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Reaching toward the Reader: James Baldwin's Voice in "Notes of a Native Son"

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Abstract

This article is a close analysis of Baldwin's voice in the essay "Notes of a Native Son." Much has been written about Baldwin's themes, but without his singular voice, the power of his works would not endure. Through his use of diction, repetition, alliteration and assonance, scene selection, and even punctuation, Baldwin provides the reader with a transformative experience by rendering his own experience accessible. The political and the personal are inextricable, a truth made unavoidable by the way Baldwin writes as much as by the subject he chooses. Examining how he crafts his voice allows us to understand more deeply the power of "Notes of a Native Son."

Keywords: James Baldwin, authorial voice, punctuation, close reading, rhetorical analysis, "Notes of a Native Son"

In “Notes of a Native Son” (1955), James Baldwin brilliantly renders for the reader two evolutions: his feelings for his father, which move from hatred to mourning, and his view of the reality of racism in America, which shifts from innocence to frightened acknowledgment. Much scholarly work has focused on this compelling essay, but, as William E. Dow has noted, there has been “a critical neglect of Baldwin’s aesthetics.”¹ Dow points to Douglas Field’s suggestion that “scholars no longer need to write about his critical neglect; the critical ground has been cleared, and it should make way for criticism that pays more attention to Baldwin’s style—to his formal qualities as poet, playwright, novelist, and essay writer.”² Following Dow and Field’s lead here, I argue in this article that the particular rhetorical strategies employed in “Notes of a Native Son” create an intimate, humanizing experience of evolving sentiment and understanding.

When I first read “Notes of a Native Son,” I understood in my heart, to the best of my ability as a white female reader, what Baldwin had experienced. I wanted to ferret out the rhetorical techniques he had used to affect me so profoundly. Michael Leff, in his seminal essay “Textual Criticism: The Legacy of G. P. Mohrmann,” stated that one “begins with a severely empirical orientation; the critic must attend to the elements contained within the text itself.”³ I read the essay five more times, marking words and punctuation, drilling into the mechanics of Baldwin’s triumph. But, as Leff noted:

Texts simply do not yield up their own rhetorical interpretation. Critics must move from what they perceive is given in the text to something they themselves produce—an account of the rhetorical dynamics implicit within it . . . Since this process necessarily entails principles or categories “not native to the original,” it requires an exercise of judgment at some level of abstraction, and it eventuates in something we might call theoretical understanding of the particular case.⁴

Underpinning my theoretical understanding is my perception that Baldwin wants to give the reader an intimate, humanizing experience. His rhetorical choices reflect that motivation. Alice Mikal Craven characterizes Baldwin’s response in “Many Thousands Gone” to Richard Wright’s *Native Son* as a criticism of perspective. Wright was not able to depict a Black man in America sufficiently in Baldwin’s view, because Wright was, like Bigger Thomas, “trapped by an unrewarding rage which prevent[ed] him from voicing his concerns about the social conditions in America more productively.”⁵ The Wright reader’s view, therefore, could only be of the Black man as “debased.”⁶ “This dehumanization of the African American” was, according to Craven, one of Baldwin’s core criticisms of Wright.⁷

In “Many Thousands Gone,” Baldwin posited that if

no American Negro exists who does not have his private Bigger Thomas living in his skull, then what most significantly fails to be illuminated here is the paradoxical adjustment which is perpetually made, the Negro being compelled to accept the fact that this dark and dangerous and unloved stranger is part of himself forever.⁸

Craven asserts that Baldwin is here “laying the groundwork for later themes.”⁹ I would add to this viewpoint that Baldwin is also signaling his intention to employ rhetorical choices that will support those themes. Baldwin wanted to write in a way that would humanize the Black man in America for a white reader. He also wanted to provide a recognizable perspective for a Black reader and a way to live with Bigger “in his skull.” To go beyond what he perceived as Wright’s limiting perspective, he therefore needed to present himself as intimately as possible.

What provides this intimacy is Baldwin’s voice, which, through many authorial choices, conveys the narrator’s personality and inner workings and establishes a rapport with the reader. Baldwin employs diction, the repetition of phrases and words, alliteration, syntax, scene selection, and displays of empathy to create a voice that is mournful and reflective, regretful and angry, preaching and convincing, and, ultimately, searching. The reader can observe an attitudinal evolution about racism in the narrator and possibly experience that same evolution, whether the effects of prejudice are, as for a white reader, foreign, or, as for a Black reader, all too familiar. We are also given the intimate experience of the narrator’s emotional evolution as his feelings for his father change following his father’s death, which regardless of race, teaches the reader something about love. Both narratives are complicated to write, because both are interior and rooted in emotion. The interiority of these stories means the voice of the narrator is integral to their success.

Baldwin opens with an incredible confluence of facts:

On the 29th of July, in 1943, my father died. On the same day, a few hours later, his last child was born. Over a month before this, while all our energies were concentrated in waiting for these events, there had been in Detroit, one of the bloodiest race riots of the century. A few hours after my father’s funeral, while he lay in state in the undertaker’s chapel, a race riot broke out in Harlem. On the morning of the 3rd of August, we drove my father to the graveyard through a wilderness of smashed plate glass.

The day of my father’s funeral had also been my nineteenth birthday.¹⁰

What the reader gathers from this opening about the narrator is that he is going to be truthful. He establishes credibility through specific time markers and events, so we are grounded in time and place at the start. The reader also registers that the narrator is not self-aggrandizing, because his own birthday comes at the end of the list of relevant events. The narrator here begins claiming his father with the possessive “my,” but we are also made aware there are others in the picture through his use of the first-person plural possessive and the first-person plural nominative: “our energies,” “we drove.” Because “my father” repeats fifty-four times in the piece, changing only once to “our father,” the reader knows this is about the narrator’s view, not necessarily the view of all nine children who claim this man as father. We intuit that the narrator understands there are other views, and the one he presents is his alone. The identifier “my father” also underscores that the conflict is between the narrator and his father. The reader is thus oriented to this

father's importance to the narrative by the use of the possessive and the repetition of the phrase.

In the second paragraph, the narrator tells us:

As we drove him to the graveyard, the spoils of injustice, anarchy, discontent, and hatred were all around us. It seemed to me that God himself had devised, to mark my father's end, the most sustained and brutally dissonant of codas. And it seemed to me, too, that the violence which rose all about us as my father left the world had been devised as a corrective for the pride of his eldest son. I had declined to believe in that apocalypse which had been central to my father's vision; very well, life seemed to be saying, here is something that will certainly pass for an apocalypse until the real thing comes along. I had inclined to be contemptuous of my father for the conditions of his life, for the conditions of our lives. When his life had ended I began to wonder about that life and also, in a new way, to be apprehensive about my own.¹¹

We are hereby prepared for both narratives from the outset. The narrator tells us he had declined to agree with his father, but in this early paragraph he is setting out the possibility that in the pages to come he will revisit that belief: "I began to wonder about that life." The race riot with its attendant horrors is woven in and has created in the narrator apprehension about his own life. The reader is enticed and wants to understand the connection, how these two threads will intertwine. We also understand from this opening that the narrator is religious and that he is self-aware, that he is prideful and knows this is a flaw. We see a bit of humor in his personification of life as joking with the narrator about sending a semi-apocalypse. This humor adds to the narrator's appeal. The reader additionally discerns from the beginning that the narrator is an educated, intelligent person, demonstrated by his language choices: "brutally dissonant codas," "devised as a corrective." We have the promise in the first two paragraphs that we can rely on the narrator, expect him to provide us with an intelligent discourse about his father and about race, lighten things with flickers of humor, and that he will be willing to share himself with us. We want to read more.

After these initial paragraphs, the reader enters the first section of the essay, which contains the narrator's description of his father. In this section, the voice shifts from assertive clarity based in facts and revealing self-assessments to one of description underlined with acknowledgment of the narrator's inability to know the full truth. This section sets out the narrator's hatred of his father during his childhood and, through the insertion of doubt via the word choices, makes possible our belief in the narrator's evolution to the more nuanced and accepting feelings he has for his father at the end of the essay. Because the narrator telegraphs this cloudiness around his feelings of hatred through the verbs and adjectives he uses, when a different attitude emerges, we can believe the evolution. We sense in the language that the narrator's view of his father is subject to change.

The section starts with the narrator's admission, "I had not known my father very well ... When he was dead I realized that I had hardly ever spoken to him.

When he had been dead a long time I began to wish I had.”¹² That the narrator “began to wish [he] had” points to the future outcome, the movement toward resolution of this hatred. Baldwin omits commas after some introductory clauses and thereby creates a flow in his language, enhancing the conversational tone and feel of the sentences. His syntax also suggests a mind at work, one that begins with thinking something, then adds to it, then adds something more, a qualifier or more information about the preceding clause. This sentence works well as an example: “He had been ill a long time—in the mind, as we now realized, reliving instances of his fantastic intransigence in the new light of his affliction and endeavoring to feel a sorrow for him which never, quite, came true.”¹³ To break this down:

“He had been ill a long time”: Factual statement.

“in the mind”: More information about the first clause, description of the type of illness.

“as we now realized”: Additional information, when the family found out.

“reliving instances of his fantastic intransigence in the new light of his affliction”: Additional information, what the family did with the new knowledge.

“and endeavoring to feel a sorrow for him”: What the family wanted to feel after receiving the new information.

“which never”: The outcome of those attempts.

“quite”: The outcome qualified from “never” to “almost.”

“came true”: Adds depth to the description of the family’s desire. They wanted to feel it, but it was like a wish that wouldn’t come true.

In the hands of a lesser writer, this sentence might have been: “My father was diagnosed with paranoia, and when we later learned this is what had affected his behavior, we wanted to feel compassion for him, but we couldn’t get past the horrors we had suffered at his hands.” This translated sentence is clear, but it lacks the rhythm of thought. Baldwin’s sentence, in contrast, is an invitation to view his mental circuitry. It is one of the ways Baldwin creates intimacy with the reader.

Throughout this section, the narrator’s voice is striving, as if he is telling himself that his view of his father is the truth, but the reader perceives an undercurrent of uncertainty. “No one, including my father, seems to have known exactly how old he was.”¹⁴ “From what I was able to gather of his early life, it seemed that this inability to establish contact with other people had always marked him.”¹⁵ The narrator thus tells the reader he is gathering information, cobbling together these facts about his father that he thinks are true. He describes his father physically as “handsome, proud, and ingrown, ‘like a toe-nail,’ somebody said.”¹⁶ By quoting someone, even a nameless someone, the narrator lends credibility to his characterization. Further evidence of the narrator’s attempt at accuracy comes in the phrasing “yet it must be said that there was something else in him, buried in him, which lent him his tremendous power and, even, a rather crushing charm.”¹⁷ By inserting “yet it must be said,” the narrator wants the reader to feel he is trying to be balanced. The narrator tells us, “He could be chilling in the pulpit and indescribably cruel in his personal life and he was certainly the most bitter man I have ever met.”¹⁸ “Certainly” tells us the narrator

means it, but in persuasive language, like the language of lawyers, “certainly” is often used when the thing described is not actually certain.

The narrator deploys the word “never” in this section twelve times, more than anywhere else in the essay. “Never” conveys certitude of the negative and creates in the reader a feeling of darkness, because in this section it is used to express that not once did a thing happen, the happening of which would otherwise have been a positive thing. These excerpts illustrate the narrator’s use of “never,” as well as other extreme descriptors:

My father never mentioned Louis Armstrong, except to forbid us to play his records.¹⁹

... all these things sometimes showed in his face when he tried, never to my knowledge with any success, to establish contact with any of us.²⁰

There was something in him, therefore, groping and tentative, which was never expressed and which was buried with him. One saw it most clearly when he was facing new people and hoping to impress them. But he never did, not for long.²¹

He used to make little jokes about our poverty, which never, of course, seemed very funny to us; they could not have seemed very funny to him, either, or else our all too feeble response to them would never have caused such rages.²²

When he took one of the children on his knee to play, the child always because fretful and began to cry; when he tried to help one of us with our homework the absolutely unabating tension which emanated from him caused our minds and our tongues to become paralyzed, so that he, scarcely knowing why, flew into a rage and the child, not knowing why, was punished.²³

Human behavior is rarely consistently of one sort rather than another. People are complicated mixtures of good and bad. The narrator’s words in this section about his father suggest fixedness and certitude, the repetition of the negative, the vague justifications—“someone said,” “something in him”—and the use of extreme adjectives—“absolutely unabating”—and adverbs—“always”—convey to the reader that this portrait is filtered through the narrator’s unwavering sensation of hostility toward his father. The reader does not doubt that the hostility has been earned, because the reader believes in the narrator, but we also are not surprised at the end when there is an evolution away from what we perceived earlier to be an absolute-filled stance.

We notice that the narrator has some ability to empathize with his father, which supports his later emotional evolution. The narrator indicates that his father in his paranoia hated all nine of his children, because they “betrayed him too by reaching towards the world which had despised him.”²⁴ The narrator states, “I began to wonder what it could have felt like for such a man to have had nine children whom he could barely feed.”²⁵ The narrator here reveals himself as capable of putting himself in his father’s place and of wondering about his emotional state. The narrator’s ability to show empathy for his father, who is otherwise portrayed so negatively, keeps

us on his side. He shows this side again when he comments about his white teacher's visit with his father prior to her taking the narrator to the theater: he "had no way of knowing that [his father] was facing in that living room a wholly unprecedented and frightening situation."²⁶ We see empathy in the narrator for other people as well. In the restaurant scene, he says of his friend, "Heaven only knows what was going on in his mind, but he had the good sense not to touch me"; and of his aunt on their train ride to see his father on his deathbed, he comments, "She wrangled with me because she could not bear to face the fact of her brother's dying."²⁷ These intimate moments of empathy increase our liking of the narrator and our faith in his assessments, because we can trust him to see beyond himself.

Though the narrator uses the singular possessive to refer to his father extensively, he expands it to the first-person plural in the section describing his father. The narrator wants to persuade the reader that his father was like this with all his children, so that his feelings are corroborated by what he perceives to be the feelings of others: "when he tried to help one of us," "our minds and our tongues," "which never, of course, seemed very funny to us."²⁸

The negative attitude of the narrator in connection with his father is underscored as well by the use of adjectives modified by adverbs and adverbs modified by adjectives: "indescribably cruel," "most bitter," "rather crushing," "outrageously demanding," "absolutely unabating," "almost unflinching," "most appalling," "most clearly," "more improbable," "unimaginably close," "almost always," "vindictively polite," and "almost ludicrously."²⁹ Though Baldwin employs this description technique elsewhere in the piece, he uses it the most in this section about his father. His intense hatred inspires an inflation of his descriptors. The effect on the reader is that we feel the intensity as well.

Baldwin employs repetition to weave the piece together and to remind the reader at a subconscious level of prior emotions elicited in earlier moments of the essay. He does this within sections, in addition to calling back to the beginning from the end of the essay. He thereby recreates in the reader's reactions the arc of the evolution of his own emotions and ideas. In the opening paragraphs, the narrator uses the phrases "we drove my father to the graveyard" and "as we drove him to the graveyard," and several long paragraphs into the section describing his father, the narrator states, "He had lived and died in an intolerable bitterness of spirit and it frightened me, as we drove him to the graveyard through those unquiet, ruined streets, to see how powerful and overflowing this bitterness could be and to realize that this bitterness now was mine."³⁰ This is the answer to the second paragraph's hint about the narrator's apprehension—"in a new way, to be apprehensive about my own"; this bitterness is what makes the narrator afraid for himself, and the use of the repeating phrase "as we drove him to the graveyard" reminds the reader of the opening and the question that was set up there for which we wanted an answer.³¹

Baldwin's syntax shifts to simple sentences without qualifiers when he arrives at a major point. Sometimes, these are preceded by a colon.

... discovered the secret of his proudly pursed lips and rigid carriage. I had discovered the weight of white people in the world.³²

That was all we said. It was awful to remember that was all we *ever* said.³³

... for Harlem had needed something to smash. To smash something is the ghetto's chronic need.³⁴

This was his legacy: nothing was ever escaped.³⁵

The reader pays attention to these simple sentences. They follow, or are set within, the more typical syntax of Baldwin, which is a sentence broken into segments of qualifiers surrounded by commas. The clarity of the simple sentences punctuates the narrator's train of thought, as if to say, here is the conclusion of the mental journey we just went on together.

In the second section of the essay, the narrator tells the story of how he experienced racism himself, which he previously had declined to accept as a valid source for his father's bitterness. The narrator, while living in New Jersey and working in the defense factories, learns about "the weight of white people in the world." Here, he discovers the Bigger Thomas in his skull:

I first contracted some, dread chronic disease, the unfailing symptoms of which is a kind of blind fever, a pounding in the skull and fire in the bowels. Once this disease is contracted, one can never be really carefree again, for the fever, without an instant's warning, can recur at any moment ... There is not a Negro alive who does not have this rage in his blood.³⁶

He then depicts the events that awakened this disease in a section describing a night out with a white friend in New Jersey. The rendering of that evening is one of two parts of the essay—the other being the narrator's thoughts during the funeral scene—in which Baldwin's narrative voice conveys an immediacy and intimate experience to the reader, such that the white reader potentially is altered by the reading of it and, one posits, the Black reader, through identification, feels fully recognized as human.

The voice changes in this section to one more lyrical and poetic than previously used in the essay. First, as was true in the opening of the essay, the narrator gives us facts, again providing orientation in time and space, as well as lending credibility to the forthcoming story. The narrator remembers "almost every detail" of that night in Trenton, New Jersey: the name of the movie he saw, the actors who were in it, the movie's plot, and the fact that they went to the ironically named "American Diner," where the narrator is told by the server, "We don't serve Negroes here."³⁷ Baldwin uses this phrase to great effect in this part, repeating it in the section three times, so that it becomes almost an incantation that the narrator, and therefore, the reader, hears throughout the events of this section, as well as through to the end of the essay because it becomes imprinted in the mind. He also uses another repeating phrase as an echo. As he leaves the diner where he has been refused service, he tells us, "And I felt, like a physical sensation, a *click* at the nape of my

neck,” and later when he is at the fancy restaurant, after he throws a mug at the waitress, a man grabs him “by the nape of the neck,” as one would an animal.³⁸ These repeating phrases provide lyricism to the story.

The narrator vividly describes the scene as he enters the street after leaving the diner, recreating for us what he terms “a nightmare”: “People were moving in every direction but it seemed to me, in that instant, that all of the people I could see, and many more than that, were moving toward me, against me, and that everyone was white. I remember how their faces gleamed.”³⁹ The reader can see this scene, knows what it is like to be in a vast crowd, and understands from the description that the narrator is in an altered state. His friend does not dare touch him, and the narrator tells us this was a good thing, because he was out of his mind and might have hurt him. Then, as he continues to walk the street, wanting to crush the white people around him, he comes to “an enormous, glittering, and fashionable restaurant in which I knew not even the intercession of the Virgin would cause me to be served.”⁴⁰ Here we have a flicker of humor. We are aligned with this narrator; we know how he is. He can be funny even when things are dark. The restaurant is enormous and sparkling, and Baldwin connects it to the gleaming white faces through the repeated “gl” sound in “glittering.” It is a forbidden, yet alluring, promised land.

After the scene shifts to the elegant restaurant, Baldwin employs alliteration and assonance liberally. In the following paragraph, we find alliteration and assonance, as well as rhyme. We hear a succession of words beginning with “w” and “f”:

I do not know how long I waited and I rather wonder until today, what I could possibly have looked like. Whatever I looked like, I frightened the waitress who shortly appeared, and the moment she appeared all of my fury flowed to her. I hated her for her white face, and for her great, astounded, frightened eyes. I felt that if she found a black man so frightening I would make her fright worth-while.⁴¹

Because the emphasis here is on “w,” the reader may recall the earlier, simple statement, “I had discovered the weight of white people in the world,” also alliterative with “w” sounds. We may also remember the prior use of the word “frightened” from the narrator’s statement: “He had lived and died in an intolerable bitterness of spirit and it frightened me.”⁴² In this restaurant story, the narrator shows the reader how he came to understand his father’s bitterness and why the narrator has reason to be frightened of white people. The emphasis on these words and letters is a further lyrical weaving of words and sounds in the essay, providing continuity as well as echoes for the reader, which, while not explicitly spelled out in a didactic way in Baldwin’s prose, have an impact on the reader’s experience.

Assonance is also part of this paragraph in the long “a” sounds of “waited” and “waitress,” the long “i” sounds of “white” and “frightened,” the short “a” sounds of “what,” “appeared,” and “whatever,” and the short “o” sounds of “how,” “long,” and “wonder.” Baldwin also repeats words within this section, which adds to the flow

of the sentences and the connection between them: “looked like,” “frightened,” “appeared,” and “for her,” all repeat twice in a rhythmic way.

In the last two lines of this paragraph, the reader hears a rhyme and feels a rhythm, which, if set forth as poetry, might look like this:

I hated her for her white face,
 And for her great, astounded, frightened eyes.
 I felt that if she found a black man
 So frightening
 I would make her fright worth-while.

We understand the fury he feels, because he so well expresses his emotions with these simple lines, and the rhyme and the rhythm add depth to those feelings and sweep us further into the moment of it. In this section, Baldwin’s voice allows a white reader to understand his personal experience, to be able to feel what he felt, and by providing us the experience of racism, the absurdity of it, the rejection of it, we feel the anger too. For a Black reader, this well-rendered depiction may allow for self-recognition and a validation of what’s “inside his skull.” At this point in the essay, we have come to know the narrator as a person, we have related to the narrator. He is real to us. This is a powerful scene, but Baldwin does not open the essay with it. He wants us to be aligned with him by the time we get to it, so that the power of it can be more deeply, intimately felt.

We also find alliteration and consonance in this sentence in the words beginning with, and containing, the letter “r”: “Somehow, with the repetition of that phrase, which was already ringing in my head like a thousand bells of a nightmare, I realized that she would never come any closer and that I would have to strike from a distance.”⁴³ Again, this adds to the mesmerizing flow of the words, particularly as it references “We don’t serve Negroes here,” and draws the reader into the moment, causing that phrase to ring in our ears too.

In the final part of the restaurant scene, the voice shifts to short action phrases, which heighten the energy of the moment when the narrator comes out of his nightmare trance:

There was nothing on the table but an ordinary water-mug half full of water, and I picked this up and hurled it with all my strength at her. She ducked and it missed her and shattered against the mirror behind the bar. And with that sound, my frozen blood abruptly thawed, and I returned from wherever I had been, I saw for the first time, the restaurant, the people with their mouths open, already, as it seemed to me, rising as one man, and I realized what I had done, and where I was, and I was frightened. I rose and began running for the door. A round potbellied man grabbed me by the nape of the neck just as I reached the doors and began to beat me about the face. I kicked him and got loose and ran into the streets. My friend whispered, “Run!” and I ran.⁴⁴

These action verbs convey urgency, and Baldwin achieves his goal. We are right there with the narrator, running for our lives. We understand intimately what he

felt, and we empathize and sympathize with his closing assessment of himself after this experience: "I had been ready to commit murder. I saw nothing very clearly but I did see this: that my life, my *real* life, was in danger, and not from anything other people might do but from the hatred I carried in my own heart."⁴⁵ The colon signifies the importance of the summary statement. The reader must, if this essay is to succeed as Baldwin intends, understand the narrator's problem from the inside, because it is the weight of this new understanding that is the crux of the narrator's issue. This experience in the restaurant is at the core of the bitterness in his heart, and its resolution or, rather, the problem it creates of a need for resolution, is a burden that must be solved or borne by him and by us.

In the essay's second section, the narrator describes the state of Harlem immediately preceding the riot that occurred just after his father's funeral and before the burial in the graveyard. He describes himself and his family as waiting for the birth of his sister and the death of his father. He links this to Harlem as being in a state of waiting as well, with people not cursing or laughing, as was usual, and with people in diverse groups, churchgoers mixing with street women, older men and disreputable "race" men, and "their stance seemed to indicate that they had all, incredibly, seen a common vision, and on each face there seemed to be the same strange, bitter shadow."⁴⁶ They receive "bitter letters" from the young men stationed in the South, and everyone feels a "hopeless bitterness."⁴⁷ The use of the word "bitter" here is another repetition from earlier in the essay and ties the theme of racism to a father whom the narrator repeatedly describes as bitter.

The narrator injects some humorous comments. About his sister in utero who is late to be born: "I understood her perfectly and congratulated her on showing such good sense so soon." About his journey by train with his aunt to visit his father for the last time: "We traveled out to him ... to what seemed to be the very end of a very Long Island."⁴⁸ Later, in the final section, he provides some levity about the funeral: "When planning a birthday celebration one naturally does not expect that it will be up against competition from a funeral," and "nor, since there were no overwhelming, uncontrollable expressions of grief, could it be called—if I dare to use the word—successful."⁴⁹ These comments continue to make the narrator appealing to the reader, as well as lightening an otherwise unrelentingly dark and mournful story.

The funeral scene is the emotional heart of the essay. In this section the narrator goes through a radical reconciling and release of his hatred for his father. In the restaurant scene, Baldwin depicts a nightmare through lyrical language, alliteration, and rhyme, and the reader feels as though she had lived through it. In the funeral scene, Baldwin also gives the reader an emotional experience, but he employs different techniques. The restaurant scene is one of action. The funeral scene is one of introspection. Thus, the voice must be different.

Baldwin reveals the narrator's evolution through an intense internal monologue. It begins as the narrator listens to the preacher's eulogy, which presents to those gathered a man who is not like the man the narrator knew. The narrator comments with respect to the generous picture of his father sketched by the preacher: "And no

doubt the children, in their disturbed and guilty state, were almost ready to believe this; he had been remote enough to be anything and, anyway, the shock of the incontrovertible, that it was really our father lying up there in that casket, prepared the mind for anything.”⁵⁰ The narrator has not referred to his father before using the first-person plural possessive, but here he does, because he too is one of the children, he too thinks of his father as remote enough to be anything, and he too must recognize that his father is dead. “The real man, whoever he had been, had suffered and now he was dead: this was all that was sure and all that mattered now.”⁵¹ He says these things as if he is speaking of his siblings’ thoughts and of those of the other attendees at the funeral, but the reader knows he is also reflecting the truth about himself through this intimate assessment.

As the narrator reaches the moment of understanding his father is truly gone, the narrative voice shifts to the language of a preacher, and it is this shift that signals the importance of the passage.⁵² During his earlier teenage years, the narrator was a preacher like his father, though this bit of information is not given to the reader until some paragraphs later. However, if the reader is reading this essay in the context of the collected essays, then they may have learned about the narrator’s teenage preaching in the “Autobiographical Notes” that open the collection: “When I was fourteen I became a preacher, and when I was seventeen I stopped.”⁵³ When a twenty-first-century reader reads this passage in the essay in isolation from the collection, we know that the narrator’s father was a preacher and that the narrator had been listening to his father’s sermons all of his life. We know it is not the preacher at the funeral saying these things, but it is natural that the narrator, as he listens to the language of the preacher, shifts his own language to the same register. We are still, as we have been the entire essay, in the narrator’s mind.

Baldwin does an amazing thing here. We are inside the narrator’s thoughts as they shift to become what the narrator imagines would be his father’s sermon about his own parenting. These words contain what the narrator thinks his father thought about the problem of racism and about the problem of raising Black, menaced children. The narrator shows compassion for his father as he imagines these feelings within the sermon and, in so doing, resolves his long-held hatred.

Taking this passage line by line reveals the depth of Baldwin’s crafted voice: “Every man in the chapel hoped that when his hour came he, too, would be eulogized, which is to say forgiven, and that all of his lapses, greeds, errors, and strays from the truth would be invested with coherence and looked upon with charity.”⁵⁴ The narrator is thinking about every man here, how each of us wants forgiveness for our human failings after we have died. The voice is the narrator’s voice that we have heard throughout the essay constructed with qualifiers and explanations. This thought inspires him toward the idea of applying this forgiveness to his father: “This was perhaps the last thing human beings could give each other and it was what they demanded, after all, of the Lord.”⁵⁵ The narrator has accepted his father is dead and knows he has one thing left that he can give his father: a charitable, empathetic assessment. The reference to sinners asking forgiveness from the Lord is what triggers the narrator to shift to take on the voice

of a preacher. “Only the Lord saw the midnight tears, only He was present when one of His children, moaning and wringing hands, paced up and down the room.”⁵⁶ This sentence could well be two sentences but by separating them with a comma—“tears, only”—Baldwin is recreating preacher-style speaking and he is using the capitalization that signals he is referring to God, as his preacher father would have, when he uses the male pronoun and the male possessive. “His children” refers not to his father’s children but to those who serve God. He also here uses lyrical speech—“midnight tears”—and church imagery—“moaning and wringing hands.” The reader is not sure yet who is pacing and crying in the middle of the night. It could be the narrator, it could be any man, it could be Baldwin’s father. Though we know we are in the narrator’s thoughts, we do not yet understand what is happening.

“When one slapped one’s child in anger the recoil in the heart reverberated through heaven and became part of the pain of the universe.”⁵⁷ Here is the point at which the reader becomes aware the narrator is not the actor in this, because we do not know of any children born to the narrator. We suspect that the narrator is imagining his father, as his father might have sermonized his own actions in the eyes of the Lord. The narrator imbues his father with regret at causing him pain when he slapped him as a child, and, in beautiful language, suggests that his father recoiled inside and that it “reverberated through heaven and became part of the pain of the universe.” This sentence simultaneously displays the narrator’s working his way toward forgiving his father, as well as acknowledging how deep his pain is over how his father treated him. We may recall his prior psychological observation during the deathbed scene: “I imagine that one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, that they will be forced to deal with pain.”⁵⁸ In acknowledging that his pain is part of the universal pain, the narrator is expanding his heart and his charity beyond his father, to a point and place where the world as it is can exist, and the narrator can accept it.

And when the children were hungry and sullen and distrustful and one watched them, daily, growing wilder, and further away, and running headlong into danger, it was the Lord who knew what the charged heart endured as the strap was laid to the backside; the Lord alone who knew what one *would* have said if one had had, like the Lord, the gift of the living word.⁵⁹

The narrator imagines what it was like for his father to have hungry children who “reached toward the world.”⁶⁰ This sentence is that prior hint at empathy in full bloom. He re-characterizes his father as wanting to keep the children out of danger by using the strap and that his “charged heart endured” something while administering the whipping. He gives a reason for the beatings that is not malicious, one which he had not previously considered. Baldwin italicizes *would* because it recreates the emphasis on that word that a preacher might give it through the raising of the voice. The reader can imagine a preacher slapping the podium at that moment.

It was the Lord who knew of the impossibility every parent in that room faced: how to prepare the child for the day when the child would be despised and how to *create* in the child—by what means?—a stronger antidote to this poison than one had found for oneself.⁶¹

Baldwin emphasizes *create* in the style of preacher rhythm, another slap against the podium at the pulpit. The narrator's insertion of the question "by what means," set off by em dashes, alerts us that the narrator's own words are beginning to take back over the flow of his father's imagined sermon. This phrase interrupts the imagined sentence, which, without the phrase, is still sermonic. This question is the central issue for the narrator that he delves into more deeply at the end of the essay. And again, the narrator shows empathy for his father's world view here and explains, from his father's viewpoint, why he behaved as he did toward his children. His father had encountered the poison of racism—and the narrator understands that poison from his own experience in the restaurant—and because of it, his father had tried to harden his children. But the narrator asks whether those means were the right means, whether beatings were the answer, and whether there are any means at all to achieve the sought outcome.

The avenues, side streets, bars, billiard halls, hospitals, police stations, and even the playgrounds of Harlem—not to mention the houses of correction, the jails, and the morgue—testified to the potency of the poison while remaining silent as to the efficacy of whatever antidote, irresistibly raising the question of whether or not such an antidote existed; raising, which was worse, the question of whether or not an antidote was desirable; perhaps poison should be fought with poison.⁶²

Now the narrator returns to his own voice and reasoning. The Lord is not referenced here, and the diction is no longer styled as a sermon. Rather, we hear the narrator's voice only, which previously discussed "the bars, bowling alleys, diners, places to live" as infected with racism in New Jersey.⁶³ He observes, "With these several schisms in the mind and with more terrors in the heart than could be named, it was better not to judge the man who had gone down under an impossible burden."⁶⁴ The opening phrase refers to the narrator's state of mind and heart, and he reaches the conclusion that his father carried an impossible burden, that of raising his children in racist America. No wonder he "had gone down" under this burden. He understands how his father could fail as a parent now that he too understands the racism in the world. Here, then, is the meeting of the two narratives: "It was better to remember: *Thou knowest this man's fall; but thou knowest not his wrassling.*"⁶⁵ And with this final statement, set off by a colon and italicized to emphasize its importance, the narrator acknowledges he must keep in his mind and heart that he can never know with what his father wrestled, and this leads him to set aside his judgment of him. And the reader can see that the narrator's heart and understanding has expanded beyond his father, that the narrator has in his capacity empathy for every man. This section prepares the reader for the emotional breakthrough that takes place in the next paragraph.

The narrator, upon hearing one of his father's favorite songs played at the funeral, is abruptly shifted into memories of his father when the narrator was much younger. These memories are told in a lyrical voice, with "I had forgotten" repeating twice and "I remembered" repeating twice. This part ends on a regretful note, after the recounting of a very brief exchange between the father and the son, with the father asking if the son prefers to write instead of preach, and the son answering affirmatively. The narrator tells us, "That was all we said. It was awful to remember that that was all we had *ever* said."⁶⁶ We know from this that the narrator's hatred is resolved. He is regretful that his conversations with his father are forever over. When the narrator views his father in the casket, he is no longer a giant, and the evolution that started at the deathbed is fully realized in this moment: "He was simply an old man dead."⁶⁷

In the final section of the essay, the narrator views the damage of the Harlem riot. The setting, as well as the words and images, tie us back to the beginning. He thinks of his father "as we drove him to his resting place," echoing the opening paragraph's use of this phrase. He reminds us of his own prideful ways, also referenced in the opening paragraphs: "I had preached it once myself, proudly giving it an interpretation different from my father's."⁶⁸ He comments, "That bleakly memorable morning I hated the unbelievable streets and the Negroes and whites who had, equally, made them that way," calling back to the description of his father's life in the first section of the essay: "His blackness ... had fixed bleak boundaries to his life."⁶⁹ We are also reminded of the connection between the two narratives, his father's bitterness and consequential failure as a father due to the prejudice in his life, and the problem of racism that the narrator now confronts in his own life and the world: "But I knew that it was folly, as my father would have said, this bitterness was folly. It was necessary to hold on to the things that mattered ... Hatred, which could destroy so much, never failed to destroy the man who hated and this was an immutable law."⁷⁰

The narrator's assertion that "as my father would have said, this bitterness was folly" suggests an insight drawn from the fact that life ends: his father, having died, knows now what matters and what does not.⁷¹ "The dead man mattered, the new life mattered; blackness and whiteness did not matter" is the truth about life the narrator has learned from the loss of his father.⁷² We are reminded of the funeral scene in which the narrator thought, "He was dead: this was all that was sure and all that mattered now."⁷³ The resolution of that hatred at the funeral has led the narrator to the conclusion that hate hurts the hater, and his new awareness of mortality means he should not cling to bitterness lest his life be like that of his father.

The voice here is assertive and directive. Baldwin wants the reader, both white and Black, to take this in and hold onto it.

It began to seem that one would have to hold in the mind forever two ideas which seemed to be in opposition. The first idea was acceptance, the acceptance, totally without rancor, of life as it is, and men as they are: in the light of this idea, it goes without saying that injustice is a commonplace. But this did not mean that one could be complacent, for the second idea was of equal power: that one must never, in one's own life, accept these injustices as commonplace but must fight them with all one's strength. This

fight begins, however, in the heart and it now had been laid to my charge to keep my own heart free of hatred and despair. This intimation made my heart heavy and, now that my father was irrecoverable, I wished that he had been beside me so that I could have searched his face for the answers which only the future would give me now.⁷⁴

The narrator's voice is not full of qualifiers. He has reached a heavy clarity about people. The world and the people who occupy it are as they are, but accepting this should not, he tells the reader, produce personal passivity about the injustice it contains. The narrator employs directive language: "acceptance, totally without rancor," "one must never, in one's own life," and "must fight them with all one's strength."

We are told "this fight begins ... in the heart" and the narrator's "charge" is to keep his "free of hatred and despair." The use of the word "charge" echoes the father's "charged heart" in the funeral scene. The narrator saw what bitterness did to his father's heart, and he does not want it to be his inheritance. We are reminded thereby of the great evolution that took place in the heart of the narrator, freeing him from hatred to find acceptance of his father. We know from that evolution that the narrator may have the capacity to manage his life differently, to not live an embittered life as his father had. The voice remains intimately truthful with us. Baldwin does not give us a shiny ending. He keeps the tone clear, assertive, and realistic by leaving open the question of what the racist world may show to the narrator and whether he will be able to manage it. He closes with the narrator yearning for answers. And in this yearning is an acknowledgment of what the reader carries, that, like the narrator, they too shoulder this burden of the racist world.

And yet Baldwin reaches toward all readers with hope. Through the voice of the narrator, he has shown us so intimately his own evolution toward love that we can believe he can meet the undecided future, that his heart is capable. And because of Baldwin's choices in creating his voice, we have experienced what the narrator experienced. He is no Bigger Thomas; he is wholly human. We know, because Baldwin has made it real for us, the burden of prejudice, the destructive power of hatred, and, here at the end, the freedom that comes from emptying our own heart of bitterness. Experiencing "Notes of a Native Son" leaves us with hope for ourselves.

Notes

- 1 William E. Dow, "Journeys of the 'I' in James Baldwin's Literary-Journalistic Essays," in Alice Mikal Craven and William E. Dow (eds.), *Of Latitudes Unknown* (New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), p. 127 n. 4.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 128 n. 7.
- 3 Michael Leff, "Textual Criticism: The Legacy of G. P. Mohrmann," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 72:4 (1986), 378.
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 Alice Mikal Craven, "Responding to Richard Wright," in D. Quentin Miller (ed.), *James Baldwin in Context* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 268.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 *Ibid.*

- 8 James Baldwin, "Many Thousands Gone" (1955), in *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston, Beacon Press, 2012), p. 42.
- 9 Craven, "Responding to Richard Wright," p. 268.
- 10 James Baldwin, "Notes of a Native Son" (1955), in *Notes*, p. 85.
- 11 *Ibid.*, pp. 85–6.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 86.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 89.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 86.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 88.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 87.
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 86.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 87.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 88.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 90.
- 23 *Ibid.*, pp. 87–8.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 90.
- 25 *Ibid.*
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 92.
- 27 *Ibid.*, pp. 96, 102.
- 28 *Ibid.*, pp. 87, 88, 90.
- 29 *Ibid.*, pp. 87–91.
- 30 *Ibid.*, pp. 85, 88.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 86.
- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 88.
- 33 *Ibid.*, p. 108.
- 34 *Ibid.*, p. 111.
- 35 *Ibid.*, p. 113.
- 36 *Ibid.*, p. 94.
- 37 *Ibid.*, p. 95.
- 38 *Ibid.*, pp. 95, 97.
- 39 *Ibid.*, p. 95.
- 40 *Ibid.*, p. 96.
- 41 *Ibid.* (emphasis added).
- 42 *Ibid.*, p. 88.
- 43 *Ibid.*, p. 97 (emphasis added).
- 44 *Ibid.* (emphasis added).
- 45 *Ibid.*, pp. 97–8.
- 46 *Ibid.*, p. 100.
- 47 *Ibid.*, pp. 101, 102.
- 48 *Ibid.*, pp. 98, 101–2.
- 49 *Ibid.*, p. 104, p. 105.
- 50 *Ibid.*, p. 105.
- 51 *Ibid.*
- 52 Before *Notes of a Native Son* was published, this essay was published in an altered version in *Harper's* with the title "Me and My House," and this particular section, incredibly, was not included.
- 53 James Baldwin, "Autobiographical Notes," (1955), in *Notes*, p. 4.

- 54 Baldwin, "Notes of a Native Son," p. 105.
 55 *Ibid.*
 56 *Ibid.*, pp. 105–6.
 57 *Ibid.*, p. 106.
 58 *Ibid.*, p. 101.
 59 *Ibid.*, p. 106.
 60 *Ibid.*, p. 90.
 61 *Ibid.*, p. 106.
 62 *Ibid.*
 63 *Ibid.*, p. 93.
 64 *Ibid.*, p. 106.
 65 *Ibid.*
 66 *Ibid.*, p. 108.
 67 *Ibid.*, p. 109.
 68 *Ibid.*, p. 112.
 69 *Ibid.*, pp. 87, 113.
 70 *Ibid.*, p. 113.
 71 *Ibid.*
 72 *Ibid.*
 73 *Ibid.*, p. 105.
 74 *Ibid.*, pp. 113–14.

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 ———. "Many Thousands Gone" (1955), in *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston, Beacon Press, 2012), pp. 25–46.
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