

## James Baldwin : Social Protest in *Another Country*

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James Baldwin, essayist, novelist and playwright is easily one of the most outstanding figures in American letters of the past two decades. That Baldwin also happens to be a Negro and one of their foremost spokesmen lends his writings, both creative and non-fiction, an added dimension, especially against the background of the racial tensions and turmoil's in the United States, which in recent years have assumed an urgency and seriousness not known before. Indeed, Baldwin, as Joseph Epstein remarks, "has become one of those writers, rare at any time, whom one simply cannot afford to neglect,"<sup>1</sup>

Baldwin's work and activities reflect a good deal of American history of recent times – the last quarter century, to be more precise. Born in 1924 in New York City and brought up in the Harlem area with all its effects, Baldwin grew into manhood and maturity when the Second World War was over and the American society needed to look inwards and examine how far the values which had inspired the founding fathers to create the "New World" had really been achieved. The end of the forties saw the emergence of the vocal and effective Negro intellectual with Baldwin and Ellison as the most illustrious examples, asserting their role as writers regardless of their racial origins.

In the beginning of his career Baldwin tried to draw a sharp distinction between the claims of art and one's sense of social responsibility to the

community at large and one's own ethnic group. His well-known controversy with Richard Wright,<sup>2</sup> centered round his disapproval of what he terms as "an insuperable confusion, since literature and sociology are not one and the same."<sup>3</sup> He argues against the dependence of the novel on a set of "abstract and impersonal ideas or principles."

While accepting the social responsibility of the artist as a citizen Baldwin had no hesitation in declaring that, "social affairs are not generally speaking the writer's prime concern, whether they ought to be or not; it is absolutely necessary that he establish between himself and these affairs a distance which will allow, at least, for clarity, so that before he can look forward in any meaningful sense, he must first be allowed to take a long look back."<sup>4</sup> An ideal artist is not really concerned with effecting any change even if the change is from bad to good but "writes out of one thing only – one's own experience. Everything depends upon how relentlessly one forces from this experience the last drop, sweet or bitter, it can possibly give. This is the only real concern of the artist, to recreate out of the disorder of life that order which is art. The difficulty then, for me. Of being a Negro writer was the fact that I was, in effect, prohibited from examining my own experience too closely by the tremendous demands and the very real dangers of my social situation."<sup>5</sup> And to achieve this distance and overcome this handicap, he left America. To put it in his own words : "I left

America because I doubted my ability to survive the fury of the color problem here. I wanted to prevent myself from becoming *merely* (italics his) a Negro; or even, merely a Negro writer.”<sup>6</sup>

The subsequent development in the career and work of Baldwin is an indication of the complexity of the problem. For, as he himself points out, on the one hand writing “demands a great deal of stepping on of a social situation in order to deal with it,” while on the other hand “all the time you’re out of it you can’t help feeling a little guilty that you are not, as it were, on the firing line, tearing down the slums.”<sup>7</sup> To what extent has Baldwin been able to live up to the ideals he had set down? Is it, after all, possible for a Negro writer to set for himself a program of “aesthetic autonomy and faithfulness to private experience, as against ideological noise and blunt stereotype?”<sup>8</sup> In a way Baldwin’s dilemma is essentially that which has always faced an artist who is also, consciously or not, committed to a specific social goal. as an artist he has constantly expressed the need to see humanity as a whole and to escape the narrow vision which results from such involvement.

His long absence from the American scene (he spent 9 years in Paris) seemed to have convinced him that it was almost impossible for the Negro writer to transcend his experiences as a Negro and it is these experiences alone which constituted the core of his creative ability. This change in Baldwin is clearly reflected when in his review of the *Selected Poems* of Langston Hughes, he wrote : “Hughes is an American Negro poet and has no choice but to be acutely aware of it. He is not the first American Negro to find the war between his social and artistic responsibilities all

but irreconcilable.”<sup>9</sup> All of Baldwin’s subsequent works, *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961), *Another Country* (1962), *The Fire Next Time* (1963), *Blues for Mr. Charlie* (1964) and *Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone* (1968) confirm this view and serve to establish Irving Howe’s contention that the “Negro writers would not be able to even if they wished, to escape the imperatives of protest.”<sup>10</sup>

Baldwin has however striven hard to maintain the distinction between literature and political propaganda and to raise his writings above the limiting confines of categorization and make his experiences appear in the broader context of the human situation. *Another Country* his most ambitious work to date affords a fine example of his effort in this direction. A harrowing tale of the anguish, torment and inhumanity that the sensitive Negro has to suffer in a white-ruled society, the novel at the same time attempts to subordinate this racial problem to the more fundamental problem of isolation and the desperate failure of human communications. The novel appeared at a time when the Negro revolt was gathering strength. And Baldwin has become one of its most distinguished spokesmen.<sup>11</sup> It is therefore natural that the “stance of militancy” which some critics find in the book would appear more openly and forcefully in his next book with the revealing title, *The Fire Next Time*.

*Another Country* can be read as a severe indictment of the American society for its unjust treatment of a section of the same society. *Another Country* has for its theme a promising subject : the bringing together and inter-action of the two races and the examining the relations between the Blacks and the Whites. And what

relationship could be closer than the sexual one? This apparently accounts for the preponderance of the sexual scenes in the novel.

*Another Country* does not have an elaborate plot but revolves around a number of major characters—black and white, men and women, hetero-sexuals homo-sexuals and bi-sexuals, and the couples are, as a critic put it, “as geometrically entangled as Far Eastern erotic sculpture.”<sup>12</sup> It is through the love relationships among these that Baldwin presents the racial conflict. The novel indeed presents a maze of sexual combinations and as Norman Mailer analyzed, “with the exception of Rufus Scott who does not go to bed with his sister, everybody else in the book is connected by their skin to another character who is connected to still another.”<sup>13</sup> In a sense these affairs are confrontations between opposing cultural patterns. America meets Europe, White meets Black, Downtown meets Uptown and the difficulties inherent in such unions is not underscored by Baldwin. As the title suggests, *Another Country* is the other land where a handful of people seek renewal through love which they fail to realize.” “Love,” as one of the characters reflects, “was a country he knew nothing about.”

The novel opens with the Rufus-Leona relationship and it is through the character of Rufus, a dazzling black jazz musician, and his treatment of Leona, a poor white woman from the South, that Baldwin very effectively and touchingly portrays the torture and torment the Negro has to undergo and how this experience of being born black mars and finally dooms even the intimate relationship between two lovers. For we are left in no doubt that Rufus loved Leona and she, in turn, loved him and yet what happens : Rufus commits suicide by jumping into a river and Leona ends up

in a lunatic asylum. Rufus’ brutal beating of Leona is really an expression of the masochistic instinct which is the sign of self-hatred.<sup>14</sup> Very early in the novel we are told how Rufus remembered “his days in boot camp in the South and felt again the shoe of a white officer against his mouth . . . the white officer . . . had gone forever beyond the reach of vengeance. His face was full of clay and tears and blood; he spat red blood into the red dust.”<sup>15</sup> Rufus could not help thinking of the “high price” he would be required to pay, the troubles he would have to face if he lived with a white woman but “the lowest whore in Manhattan would be protected as long as she had Vivaldo on her arm. This was because Vivaldo was white” (p. 37). This mental anguish of Rufus is very sensitively presented when he tells Vivaldo that it is not sexual satisfaction that he longs for but something else : “I want the chick to love me. I want to make her love me. I want to be loved” (p. 37). Unable to bear any more, he contemplates suicide : “Something in Rufus which could not break, shook him like a rag doll .... He knew the pain would never stop. He could never go down into the city again. He dropped his head as though someone had struck him and looked down at the water. It was cold and the water would be cold. He was black and the water was black.” (p.90).

The central action of the novel, if we have such a thing, is the Vivaldo-Ida relationship and it is through a detailed description and examination of this white-black heterosexual relationship that Baldwin presents his theme. Vivaldo, a “good liberal” white struggling novelist of Italian-Irish descent and a friend of Rufus (they had a homosexual relationship) falls in love with Ida, Rufus’ younger sister and his love is reciprocated. Throughout the rather “tempestuous progress” of

this affair which occupies a substantial part of the book, Baldwin examines in detail and with frankness all the factors which come in the way of any successful black-white love relationship of a lasting nature and makes such a thing almost impossible. Though the pair finally, in the penultimate chapter of the novel, seem to triumph over the racial barrier with Ida falling into the arms of her lover, we are left with an uncomfortable feeling that there really has not been any genuine understanding and the racial problem would still be haunting them all their lives. It is significant that Ida tells Vivaldo in the final scene, "I don't want you to be *understanding*. I don't want you to be kind" (p. 412). And the author comments : "He began, slowly, with a horrible, strangling sound, to weep, for she was stroking his innocence out of him" (p. 412). Incidentally this reminds one of the earlier Rufus-Vivaldo relationship which despite the desire from both sides had also been marked by a lack of any real understanding. As the novelist put it : "They were friends, far beyond the reach of anything so banal and corny as color. They had slept together, got drunk together, balled chicks together, cursed each other out, and loaned each other money. And yet how much, as it turned out had each kept hidden in his heart from the other! It had all been a game, a game in which Rufus had lost his life. All of the pressures that each had denied had gathered together and killed him" (p. 134). It is however worth nothing that for such failures, Baldwin does not always blame the whites only : very often he makes the blacks responsible for hating the whites and for being unable to get over their suspicion and prejudice. This is well illustrated by Rufus' treatment of Leona and Vivaldo.

The subsidiary characters are all whites most of whom come into contact with one another and with the black characters. From among this group, the relationship between Cass, a white woman of "good family," and Richard, of Polish origin, a successful novelist and a friend of Vivaldo. The complex relationship between this white couple is traced in detail leading to its failure and the affair between Cass and Eric, a rich white actor originally from Alabama but settled in Paris. Eric's homosexual affairs with Le Roi, a Negro boy, Rufus and with a French boy, Yves is treated in fair detail. Through the Cass-Richard-Eric affair, Baldwin creates a "white racial tangle" which echoes the profounder complexities of the Rufus-Leona and Vivaldo-Ida relationships, thus showing the conflicts and pressures involved in human relationships as such even when there is no black-white problem.

This brief account of the novel would make it quite obvious that for a Negro writer the distance which Baldwin had been talking of as a necessity for a writer is just not possible to keep. *Another Country* was written after Baldwin had visited the Southern States for the first time in 1958 and the book bears unmistakable marks of the immediate pressures of the American experience. His play *Blues for Mr. Charlie* first produced in 1964 also confirms this.<sup>16</sup> But the change in thinking of his role as more a social critic than artist is more specifically brought about when one examines his *The Fire Next Time*.

Earlier in the book, he had pleaded for integration and explained what he meant by it : "If the word *integration* means anything, this is what it means : that we, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease

fleeing from reality and begin to change it.”<sup>17</sup> It is time, Baldwin felt, that America realize that the “price of the liberation of the white people is the liberation of the blacks—the total liberation, in the cities, in the towns, before the law, and in the mind.”<sup>18</sup>

Much has happened since Baldwin uttered these words nearly ten years ago. While some progress has been made in the direction of integration there has also come up a black movement for separation and for denouncing the common American past.<sup>19</sup> The emergence of militant organization like the Black Panthers openly advocating violence and breakup of the social system has been another disturbing feature. When Martin Luther King was assassinated in 1968, Eldridge Cleaver wrote a “Requiem for Non-violence”; and said, “the war has begun. The violent phase of the black liberation movement is here and it will spread. From that shot, from that blood, America will be painted red. Dead bodies will litter the streets and the scenes will be reminiscent of the disgusting. Terrifying nightmarish news reports coming out of Algiers during the final break down of the French colonial regime.”<sup>20</sup>

Right now, according to informed commentators, we are too close to the processes of change in the Negro intelligentsia to know precisely what future trends will be.<sup>21</sup> Where does Baldwin find himself in a situation like this? The Negro writer at the moment finds himself in a very difficult situation indeed, for as Irving Howe points out, “(he) shares in the sufferings of an exploited race, and it would be outrageous to suppose that simply by decision he can avoid declaring his outrage . . . but he is also a solitary man, a writer . . . . Frequently he is detached from and in

opposition to other blacks.”<sup>22</sup> Baldwin, it seems, as his novel *Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone* (1968) shows, has come to a stage when all these problems crush down upon him and he does not quite know what to do. In his essay, ‘the discovery of What It Means to be an American’, he had written : “In this endeavour to wed the vision of the Old World with that of the New, it is the writer, not the statesman, who is our strongest arm. Though we do not wholly believe it yet, the interior life is a real life, and the intangible dreams of people have a tangible effect on the world.”<sup>23</sup> How one wishes this to happen so that the world day be a better place to live in !

## Reference

1. Joseph Epstein, “James Baldwin Everyone knows His Name,” *American Review*, XIII (January 1959), 34.
2. First published in *Partisan Review*, June 1949.
3. James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston : 1955), p. 19.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
6. James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name* (London, 1964), p. 17.
7. James Baldwin, “The Negro in American Culture,” *Cross Currents*, XI (Summer 1961), 205-206.
8. Irving Howe, “James Baldwin : At Ease in Apocalypse,” *Harper’s Magazine*, 237 (September 1968), 92.
9. Quoted in Maurice Charney, “James Baldwin’s Quarrel with Richard Wright”, *American Quarterly*, XV (Spring 1963), 65.
10. Irving Howe, *Harper’s Magazine*, 92.

11. See Colin MacInnes, "Dark Angle : The Writings of James Baldwin," *Encounter*, 119 (August 1963), 22-33.
12. Charles Newman, "The Lesson of the Master : Henry James and James Baldwin," *Yale Review*, 56 (October 1966), 47.
13. See Harry T. Moore, ed. *Contemporary American Novelists* (Carbondale, 1964) Mailer's Discussion of Baldwin.
14. See C.W.E, Bigsby, "The Committed Writer : James Baldwin as Dramatist," *Twentieth Century Literature*, 13 (April 1967), 39-48.
15. James Baldwin, *Another Country* (London 1965), p. 20. All subsequent references in the text are to this edition of the novel.
16. See Bigsby, *Twentieth Century Literature*.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 83.
19. See Larry Neal and LeRoi Jones, eds. *Black Fire* (New York, 1968).
20. Robert Scheer, ed. *Eldridge Cleaver : Post Prison Writings and Speeches* (New York, 1969).
21. See Jeremy Lanner, "To Speak of Black Violence," *Dissent* (Winter 1973). 69-78.
22. Irving Howe, *Harper's Magazine*, 95.
23. *Nobody Knows My Name*, p. 23.