

Roschelle Bulda

Dr. Jamall Calloway

THRS 379

May 16, 2021

Final

The Inspiration of Baldwin

Somewhere midway through the semester I began to write poetry. With the exception of adolescent attempts at homemade Mother's Day cards and a few required haikus in high school creative writing, I had never written poetry before. And suddenly I was writing prose and looking up deadlines for poetry submissions at *The New Yorker*. I was profoundly inspired by Baldwin and gained an unfounded confidence that I could be the insightful person that he believed we have the capacity to be. After reading his work my mind would continue to process his words long after I closed the books and placed them back on my shelf. I felt enveloped by his intentions and I would get lost in contemplating his presence. The artistic lens with which he saw life through is both painfully honest and beautiful, and his understated assuredness about his near Aristotelian knowledge of our existence is powerful. In his introduction to *Notes of Native Son*, Edward P. Jones laments, "The wonderful thing about writers like Baldwin is the way we read them and come across passages that are so arresting we become breathless and have to raise our eyes from the page to keep from being spirited away." At the cost of being dramatic and romantic, I was often breathless and spirited away while reading Baldwin. The mark of a great artist is their ability to remain relevant, even unfortunately so, and to inspire. I feel like he knew that he had that ability, and he owned the responsibility of it by weighting his work with words

and relations that either covertly or explicitly move us to be better human beings. His work would serve as both “a warning as well as an inspiration.”¹

He often spoke about a disconnection that we have with each other and within ourselves and yet “... he still wrote to us with love.”² By paying attention to the world in an intimate way, and by conveying “the eternal and universal ... word by hard-won word”³ he revealed how accurately he knows us. And through his words about us, we were privy to know him. “There’s nothing in me that is not in everybody else, and nothing in everybody else that is not in me.”⁴ He attempted to connect the disconnected in that way. To illuminate how we have inspired one another, in negative and positive ways. Although he could be criticized as someone who was largely absent during pivotal times of American unrest, his account of “... the minutiae of the everyday”⁵ made him ever present. He wasn’t emboldened by arrogance and he didn’t speak for the sake of hearing his own voice. He did so out of an urgent necessity, having been witness to his countrymen “... destroying hundreds of thousands of lives.”⁶ Equipped with his typewriter, or what he would refer to as “my weapon or my tool,”⁷ his artistic positioning enabled him to reach ears far beyond Harlem or Paris and “... through it all, with each word – perhaps as evidence of a man certain of his message – he never shouts,”⁸ and yet his testimony emphatically resonates.

¹ Als, Hilton. “The Making and Unmaking of James Baldwin.” *The New Yorker*, 9 Feb. 1998, www.newyorker.com/magazine/1998/02/16/the-enemy-within-hilton-als.

² Glaude, Eddie S. *Begin Again James Baldwin's America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own*. Crown, 2020, xxviii.

³ Baldwin, James. *Notes of a Native Son with a New Introduction by Edward P. Jones*. Beacon Press, 2012, introduction.

⁴ Goldstein, Richard. “James Baldwin on Being Gay in America.” *The Village Voice*, 22 June 2018, www.villagevoice.com/2018/06/22/james-baldwin-on-being-gay-in-america/.

⁵ Baldwin, James. *Notes of a Native Son with a New Introduction by Edward P. Jones*, introduction.

⁶ Baldwin, James. *The Fire next Time*. Vintage International, 1993, 5.

⁷ Pakay, Sedat, director. *James Baldwin – From Another Place (Sedat Pakay, 1970)*. YouTube, 21 Aug. 2016, youtu.be/cKFRGUcl0Jo.

⁸ Baldwin, James. *Notes of a Native Son with a New Introduction by Edward P. Jones*, introduction.

As the eldest son and as a revered uncle, he had an innate sense to protect his family. Without ignorance of how great the connection was between the suffering endured in his home with that of the nation, he protected them by way of boldly exposing a “loveless world”⁹ to them, and in turn to itself. By warning his nephew that he would be seen as “a worthless human being,” he unflinchingly revealed the normalization of human cruelty that we’ve become comfortable with and complicit in. Glaude would attest that “‘In this debasement and definition of black people’, Baldwin argued, white people ‘debased and defined themselves.’”¹⁰ Baldwin aimed to make it clear that we had created a world that would continue to suffer if we didn’t own and face the debilitating position that we’ve put ourselves in. “The standards of the civilization into which you were born are first outside of you, and by the time you get to be a man they are inside of you. And this is not susceptible to any kind of judgement, it’s a fact. If you’re treated a certain way, you become a certain kind of person. If certain things are described to you as being real, they’re real for you whether they are real or not.”¹¹ He pressed upon us inspired revelations to open our eyes to an evil history created and repeated, where identities were stolen and lost, and where a clear and present danger of continual suffering presides over us, if we are to not change the civilization into which are children are born. As a victim of love, loss, and faith Baldwin could write about suffering in exacting and eloquent ways because he “understood these things, because he’d survived them.”¹² His earned wisdom, and his choice and privilege to step outside of American civilization, gave him a unique perspective to relay calls to action for both internal and external healing. I feel that because he understood how iniquitous we had proven to

⁹ Baldwin, James. *The Fire next Time*. Vintage International, 1993, 7.

¹⁰ Glaude, Eddie S. *Begin Again James Baldwin's America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own*, 7.

¹¹ “Full Conversation with James Baldwin and Nikki Giovanni in London, 1971.” Performance by James Baldwin, and Nikki Giovanni, *YouTube*, 26 May 2020, youtu.be/KL_cM7SXfbo.

¹² Als, Hilton. “The Making and Unmaking of James Baldwin.”

be, he had strong faith in our virtuous capacities. “It demands great spiritual resilience not to hate the hater whose foot is on your neck, and an even greater miracle of perception and charity not to teach your child to hate.”¹³ That trust in the human condition is what makes him generationally inspirational.

His connection and disconnection with the church and with God further cemented his reliance on humans to be the salvation of ourselves. He understood the thrownness and absurdity to which we are all present in, and didn’t encourage a commitment to waiting for divine inspiration to lift us up, rather he placed greater precedence on our aptitude to reorient ourselves towards morality, citing “If we don’t make it, he’s not going to make it either.”¹⁴ This is not to say that he disregarded God, for it seems that he may have had a very personal and complicated relationship with him. “I told him quite a long, long time ago there would be two of us at the Mercy Seat. He would not be asking all the questions.”¹⁵ His faith, the church and the embracement or rejection of life that religion dictated was very often the backbone of his writing. Although he may have swayed in and out of his faith in God, he persisted with a staunch faith in humanity. That trust in us, after we’ve shown ourselves as monsters and continually embraced a “society that engenders distrust,”¹⁶ where we are still struggling to come to terms with our addiction to “whiteness, violence, and domination”¹⁷ is a revelation. “Toward the end of his life in one of his last interviews, Baldwin confessed to Richard Goldstein: ‘I am working towards the

¹³ Baldwin, James. *The Fire next Time*. Vintage International, 1993, 99-100.

¹⁴ “Full Conversation with James Baldwin and Nikki Giovanni in London, 1971.”

¹⁵ Goldstein, Richard. “James Baldwin on Being Gay in America.”

¹⁶ Calloway, Jamall. “THRS 379.” Lecture on James Baldwin, 2021, San Diego, University of San Diego.

¹⁷ Hardy III, Clarence E. *James Baldwin’s God: sex, hope, and crisis in black holiness culture*. The University of Tennessee Press, 2003, 97.

New Jerusalem. That's true, I'm not joking. I won't live to see it but I do believe in it. I think we're going to be better than we are.”¹⁸

Possibly working in concert with his gift of sermon, he seemed to have a prophetic intuition about human nature, which was elevated by his artistic ability to poetically elucidate our lives, both the darkness and the light. “Baldwin saw us long before we saw ourselves”¹⁹ which informed his faith, trust, and belief in us. His genuine tendency to focus on our aspired potential can be seen as lofty idealism, or it can be seen as he believed we could see it, as inspirational.

¹⁸ Hardy III, Clarence E. *James Baldwin's God: sex, hope, and crisis in black holiness culture*, 97.

¹⁹ Baldwin, James, and Nikky Finney. *Jimmy's Blues and Other Poems*, Beacon Press, 2014, pp. ix-xxi.

Works Cited

- Als, Hilton. "The Making and Unmaking of James Baldwin." *The New Yorker*, 9 Feb. 1998, www.newyorker.com/magazine/1998/02/16/the-enemy-within-hilton-als.
- Baldwin, James, and Nikky Finney. *Jimmy's Blues and Other Poems*, Beacon Press, 2014, pp. ix-xxi.
- Baldwin, James. *Notes of a Native Son with a New Introduction by Edward P. Jones*. Beacon Press, 2012.
- Baldwin, James. *The Fire next Time*. Vintage International, 1993.
- Calloway, Jamall. "THRS 379." Lecture on James Baldwin, 2021, San Diego, University of San Diego.
- "Full Conversation with James Baldwin and Nikki Giovanni in London, 1971." Performance by James Baldwin, and Nikki Giovanni, *YouTube*, 26 May 2020, youtu.be/KL_cM7SXfbo.
- Glaude, Eddie S. *Begin Again James Baldwin's America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own*. Crown, 2020.
- Goldstein, Richard. "James Baldwin on Being Gay in America." *The Village Voice*, 22 June 2018, www.villagevoice.com/2018/06/22/james-baldwin-on-being-gay-in-america/.
- Hardy III, Clarence E. *James Baldwin's God: sex, hope, and crisis in black holiness culture*. The University of Tennessee Press, 2003.

Pakay, Sedat, director. *James Baldwin – From Another Place* (Sedat Pakay, 1970). YouTube, 21 Aug. 2016, youtu.be/cKFRGUcl0Jo.