

Myths over Men

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— the writer obscured by the prophet

SOON IT WILL BE nearly a year-and-a-half since James Baldwin's "A Letter from A Region of My Mind" appeared in *The New Yorker*. This essay, because of its topical significance and its general excellence, has meant many things to the course of Baldwin's career. Its success elevated him from a position of a seasonal appearer on the lower half of the best-seller lists to a thirty-week-first-runner in the non-fiction columns, from a frequenter of small chatty artist gatherings to the centre of the vast mass media's audience, and from a self-image of obscurity (*Nobody Knows My Name*) to a certain sense of "arrival". He had outdistanced his writer colleagues and competitors; nothing so spectacular had happened to Mailer or Bellow or Updike. Within the span of nine months, from the time of the article's publication to the crisis of Birmingham, Baldwin had become an American legend, a contemporary classic. Now, and only at this moment, when there seems to be an interim silence in his camp, it is possible to assess the real importance of his work and to attempt an approximation of his posture.

It is definitely difficult, if one has only read the books, to believe that the given itinerary of Baldwin's travels upward is little more than an all too facile, much too idealized parallel of a typical American success story. In fact, the account is only an outline of a ramified ascendancy. After three weeks, the *New Yorker* magazine in which the original essay was

printed became a collector's item. At Christmas, the article appeared in book form and was more of a success, rising quickly in national sales. Throughout the following two months, the book was the subject of party talk, discussion groups, and autograph gatherings. Until then, the book was virtually without signature, for the author had not appeared. He kept to his usual circuit. When the nation began to see the pictures and hear the rhythmic spirituals of Birmingham, Baldwin came to the centre of clamour. What had been, until this point, a reasonable expression of acclaim transformed itself into a much more accelerated spiritual upsurge with a very noticeable leader. *Time* magazine featured him on its front cover. *Life* did a four-page spread of his travels in the South complete with pictures of Baldwin's speaking engagements, his New York apartment plus telephone, a rather stiff exercise in a popular dance known as the "hitchhike", and a meeting with a destitute Negro family in North Carolina. He managed in May to be published in a well-circulated ladies' journal in which he talked simultaneously on "the problem" and assaulted their modern pruderies by proclaiming an ambiguous sexuality. On a national speaking tour, he accumulated two articles on his early life, several television interviews in which the moderator referred familiarly to him as "Jimmie", and numerous pictures of him holding a scotch, double from the captions. Finally, near the beginning of the summer, his year-old letters to his agent from some isolated spot in Turkey, were printed by a national magazine. I saw

him last in New York at a rally of several thousands on the day of the Birmingham bombings. Dressed in funeral black, he spoke hoarsely into the microphone, smoked continuously and looked virtually exhausted. In these tortuous months and in all these ways, he had emerged as a prophet to the people who listened and watched. And, from his history and performance, one is never sure whether he separates the private artistry from his public gesture, whether he does not harbour and nurture notions of prophecy.

ARMED WITH BESSIE SMITH and the small material inheritance of his Harlem early life, he had gone to Europe with the hope of preparing his vision, the story and meaning of his existence as a circumscribed black within a republic of free white men. He sought to regain a sense of integrity in a society which did not demand a stage presence poisonous to any feelings of moral honesty. Achieving a state of anonymity, he inhabited the Parisian underground where, one would gather from his books, society hung in suspension between a virulent, philistine majority's conception of it and its own amorphous, caged expression of itself. The reasons for its members' banishment were different from Baldwin's. Yet, the badge was no more honourable and equally pained. It was during this period that Baldwin laid bare his soul to revelation, and established the priorities on which his moral imperatives would rest. Reportedly, a Danish girl who mocked his racial invective at a party served as the final element in the shock of recognition: that hatred could not unify the historical and metaphysical paradoxes of his existence, that Europe had only provided the time and experience for reasoning through his plight, and most important, that the extension of his drama must be played out amid his own countrymen, both black and white. Despite the protracted nature of his conflict, the native son took heart and returned home.

As with all missions, so the story runs, at first, there was little or no acceptance; his original rejection, the flight to Europe, was now being reciprocated at the most crucial time, the moment of flesh pregnant with the word. But, sure of the inevitable triumph over earthly entanglements, he continued to labour, articulating out of a gnawing experience

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the signal of return (*Notes of a Native Son*) and the feeling of loss and isolation (*Nobody Knows My Name*). History, in this case, a confrontation of discontented blacks and many indifferent whites, rigidly symbolic of the disparity between the republic's actualities and ideals, finally prepared the way for the messenger. The times demanded the word and he had set it down, sifted it through new experience and logic and was willing not only to bring his pulpit but to hold it with deliberateness, tirade, and some quick, biting wit. The message would be discomforting; but it would be also the balm of which the spirituals tell. The place of pontification would be a mass meeting, resembling slightly a church gathering designed to purge the spirit through something both evangelical and grave.

THE AUDIENCE IS NORMALLY about two thousand with half of this number sitting and the rest standing, leaning from balconies, and sitting in window sills. The crowd is very excited: young girls of the long black hair-sandals-twentyish vintage exchange cigarette puffs with the fellows next to them; middle-aged men and women stumble through aisles, step on toes, and make loud, hollow apologies; Negroes walk nervous on the sides looking for other Negroes with whom they would like to "share this experience". Everyone's timing is a bit off. There is talk until he appears. Then, as he walks onto the stage, there is scattered applause. (He spares us the long, serious walk through the centre of the audience to the stage.) He acknowledges it through a slight turn of the head, produces a dense smile, and returns to talking with the moderator.

In every aisle, there is jostling to catch a glimpse of his face. Baldwin knows this and inadvertently keeps only a partial profile to the audience. Once at the podium, he yells, into the microphone (always more than adequate), "Can you hear me? Can you hear me?" and, from the very back come jubilant declarations of "Yes, yes, we hear you". Beginning, he strikes the New York pose: worn and tired from travelling and planning, a self-condemning grimace for having a possible hint of liquor on his breath, chainsmoker-blowing the smoke downwards and spitting the bits of tobacco on to the floor, hair brushed straight back with little regard for the scraggy



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temples and sides, and an intermittent belch punctuating the already staccato sentences. Although these features are important to the followers, it is his face that is central to the performance. Cast in almost the same lighting effect as the book cover pictures, it appears as a distorted commentary on the real in which eyes, rapidly moving extended globes, send their frightened message along to a sharply descending nose and to a taut mouth. Probably, he realizes the attraction of his face, for there are so many quick smiles, odd movements of the eyes, and suggestive eyebrow shifts that he achieves a blinding mirror effect. His emotions are quick and decisive, suggesting a possible escape and explosion.

With every eye on him, he begins to hold forth. He tells us first of the blues, of "Bessie", "the Duke", "Ray" and "Mahalia", and of their deep moan over "Lawd, why ya make me so black and blue . . . Why ma mama begat me?" An interpretation follows in which he tells us that these songs, their moan, are as much a part of the existence of white as Negro Americans. Aside from the opening that varies, the remainder of the talk is usually the same.

Condensed, his logic is this: We are involved in a grand, pitiable illusion that pivots on the mythical image Americans hold of themselves. We believe that the republic was built through the enterprising businessman, the ingenious pioneer, both of whom were aggressive and proud in times of progress and stoical in the face of disaster. This has produced the concept of the challenging, self-willed Anglo-Saxon nation, untrapped by tradition and aristocracy, and buoyed by prosperity and success. This white nation has no equivalent of tragedy. They cannot imagine themselves singing "My Lawd, what a mornin' when the sun refused to shine", or "Green trees are bending, poor sinners stands tremblin'", or "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child, a long way from home". Hence, there is a national spiritual division, a sharp demarcation of American tragedy and success, a psychic barrier between the disinherited and the prosperous, in summation, a denial that "Ray", of the wailing part of the nation, could be telling the true story of all the flannel-suited men.

To crystallise their image of the happy nation, to seal themselves in their fictional territory, they conjure the "Negro"

and enslave the embodiment of their definition, the tragic opposite of themselves. Building on this, he rings with prophecy. If they do become a part of this tragic kingdom and hence question their self-image, we will not achieve a nation. There can be nothing less than doom and it will not be an honourable one. There is a sigh from the audience: they have passed the trying place. Baldwin breathes deeply, and then there is thunderous applause, shouts, some tears, and more jostling for looks and handshakes. That is the pattern of the ritual. But, what of the cult followers, their apparatus and behaviour?

IT IS EASIER TO DEFINE Baldwin's followers by a process of elimination, by what remains of the American nation. There is a noticeable absence of many types and groups from the rallies. Many Negro writers, especially those of the *Umbara* magazine-New York set, openly boycott the speeches. They believe Baldwin is a product of Madison Avenue who, in the fashion of his producers, affronts the public with a lot of mediocre-spokesman talk on the racial situation. Smith college girls and other fresh-eyed human species are present in small numbers. Businessmen do not come, for obvious reasons. Also, government officials do not appear; they bank on Leonard Bernstein. An American establishment acceptance of Baldwin would mean an incorporation of Mailer and no one is prepared to be that "dangerous". Then there is the remainder: teary old ladies, movie people, civil servants, anti-intellectual and intellectual students and teachers, Negro liberals, white liberals, Black Muslims and supporters, interested conservatives, ministers and "Hands off Cuba" groups. As one can see, there are generous portions of every group and some are a credit to Baldwin. But, if his support is widespread and indefinite, then the ritual objects and axioms are just the opposite. First, there are the six hooks and one should secure an autograph for *The Fire Next Time*. Second, one should track down past, small entries in now defunct literary magazines. Third, three albums of "Ray" are essential plus an old collector's "Billie" album and a final obscure recording of an Alabama wash-woman or Mississippi prison songs. Odetta will not do. Finally, one should have two good pictures of Baldwin either sitting in a shadowy room or staring fearfully out at you. The rules are not

as extensive. A follower should drink double scotches, if he can afford them (cheap California wine is a good substitute), and smoke non-filter cigarettes. Foreign brands are a dead giveaway for a newcomer. He should speak the Negro idiom fluently, and even drop an occasional "funky", "cool", or "jive" in academic or on-the-job discussion. This goes over good at middle-class dinner parties. The latter challenge is most severe for whites, for the slightest twangy slip will make a follower into an "ofay" (generally used for whites but meaning also a square). He should never miss an opportunity for a Baldwin reading and when this does occur, he must always speak of "interpretation" or "meaning" rather than of what is actually written. This conveys the impression of textual criticism and study of the word.

I HAVE BEEN MUCH TOO HARSH on "Jimmy". Most of this was intended not so much as a critique of Baldwin but as a portrait of the crisis in American society, indeed, in the human community. For if he appears as a prophet in our world, it is because of our lack of direction and commitment, our inability to confront ourselves in the plight of others, and our underestimation of the effects of oppression anywhere in our own lives. Rather by chance than by providence, Baldwin fills this hole in the interior of the private Self. He might speak as a healer. But, we would be naive to believe that what he is or says is only medicinal. The intention is to exorcise, since he hopes to rid us of inexcusable lapses in logic, action and charity. If one assumes that the important duty of a writer is to pose the question we refuse to ask, then Baldwin does this and with considerable art. He speaks of change: that we must have as much faith and attachment to the future and its realisation as to the past. He reminds us of honour: That we cannot feel faint when injustice is widespread in the land. In so many ways, he has forced us back on the claims and hopes of the world society. When asked, in a recent interview, whether he had more writings planned, he replied that the task was not complete and that he had more to say. In my opinion, he represents the best of the few men of our time. I would hope, too, that he is not yet finished. Moreover, I would feel that we now have work to do. ●



* *Le Congo, terre d'avenir est-il mence?* Published in Brussels, by the Office de Publieite, 1961. All quotations from the book are my own translations from the French original.

ANY OBJECTIVE STUDENT of Lumumba's political role in the Congo must come to the conclusion that the man fell very short of the stature which his position required. While his support of a strong central government and the circumstances of his torture and assassination go a long way towards explaining the meteoric rise of a legend around him and his consecration as the martyr of African liberation, Lumumba was, in fact, an inept, incompetent, wavering prime minister, and a midget compared to the great intellectuals and statesmen of African independence: Nkrumah, Senghor, Sékou Touré, Nyerere, Banda, Kaunda, Luthuli, Mamadou Dia, Kenyatta and others. To make him responsible for the post-independence chaos in the Congo would be grossly unfair, however. That chaos was largely the result of a Belgian policy of paternalistic obscurantism, and it is doubtful that anybody could have held the country together. Given the collapse of the technical and administrative infrastructure, and the absence of a country-wide political party organization to substitute for it, no amount of states-

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