return to America. When Giovanni prompts him about what he wants, he says, "I want to end this terrible scene."⁵⁷ And like his analog Hollywood,

he'll do everything in his power to make sure it ends up buried in some unopened canister in a locked archive.

Baldwin's love affair with the movies is decidedly over when the screenplay of Malcolm X's life he has been asked to write is thoroughly coopted and debased, or, to adopt the term he uses repeatedly to describe this misadventure, "translated."⁵⁸ What he witnesses during his excursion into the lion's mouth is an exercise of power, the power to reshape reality. He intercepts a memo circulated among the studio executives that clearly indicates that the film should emphasize that Malcolm "had been mistreated, early, by some whites, and betrayed (later) by *many* blacks: emphasis in the original."⁵⁹ Such an attempt to rewrite Baldwin's vision of the complex and highly important figure of Malcolm X is essentially an act of violence. "Translation" is a euphemism for abuse. He recognizes and calls out this violence when he analyzes *Lady Sings the Blues* (1972), the story of another Black culture hero, Billie Holiday, whose life is mistranslated when portrayed on the screen:

Now, obviously, the only way to translate the written word to the cinema involves doing considerable violence to the written word, to the extent, indeed, of forgetting the written word. A film is meant to be seen, and, ideally, the less a film talks, the better. The cinematic translation, nevertheless, however great and necessary the violence it is compelled to use on the original form, is obliged to remain faithful to the intention, and the vision, of the original form.⁶⁰

Cinematic translation is neither "faithful" nor "honest" in the way Billie Holiday was honest in her book.⁶¹ A lover who is neither faithful nor honest cannot be redeemed. But more: the silver screen has filtered out the essence of Holiday's "testimony," a word Baldwin chooses and emphasizes deliberately; he writes, "I repeat: her testimony, for that is what we are compelled to deal with, and respect, and whatever others may imagine themselves to know of these matters cannot compare with the testimony of the person who was there."⁶² Or, as Giovanni would say, "You have never loved anyone. I am sure you never will!"⁶³ For Baldwinian love ultimately involves recognition, respect, understanding, and knowledge. The violence of cinematic "translation" is just the opposite, the work of the devil.

Having loved and lost, Baldwin realizes that the so-called magic of the movies is actually the will to "control reality and rule the world."⁶⁴ Now that he has paid attention to the proverbial man behind the curtain, or "seen this machinery at such close quarters," he no longer finds it alluring, and indeed, considers it dangerous.⁶⁵ Translation in the context of what he calls "the American looking-glass" is a distortion; the magic we see on screen is actually a means of lying about reality and calling it a myth.⁶⁶ But Baldwin does not simply walk away and throw up his hands; rather, he returns to the concept of "revelation" that he learned from his physically and spiritually exhausting conversion experience in the church: "This moment changes one forever."⁶⁷ Revelation (as opposed to cinematic resolution) gives one the strength to sing the blues, and "to engage Satan in a battle which we knew could never end."⁶⁸ We recall that "battle" is one of the words Baldwin uses to define "love," and we realize that the love battle with Hollywood he has been

describing is meant to do precisely what he says revelation is to do: revelation is “the aim of the story,” the resolution of which “must occur in us, with what we make of the questions with which the story leaves us.” “Us”—readers of *The Devil Finds Work*—have just read a love story in the form of a Baldwin testimony rather than “pure bullshit Hollywood-American fable.”⁶⁹ It is only once we have stripped away the fables, distortions, myths, translations, and legends that Hollywood fashions out of America’s most damaging hierarchies that we can finally see self and other clearly, and here is Baldwin’s ultimate revelation: “To encounter oneself is to encounter the other: and this is love.”⁷⁰ The screen goes dark, the lights come up, the audience exhales. *Fin*.

Notes

- 1 Cassandra M. Ellis, “The Black Boy Looks at the Silver Screen,” in D. Quentin Miller (ed.), *Re-Viewing James Baldwin: Things Not Seen* (Philadelphia, PA, Temple University Press, 2000), p. 192.
- 2 Alice Mikal Craven, “Black Bodies on Screen, White Privilege in Hollywood: James Baldwin on Lang and Preminger,” in Alice Mikal Craven and William E. Dow (eds.), *Of Latitudes Unknown: James Baldwin’s Radical Imagination* (London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), pp. 15–31.
- 3 Jenny M. James, “A Long Way from Home: Baldwin in Provence,” in D. Quentin Miller (ed.), *James Baldwin in Context* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 72; Nicholas Boggs, “Of Mimicry and (Little Man, Little) Man,” in Dwight McBride (ed.), *James Baldwin Now* (New York, New York University Press, 1999), p. 135.
- 4 William Dow, “Reviewers, Critics, and Cranks,” in Miller (ed.), *James Baldwin in Context*, p. 296.
- 5 Jerry H. Bryant, “Review of *The Devil Finds Work* by James Baldwin,” *The Nation*, 3 July 1976, p. 27.
- 6 *Ibid.*, pp. 26, 27.
- 7 *Ibid.*, pp. 25, 27.
- 8 James Baldwin, “Stranger in the Village” (1953), in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York, Library of America, 1998), p. 129; James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (1963), in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, p. 347.
- 9 1975 is the year the text was completed, though it was published in 1976.
- 10 David Leeming, *James Baldwin* (New York, Knopf, 1994), p. 332.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 James Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work* (New York, Laurel/Dell, 1976), p. 115.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 24.
- 22 *Ibid.*, pp. 24, 25.

- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 *Ibid.*, pp. 30, 31, 15.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 35.
- 26 James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room* (1956) (New York, Vintage, 2013), p. 58.
- 27 *Ibid.*, pp. 60, 61.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 64.
- 29 James Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues" (1957), in *Early Novels and Stories*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York, Library of America, 1998), p. 841.
- 30 Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*, p. 34.
- 31 Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, p. 341; James Baldwin, *No Name in the Street* (1972), in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, p. 467.
- 32 Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*, p. 141.
- 33 Baldwin, *Devil*, p. 52.
- 34 *Ibid.*, pp. 88, 89.
- 35 *Ibid.*, p. 89.
- 36 *Ibid.*, pp. 50–1.
- 37 *Ibid.*, p. 50.
- 38 *Ibid.*, p. 53.
- 39 *Ibid.*, p. 67.
- 40 *Ibid.*
- 41 *Ibid.*
- 42 Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*, p. 87.
- 43 *Ibid.*, p. 52.
- 44 *Ibid.*, p. 75.
- 45 *Ibid.*
- 46 *Ibid.*
- 47 *Ibid.*, p. 90.
- 48 Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, pp. 346–7.
- 49 Baldwin, *Devil*, p. 73.
- 50 *Ibid.*, pp. 71–2.
- 51 *Ibid.*, pp. 75, 90, 91.
- 52 Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*, p. 141.
- 53 Baldwin, *Devil*, pp. 68–9.
- 54 *Ibid.*, p. 116.
- 55 *Ibid.*, pp. 116, 120.
- 56 *Ibid.*, p. 120; Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*, p. 143.
- 57 Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*, p. 142.
- 58 Baldwin, *Devil*, pp. 117, 118, 119.
- 59 *Ibid.*, p. 117.
- 60 *Ibid.*, p. 130.
- 61 *Ibid.*
- 62 *Ibid.*, p. 131.
- 63 Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*, p. 141.
- 64 Baldwin, *Devil*, p. 91.
- 65 *Ibid.*, p. 117.
- 66 *Ibid.*, p. 120.
- 67 *Ibid.*, pp. 138, 139.
- 68 *Ibid.*, p. 140.

69 *Ibid.*, p. 133.

70 *Ibid.*, p. 148.

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