The Art of Reading James Baldwin

THE TRUTH OF OUR PAIN

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I WENT looking for the devil, but James Baldwin found me first. I had good reason to be looking: not only because I was a wobbling Catholic (beware of any other kind) but also because I was almost born prematurely in a movie theater in 1974 as my parents sat trembling to *The Exorcist*. I'd always known this; it was one of the first things I could remember my mother telling me: "Never watch that movie. It nearly made you a preemie." All through the erratic tacking of my teens and twenties, and through shifting degrees of unbelief, I stuck closely to my mother's paranoid warning—until my early thirties, when deliberately not watching a devil movie seemed worse than cowardly. It seemed a bit silly.

As it turned out, it was *The Exorcist* that was silly. I could not comprehend what had spooked my nineteen-year-old mother into false-birth pangs. We Catholics, lapsed or not, are a superstitious, demon-happy lot; it doesn't take all that much to get our demonic cogs going. After I failed to be harassed by *The Exorcist*, I went in search of Satan-related material to aid myself in understanding that failure. I say that James Baldwin discovered me at this time and not the other way around because I hadn't gone looking for him and yet there he was, waiting for me. I'm told that God and love often function this way: *They* find *you*. Lost in the stacks of Boston University's Mugar Library, I turned into an aisle and there, out of place at eye-level, was Baldwin's impeccably titled little book *The Devil Finds Work* (Dial Press, 1976).

Of course I knew Baldwin as the author of the much-anthologized short story "Sonny's Blues," and I knew his reputation as a necessary American intellect, but he was among the many necessary intellects I had not yet got around to. Reading *The Devil Finds Work* was for me one of those scarce encounters when a reader understands that he'll never be safe from a writer, that he must go in search of that writer's every sentence, imbibe him whole.

Joseph Brodsky once said that while intelligent writers can make you feel lacking, W. H. Auden was so out-of-this-world intelligent that he makes *you* feel intelligent too: He articulates and confirms your best thoughts, dispels your worst. Baldwin is like that—so smart and sane it's

impossible to read him, to experience the staunch morality of his perception, and not sense yourself growing smarter and saner by the page. Like Orwell's, Baldwin's powers were put most beautifully to use in nonfiction. He insisted on a dignified pathos, insisted that every essay or review be unabashedly personal, germane not only to the quaking times but to his own vista, his own history as artist and witness, which is why he so often employs memoir in criticism. Personal testimony, not mere confession—he was clear in that distinction. Oscar Wilde said that literary criticism is the only civilized form of autobiography; with Baldwin's criticism you get Wilde's meaning.

The Devil Finds Work is an exhilarating alloy of memoir, film criticism, and social comment. His thoughts on *The Exorcist* were my thoughts, except I lacked the articulation necessary to shape those thoughts into sentences. That's the distinct aptitude of all eminent writers: They give you not only the new thoughts you need but the proper phrasing for the thoughts you already have. *The Exorcist*, Baldwin writes, is "desperately compulsive, and compulsive, precisely, in the terror of its unbelief." He refers here, in part, to the character of Father Karras, who admits that his belief has gone limp just before Satan comes around to re-stiffen it. Baldwin stresses disgust at the suggestion that hell is the revenge visited upon any unbeliever, and then:

> *The Exorcist* has absolutely nothing going for it, except Satan, who is certainly the star: I can say only that Satan was never like that when he crossed *my* path (for one thing, the evil one never so rudely underestimated me). His concerns were more various, and his methods more subtle.

And, one might add, more destructive. Focusing on the supernatural seems a perverse enterprise when real, human evil is wrecking people's lives in every pocket of America.

The terms *devil* and *evil* hiss frequently in Baldwin's nonfiction. Speaking to Studs Terkel, in 1961, about living in a Swiss village: "Those Swiss people really thought I had been sent by the devil." In his 1964 essay "Nothing Personal": "It has always been much easier (because it has always seemed much safer) to give a name to the evil without than to locate the terror within." Writing about Shakespeare that same year: "Evil comes into the world by means of some vast, inexplicable and probably ineradicable human fault." And of course *The Devil Finds Work* is replete with *evil* and the evil one: "He who has been treated *as* the devil recognizes the devil when they meet." Or: "In our church, the Devil had many faces, all of them one's own. He was not always evil, rarely was he frightening—he was, more often, subtle, charming, cunning, and warm." Baldwin cribs nicely from Hamlet there: "The devil hath power / T' assume a pleasing shape." He was sentenced to be an American Jacob forever wrestling with devils dressed as angels. But he always saw through the ruse.

As someone who was brought up to believe that evil has real potency in our lives, I went on believing it long after I ceased to believe much else of what the priests and nuns dished to me. To see Baldwin, a non-Catholic, take up evil in his way was a relief after my grapplings with Augustine and Aquinas, after the many exhortations I endured in the classroom and from the altar. In a 1948 book review, Baldwin admits that "it is difficult, if not impossible, for anyone not a Catholic to properly comprehend and discuss a Catholic philosopher." But I'd here like to christen Baldwin an honorary Catholic: He understood the sins and superstitions of spirit and flesh, the fetishizing of blood, and the guilt we tote around after our crimes against others and ourselves. He understood sacraments and sacrifice, the benedictions aiming for grace.

One of the first things to know about Baldwin is that he was a teenage

James Baldwin at home in Saint-Paul-de-Vence, France, in 1985.

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minister, a preacher in his stepfather's Harlem church. (He never knew his biological father. Much of Baldwin's work bleeds from the wounds of the father-son clash. In a 1967 review he argues that "the father-son relationship is one of the most crucial and dangerous on earth.") Such with-the-blood believing, such fervent proselytizing was a bad fit for an intellect as enormous as Baldwin's, for someone so wedded to reason, but those "adolescent holy-roller terrors," as he writes, "marked me forever," and how could they not?

Religion for Baldwin remained a fraught affair, as it must. His struggle with the soul had precedent in the most authoritative religious writers—John Donne, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Simone Weil, Flannery O'Connor—and it is the bearing and baring of this struggle that allots Baldwin what Harold Bloom has named his "pathos of the prophetic predicament." Although he chose to tag himself a witness, Baldwin was really a secular prophet with a sacral message, a literary cleanser of sin. Think of his titles borrowed from the Bible (*The Fire Next Time*, *No Name in the Street*) and how he co-opted and then renovated their meaning. Think of how the term *soul* permeates his work, how essential soul was to his dealing with America's crisis of class, race, and mind.

His conception of soul could not be disentangled from his writer's need for privacy. In a 1959 essay he writes: "Finally for me the difficulty is to remain in touch with the private life. The private life, his own and that of others, is the writer's subject—his key and ours to his achievement." This commitment to the nobility of human privacy was a manner of enacting his commitment to the soul. His work is, at bottom, holy, and not just in its grasp of the sacred and profane, but in its refusal to relegate human integrity below the flapping of angels. If it's our lot to writhe halfway between beasts and gods, it was Baldwin's hope that we'd aspire more earnestly and mercifully toward the latter. He had, like his hero Henry James, an unrelenting eye on our interiority, and so the soul was his true subject: the responsibility of the individual soul, an Emersonian self-reliance of soul, a self-accountability and self-control without which it's impossible to sustain self-respect. "If you don't survive your trouble out of your own resources," he writes in 1964, "you have not really survived it; you have merely closed yourself against it." And this: "There is nothing you can do for me.... It must be done for you." He wanted no favors; what he did want was for you to stop looking at his skin and start looking at your own inner life.

For Baldwin, the strife of the soul was a subject that deserved much better than clerics; it deserved artists. In *The Fire Next Time* (Dial Press, 1963), he was unafraid of anti-clericalism or blasphemy—in fact blasphemy was essential to his ethical and technical program:

> It is not too much to say that whoever wishes to become a truly moral human being (and let us not ask whether or not this is possible; I think we must *believe* that it is possible) must first divorce himself from all prohibitions, crimes, and hypocrisies of the Christian church. If the concept of God has any validity or any use, it can only be to make us larger, freer, and more loving. If God cannot do this, then it is time we got rid of Him.

What was the crux of Baldwin's quarrel with religion? It must be understood as an issue much more practical than the obligatory Freudian revolt against his preacher father. The answer is available most explicitly in a 1948 book review: "It is unhelpful indeed to be assured of future angels when the mysteries of the present flesh are so far from being solved." Unhelpful, yes, and vulgar. The flesh he means there is not only human flesh in general or black flesh in particular but all American flesh and its genesis in the convulsions of Puritanism.

Like Baldwin and religion, Baldwin and America made a curious pair. All through his nonfiction we are confronted with the sins and sanctimonies of the land of the free. We are made to gauge "the American failure to face reality," our "striking addiction to irreality." We are, alas, "the most inarticulate people" he has ever come across, "inarticulate and illiterate… unlettered in the language," living our consumerist lives in "an emotional kindergarten." Few American writers ever beheld American reality as uncompromisingly as Baldwin did: That word, *reality*, appears all through his work. For clear seeing such as his, one begins reaching for a roster of lionized names to give him company: Montaigne, Wilde, Hazlitt, Woolf.

Baldwin comprehended his bilious criticisms of America as a gesture of his love for her. At the start of *Notes of a Native Son* (Beacon Press, 1955), he admits: "I love America more than any other country in the world, and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her." His 1962 essay "The Creative Process" contains this extraordinary line: "Societies never know it, but the war of an artist with his society is a lover's war, and he does, at his best, what lovers do, which is to reveal the beloved to himself." *A lover's war*: It is the artist's duty to enter battle, to show society itself, and that duty doubles when society does not have the eyes to see. An artist gives his country eyes. "This most sinister and preposterous of Edens," Baldwin writes, needed to stand and hear his judgments. If she was as good as she continually claimed she was, she would stand and hear him. "This depthless alienation from oneself and one's people is, in sum, the American experience": A charge such as that cannot be unmade and it cannot be ignored. If, as Baudelaire contends, the devil's wiliest mischief is convincing us that he isn't real, then Baldwin would not let those American devils—those who write textbooks, who hold office—slither by uncontested. *The Devil Finds Work* has these robust lines:

> To encounter oneself is to encounter the other: and this is love. If I know that my soul trembles, I know that yours does, too: and, if I can respect this, both of us can live. Neither of us, truly, can live without the other: a statement which would not sound so banal if one were not endlessly compelled to repeat it, and, further, believe it, and act on that belief.

If the soul was his true subject, then the soul must be conceived as a moral organ. In praising a novel by Warren Miller called *The Cool World* (Little, Brown, 1959), he refers, in

anguished tones, to "the moral state of this country," and in the preface to the 1984 edition of *Notes of a Native Son*, he makes this unassailable edict: "Moral change is the only real one." Post that placard in every town square. This is what Harold Bloom means when he claims of Baldwin that "a kind of aesthetic of the moral life governs his vision": If writers' aesthetics are not moral, if they do not comprehend that style is the assertion of morality, then they're just goofing off.

Saul Bellow dubbed Baldwin's morality "fiery but formless," and that misses the mark in a most un-Bellovian manner. Baldwin's morality was an obligation his intellect could not discount, a reasoned necessity born of heartbreak, of his being the ultimate American outsider: black, gay, and illegitimate. Edward P. Jones makes the point that even when Baldwin vents his exhausted dismay at the chore of being black in America, not only is he never pessimistic, but "he never shouts." He was too dignified for shouting, too debonair, too downright certain of his character. Which doesn't mean that he wasn't nobly indignant, especially in his late-period work (see his 1970 open letter to a jailed Angela Davis), only that shouting would have been beneath his moral charisma. That style of being was itself the form of his morality: not amorphous impulses firing wildly, but an ethics erected on the rational certainty that goodness and beauty are superior to their opposites.

We live, Baldwin saw, in a "brutally indifferent world," and we are forced to endure "our absolutely unspeakable loneliness," what he calls, in 1962, "the human damage": not only the damage done to us by unholy forces, or the damage we do to one another, but the damage we do to ourselves. For someone who was contemptuous of psychotherapy and Freudian equations, he uttered his most Freudian statement in 1967: "The truth of our pain is all we have, it is the key to who we are." That's not an emotional statement; that's an artist's moral statement.

If Baldwin had a moral philosophy of the artist, that philosophy concerns "the nature of the artist's responsibility to his society. The peculiar nature of this responsibility is that he must never cease warring with it, for its sake and for his own." He believed that "the entire purpose of society is to create a bulwark against the inner and the outer chaos, literally, in order to make life bearable." But the artist understands that the sundry ways we make life bearable can deprive it of deep meaning or spiritual merit, and so the artist must be a Joshua blasting his horn at that bulwark. Artists must convert their inner chaos into living things of wisdom and beauty, and from that conversion will come their ability to bear life, to brook what Baldwin names "our cruel and unbearable human isolation."

"The artist's responsibility to his society" does not mean that a work of art succeeds only if it scorns social malfeasance. "Social affairs," Baldwin believed, "are not generally speaking the writer's prime concern." He understood the requisite distinction between the rhetorical work of social progress and the imaginative work of literature, and he was often merciless to those who didn't. As a critic he refused to give writers a free pass simply because he shared their politics, or sexuality, or skin color; he could be as hard on Edward Albee or Richard Wright as he could be on any straight or Caucasian writer. When it came to literature, he knew that beauty was more important than message, that message mattered not at all if the thing was badly made. "Literature and sociology," he writes in *Notes of a Native Son*, "are not one and the same; it is impossible to discuss them as if they were."

Addressing Wright's *Native Son* (Harper, 1940) in 1961, he fired the volley that nearly killed their friendship: "It seems to me that where the polemic is most strong, the novel is least true; and, conversely, that the real

fury of the novel tends to complicate and compromise and finally, indeed, to invalidate the novelist's social and political attitudes." Writing about Maxim Gorky and his imitators in 1947, he is unapologetic on this front: "Regardless of how well they succeed as outraged citizens, they are incomplete as artists." That's precisely what he thought of *Native Son*: incomplete art. Wright helped to get Baldwin's career started, and so he never fully forgave Baldwin for his inspired brazenness in attacking *Native Son*, though I suspect that much of Wright's upset came from the fact that, line for line, Baldwin was a better writer. Line for line, Baldwin is a better writer than almost everybody. For him, the prose was all. Here he is reviewing a biography of Robert Louis Stevenson in 1948: "The most enduring delight offered by Stevenson is contained in his prose; he could write superbly well, a virtue for which we should all be grateful."

Baldwin wielded a fierce critical acuity and was punishing to a degree we today are too delicate to endure. Reviewing a forgettable book ("progressive fiction concerning the unhappy South") in 1948: "Novels and novelists of this genre serve no purpose whatever…except to further complicate confusion." His view of the criminally overrated James M. Cain? "What, after all, is one to say about such persistent aridity, such manifest nonsense? Mr. Cain is no novelist." Sinclair Lewis's *Kingsblood Royal* (Random House, 1947) is "a lugubrious, sentimental nightmare…utterly without significance." On Chester Himes's novel *Lonely Crusade* (Knopf, 1947): "Some of the worst writing on this side of the Atlantic." Erskine Caldwell's novel *The Sure Hand of God* (Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1947) "is almost impossible to review, largely, I suspect, because it is almost impossible to take it seriously. One wonders why it was done at all."

This is not savagery for the sake of itself; this is a critic in revolt against what he calls the "debasement of literary standards," a critic in practiced control of his good taste. To Baldwin, "the ability to write a sentence," as he named it, was no paltry feat. And this is the chief value of James Baldwin: His intensity of intellect and imagination put on the page with rare powers of seduction, with that frightful Baldwinian eloquence—the dialectical tenor of the prose, its easeful way with itself, its rueful wisdom, patiently unfurling, those pregnant digressions and detours, the delivery unobtrusively sermonic, a rhetoric devoid of dogma. Baldwin's prose takes its time: a high-purchase prose that sizes up its target, grabs its, shakes it, refuses to release it. His style thinks; not all style does. He is everywhere unfailingly vivid with articulation, the prose in the process of discovering itself while also proclaiming that it knows exactly what it thinks. It does not hedge; it does not pander.

Here's a sentence from *The Devil Finds Work* that appears after he

speaks of having been "bull-whipped" through the Bible as a teen:

> For, I was on Job's side, for example, *though He slay me, yet will I trust Him, and I will maintain mine own ways before Him*—You will not talk to *me* from the safety of your whirlwind, never—and yet something in me, out of the unbelievable pride and sorrow and beauty of my father's face, caused me to understand—I did not understand, perhaps I still do not understand, and never will—caused me to begin to accept the fatality and the inexorability of that voice out of the whirlwind, for if one is not able to live with so crushing and continuing a mystery, one is not able to live.

A seven-line sentence put down by a lesser pen would lurch and trip over its own rhythm; many clauses would have trouble finding the thread after four dashes. There's a startling confidence and conviction unleashed in Baldwin's prose, an earned impudence balanced by tenderness, a union of erudition and emotion unpolluted by bathos (Baldwin detested bathos). Hear the bite in "You will not talk to *me*," a bite that owes something to Donne's first "Holy Sonnet." Hear the wounded bafflement in "perhaps I still do not understand," followed by the nonnegotiable sophistication of "if one is not able to live with so crushing and continuing a mystery, one is not able to live."

When blurbists and reviewers praise a writer's prose, they normally rely on the prefab term *poetic*. That's nonsense: If prose is poetry it is not prose. Baldwin's prose indeed has melodic rhythms, but they are the natural rhythms of the prose he spoke, the oratorical lilts he picked up in that Harlem church. Langston Hughes saw how Baldwin "uses words as the sea uses waves, to flow and beat, advance and retreat, rise and take a bow in disappearing," and Harold Bloom made a similar point in saying that Baldwin's "rhetorical power" derives from "a judicious blend of excess and restraint."

Excess and restraint, yes, but also sensitivity and ego. If most writers compose from a cocktail of three-fifths ego and two-fifths sensitivity, for Baldwin those fractions were reversed, and that reversal helps explain his fluent charm. If it's impossible not to feel a towering affection and admiration for him, that's partly because he was literary and religious before he was political, which is to say that he was from the beginning committed to the eternal and its language. Politics was an obligation, but literature was a necessity. "The only word for me, when the chips are down," he writes in 1963, "is that I am an *artist*," because artists "are finally the only people who know the truth about us." Writing well contains its own truth. In his biography of Baldwin, David Leeming writes that at the peak of Baldwin's political activism, he was "a guru-prophet who could do no wrong." But James Baldwin wanted to be something else, and we can be grateful, always, that he was: "I want to be an honest man and a good writer."