

THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA

AN ANALYSIS OF BLACK/WHITE RELATIONS
IN THE WORKS OF JAMES BALDWIN.

by

PAT LOCKIE

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
OF MASTER OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

WINNIPEG, MANITOBA

October 1971.

THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA
LIBRARY

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to illustrate and explain recurring patterns of description and analysis of black/white relations in selected works of James Baldwin. Chapter I introduces the three themes outstanding in Baldwin's treatment of interracial relationships: the intangible union of black and white; the white man's social and economic conceptualization of the Negro; and, finally, the psychological repercussions of external definition upon black people. These themes and their significance are outlined and illustrated in this introductory chapter using Baldwin's major collections of essays, Notes of a Native Son, Nobody Knows My Name, and The Fire Next Time, and a volume of the author's short stories, Going to Meet the Man. Chapters II, III and IV discuss the presence of the same themes in Another Country, Blues for Mister Charlie, and in Baldwin's most recent novel, Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. ANOTHER COUNTRY	23
III. BLUES FOR MISTER CHARLIE	44
IV. TELL ME HOW LONG THE TRAIN'S BEEN GONE	59
CONCLUSION	80
BIBLIOGRAPHY	88

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

It is my intention in the following introductory pages to outline and illustrate the three major, interrelated themes operational in Baldwin's explorations of black/white relations. These themes will then be analyzed in depth in individual chapters devoted to Another Country, Blues for Mister Charlie, and Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone. Baldwin's treatment of black/white relations consistently incorporates one or more of the following, key thematic patterns; firstly, the notion of the oppressor and the oppressed being bound together within an unseverable psychic union; secondly, a study of the Negro as a concept created by white Americans; and finally, an account of the tremendous psychological repercussions for black people, arising from the white man's conceptualization of the Negro.

I will examine first of all the psychic union which Baldwin distinguishes binding the white man and the black together. Recounting his experiences during his first visit to the deep South, Baldwin described the behaviour of whites and blacks, observed during a bus ride in Montgomery, Alabama, in the following way:

The bus pursued its course, picking up white and Negro passengers. Negroes sat where they pleased, none very far back....And the whites sat there, ignoring them in a huffy, offended silence.

This silence made me think of nothing so much as the silence which follows a really serious lovers's quarrel: the whites, beneath their cold hostility, were mystified and deeply hurt. They had been

betrayed by the Negroes, not merely because the Negroes had declined to remain in their "place", but because the Negroes had refused to be controlled by the town's image of them. And without this image, it seemed to me, the whites were abruptly and totally lost. The very foundations of their private and public worlds were being destroyed.¹

In this account lies the essence of a crucial tenet of Baldwin's analysis of black/white relations in America. Significantly, the atmosphere between Negroes and whites on the bus reminds Baldwin not of that existing between enemies, but rather of that between lovers after a quarrel. The idea of blacks and whites as lovers is a figurative expression frequently reiterated in Baldwin's writings. It is used to give emphasis to the author's belief that there is a deep-rooted, psychic union between blacks and whites. It is a fact, however, which white Americans attempt to deny, claims Baldwin who has said that "the only people who understand Americans at all, the only people in the world who have the least comprehension of what goes on in the American heart and mind are their black brothers and sisters. The great dilemma of being a white American precisely is that they deny their only kinship."²

From this fundamental observation, Baldwin throughout his writings explores the effects and consequences of whites and blacks being bound together in such an intangible form. It is not, as one correspondent suggested to Baldwin, a matter of being "locked together in a dance of eternal hatred,"³ but rather, according to Baldwin in one of his more

¹James Baldwin, "The Dangerous Road Before Martin Luther King," Harper's Magazine, 222, February 1961, p. 35.

²A conversation recorded by the BBC between Baldwin, author Colin MacInnes and foreign correspondent, James Mossman, printed in Encounter, 25, July 1965, pp. 57-59.

³James Mossman, ibid.

optimistic moods," a kind of misunderstanding of each other,"⁴ in which both whites and blacks are endeavouring to come closer to something human in one another. In his autobiographical book of essays, Nobody Knows My Name, Baldwin writes again of the union between black and white: "No one in the world - in the entire world - knows more - knows Americans better, or odd as this may sound, loves them more than the American Negro. This is because he has had to watch you, outwit you, deal with you, and bear you, and sometimes even bleed and die with you, ever since we got here - and this is a wedding. Whether I like it or not, or whether you like it or not, we are bound together forever. We are part of each other. What is happening to every Negro in the country at any time is also happening to you."⁵

Developing his theory of the "wedding" of Negro and white, Baldwin claims that the dehumanization of the black man in America paradoxically produces the debasement and subsequent enslavement of the oppressors, who become guilt-ridden. One of Baldwin's most frequently repeated themes is the idea that the treatment of the blacks, the history of the Negro's suffering and persecution in America, is, in fact, also the inescapable history of whites. It is a diabolical record of cruelty and violence, which will haunt white Americans until they liberate the Negro. Baldwin sees the liberation of blacks, their achievement of full civil, social, political and human rights, as a necessary prerequisite for the liberation of white Americans from their own degradation, which has followed upon their oppression of the Negro.

⁴Baldwin, Ibid., p. 58.

⁵Baldwin, "In Search of a Majority," Nobody Knows My Name (New York, Dell Publishing Co. Inc., 1963), pp. 113-114.

Baldwin suggests that the Negro represents for the white man a constant reminder of his guilt:

When an Englishman or an American white man, in the main, looks at a black man, he is also looking at his own past, and a lot of what happens in the mind and heart of a white man looking at a black man is involved with his guilt because I - after all - for nothing built the city...we're talking about an historical fact - it is also a present fact - which controls the society in which we live. It is one of the reasons that my son, you know, my daughter, or my niece or nephew can't use a white waiting-room in the deep South.⁶

Over-stated and melodramatic as this point of a guilt-ridden white society undoubtedly is, Baldwin moves on to firmer ground when he claims that the crux of the interracial tension in America is the white man's unwillingness to face up to his history, trying to overcome a sense of guilt by the introduction of piece-meal, hopelessly inadequate measures to help the Negro. According to Baldwin, until the white American can confront his history and overcome it by freeing the Negro, his life, based on a proud boast of democracy and equality, is a lie. Political and economic motives apart, the main obstacle in the path of the whites ceasing their oppression is an irrational fear of the black man, which enables them to continue their inhuman treatment. He adds that the continued enslavement of the Negro through the use of social, political and economic fetters is an indication that white Americans are unable to face the dark side of their own natures, to confront their true identities. In Notes of a Native Son, Baldwin writes: "Our dehumanization of the Negro, then, is indivisible from our dehumanization of ourselves; the loss of our own identity is the price we pay for the annulment of his,"⁷ and in Nobody Knows My Name:

⁶Baldwin, Encounter, p. 58.

⁷Baldwin, "Many Thousands Gone," Notes of a Native Son (New York, Bantam Books Inc., 1964) p. 19.

We would never allow Negroes to starve, to grow bitter, and to die in ghettos all over the country if we were not driven by some nameless fear that has nothing to do with Negroes. We would never victimize, as we do, children whose only crime is color and keep them, as we put it, in their place. We wouldn't drive Negroes mad, as we do, by accepting them in ball parks, and on concert stages, but not in our homes and not in our neighborhoods, and not in our churches....No, it has everything to do with ourselves and this is one of the reasons that for all these generations we have disguised this problem in the most incredible jargon.⁸

During an interview published in Time magazine, Baldwin declared that, "at the root of the American Negro problem is the necessity of the American white man to find a way of living with the Negro in order to be able to live with himself. And the history of this problem can be reduced to the means used by Americans - lynch law, segregation, and legal acceptance, terrorization and concession - either to come to terms with this necessity, or to find a way around it....In this long battle, the white man's motive was the protection of his identity; the black man was motivated by the need to establish an identity."⁹

Writing in a more apocalyptic vein in The Fire Next Time, Baldwin maintains that the Negro has become a key factor in the future of America, and as such the attitudes of white Americans towards him must change:

What it comes to is that if we, who can scarcely be considered a white nation, persist in thinking of ourselves as one, we condemn ourselves with the truly white nations to sterility and decay, whereas if we could accept ourselves as we are, we might bring new life to the Western achievements, and transform them. The price of this transformation is the unconditional freedom of the Negro; it is not too much to say that he, who has been so long rejected, must now be embraced, and at no matter what psychic or social risk. He is the key figure in his country, and the American future is precisely as bright or as dark as his. And the Negro recognizes this, in a negative way. Hence the question: Do I really want to be integrated into a burning house?¹⁰

⁸ Baldwin, "In Search of a Majority," Nobody Knows My Name, p. 112.

⁹ Baldwin, "At the Root of the Negro Problem," Time, 81, May 24, 1963, pp. 24-25.

¹⁰ Baldwin, The Fire Next Time (New York, Dell Publishing Co. Inc., 1963), p. 126.

As in his earlier writings, Baldwin insists on full recognition by whites of the significance of the Negro as an individual, and of his importance in the achievement of stature by his country. "Negroes are Americans and their destiny is the country's destiny."¹¹

The bond between black and white, as Baldwin indicates in all his works, is not the relatively simple one of victim and tyrant. There are multiple and subtle nuances to the relationship, which produce a mysterious paradox, whereby the Negro by virtue of his innate knowledge of the white man, learned through centuries of slavery, has a certain fragile, psychic power over his white contemporary. This power, as Baldwin is well aware, has no practical value: it doesn't remove Negroes from their ghetto homes, nor does it prevent the black man's constant public humiliation and rejection by whites. But it exists in the form of the white man's unease at the black man's plight, at the recollection, also, that in the distant past his ancestors were slave owners. This is not, as Baldwin dramatically terms it, "the Negro's tyrannical power,"¹² but is, nevertheless, an important facet in any analysis of black/white relations in America today. Baldwin claims that by deliberately shutting himself away from the black man, by refusing to see the Negro as an individual just like himself, the white man is obscuring part of his own identity: "The reason that it is important - of the utmost importance - for white people, here, to see Negroes as people like themselves is that white people will not, otherwise, be able to see

¹¹Baldwin, "Many Thousands Gone," Notes of a Native Son, p. 33.

¹²The Fire Next Time, p. 129.

themselves as they are."¹³ The idea that the white man must embrace the black man in all aspects of life before he can truly hope to know himself, and before he can free himself from the Negro's hold over him is given greater metaphoric expression in The Fire Next Time, in which Baldwin says the white man must, "consent, in effect, to become black himself, to become a part of that suffering, and dancing country that he now watches wistfully from the heights of his lonely power and, armed with spiritual traveler's checks, visits surreptitiously after dark."¹⁴

Moving now from a consideration of the mental umbilical cord, which Baldwin sees linking blacks and whites, to the conceptualization of the Negro by white society, I shall examine this second theme in two parts: firstly, the sexual-oriented myths surrounding the Negroes, and their significance; and secondly, the social and economic importance of the Negro to the white man. Central to the first part of my discussion is Baldwin's belief that the white man suffers from an acute case of sexual paranoia. The Negro, then, in Baldwin's eyes is an image deliberately built up by white Americans who have invested their creation with a fantastic sexual mythology. And at the core of the nameless fear which Baldwin identifies as one of the great driving forces governing the whites' maltreatment of blacks is a sexual insecurity. Baldwin writes that "there is probably no greater (or more misleading) body of sexual myths in the world today than those which have proliferated around the figure of the American Negro. This means that he is penalized for the guilty imagination of the white

¹³"East River Downtown: Postscript to a Letter from Harlem," "Nobody Knows My Name, p. 69.

¹⁴The Fire Next Time, p. 129.

people who invest him with their hates and longings, and is the principal target for their sexual paranoia."¹⁵ Later, in the same book of essays, Baldwin writes, "I think I know something about the American masculinity which most men of my generation do not know because they have not been menaced by it in the way I have been. It is still true, alas, that to be an American Negro male is also to be a kind of walking phallic symbol: which means that one pays in one's own personality for the sexual insecurity of others."¹⁶ The sexual aspects of racist attitudes in America have for the past decade produced interesting studies by sociologists and psychologists. Calvin C. Hernton, a black sociologist, confirms much of what Baldwin says about the sexual aura which surrounds black/white relations in America today: "The sexualization of racism in the United States is a unique phenomenon in the history of mankind; it is an anomaly of the first order...there is a sexual involvement, at once real and vicarious, connecting white and black people in America that spans the history of this country from the era of slavery to the present."¹⁷ Like Baldwin, Hernton points out that through the various myths which have been cultivated about the sexual powers of Negroes - particularly of the young Negro male - a host of tragic offshoots in the relations between blacks and whites has arisen. White men fear the alleged superior, animal-like sexuality of the Negro male, who has been turned into the ultimate phallic symbol in white society. The cruellest irony in this situation is that the Negro is denied all right to approach the pre-dominant sexual image which surrounds him - the white woman, a theme to

¹⁵"Alas, Poor Richard", Nobody Knows My Name, p. 151.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 172.

¹⁷Calvin C. Hernton, Sex and Racism in America (New York, Grove Press Inc., 1968), p. 7.

which Baldwin gives his most dramatic expression in Blues for Mister Charlie, a play based on the Emmett Till case, in which a young Negro boy was murdered in Mississippi in 1955 for wolf-whistling at a white woman, and in which his murderer was acquitted.

In their book, Black Rage, authors William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs point out that because of the difficulties confronting the Negro striving for manhood in a materialistic world, he tends to turn for fulfillment to the world of sexual folklore which has grown up about his race. Sex now becomes the black man's weapon against his white oppressor: "If he cannot fight the white man openly, he can and does battle him secretly. Recurrently the pattern evolves of black men using sex as a dagger to be symbolically thrust into the white man."¹⁸ The aggression of the Negro against white society finds an outlet in interracial sex, as witnessed in the attitudes of both Rufus and Ida Scott towards their white lovers in Another Country (to be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter).

In the introductory notes to his best-selling novel, Native Son, Richard Wright presented his stark impressions of the Negro's place in white society. He described how young Negro boys were frequently picked up on the streets by the police, taken to gaol and there charged with the rape of white women: "This thing happens so often that to my mind, it had become a representative symbol of the Negro's uncertain position in America."¹⁹ The white man's insistence on the Negro as a rapist of white women, as a brute animal with only lust in his heart, is largely the myth round which

¹⁸William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs, Black Rage (New York, Basic Books Inc., 1968), p. 60.

¹⁹Richard Wright, Native Son (New York, Harper and Row Publishers, 1940), p. xxviii.

Wright established the character of his protagonist, Bigger Thomas. In his essay, "Many Thousands Gone," Baldwin expresses a conviction that there is a potential Bigger Thomas in all Negroes:

And there is, I should think, no Negro living in America who has not felt, briefly, or for long periods, with anguish sharp or dull in varying degrees and to varying effect, simple, naked and unanswerable hatred; who has not wanted to smash any white face he may encounter in a day, to violate out of motives of the cruellest vengeance, their women, to break the bodies of all white people and bring them low, as low as that dust into which he himself has been and is being trampled; no Negro, finally, who has not had to make his own precarious adjustment to the "nigger" who surrounds him and to the "nigger" in himself.²⁰

Baldwin's thoughts are echoed by Calvin Hernton, who writes, "I think that at one time or another, in every Negro who grows up in the South, there is a rapist, no matter how well hidden...and that rapist has been conceived in the Negro by a system of morals based on guilt, hatred and human denial."²¹

Rape for Eldridge Cleaver became an "insurrectionary act," a means of taking revenge upon the white man. In Soul on Ice, Cleaver discusses his growing awareness that blacks are indoctrinated into believing that the white woman, as a symbol of perfect beauty, is infinitely more desirable than the black woman. Subsequently Cleaver began to think of the white woman as the black man's "ogre," as a threat to be mastered by violence. Consciously and deliberately he set out to become a rapist of white women: "Somehow, I arrived at the conclusion that as a matter of principle, it was of paramount importance for me to have an antagonistic, ruthless attitude toward white women....I became a rapist....It delighted me that I

²⁰Baldwin, Notes of a Native Son, p. 30.

²¹Hernton, op. cit., p. 67.

was defying and trampling upon the white man's laws, upon his system of values, and that I was defiling his women."²² This passage reveals the latent Bigger Thomas at work in Cleaver, and, if Baldwin and Hernton are to be believed, in all Negroes, weary of being trodden underfoot by the laws of white society, who, in order to assert their humanity, turn to a violent act of crime.

Baldwin maintains that the white man has made of the Negro a scapegoat for all of his own darkest desires, for those things he dare not utter in public, and which now have been projected on to his image of the black man:

In a way, if the Negro were not here, we might be forced to deal within ourselves and our own personalities, with all those vices, all those conundrums, and all those mysteries with which we have invested the Negro race. Uncle Tom is, for example, if he is called uncle, a kind of saint. He is there, he endures, he will forgive us, and this is the key to that image. But if he is not uncle, if he is merely Tom, he is a danger to everybody. He will wreak havoc on the countryside. When he is uncle Tom he has no sex - when he is Tom he does - and this obviously says much more about the people who invented the myth than the people who are the object of it.²³

The tangled myths, which Baldwin identifies, surrounding sex and race are inextricably bound up with the socio-economic structure in American society. Proof of manhood for Negro males is merged with the capitalistic notion of "making good" within the profit-motivated system. And when, through discrimination and colour prejudice, the Negro is unable to support his family financially, his manhood becomes suspect. On this subject Grier and Cobbs write: "In a capitalistic society economic

²² Eldridge Cleaver, Soul on Ice (New York, Dell Publishing Inc., 1968), pp. 13-14.

²³ Baldwin, "In Search of a Majority," Nobody Knows My Name, pp. 111-112.

wealth is inextricably interwoven with manhood. Closely allied is power - power to control and direct other men, power to influence the course of one's own and other lives...the ultimate power is the freedom to understand and alter one's life. It is this power both individual and collectively, which has been denied the black man."²⁴ Baldwin writes about the emasculating effects of white control over black lives during an account of his first meeting with Black Muslim leader, Elijah Muhammad, in Chicago. Baldwin comments acidly on Elijah's exhortations to his followers to leave off the ways of the white man, and to "protect your women":

Protect your women: a difficult thing to do in a civilization sexually so pathetic that the white man's masculinity depends on a denial of the masculinity of the blacks. Protect your women: in a civilization that emasculates the male and abuses the female, and in which, moreover, the male is forced to depend on the female's bread-winning power. Protect your women: in the teeth of the white man's boast, "We figure we're doing you folks a favor by pumping some white blood into your kids,"²⁵ and while facing the Southern shotgun and the Northern billy.

Unlike his white counterparts, the black man, says Baldwin, faces a never-ending stream of physical and psychological obstacles in the path of his attaining manhood. It is a situation which has changed little since the days of slavery, when the black man's continued existence could depend upon the mere whim of his white master. But the Negro who has survived in white America has always been aware of the precariousness of his life, and knows its value and meaning, Baldwin affirms: "That man who is forced each day to snatch his manhood, his identity, out of the fire of human cruelty that rages to destroy it, knows, if he survives

²⁴Grier and Cobbs, op.cit., p. 60.

²⁵The Fire Next Time, p. 105.

his effort, and even if he does not survive it, something about himself and human life that no school on earth - and indeed, no church - can teach."²⁶

While visiting the deep South, an account of which appears in Nobody Knows My Name, Baldwin became more and more preoccupied with the sexual connotations governing black/white relations. He describes his first sensations on seeing the rich Georgia soil in the following way: "I could not suppress the thought that this earth had acquired its color from the blood that had dripped down from these trees. My mind was filled with the image of a black man, younger than I, perhaps my own age, hanging from a tree, while white men watched him and cut his sex from him with a knife."²⁷ The theme of lynching and castration of Negroes by whites in the South is the subject of Baldwin's masterly short story, "Going to Meet the Man," the only work in which Baldwin attempts to probe the mind of the white oppressor. The story is related from the viewpoint of a middle-aged sheriff who has been dealing with civil rights demonstrators in a small, southern town. He tries to understand their persistence, but their defiance and hatred baffle him. At the end of one particularly gruelling day he attempts unsuccessfully to make love to his wife. His mind goes back to childhood when his parents took him to a lynching, which the local white community attend as though it were a summer picnic. The macabre event is still vivid in the sheriff's mind, as he sees again the black man's gouged eyes, the repeated dousing of petrol over the naked body, which is periodically lowered into a fire, and finally the

²⁶ Ibid., p. 133.

²⁷ "A Letter from the South," Nobody Knows My Name, p. 87.

victim's castration by a white man with a butcher's knife. Reliving this experience causes the sheriff to desire his wife even more, and he whispers to her, "Come on, sugar, I'm going to do you like a nigger, just like a nigger, come on, sugar, and love me just like you'd love a nigger."²⁸ Baldwin seems to suggest in this short story that the ghastly ritual enacted by the townspeople at the lynching served to relieve them of their own sexual fantasies and subsequent feelings of guilt. By punishing the Negro, the whites have purged themselves, and at the same time, have vicariously enjoyed his presumed virility. In effect, Baldwin is repeating what he says in his essays many times, that the white Southerner needs the Negro as a scapegoat for his sexual guilt and insecurity.

I shall turn now from the sexual context into which the Negro has been placed by white society to a consideration of his social and economic standing as seen by Baldwin. The black man is important to whites intent on climbing the social ladder of success because he is an indication of what lies on the bottom rung; one can fall no further than the place occupied by the Negro: "In a way, the Negro tells us where the bottom is: because he is there, and where he is, beneath us, we know where the limits are and how far we must not fall....We must never allow ourselves to fall that low...."²⁹ In a moving letter to his nephew, James, which provides the introductory chapter to The Fire Next Time, Baldwin discusses the way in which white Americans have deliberately made an abstraction of the Negro, rarely thinking of him in human or individual terms. The whites

²⁸ Baldwin, "Going to Meet the Man," Going to Meet the Man (New York, Dial Press, 1965), p. 218.

²⁹ "In Search of a Majority," Nobody Knows My Name, p. 111.

have created a concept which they call a Negro; they have defined for their own purposes what a Negro is, and have laid down the limits to which he may aspire in society. Baldwin tells his nephew, "The details and symbols of your life have been deliberately constructed to make you believe what white people say about you. Please try to remember that what they do and cause you to endure does not testify to your inferiority but to their inhumanity and fear."³⁰ As in his account of the behaviour between whites and blacks, witnessed during a bus ride in Montgomery, Baldwin insists that if Negroes deviate from the image of them created by whites, there follows a sense of confusion and betrayal among whites: "The black man has functioned in the white man's world as a fixed star, as an immovable pillar; and as he moves out of his place, heaven and earth are shaken to their foundations."³¹ But black people are no longer content to be governed by what the white man says he is, and they aspire beyond the limitations set them by white society. Most important of all, Negroes are crying out for recognition of their humanity: "The black man insists, by whatever means he finds at his disposal, that the white man cease to regard him as an exotic rarity and recognize him as a human being."³²

Relating his experiences as a child growing up in Harlem, Baldwin in an essay in Notes of a Native Son discusses the Negro's relations with another minority group which has suffered persecution in America, the Jews. Baldwin makes the point that there was certainly no friendship between the two ethnic minorities, and this was largely because of the success of the

³⁰The Fire Next Time, p. 19.

³¹Ibid., p. 20.

³²"Stranger in the Village," Notes of a Native Son, p. 141.

myths propagated by white Gentile Americans about both groups: "The Jew has been taught - and too often accepts - the legend of Negro inferiority; and the Negro, on the other hand, has found nothing in his experience with Jews to counteract the legend of Semitic greed. Here the American white Gentile has two legends serving him at once: he has divided these minorities and he rules....The structure of the American commonwealth has trapped both these minorities into attitudes of perpetual hostility."³³ As a result of the white man's ability to create a myth or legend about a minority group, and to live by this as truth, Negroes find themselves leading a type of schizophrenic existence, involving a troubling double vision of life, and their place in it. This is the third and final theme I wish to introduce.

The Negro's double vision of life, his sensation of being two different people resulting from his definition by the white world, is best described by W.E.B. DuBois, who in 1897 wrote:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others of measuring one's soul by the tape of the world that looked on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness - an American, a Negro - two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife -- this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self.³⁴

Many of Baldwin's heroes, for example Rufus Scott, Richard Henry and Leo Proudhammer, are the victims of an internal warfare caused by their

³³"The Harlem Ghetto," Notes of a Native Son, p. 57.

³⁴Anger and Beyond, edited by Herbert Hill (New York, Harper and Row Publishers, 1966), p. xi.

"double-consciousness," The Negro must strive to reconcile the way he feels, his desires and ambitions, with the rigid definition placed upon him by the white man. The end result of this type of polarity is often a blind despair, rage or hatred - a destructive fever from which it is almost impossible to recover. In The Fire Next Time, Baldwin recalls how he watched the disintegration of his former childhood friends once they had left school: "My friends were now "downtown" busy, as they put it, "fighting the man"...They began to care less about the way they looked, the way they dressed, the things they did; presently one found them in twos and threes and fours, in a hallway, sharing a jug of wine or a bottle of whiskey, talking, cursing, fighting, sometimes weeping: lost, and unable to say what it was that oppressed them, except that they knew it was "the man" - the white man."³⁵ He remembers, too, in Nobody Knows My Name, the efforts made by Negro parents to make their children look less black, less like what they really were, in the faint hope, perhaps, that they might then suffer less humiliation and trouble. But, as Baldwin bitterly stresses, the effect was simply to confuse the child, to begin the inner turmoil which would continue throughout his life: "One was always being mercilessly scrubbed and polished, as though in the hope that a stain could thus be washed away....And yet it was clear that none of this effort would release one from the stigma and danger of being a Negro; this effort merely increased the shame and rage....And the extraordinary complex of tensions thus set up in the breast, between hatred of whites and contempt for blacks, is very hard to describe. Some of the

³⁵The Fire Next Time, p. 31.

most energetic people of my generation were destroyed by this interior warfare."³⁶ The rage and despair at his situation remain with the Negro, in varying degrees of intensity, all his life. Baldwin remembers when he was a child, being aware of the bitterness of his father against whites, and how his father warned him against the falseness of white people. When his father died, Baldwin saw himself as the inheritor of a legacy of hatred. Writing of his father, Baldwin notes that "he had lived and died in an intolerable bitterness of spirit and it frightened me, as we drove him to the graveyard...to see how powerful and overflowing this bitterness could be and to realize that this bitterness was now mine."³⁷ As a result of the many public humiliations he was subjected to while working in New Jersey, Baldwin's bitterness grew, nourished on the constant rejections and insults he received at the hands of white people. He describes the far-reaching, psychological impact these experiences had upon him in the following way:

I first contracted some dread, chronic disease, the unfailing symptom 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 - one has the choice, merely of living with it consciously or surrendering to it. As for me, this fever has recurred in me, and does, and will until the day I die....I wanted to do something to crush these white faces, which were crushing me.³⁸

Baldwin's heroes, Rufus Scott and Richard Henry, demonstrate the agony of the Negro's fever, as they struggle to assert themselves in a world which continuously puts them down. Peter, the main character of Baldwin's short

³⁶ "East River Downtown: Postscript to a Letter from Harlem," Nobody Knows My Name, p. 73.

³⁷ "Notes of a Native Son," Notes of a Native Son, pp. 73-74.

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 79-80.

story, "Previous Condition," experiences an almost murderous rage when his white landlady evicts him because he is coloured, and because her tenants have been complaining:

"You get outa my house!" she screamed. "I got the right to know who's in my house! This is a white neighborhood. I don't rent to colored people. Why don't you go uptown where you belong?"

"I can't stand niggers," I told her. I started to close the door again but she moved and stuck her foot in the way. I wanted to kill her, I watched her stupid, wrinkled, frightened white face and I wanted to take a club, a hatchet and bring it down with all my weight, splitting her skull down the middle where she parted her iron-grey hair.³⁹

Baldwin says that no black man can ever hope to be entirely free from the war which is waged inside him, caused by his double vision of life. But at the same time he affirms that "you can only be destroyed by believing that you really are what the white world calls a nigger."⁴⁰

Another result of the Negro being defined and limited according to the white image of him is that black people inevitably put on an act before whites, an act which could mean the difference between harsh rebuttal and a patronizing acceptance: "It is part of the price the Negro pays for his position in this society that, as Richard Wright points out, he is almost always acting. A Negro learns to gauge precisely what reaction the alien person facing him desires, and he produces it with disarming artlessness."⁴¹ The black singer, hero of another of Baldwin's short stories, "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon," on the eve of a triumphant return to America after several years spent in France as a successful entertainer, recalls a visit back to New York before he was

³⁹"Previous Condition," Going to Meet the Man, p. 76.

⁴⁰The Fire Next Time, p. 14.

⁴¹"The Harlem Ghetto," Notes of a Native Son, p. 56.

famous, and shortly after his mother's death. After getting off the boat he begins to panic, wondering how he is going to deal with the white dock-side officials: "I had not had to deal with these faces in so long that I had forgotten how to do it. I had once known how to pitch my voice precisely between curtness and servility, and known what razor's edge of a pickaninny's smile would turn away wrath. But I had forgotten all the tricks on which my life had once depended."⁴² The singer tells a French friend his fears about returning to America with his white wife and their young son. His disquietude centres upon the white American's attitude towards Negroes: "They want you to feel that you're not a man, maybe that's the only way they can feel like men....I always feel that I don't exist there, except in someone else's - usually dirty - mind."⁴³ The Negro, then, as Baldwin attempts to illustrate in his works, is utterly divided and confused by the role the white man has designed for him. He desperately wants to reject the image of a mentally inferior, over-sexed creature, someone to be thought of only in terms of statistics, but at the same time, somehow, he has to survive in a white-controlled society. For many the only answer is to play up to the image. Baldwin himself became a victim of an internal warfare, feeling both hatred for whites and contempt for blacks: "I left America because I doubted my ability to survive the fury of the color problem here (sometimes I still do)....I wanted to find out in what way the specialness of my experience could be made to connect me with other people instead of dividing me from them, (I was as isolated

⁴²"This Morning, This Evening, So Soon," Going to Meet the Man, p. 141.

⁴³Ibid., p. 152.

from Negroes as I was from whites, which is what happens when a Negro begins, at bottom, to believe what white people say about him)."⁴⁴ But Baldwin was able to conquer this sense of division in a way denied to several of his main characters. In spite of his anger, Baldwin has a steadfast belief in the reconciling and redemptive power of love. Characters such as Rufus Scott and Richard Henry are destroyed as much by their hatred and despair as by direct white oppression. Baldwin himself recognizes the destructive force of the Negro's bitter hate: "Hatred, which could destroy so much, never failed to destroy the man who hated and this was the immutable law."⁴⁵

In summary, Baldwin's essays are not simply a declaration of Negro independence. Rather they are a clear statement of the interdependence of whites and blacks in America. Suppression of the black man is equated with the suppression of a life force vital to all of America, and Baldwin repeatedly stresses that the white man's salvation depends upon the liberation of the Negro. The white man, if he is to recover his own identity, must recognize in full the humanity of the Negro, and he must recognize also that he has projected onto the Negro his own fears and longings. To Baldwin, it is the height of absurdity and self-delusion for the white man to assume the Negro wishes to be his "equal". Indeed, Baldwin proclaims quite the opposite; the white man must strive to be the equal of blacks: "Why, for example, - especially knowing the family as I do - I should want to marry your sister is a great mystery to me. But your

⁴⁴"The Discovery of What It Means to be An American, "Nobody Knows My Name, p. 17.

⁴⁵"Notes of a Native Son," Notes of a Native Son, p. 95.

sister and I have every right to marry if we wish to....If she cannot raise me to her level, perhaps I can raise her to mine."⁴⁶

Secondly, Baldwin's writings suggest that the Negro, as the majority of people outside America know him, is a concept, an invention promoted by white Americans to further their own social and psychological needs. It is quite clear, says Baldwin, that few of the characteristics that white men attribute to Negroes are universally accurate. Baldwin dwells extensively on the sexual-orientation of the Negro's image in white society, and the traumatic effect this has upon blacks. Finally, stemming from the theme of the Negro as a deliberate image built up by whites for their own ends, Baldwin considers the mental and emotional dilemma of Negroes given dual personalities through white definition, and trying to survive in this schizophrenic type of existence.

Baldwin once said that, "White is not a color, it's an attitude. You're as white as you think you are....Black is a condition."⁴⁷ Baldwin's writings make this distinction - between an attitude of mind and a state of environment - in a compelling way. His essays argue again and again that man's only hope for discovering the truth lies in the relentless examination of his own inner nature. This involves the whites casting off their attitudes of whiteness, and facing the real darkness present in all men: "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....We cannot be free until they are free."⁴⁸

⁴⁶The Fire Next Time, pp. 130-131.

⁴⁷"How Can We Get Black People to Cool It?" Esquire, 70, July 1968, p. 52.

⁴⁸The Fire Next Time, pp. 21-22.

CHAPTER II

ANOTHER COUNTRY

The underlying plea amid the frantic roundabout of sexual and racial conflict in Another Country is for white Americans to "pay their dues," to accept the inhumanity of their treatment of blacks and to at last see Negroes as men, as individuals. The novel was conceived as a joint attack on racial and sexual intolerance, and for this reason Baldwin unites his Negro and homosexual characters through their suffering and persecution. According to literary critic, Mike Thelwell, a West Indian, the novel also represents a direct assault on "...the cultural hegemony, the dictatorship of perception and definition of the Anglo-Saxon vision as it operates through the literature onto society."¹ Thelwell adds, "It presents a self-consciously and even arrogantly black consciousness refuting and demolishing certain cherished notions about the 'quality of life' in society, presenting an unapologetic and relentless vision of white society and white characters as they are registered in a black consciousness."² Baldwin, is, as Thelwell indicates, breaking through a one-way mirror of social definition. His essays, as noted in chapter one, stress that the American Negro is the victim of white power, which has defined in the public, and even in the black man's own consciousness,

¹Mike Thelwell, "Another Country: Baldwin's New York Novel," The Black American Writer, vol. 1, edited by C.W.E. Bigsby (Baltimore, Penguin Books Inc., 1971), p. 188.

²Ibid.

his role or image. In Another Country, however, the tables are turned; it is now the white man who is being defined by a totally black consciousness. This is one of the reasons, it has been suggested, that the novel received such an unfavourable reception from white critics on its publication in 1962.

Another Country grows out of the despair and death of Negro jazz musician, Rufus Scott. Rufus dies at the end of the book's first chapter because he is no longer able to endure white oppression. He has also recently experienced a violent and painful affair with a white southern girl. As he plunges from the George Washington Bridge into the icy waters of the Hudson River below, Rufus curses the white world and its white God: "He raised his eyes to Heaven. He thought, You bastard, You motherfucking bastard. Ain't I your baby too?"³ Although he decries the white world, Rufus' hatred is not total - most of his friends are white, and when he is at his lowest ebb, after almost starving to death on the Bowery, it is to Vivaldo, an "Irish Wop" that Rufus turns, rather than to his family. Rufus experiences turbulent love-hate relationships with Eric, a white bisexual actor, with Vivaldo, and with Leona, the southern girl he finally drives into a home for the insane. Each relationship - with Vivaldo it was simply friendship - founders on the rocks of Rufus' paranoia and his desire to hit back at a white world which has caused him so much suffering and humiliation. As victims of the white man's persistent inhumanity Negroes such as Rufus and his sister Ida can only defend themselves with hatred and with dreams of vengeance, claims Baldwin. For Rufus the

³Baldwin, Another Country (New York, Dell Publishing Co. Inc., 1970), p. 78.

instrument of his revenge becomes Leona, and for Ida, Vivaldo and Ellis, the white television producer with whom she sleeps to further her singing career. Rufus desperately wanted love, wanted a feeling of belonging instead of the feeling of alienation, of being the outsider, which never left him. Vivaldo and Eric are both aware they failed Rufus in some way:

He [Vivaldo] had insisted that he and Rufus were equals. 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....Well, perhaps they had been afraid that if they looked too closely into one another, each would have found - He looked out of the window feeling damp and frightened. Each would have found the abyss. Somewhere in his heart the black boy hated the white boy because he was white. Somewhere in his heart Vivaldo had feared and hated Rufus because he was black.⁴

Rufus' relationship with Eric and with Leona were different, more brutal than his friendship with Vivaldo. There is in Rufus' antagonism and cruelty towards his white lovers a direct correlation with the treatment of Negroes by whites. Rufus tried to make Eric and Leona pay for their sexual pleasure by humiliating and assaulting them - but really he wanted them to pay for being whites: "He had despised Eric's manhood by treating him as a woman by telling him how inferior he was to a woman, by treating him as nothing more than a hideous sexual deformity. But Leona had not been a deformity. And he had used against her the very epithets he had used against Eric, and in the very same way, with the same roaring in his head and the same intolerable pressure in his chest."⁵ Baldwin stresses here that Rufus needed to make his lovers feel "inferior," as though in compensation for

⁴Another Country, p. 116.

⁵Ibid., p. 44.

his own degraded position imposed on him by white society. Later, after Rufus' death, and after his own return to New York from France, Eric tries to analyze his relationship with the black man: "But had he ever loved Rufus? Or had it simply been rage and nostalgia and guilt? and shame? Was it the body of Rufus to which he had clung, or the bodies of dark men, seen briefly somewhere, in a garden or a clearing long ago, sweat running down their chocolate chests and shoulders, their voices ringing out, the white of their jock-strap beautiful against their skin.... Certainly he had never succeeded in making Rufus believe he loved him. Perhaps Rufus had looked into his eyes and seen those dark men Eric saw, and hated him for it."⁶ Eric, like Leona, was from the South, and as a child he suffered humiliation at the hands of fellow whites because of his association with a Negro, his only friend; but unlike Leona, Eric is able to escape Rufus' revenging spirit and to find happiness elsewhere.

Rufus is unable to control his increasing paranoia and the violence this invokes in him. He looks at Leona and is forced to ask himself whether he would still desire her so much were she not a white woman. His relationship with her becomes an enactment of the myth of Negro sexuality, so that when he first seduced Leona, he "...cursed the milk-white bitch and groaned and rode his weapon between her thighs. She began to cry. I told you, he moaned, I'd give you something to cry about, and at once, he felt himself strangling, about to explode or die. A moan and a curse tore through him while he beat her with all the strength he had and felt the venom shoot out of him, enough for a hundred black-

⁶Ibid., p. 166.

white babies."⁷ Later Rufus is forced to admit to himself that, "It was not love he felt during these acts of love; drained and shaking, utterly unsatisfied, he fled from the raped white woman into the bars. In these bars no one applauded his triumph or condemned his guilt. He began to pick fights with white men."⁸ Rufus eventually succumbs to the myth completely, becoming a Bigger Thomas-type figure, carrying out acts of violence against Leona, urged on by a suffocating sense of rage and impotency in the white man's world. Ultimately he destroys both Leona and himself. Calvin Hernton, writing on the relations between blackmen and white women, has noted: "To the black man who is sexually sick, the white woman represents an object for symbolic mutilation as well as an escape from a despised self through the act of sexual intercourse. To the depraved Negro, every white woman is the living embodiment of the forces that have oppressed and crippled him,"⁹ and: "The white world is virtuous, holy, chaste. The black world is dirty, savage, sinful. At the centre of the clean world stands the white woman. To Negroes who feel and suffer the atrocities of racism and inhumanity with intensity, one of the necessary components for transcending or "cleansing" the sin of blackness from their beings is to possess the white woman."¹⁰ In Rufus' case, however, there could be no transcending fear and hatred. No power, not even the love of a white woman, could eliminate Rufus' suffering. Love failed him because his own internal warfare could not allow the trust necessary for happiness. Rufus hated whites, and at the same time sought them out as friends - Eric, Vivaldo, Cass and Richard Silenski, and

⁷Ibid., p. 24.

⁸Ibid., p. 50.

⁹Hernton, op.cit., p. 78.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 84.

finally, Leona. He could not reconcile the two opposing forces working within him. He was unable to accept Leona's love and forget his bitterness, and so their relationship moved from abuse to violence, and ultimately to destruction and madness.

The despair of Rufus Scott is the governing force of the novel. His ghost haunts all of the other major characters. His friends are made partly responsible for his death because they failed to understand the extent of his suffering. After the death of Rufus, Baldwin pursues the themes of vengeance, and of loss of "innocence" through the character of Ida. Made of stronger stuff than her brother, Ida resists any but the most superficial relationship with Vivaldo at first, refusing to expose herself in the same way Rufus did, and denying even a possibility of tenderness and compassion. Ida is one of Baldwin's most compelling illustrations to indicate what the white man's definition of blacks in society has done to the Negro woman. Ida uses the image of Negro sexuality for her own ends. In her affair with Ellis she ruthlessly enters into a role of the white man's Negro whore. Sex is used as a weapon of revenge, and as a means of advancement. Like her brother, Ida is consumed by a passionate rage against whites, and a burning sense of frustration at the Negro's impotency in a white-controlled society. In his analysis of Another Country, Margolies writes:

Like Eric, who has served so many lonely, desperate and unloved men, Ida and Negro women like her, cater to the sick and impassioned needs of white men. Their sex serves to alleviate - at least temporarily - the anguish and the agony of spiritual pariahs. They are, in a sense, priests, confessors, witnesses whose sexuality endows them with mysterious healing qualities, and because they are

privity to the secret life of their supplicants, they possess a hidden knowledge and power that in some respects terrify the very persons who fly to them for succor. The terror is then translated into oppression and persecution in order to compel them to continue to play out their role as healers in the diseased sexual fantasies of white persons. It is precisely this that most enrages and embitters Ida and Baldwin's other Negro characters. They must suffer and stifle and die in the miserable ghettos of America in order to appease the sickened psychic innocence of whites.¹¹

The emphasis on white American "innocence," a prominent theme of Baldwin's essays, is a keynote in Another Country, and in particular, in the relationship of Ida and Vivaldo. Robert Bone has written:

At the heart of what Baldwin calls the white problem is a moral cowardice, a refusal to confront the "dark" side of human experience. The white American, at once over-protected and repressed, exhibits an infuriating tendency to deny the reality of pain and suffering, violence and evil, sex and death....

The American Negro, exposed to the ravages of reality by his status as a slave, has never enjoyed the luxury of innocence. On the contrary, his dark skin has come to be associated, at some buried level of the white psyche, with those forbidden impulses and hidden terrors which the white man is afraid to face. By projecting the "blackness" of his own being upon the dark skin of his Negro victim, the white man hopes to exorcise the chaotic forces that threaten to destroy him from within.¹²

In Ida's eyes, Vivaldo has denied responsibility for her brother's death. He cannot - or will not - acknowledge the white man's guilt. In the end Ida is able to release Vivaldo from his state of innocence, bringing him to reality through a painful awareness of what being black in America really means. Vivaldo's comfortable world of illusion and half-truths is swept away when Ida confronts him with the bitter truths of Negro life. She relates her story from the time of Rufus' death up to and including her affair with Ellis. Howard Harper wrote of Ida:

¹¹Edward Margolies, Native Sons (New York, J.B. Lippincott Co., 1968), p. 120.

¹²Robert Bone, "James Baldwin," The Negro Novel in America (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1965), p. 229.

"Her truth is that sin was black, and the white world drove her to accept its definitions of sin and sex, and indeed to use sex as a weapon."¹³

Vivaldo is at last face to face with a truth he and characters such as Cass and Richard Silenski in the comfort of their white security have never known. Even Cass is liberated from some of her native New England innocence during a conversation with Ida, when the black girl tells her, "You've never decided that the whole world was just one big whorehouse and so the only way for you to make it was to decide to be the biggest, coolest, hardest whore around and make the world pay you back that way."¹⁴ She also admits to Cass that Negroes can never really afford to get close to a white person, as this diminishes the bitterness and hatred from which they find the strength to endure their condition:

If any one white person gets through to you, it kind of destroys your - single-mindedness. They say that love and hate are very close together. Well, that's a fact....wouldn't you hate all white people if they kept you in prison here?... They keep you here because you're black, the filthy white cocksuckers, while they go around jerking themselves off with all that jazz about the land of the free and the home of the brave....I wish I could turn myself into one big fist and grind this miserable country to powder....Vivaldo didn't want to know my brother was dying because he didn't want to know that my brother would still be alive if he hadn't been born black.¹⁵

The final statement in this passage is the crux of the confrontation between Ida and her white lover. It is an accusation Ida levels at all white people, who remain blind to the humanity and dignity of the black man, and who use their power to curb the Negro life force. Ida's rage is an extension of the destructive fever which seized her brother. Her speech to Cass recalls

¹³Howard Harper, "James Baldwin - Art or Propaganda?" Desperate Faith (University of North Carolina Press, 1967), p. 155.

¹⁴Another Country, p.293.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 295.

Rufus' talk with Vivaldo just after he beat up Leona: "How I hate them - all those white sons of bitches out there. They're trying to kill me.... They got the world on a string.... Sometimes I lie here and I listen, listen for a bomb, man, to fall on this city and make all that noise stop. I listen to hear them moan, I want them to bleed and choke, I want to hear them crying, man, for somebody to come help them. They'll cry a long time before I come down there."¹⁶

From the outset, the Scotts recognize that they must wrestle with white society for the right to self-definition, to be what they can be, in the face of a power that is ready with a gratuitous and shameful set of definitions for them. The struggle proves too much for Rufus. Ida achieves a victory in giving to Vivaldo the experience of "blackness," taking away his former naiveté, or innocence, and his illusion of security. Vivaldo, through Ida, achieves liberation, a new sense of reality. Even before her confession about her deception with Ellis, Vivaldo learns painful lessons about the implications of being black:

She [Ida] was very, very dark, she was beautiful; and he was proud to be with her, artlessly proud, in the shining, overt, male way; but the eyes they passed accused him, enviously, of a sniggering, back-alley conquest. White men looked at her than looked at him. They looked at her as though she were no better, though more lascivious and rare, than a whore. And then the eyes of the men sought his, inviting a wet complicity. The women, too. They saw Ida first and might have been happy to admire her if she had been walking alone. But she was with Vivaldo, which gave her the status of a thief....

So their passage raised small clouds of male and female hostility which blew into their faces like dust. And Ida accepted this spiteful tribute with a spiteful pride.¹⁷

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 61.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 125.

During a fierce quarrel which developed after Vivaldo jokingly suggested taking Ida to meet his family, the Negro girl's wrath and bitterness become formidable opponents: "You want to educate your family, get them some slides, you hear? Colored slides....I don't give a damn if there's any hope for them or not. But I know that I am not about to be bugged by any more white jokers who still can't figure out whether I'm human or not."¹⁸ Later in the novel when Vivaldo is getting high with friends, fearing to go home because he knows Ida is not there, his anguish is clearly visible: "Vivaldo thought of his spade chick, his dark girl, his beloved Ida, his mysterious torment and delight and hope, and thought of his own white skin. What did she see when she looked at him?... Oh, Ida, he thought, I'd give up my color for you, I would, only take me, love me as I am!"¹⁹ The only way, however, that Ida can enter into a genuine, an honest relationship with Vivaldo is by showing him the bottomless pit of pain and degradation into which Negroes are forced by whites:

I used to see the way white men watched me, like dogs. And I thought about what I could do to them. How I hated them, the way they looked, and the things they'd say, all dressed up in their damn white skin, and their clothes just so, and their little weak, white pricks jumping in their drawers. You could do any damn thing with them if you just led them along, because they wanted to do something dirty and they knew that you knew how. All black people knew that. Only the polite ones didn't say dirty. They said real. I used to wonder what in the world they did in bed, white people, I mean, between themselves, to get them so sick. Because they are sick, and I'm telling you something that I know.²⁰

Ida tries to indicate the powerlessness of Negroes in their relations with whites. The black man or woman does not exist as a person, as an individual,

¹⁸Ibid., pp. 236-237.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 260.

²⁰Ibid., p. 352.

in the white consciousness, she claims. After confessing her affair with Ellis to Vivaldo, the black girl expresses her self-disgust, and her contempt at the inhumanity of whites: "Oh, yes, I found out all about white people, that's what they were like, alone, where only a black girl could see them, and the black girl might as well have been blind as far as they were concerned. Because they knew they were white, baby, and they ruled the world. But now it was different, sometimes when Ellis put his hands on me, it was all I could do not to scream, not to vomit. It had got to me, it had got to me, and I felt that I was being pumped full of - I don't know what, not poison exactly, but dirt, waste, filth, and I'd never be able to get it out...."²¹ She remembers the night Ellis made her sing at a nightclub, in spite of obvious hostility from the Negro musicians there. When her song was over one of the players whispered to her: "You black white man's whore, don't you never let me catch you on Seventh Avenue, you hear. I'll tear your little black pussy up....I'm going to do it twice, once for every black man you castrate every time you walk, and once for your poor brother because I loved that stud."²² Ida's affair with Ellis, and the Negro musician's condemnation of it, are ironical reverberations of Ida's own viewpoint of Leona's affair with Rufus, when she tells Eric: "You weren't here, you never saw Rufus's last girlfriend - a terrible little whore of a nymphomaniac from Georgia. She wouldn't let him go....I swear there's nothing like a Southern white person, especially a Southern woman when she gets her hooks into a Negro man."²³

²¹Ibid., p. 355.

²²Ibid., p. 357.

²³Ibid., p. 225.

Baldwin is here skilfully juxtaposing myths - the Negro whore, and the Southern white "trash" woman - to indicate how both white and blacks suffer, how they can both be victims of roles imposed on them from outside. Leona was just as much condemned for being a black man's mistress by her own people, as Ida was for being the mistress of a white man. Both women suffer because of the myths from which they cannot escape. Baldwin is, in fact, saying, as he does throughout the novel, that it is love, not colour which is important. Ida did not love Ellis, and consequently suffered pangs of self-disgust; but in Leona's case love failed and, as C.W.E. Bigsby has noted, Leona is "...a victim not only of the tormented dementia of a Negro driven wild by prejudice, but of the elemental failure of love and the instinct for masochism which is the sign of self-hatred."²⁴ It is love which holds Vivaldo and Ida together during the black girl's affair with Ellis, and it is the power of love which enables Vivaldo to make the difficult passage to "another country," when Ida reveals just what the reality of her blackness means. At the novel's end, Vivaldo's innocence is gone. He has progressed towards the acceptance of truths - about himself and about Ida. His growth is not, however, entirely unequivocal; Vivaldo is unsure how he is to live with his new-found knowledge, and he weeps for his former illusions: "And it was she who was comforting him. Her long fingers stroked his back, and he began, slowly, with a horrible strangling sound, to weep, for she was stroking his innocence out of him."²⁵

After considering black/white relations in Another Country mainly in the context of male/female interactions, I want now to examine the

²⁴C.W.E. Bigsby, Confrontation and Commitment (University of Missouri Press, 1967), p. 128.

²⁵Another Country, p. 362.

significance of the parallelism of the Negro and homosexual elements in the book. On this subject Margolies has written: "In Another Country, Baldwin assumes an increasingly militant force, focusing on the superiority of the Negro and the homosexual by virtue of their extended suffering. The homosexual and the Negro are shown as one in that both have gleaned the value of suffering and are thus both redeemable. The average white American, on the other hand, because he has submerged a knowledge of himself, dwells in a kind of psychic hell."²⁶ The homosexual, like the Negro, has been treated as an outcast. He has been subjected to rejection and humiliation by the white majority, and Baldwin draws upon this to equate sexual and racial intolerance as deriving from the same kind of mentality. The American "innocence" which denies the humanity of the Negro, which refuses to admit its kinship with the black man, also denies the potentialities of the homosexual way of life. As Professor Bone has indicated, the homosexual themes of Another Country were first explored - but solely with white characters - in Giovanni's Room (1956).²⁷ There is, however, in the later novel a marked change of attitude on the part of the writer. In Giovanni's Room, a part of Baldwin wished David to escape from "the male prison," while another part of him remained committed to the ideal of homosexual love; whereas in Another Country, Baldwin seems convinced that homosexuality is a liberating force.

Books II and III of Another Country are dominated by the figure of Eric Jones, the white bisexual actor who was once Rufus' lover. Bone suggests that what Baldwin really feels in this novel is dramatized through

²⁶Margolies, op. cit., p. 118.

²⁷Bone, op.cit., p. 228.

Rufus and Eric: "Rufus can be neither fully reconciled to, nor fully defiant of white society. He is incapable of total hate. Pushed to the limits of endurance he commits suicide. Similarly, Eric cannot be fully reconciled to women, nor can he surrender to the male demimonde, so he camps on the outskirts of Hell."²⁸ What Bone claims is only partially true. Eric, for example, is hardly hovering on the brink of the abyss during his time with Yves, or on his return to New York. Of all the characters in Another Country, in fact, Eric appears the most assured, the one most certain of his identity. Through the love he offers, first to Cass and then to Vivaldo, he is able to bring them closer to a sense of their own identities. Significantly, Cass is able to find with Eric more emotional integrity than she has with her middle-class, writer husband, Richard, while Vivaldo's brief sexual encounter with Eric equips him in some measure to face Ida's truth. Professor Bone has criticized Baldwin for purporting to represent reality in his novel, when in actual fact what the writer does, says Bone, is to evade truth with an idealization of homosexual love: "To most, homosexuality will seem rather an evasion than an affirmation of human truth. Ostensibly the novel summons us to reality. Actually, it substitutes for the illusions of white supremacy those of homosexual love."²⁹ But the point surely is, that for Baldwin homosexual love is not an illusion, and particularly in this novel it is important in demonstrating the power of love to help confront reality. Eric's role played out with Cass and Vivaldo is a direct counterpart to that which Baldwin sees the Negro playing opposite

²⁸Ibid., p. 235.

²⁹Ibid., p. 234.

the white man. Eric is a redemptive figure who helps others achieve a sense of true identity through love. This is precisely the role Baldwin envisages the Negro playing in American society: "...you must accept them.... You must accept them and accept them with love. For these innocent people have no other hope. They are, in effect, still trapped in a history which they do not understand;...They have had to believe for many years, and for innumerable reasons, that black men are inferior to white. Many of them, indeed, know better, but,...people find it difficult to act on what they know. To act is to be committed, and to be committed is to be in danger. In this case, the danger, in the minds of most white Americans is the loss of their identity."³⁰

Like the Negro, the homosexual has had definition imposed on him from without. In order to liberate himself from majority oppression the homosexual has to create his own standards and to make up his own definitions as he goes along. This, we are told, is precisely what Eric does: "He knew that he had no honour which the world could recognize. His life, passions, trials, loves were, at worst, filth, and, at best, disease in the eyes of the world, and crimes in the eyes of his countrymen. There were no standards for him except those he could make for himself. There were no standards for him because he could not accept the definitions, the hideously mechanical jargon of the age."³¹ Eric, like Rufus and Ida, has few illusions about the society that surrounds him. He is aware of his isolation and the hostility with which he is regarded by most people. But unlike the Scotts, Eric's awareness has not left him with a consuming bitterness and distrust.

³⁰The Fire Next Time, pp. 19-20.

³¹Another Country, p. 181.

Thelwell writes of Eric that, "He is less tormented and uncertain than the other characters and consequently strangely attractive to them....What this character represents is more subtle than simply an attack on the virility of the conventional American he-man. His ability to discover what and who he is, to accept this, and to be honest to his emotional impulses, however socially unacceptable they may be, is an expression of one of Baldwin's major insights."³² When Vivaldo talks to Eric about the anguish he endures in loving Ida, the actor responds by speaking of his love for Yves, the street boy he met in Paris, and with whom he lived before his return to New York. Vivaldo is understandably cynical about the strength of Eric's commitment to Yves, in the face of his affair with Cass. Eric says one must recognize the innermost truth - in his case, that the most satisfying relationships are with men, relationships with women being only "a kind of superior calisthenics."³³ He tells Vivaldo: "I think you've got to be truthful about the life you have. Otherwise, there's no possibility of achieving the life you want."³⁴ This is exactly what Vivaldo in his relationship with Ida has not been doing. He lied to himself through fear about Ida's affair with Ellis, and more fundamental to their situation, he lied about his relationship with Rufus. Eric's calm acceptance of his alienation from the mass helps Vivaldo confront the past and accept the present.

A similar sort of enlightenment comes to Cass as a result of her affair with Eric. When the two meet for the last time, after Richard has discovered their relationship, Cass sadly reflects, "I'm beginning to think...

³²Thelwell, op.cit., p. 194.

³³Another Country, p. 283.

³⁴Ibid.

that growing just means learning more and more about anguish....You begin to see that you, yourself, innocent, upright you, have contributed to and do contribute to the misery of the world. Which will never end because we're what we are."³⁵ She recognizes at last her part in helping to make her husband what he is. Like Vivaldo, Cass also ultimately comes to realize her responsibility for the sufferings of Rufus and Ida. With this realization comes freedom from illusion. In her book on James Baldwin, Fern Marja Eckman has written: "It is Baldwin's conviction that none of us in the U.S., regardless of individual attitude and the blamelessness of our deeds, can really be judged innocent. We have all of us, he reiterates, contributed in some degrees to the subjugation of a people, passively, or actively, overtly or covertly, consciously or unconsciously."³⁶ It is a conviction borne out in particular by Baldwin's treatment of Vivaldo Moore and Cass Silenski in this novel.

Having examined the interaction of black and white characters, and the equation of the homosexual and Negro elements in Another Country, I propose to conclude this chapter with an evaluation of the novel's significance, summarizing those thematic patterns outlined in the previous chapter and operational in this work. A major point in considering the significance of Another Country is the issue of "consciousness," suggested at the opening of this chapter. Baldwin was one of the first Negro writers to use his insight into the Negro as an image or concept defined by the white power structure to reveal certain truths about the psychological needs of whites.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 341.

³⁶ Fern Marja Eckman, The Furious Passage of James Baldwin (New York, M. Evans and Co. Inc., 1966), p. 23.

In the thirties, Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison attempted to alter the balance of a purely white definition of society and the Negro's place in it. But their efforts were quickly absorbed into the political and economic furor of the times, and after them until Baldwin, there were no really meaningful attempts to probe the image and identity of the Negro as a product of white power, or to show that oppression of the black man was a reflection of the fears and needs of white Americans.

In Another Country, Baldwin has put forward a black definition of men such as Ellis, a man who has "made it" in the eyes of his white contemporaries, and the envy of those aspiring to success such as Richard Silenski. But Ellis and Richard win no admiration from Baldwin. They are the uncaring white men who ignore or try to diminish the sufferings of Negroes. When Ida goes to the Silenskis' home to get news of her brother, Richard becomes indignant at Ida's claim that the police are not in the least concerned about what happens to a black man: "Oh, well, now," cried Richard, his face red, 'is that fair? I mean, hell, I'm sure they'll look for him just like they look for any other citizen of this city.' She looked at him. 'How would you know? I do know - know what I'm talking about. I say they don't care - and they don't care.'

'I don't think you should look at it like that.'"³⁷

Cass Silenski and Vivaldo Moore are also defined through a black consciousness. They are shown to be blind in their "American innocence"³⁸ to blackness, and the suffering resulting from being born black; but they are not beyond

³⁷Another Country, p. 89.

³⁸Margolies, op.cit., p. 118.

redemption. The liberator's role is divided between the homosexual and the Negro, the one working with love and compassion, the other with aggression and a ruthless drive towards reality.

Rufus and Ida are among the strongest of Baldwin's illustrations of Negro suffering because of white definition. Both of them give in to the myth of Negro sexuality in order to try and accommodate themselves in a white-controlled society. Eventually, Rufus becomes, in his own mind, a Negro rapist of a white woman - which he knows is how his violent affair with Leona would be viewed by white southerners. Ida becomes in her mind - and in the eyes of her fellow blacks - a typical Harlem whore in her affair with Ellis. Both Rufus and Ida are governed in some large measure by what white society has said about their race. They know the limitations placed upon them by whites, and so, like Bigger Thomas, the only means for them to achieve identity appears to be through the enactment of those very myths propagated by whites.

The Scotts are also examples of the internal warfare with which a Negro lives, and which in its most destructive form can cause a total disintegration. Rufus and Ida both hate their Harlem background. Part of Ida's relentless quest for revenge for her brother's death is based on her earlier dependence on Rufus to take her out of her ghetto environment. The Scotts blame the white man for their imprisonment in Harlem - yet they have mainly white friends. Rufus and Ida are both victims of the need to escape from the garbage cans, but they are unable to do it on their own. Ida first looked to her brother, then to Vivaldo and finally to Ellis as a means of

escape. Leona could have saved Rufus, but her love served only as a catalyst to the already turbulent and conflicting emotions within him. He both hated and loved white people, and could find no means of reconciling these two warring poles of his soul.

Ultimately what Baldwin is expressing through the frenetic round of couplings and conflicts which constitute Another Country is a conviction that the only meaningful realities are individuals and love. Ihab Hassan expresses this idea as follows: "...Baldwin recognizes that the problem of race is at bottom a hunger of flesh and heart; he sees that it is as chaotic in its infinite inversions as the plight of love. The metaphor of outrage in Another Country is an erotic metaphor which attempts to embrace victims and tormentors as lovers embrace in bed."³⁹ Baldwin, as is evident from all his works, is certain that what is wrong with America has to do with its restrictive, puritanical attitudes towards love. Too much is forbidden, or looked down upon, resulting in crippling repercussions; the country has become sexually unhealthy as indicated by its sexual exploitation of the Negro, who has been conveniently metamorphosed into a phallic fetish. Another Country has a remorseless insistence upon truth, and the reality which individuals should be free to make. Norman Podhoretz has given an excellent summary of Baldwin's intent in this respect:

Whites coupled with Negroes, heterosexual men coupled with homosexuals, homosexuals coupled with women, none of it involving casual lust or the suggestion of perversity, and all of it accompanied by the most serious emotions and resulting in the most intense attachments - it is easy enough to see even from so crude a summary that Baldwin's intention is to deny any moral significance whatever to the categories white and Negro, heterosexual and homosexual. He is

³⁹Ihab Hassan, "The Novel of Outrage - A Minority Voice in Postwar American Fiction," The American Scholar, Vol. 34, no. 2, Spring, 1965, p. 244.

saying that the terms white and Negro refer to two different conditions under which individuals live, but they are still individuals and their lives are still governed by the same fundamental laws of being. And he is saying, similarly, that the terms homosexuality and heterosexuality refer to two different conditions under which individuals pursue love, but they are still individuals and their pursuit of love is still governed by the same fundamental laws of being.⁴⁰

Podhoretz's comments are substantiated by remarks made by Baldwin during an interview in 1965, in which he was asked to consider to what extent a writer who may be bisexual or homosexual identifies with minority movements in a way a writer who is heterosexual would not. Baldwin replied:

...those terms homosexual, bisexual, heterosexual are twentieth century terms which, for me, really have very little meaning. I've never, myself, in watching myself and watching other people, watching life, been able to discern exactly where the barriers were....It would seem to me that in terms of the tremendous self-consciousness that all of us are afflicted by, this distrust we have of the affections and of the flesh, it's revealed most grotesquely in what we call the sexual deviates, the sexual minorities, who are really, simply the most vivid victims of our system of mortification of the flesh....

If one's to live at all, one's certainly got to get rid of labels. It seems to me an incredible way to live, to glory in the fact that one is heterosexual because it proves that you're not something else or vice versa....⁴¹

Another Country is, as Baldwin himself has said, a truthful novel. It came out of the depths of the writer's own experiences. It is the book, Baldwin claims, by which he faced his life. The novel's most formidable achievements are the sense of energy pulsating throughout the work, and the writer's passionate interpretation of experience, of social and emotional reality. Baldwin spells out with ferocity and in naked detail the sufferings of the Negro and of the homosexual. In Another Country Baldwin presents relationships and insights which had never before been revealed in quite the same way, with courage and with an unrelenting insistence on truth.

⁴⁰ Norman Podhoretz, "In Defense of James Baldwin," Doings and Undoings (New York, Noonday Press, 1964), p. 247.

⁴¹ Baldwin, Encounter, 25, July, 1965, p. 59.

CHAPTER III

BLUES FOR MISTER CHARLIE

Blues for Mister Charlie, Baldwin's second attempt at drama, is, perhaps, the most readily attackable of his works. It is a literary pot pourri of outraged sentiment and propaganda, expressed in high-flown rhetoric. As theatre, the play is an embarrassment; as the voice of protest, the work has a basic validity. Blues underlines more acutely than Baldwin's other writings the dilemma of the artist, who is also a public spokesman. The dual identity of Baldwin the writer and Baldwin the spokesman is held in near perfect equilibrium in his essays and novels; but in Blues he succumbs very largely to the latter role. The effect of such an approach is to diminish our sense of social drama. What we see in Blues is, in the main, sentimental melodrama.

Having suggested that, judged within the context of actual stage presentation - viewed in terms of dialogue and characterization - Blues is a failure, I want to go on to examine the play as an example of protest literature, observing at the same time the interaction of those thematic patterns already distinguished in the essays and Another Country. Baldwin's inspiration for Blues stemmed from a visit made to the South, during which time the writer met civil rights worker, Medgar Evers, to whose memory the book is dedicated, and from his knowledge of the Emmett Till case.¹ In the

¹Emmett Till, a Negro youth murdered in Mississippi in 1955 for wolf-whistling at a white woman. His murderer was acquitted.

play's introductory notes, Baldwin expresses a determination to understand the murderer, white store-keeper Lyle Britten: "But if it is true, and I believe it is, that all men are brothers, then we have a duty to try to understand this wretched man; and while we cannot hope to liberate him, begin working toward the liberation of his children."² Baldwin goes on to acknowledge a corporate guilt among Americans in producing men such as Lyle: "It is we who put the cattle-prodder in his hands, and we are responsible for the crimes that he commits. It is we who have persuaded him that Negroes are worthless human beings, and that it is his sacred duty, as a white man, to protect the honor and purity of his tribe."³ Baldwin's depth of understanding, his insight into the psychological make-up of the white racist - despite the magnanimity of those sentiments he expresses in the introductory notes - are not nearly so successful here as, for example, in his short story, Going to Meet the Man. The southern sheriff of the latter is a far more plausible piece of characterization than Baldwin's portrait of Lyle Britten. The reason for this, I think, lies in the rigid, structural opposition of whitetown and blacktown in Blues. It is clear from the play's opening sequence that blacktown is designated as the community of saints, and whitetown that of sinners. This early defined opposition never varies throughout the course of the play. Consequently, however much Baldwin may try to inject sympathetic material into his portrait of the oppressor (such as the facts that Lyle Britten is a poor man, and has had to struggle in life for everything he possesses), the initial, inflexible definition stands: the whites are bad, and Lyle Britten is cast as the villain of the piece.

² Baldwin, Blues for Mister Charlie (New York, Dial Press, 1964), p. xiv.

³ Ibid., pp. xiv-xv.

By giving to blacktown and whitetown their respective symbolic roles of good and bad, Baldwin has inverted the racist's most dearly held generality: "The racist is so terrified of himself as an individual that he dares not think of himself, or of anything as a particular entity. He thinks of himself as a generality. He is the "white race." Likewise, the Negro is not a man, but a concept. He is the "black race." To be white is to be everything white. To be black is to be everything black...."⁴

In Blues, Baldwin is, in fact, saying everything that is black is good, everything white is bad. This sort of structural rigidity can be successful, as, for example, in Genet's The Blacks, but moved to a much more allegorical level. Baldwin's extreme inversion has produced an unhappy, inartistic contrast with the whites being completely dehumanized, and the blacks ludicrously sentimentalized.

The play's pivotal character is Richard Henry, formerly a successful singer in New York, who returns to his small, southern hometown after ruining his career through dope addiction. He is an arrogant, loud-mouthed rebel, full of hatred for whites. This hatred, we discover, has deep-rooted sexual origins. Richard's mother was thought to have been murdered by white men because of her refusal to submit to them sexually. Richard himself turns to drugs to help him face the sexual demands made upon him by white women. Richard has been seen as Baldwin's mouthpiece, but this is a false impression. Of all the figures in Blues, Richard's characterization is the most successful. He has a highly obnoxious side to his character,

⁴Hernton, op.cit., pp. 112-113.

of which Baldwin is well aware:" 'It was very important for me, y'know, to have Richard Henry as offensive and brash and stupid as he is. Sure he had no right to talk to anybody like that. I know that. But do you have the right to shoot him? That's the question.' "⁵In spite of this awareness, however, Richard is still projected as a hero and a martyr. The black boy refuses to conform to the white man's definition of him, and because of this refusal he is killed. His nonconformity becomes a threat to the security of whitetown. In a speech delivered in a New Orleans church in 1963, Baldwin told his audience: "As soon as we are discontent with what you've told us is our place, we destroy your myth of the happy nigger, the noble savage, the shiftless, watermelon-eating darkie."⁶ This is what Richard's confrontation with Lyle amounts to - the destruction of a myth. Richard steps outside the pattern imposed on him by white society. His death is a gesture of rebellion against the "myth of the happy nigger...." C.W.E. Bigsby points out that, "The tension created between Richard as contemptuous rebel and Richard as victim accounts for some of the play's moral confusion."⁷ Richard is neurotic and hostile to a degree which seems unconsciously to invite his own death; yet he is also a hero. His "heroism" lies in the articulation of his hatred and bitterness against whites, witnessed in his adamant refusal to conform to the southern white man's conception of the "nigger."

Richard Henry is formed in the mould of Bigger Thomas and Rufus Scott. Like them he is consumed by his bitterness, and a crippling sense

⁵Eckman, op.cit., p. 232.

⁶Ibid., p. 174.

⁷Bigsby, op.cit., p. 132.

of the Negro's impotence, manifested for Richard most cruelly by his father's inability to revenge his wife's murder. Arrogance and bravado become the keynotes of Richard's behaviour in front of whites. They are the keynotes of a new identity, created in retaliation for the white man's "nigger" image, just as those of Bigger Thomas became murder and rape. It is the same ironical assertion of humanity, and the right to be treated as an individual in defiance of the white world's code. Like Rufus Scott, Richard dies still expressing contempt for the white world. In his last speech, addressed to his murderer, Richard also gets to the heart of the racist's sexual paranoia: "Why have you spent so much time trying to kill me? Why are you always trying to cut off my cock? You worried about it? Why?...Keep your old lady home, you hear? Don't let her near no nigger. She might get to like it. You might get to like it, too."⁸

The character of Lyle Britten is Baldwin's way of illustrating that the psychological make-up of the white racist requires him to have the Negro to hate, blame and fear. The origin of his need, says Baldwin, is sexual. Paradoxically, the Negro has the effect of both affirming and denying the white man's sense of sexual security. As Calvin C. Hernton has noted: "The racist is torn by repressed dreams of sexual virility. On the other hand, he is secretly haunted by fantasies of masculine inadequacy, because he cannot (due to his guilt and his involvement with sex as dirty and vile) bring himself to act out his great dreams with the white woman."⁹ Lyle Britten lusted for the sexual attractions of Willa Mae," a hot little

⁸Blues for Mister Charlie, Act III, p. 120.

⁹Hernton, op.cit., p. 112.

piece,"¹⁰ who didn't wear stockings. He lusted for "poon-tang,"¹¹ looking for a sexual pleasure which he considered white women too virtuous, too far removed from, to be able to satisfy. Lyle is the epitome of the racist, torn by the ambivalence of his sexual attitudes. He ascribes to the Negro - both male and female - a phenomenal sexual prowess. He desires the Negro woman because he wants to do with her those acts he feels repressed from carrying out with the "pure" white woman. But on no account must the pendulum swing the other way; the Negro male is expected to become sexless in the presence of white women. The racist fears his sexuality is dirty and immoral, and, therefore, to be used only with those people, who in his mind symbolically represent sin and darkness - the "niggers." Hernton's comments on this psychological trait are directly relevant to Baldwin's characterization of Lyle and his wife Jo:

He [the racist] therefore creates, out of the Negro female and Negro male, objects of degradation upon which he can act out his own feelings of iniquity and vulgarity. The racist fears that the relationships between Negro men and women are healthier and freer than those between himself and white women. He also fears that black men can be better with white women than he is. He therefore transforms the white woman into a "lily lady," no longer a woman, but an idol, and he fills her with his paranoid fears of Negro men. And, finally, as he craves to maim the Negro, the racist acquires a false sense of superiority and justification for his actions by imagining that the Negro is bent on deflowering the symbol of his guilt and inadequacy - "sacred white womanhood."¹²

Jo and the other women of whitetown are Baldwin's representatives of "sacred white womanhood." The opening scene of Act II is particularly revealing in this context. The white folks are gathered together at

¹⁰Blues for Mister Charlie, Act III, p. 115.

¹¹Ibid., Act II, p. 76.

¹²Hernton, op.cit., p. 120.

the Britten's home to help with preparations for Jo and Lyle's first wedding anniversary, and to lend moral support to Lyle on the eve of his arrest for Richard's killing. The Sunday morning chat turns to what is happening in blacktown. Baldwin's irony is merciless in its exploitation of the comfortable ignorance of the whites:

- Ellis: What's happened to this town? It was peaceful here, we all got along, we didn't have no trouble.
- George: Oh, we had a little trouble from time to time, but it didn't amount to a hill of beans. Niggers was all right then, you could always get you a nigger to help you catch a nigger.
- Lillian: That's right. They had their ways, we had ours, and everything went along the way God intended.
- Jo: I've never been scared in this town before - never. They was all like my own people. I never knew of anyone to mistreat a colored person - have you? And they certainly didn't act mistreated....How come the colored people do hate us so much, all of a sudden? We give them everything they've got!¹³

The conversation between the white people moves on to the difference between whites and blacks, and inevitably on to the sexual "interests" of Negroes. Ellis remarks that, "They got one interest. And it's just below the belly button."¹⁴ It is at this juncture that "sacred white womanhood" receives advice on the animal nature of the Negro male. Ellis confidently asserts that a naked Negro man is in no way to be compared with his white counterpart. He tells Jo: "...if you was to be raped by an orang-outang out of the jungle or a stallion, couldn't do you no worse than a nigger. You wouldn't be no more good for nobody. I've seen it."¹⁵

¹³ Blues for Mister Charlie, Act II, pp. 48-49.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 49.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 50.

The other white men express their agreement with Ellis, determined to protect the honour and virtue of their women against the ravages of Negro lust, never thinking of the Negro women raped or assaulted daily by white men, and for whom there is no protection.

In his portrait of Lyle, Baldwin juxtaposes the white racist's belief in the purity and goodness of white women with his need for and enjoyment of the Negro woman's sexuality. One of the chief reasons for Lyle's marriage to Jo, one gathers, was because, "ain't nobody in this town ever been able to say a word against you."¹⁶ During the flashback sequence before his marriage, the polarities of the racist's sexual attitude are expressed when Lyle tells Parnell: "I got to marry somebody. I got to have some kids. And Jo is - clean!...But, I swear Parnell, she might be the only virgin left in this town. The only white virgin. I can vouch for the fact ain't many black ones."¹⁷ Lyle wants to enjoy the unbounded sexual vigor that he imagines Negroes enjoy, but at the same time he wants his place as a respected pillar of white society, and to achieve that he needs a "clean" white wife, rather than a Negro mistress.

Lyle's anger against Richard is motivated by a sense of bewilderment at the black boy's behaviour. His reactions, together with those of the other members of whitetown, at the civil rights demonstrations organized by Meridian are initially very similar to the puzzlement and dismay experienced by whites on the bus ride in Montgomery which Baldwin described. There is a rift, as in a lovers' quarrel, but in Blues violence is never

¹⁶Ibid., p. 60.

¹⁷Ibid., pp. 107-108.

very far from the surface. Lyle cannot understand why Richard wants to stir up trouble. He is frightened by the fact that Richard will not consent quietly to the same treatment handed out to other members of blacktown. By stepping outside the white man's image of him, Richard constitutes a threat to the comfortable illusions of whitetown: "For while the white world can afford to ignore and persecute the non-violent demonstrations organized by Meridian, it cannot avoid the direct challenge represented by Richard."¹⁸ Richard gives vent to all the hatred and bitterness against whites, which the rest of blacktown have lived with most of their lives. His rage, as noted earlier, has sexual roots: "They can rape and kill our women and we can't do nothing. But if we touch one of their dried-up, pale-assed women, we get our nuts cut off."¹⁹ Richard's confrontation with Lyle at the store, the black boy's murder, and Lyle's subsequent trial, each brings the sexual antagonism between black and white to the surface. When Richard visits Lyle's store, the white man becomes angry at this "uppity" young Negro who has nothing less than a twenty dollar bill with which to buy a Coke. Lyle fears to see a Negro stepping out of line before his "good" wife Jo. And because the conflict takes place in front of Jo, Richard's sexual jibes take on the note of direct challenge. Richard harasses Lyle with contemptuous sneers about his virility: "A baby, huh? How many times did you have to try for it, you no-good, ball-less peckerwood? I'm surprised you could even get it up - look at the way you sweating now."²⁰ It is this direct challenge to his masculinity

¹⁸Bigsby, op.cit., p. 131.

¹⁹Blues for Mister Charlie, Act I, p. 25.

²⁰Ibid., Act II, p. 74.

which serves to enrage the white man most of all. Richard's parting shot: "You let me in that tired chick's drawers, she'll know who's the master!"²¹ left no question that Lyle would seek revenge. The white man had been humiliated by a Negro in his own store and in front of his wife - there was no possible chance that he could forget the affair. Yet, when Richard and Lyle meet for the final time, the Negro is given every possible opportunity to withdraw with only an apology, which nobody can deny Lyle was owed. It is Richard's claim to have superior sexual knowledge of white women which finally drives Lyle to shoot him: "...don't you know I've watched you all my life? All my life! And I know your women, don't you think I don't - better than you!"²² This, as noted earlier, is at the crux of the racist's sexual insecurity - a fear that the black man knows more about, and is better with white women than he himself.

At Lyle's trial, the sexual fears and obsessions of the whites are paramount in the questions put to black witnesses. The counsel for the State brings in much irrelevant, sexually-oriented material such as Richard's photographs of white women, and Meridian Henry's celibacy. Howard Harper's comments on the trial scene are of interest: "The legal process is shown to be a mockery of justice as it was in the Emmett Till case. Baldwin has the State trying the victim rather than the murderer. But he also introduces a Counsel for the Bereaved to defend the victim; this device provides an opportunity for rhetoric, but also destroys the opportunity to exploit the irony inherent in the

²¹Ibid., Act II, p. 75.

²²Ibid., Act III, p. 119.

Till case - the fact that the murdered boy really had no defenders except the ones in the Negro community, who had no legal voice, and the few moderate whites, who were afraid and politically powerless."²³ At the trial Jo lies about the incident at the store, claiming that Richard assaulted her. Her speeches are couched in language calculated to inflame the racist temper of whitetown:

He said all kinds of things, dirty things, like - well - just like I might have been a colored girl, that's what it sounded like to me. Just like some little colored girl he might have met on a street corner and wanted - wanted to - for a night! And I was scared. I hadn't seen a colored boy act like him before. He acted like he was drunk or crazy or maybe he was under the influence of that dope....His eyes was just going and he acted like he had a fire in his belly....

I - I give him the two Cokes, and he tried to grab my hands and pull me to him, and - I - I - he pushed himself up against me real close and hard and, oh, he was just like an animal, I could smell him! And he tried to kiss me, he kept whispering these awful filthy things and I got scared....²⁴

The myth of the Negro male as a lustful, brute animal is here being affirmed by a woman who has been indoctrinated by the paranoid fears of her husband and her white contemporaries. Jo's lie is supported by Parnell, the white liberal newspaper editor, who was instrumental in having Lyle arrested, in spite of the fact that they are close friends. At the trial Parnell betrays the Negro cause by covering up for Jo. He has been torn between loyalty to his friends, and his wish to see justice done. At the play's end, Parnell opts to align himself with the demonstrating Negroes, but although he is allowed to march in the same direction, the Negroes do not accept him as one of them.

²³Harper, op.cit., p. 150.

²⁴Blues for Mister Charlie, Act III, pp. 83-84.

Parnell's liberalism has a sexual and sentimental origin, reaching back to his youth when he fell in love with a Negro girl, whose mother worked at his home, "an affair which left in its wake an obsessive concern with Negroes, which in reality owes little to humanistic impulse."²⁵

Parnell himself is aware of his ambivalent position:

All your life you've been made sick, stunned, dizzy, oh, Lord! driven half mad by blackness. Blackness in front of your eyes. Boys and girls, men and women - you've bowed down in front of them all! And then hated yourself. Hated yourself for debasing yourself? Out with it Parnell! The nigger-lover! Black boys and girls! I've wanted my hands full of them, wanted to drown them, laughing and dancing and making love - making love - wow! - and be transformed, formed, liberated out of this grey-white envelope....I've always been afraid. Afraid of what I saw in their eyes? They don't love me, certainly. You don't love them, either! Sick with a disease only white men catch. Blackness. What is it like to be black?²⁶

Parnell is, in fact, the stereotype of the white man fascinated by black people, but who can see in them only a liberating sensuality. C.W.E. Bigsby has attacked Baldwin on this very point, claiming that the sexual origins of Parnell's interest in blacktown "detracts from the force of his moral integrity."²⁷ But Baldwin is by no means setting Parnell up as a moral hero. His efforts at liberalism - and his motives - are under attack by the writer, too. Parnell will not accept whitetown's values. He forces the arrest of Lyle Britten, but at the crucial moment he backs down from his support of the Negroes, and in consequence loses their trust. Ultimately, Parnell finds himself in a No Man's Land, owned by neither whites nor blacks.

²⁵C.W.E. Bigsby, op.cit., p. 133.

²⁶Blues for Mister Charlie, Act III, p. 106.

²⁷Bigsby, op.cit., p. 133.

At the heart of Blues is a debate between passivity and active revolt, and it is the character of Meridian Henry who embodies this debate. He far more than Richard Henry may, perhaps, be considered Baldwin's spokesman. At first the contrast between Meridian and his son in their attitude towards the white man is striking: Meridian places faith in the positive power of love, Richard in revolt. Finally, however, even Meridian comes to question a religion which preaches passivity and turning the other cheek, and yet which can be made to endorse violence: "For the man who had himself borne his wife's murder without striking back and who had watched the young demonstrators beaten and reviled comes, after his son's death, to question both the virtues of non-violence and the value of Christianity."²⁸ In the eyes of several of the younger members of blacktown, "It's that damn white God that's been lynching us and burning us and castrating us and raping our women and robbing us of everything that makes a man a man for all these hundreds of years."²⁹ Blues, then, goes a step beyond Go Tell It On the Mountain, in which the Negroes imprisoned in their ghetto environments sublimated their anger and bitterness in the hysterical rites of their church. There is no chance of such a happening in Blues, where the illusion of a loving God becomes for many in blacktown the horrifying reality of a white God. At the play's conclusion, Meridian talks of a solution lying with "the Bible and the gun." The alternatives are clear: love or violence, the Negro can wait no longer for his recognition by the white world. The apocalyptic note on which the play draws to a

²⁸ Bigsby, op.cit., p. 132.

²⁹ Blues for Mister Charlie, Act I, p. 4.

close - "You know, for us, it all began with the Bible and the gun. Maybe it will end with the Bible and the gun"³⁰ - is reminiscent of the prophetic warning with which Baldwin concludes The Fire Next Time.

In conclusion, Blues, although by no means good drama, is important as an indictment of racism and, in particular, of the sexual roots of racism. As a play, Blues suffers irreparable damage because of Baldwin's inability to distinguish between rhetoric and genuine language, a fault which manifests itself most forcibly in the pretentious eloquence found in the speeches of several of the Negro characters, as for example, when Meridian Henry, in reply to the counsel for the state during the trial sequence, says, "I am afraid that the gentleman flatters himself. I do not wish to see Negroes become the equal of their murderers. I wish us to become equal to ourselves. To become a people so free in themselves that they will have no need to - fear - others - and have no need to murder others."³¹ Baldwin sets before his audience a southern town in bondage to its fears. The Negroes fear the power of the white oppressor, and the whites fear the blacks for reasons they are unable to explain. Baldwin has argued in his essays many times that the white man's irrational fear of the black has to do with his reluctance to view his own inner nature - which is what the Negro represents. As a storekeeper, Lyle Britten is a relatively powerful man among his black customers, and yet he is disturbed by the appearance and behaviour of Richard. At last Lyle is confronted with the illusions of his world: he at last sees the Negro as an individual, with feelings of pride and anger like himself. But he cannot afford to accept this knowledge as reality, otherwise the basis of his way of life would crumble. More important than this, however, is the sexual antagonism between Lyle and Richard. The first time Lyle saw Richard dancing with Juanita at Papa D's, the white man felt envy: "Joel, you know I ain't never going to be able to dance like that."³² Later when sorely provoked

³⁰ Ibid., Act III, p. 120.

³¹ Ibid., p. 102.

³² Ibid., Act I, p. 31.

by Richard at his own store, Lyle finds his manhood being challenged by the Negro, and his guarded fears of the black man's sexual superiority rise to the surface. Richard, then, is killed for two reasons: firstly, for his rejection of the white man's concept of the "happy nigger...the shiftless, watermelon-eating darkie."³³ His refusal to conform menaces the security of Lyle's world; and secondly, because of his supposed sexual threat.

Through the central conflict of Blues, we see the linking of oppressor and the oppressed through fear and need. The white racist desperately needs to believe in his concept of the Negro, and to believe himself superior - in all ways. This, moreover, is related to his heated, animal attraction to Negro women, as opposed to his warped and repressed sexual feelings towards his wife. Finally, we see the double life the Negro is expected to lead - as he tries to live out his strange existence, as a Negro and as a man. The result of this effort is seen in the erosive rage of Lorenzo and Richard, who owes something in characterization to the Richard of Baldwin's first major work, Go Tell It On the Mountain - a figure who also refused to conform to the white man's view of him, and who ultimately destroyed himself rather than endure the bitterness in his heart any longer. It can also be seen in the tortured self-examination of Meridian Henry, who although delivering a funeral speech over his son's dead body in which he re-dedicating himself to a continued faith in the power of love, also comes to accept that passivity and non-violence are not enough to bring the whites to a sense of their guilt.

³³Eckman, op.cit., p. 174.

CHAPTER IV

TELL ME HOW LONG THE TRAIN'S BEEN GONE

Baldwin's most recent novel, Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, has been viewed by several critics as an indication of the writer's flagging talent. Without doubt, it is lacking the intensity of feeling which characterized much of Baldwin's earlier work. The prevailing tone is one of weary cynicism. Philip Toynbee declared that the book is "a wan stereotype, mournfully plodding from one hack convention to the next. We get every type in the book, from the Negro militant to the Negro preacher...."¹ Toynbee concludes that "Baldwin's raw-skinned pilgrimage through racist America has been too painful and enraging for his talent to encompass it. Overwhelmed by his own feelings he has collapsed into a sort of imitative jabbering. Stunned by experiences which are too hideously real, he has retreated into the most effective of all unrealities, the unreality of the ham novel...."² While agreeing with Toynbee's criticism in the main, I think this critic has missed what is new, and what is very much alive in Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone. The book is Baldwin's most ironical work. It is also, perhaps, his most pessimistic.

The novel revolves round one central metaphor - the theatre. What happens to Leo Proudhammer, the roles he is forced to play - on stage and off - because of his colour is a reflection of the Negro's position

¹Philip Toynbee, "Don't Go Tell It on the Mountain," The Atlantic Monthly, 222, July, 1968, p. 91.

²Ibid., p. 92.

within American society. This, and Baldwin's exploration of the racist myth which denies the possibility of love between black and white will be the focal points of this chapter.

While in hospital recovering from a near fatal heart attack, Proudhammer, now a celebrated actor, broods over the central events of his life. His first major flashback goes over ground Baldwin has covered several times before in his essays and novels, childhood in Harlem. Brian Lee has indicated that the Harlem sequences of Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone invite immediate comparison with those in Go Tell It on the Mountain. "The two worlds are from the same recognizable source, but the angle of vision is different. The evil world of cops, crime, squalor and poverty, from which John Grimes escaped into the Church, is the only reality here. For Leo's father and his brother Caleb, God is a sick joke, the object of their most bitter irony: 'Thanks, good Jesus Christ. Thanks for letting us go home. I mean, I know you didn't have to do it. You could have let us just get our brains beat out. Remind me, oh Lord, to put an extra nickel on the plate next Sunday.' "³ As a child, Leo remembers being both intrigued and frightened by white people: "They fascinated me more than the colored people did because I knew nothing about them and could not imagine what they were like....I rushed off the train terrified of what these white people might do to me with no colored person around to protect me."⁴ Gradually, however, the fascination with whites turns to an agonizing hatred. Leo becomes aware that the hardship, frustration and despair he witnesses in his family life are the result of

³Brian Lee, "James Baldwin, Caliban to Prospero," The Black American Writer, p. 177.

⁴Baldwin, Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone (New York, Dell Publishing Co. Inc., 1969), pp. 26-27.

white power. In an essay on Harlem, Baldwin wrote: "The people in Harlem know they are living there because white people do not think they are good enough to live anywhere else. No amount of 'improvement' can sweeten this fact."⁵ It is recognition of this fact which so embitters Leo's father, the proud and beautiful black man from Barbados, worn down by constant humiliation at the hands of white landlords, factory foremen, and welfare workers. Leo's boyish interest in whites is brought to a sudden halt one night when he and Caleb are stopped, interrogated and searched by white policemen. Caleb is convinced that he would have received a beating had he not had his small brother with him as "protection." Leo asks why the police would have beaten him, and Caleb replies with a bitterness reminiscent of that heard in the speeches of Rufus and Ida Scott: "Because I'm black.... That's what for. Because I'm black and they paid to beat on black asses. But, with a kid your size, they might just get into trouble. So they let us go....All black people are shit to them. You remember that. You black like me and they going to hate you as long as you live just because you're black. There's something wrong with them. They got some kind of disease. I hope to God it kills them soon....But it's liable to kill us before it kills them."⁶ Caleb's view is understandably extreme, but the incident does foreshadow both Caleb's wrongful arrest and imprisonment, and Leo's own arrest by white policemen several years later.

Everything inside and outside his home contributes to Leo's growing awareness of the inferior position of his race. For this reason he is scared to admit to his family his theatrical ambitions. Ultimately

⁵Baldwin, "Fifth Avenue, Uptown: A Letter from Harlem," Nobody Knows My Name, p. 61.

⁶Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, p. 46.

he tells his brother he would like to become an actor. Caleb warns that the odds are stacked heavily against his success. He comments significantly that Leo will be "on the great white way."⁷ Leo embarks on a career which has been virtually closed to his people, with a few remarkable exceptions. By choosing to become an actor, Leo is deliberately rejecting the "nigger" concept imposed upon him by white society. He aspires to move beyond white definition of what his role, or "place" should be. Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone is the record of his struggle to achieve his own definition. The novel's most basic irony is the fact that he can only attain such status on the stage.

At the time of his heart attack, Leo is booked to play the leading role in a new film. It is a part which does not specifically require a Negro actor, and as such Leo's engagement is seen as a major breakthrough by those who have always thought that the summit of a Negro's acting ambition must be to play Emperor Jones or Othello. Baldwin's ironic title for this film is "Big Deal." The history of Leo's acting career is a miniature version of the history of the American Negro. Leo graduates from one stereotyped role to another without being able to discover any visible connection between the image he must project and his sense of his own life. Reflecting on his very early roles - inevitably he was cast in one-line parts as butler, waiter, or clown - Leo comments, "I don't think I'd have minded if I could have found a role which had some relation to the life I lived, the life I knew, some role which

⁷Ibid., p. 174.

did not traduce entirely my own sense of life, of my own life....One was imitating an artifact, one might as well have been an icon, and one's performance depended not at all on what one saw - still less, God forbid, on what one felt - but on what the audience had come to see, had been trained to see."⁸ Here Baldwin is presenting a direct correlation between Leo's frustrations as an actor and those of the Negro confronting the white man's conceptualization of him. Like the struggling actor, the Negro is forced to play inferior roles which bear no resemblance to life as he knows it. As noted in the previous chapter, the Negro has a dual personality imposed upon him by virtue of the white man's definition of him, which is totally at odds with the definition he wishes to have. Leo refers to the conditioning of theatre audiences, and the way in which this governed an actor's performance. Again Baldwin is drawing a parallel between the attitudes and reactions of theatre audiences, and those of the white man towards the Negro. Leo came to feel that his stereotyped roles were dependent solely on what the audience expected to see; in much the same way, the Negro knows that whites expect a certain pattern of behaviour from him, and are disturbed when this anticipated pattern is not adhered to. When he eventually does play white parts, Leo finds to his surprise that these too bear little relation to any discoverable reality. He discovers, in fact, that white people operate in a vacuum even greater than the Negro's, and that they know even less about themselves: "Most of the roles played by white people could only be played by means of tricks, tricks which would never help one to come closer to life." He comes to

⁸Ibid., p. 264.

the conclusion that "the people who destroyed my history had also destroyed their own."⁹

In his off stage problems, Leo is able to make use of both the stereotype Negro image, and in complete contrast, his denial of that stereotype. For example, at the theatrical party he attends with Barbara at the very outset of their careers, Leo acts the role of the sullen, sexual and exotic black man. He and Barbara have an unspoken agreement about the act they perform for the benefit of the other party guests: "Her job was mainly to be charming, thus divesting the company of their spiritual valuables. My job was to be surly - my surliness being, precisely, my charm. At this point in our lives, Barbara and I had never slept together, but we had also, by now, been forced to discover how extremely unattractive and indeed offensive most people consider the truth to be. We no longer dreamed of telling the truth. Thus Barbara knew herself to be branded, merely by the fact of my presence...."¹⁰ Baldwin is making the point he repeats throughout his work - that white people have set ideas about the character of Negroes, and about the type of relationship which can exist between Black and white; they believe it can be nothing more than a sexual tie. At the party, Leo and Barbara make capital out of the stereotype. They exploit the white man's concepts of interracial relations for their own ends, secretly laughing at their audience. Describing the effects of a Negro at social gatherings, Baldwin said, "If a Negro is present in a room, there's a great silence then. Sex is on everybody's mind, but nobody's going to say anything. You can see people,

⁹ Ibid., p. 266.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 64-65.

almost in the middle of sentences, shifting gears and making wild turns, They wanted to talk sex, but now they're not going to because here sex is, right in the middle of the room, drinking a dry martini. And it all becomes extremely polite and antiseptic. But on the other hand, at four o'clock in the morning, when everybody's drunk enough, then extraordinary things can happen."¹¹ Baldwin's description in this passage is very similar to his account of the atmosphere which prevails at the party Leo and Barbara attend.

Later in the novel, after Leo and Barbara have become members of the Actors' Means Workshop, Leo runs into trouble with the local police, simply because he was seen leaving a white woman's apartment. Leo refuses to conform to the image the white police expect of him - a cowering, fearful black man. He controls his terror, and puts angry indignation into his voice instead when they come to arrest him:

...I did not whimper, What for? I ain't done nothing, but asked, as deliberately as I could, and as mockingly as I could, "What is it that you imagine me to have done?"

I was gambling on their reflexes. They were accustomed to black boys whimpering, or, on the other hand, defiant, and it was easy, in either case, for them to know exactly what to do - to amuse themselves with the whimper or the defiance, and beat the shit out of the boy, and sometimes to beat the boy to death. I had to walk a tightrope between groveling and shouting, and had to hope that a faintly mocking amusement would be sufficiently unexpected to confound their reflexes and immobilize their impulses, at least until I got to the station, where I would have to begin to calculate again. Central to my calculations was the terror of finding myself begging for mercy.¹²

At the station, much to the amusement of the white police officer in

¹¹"Disturber of the Peace: James Baldwin," The Black American Writer, p. 207.

¹²Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, pp. 193-194.

charge, Leo demands to see a lawyer before he will answer any questions. With a bitter humour Leo reflects, "Well, it was funny, all right. I saw what they saw - a funky, little black boy, talking about his lawyer."¹³ He succeeds, however, in baffling his captors. Leo has moved out of the pattern of Negro behaviour which the white police expect. They are now uncertain about their own positions, as reflected in the "fatherly" talk delivered to Leo by the officer in charge. The hypocrisy and complacency of the man's words - "Leo, I'm sorry to say this, but a lot of your friends are mighty bad company for a fine-looking boy like you....That's how this mistake was made. We weren't looking for you - we wasn't expecting to find no colored people in that house....You stay with your own people and you're sure to stay out of trouble. Why we never have any trouble with the colored people in this town - they're just the nicest bunch of colored people you'd ever want to meet, they work hard and save their money, and go to church,"¹⁴ - are ironically exploited by Baldwin in much the same way that he exposed the ignorance of whitetown in Blues for Mister Charlie. Ultimately, it is only Leo's connections with the Actors' Workshop, and the powerful San-Marquands which saves him from the wrath of the racist townspeople.

In his work as chauffeur and handyman for the Workshop, Leo encounters frequent snubs and humiliation at the hands of the white townsfolk who object both to his presence in the white section of town, and to his close friendship with Jerry and Barbara: "They disliked me because I did not appear to realize that both Barbara and Jerry were white.

¹³ Ibid., p. 197.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 199-200.

I did not, in fact, appear to know that I was colored and this filled them with such baleful exasperation, such an exasperated wonder, that the waitress' hand, when I stopped in the diner, actually trembled as she poured my coffee, and people moved away from me as though I were possessed by evil spirits. Naturally, I despised them. They didn't even have the courage of their convictions, for if they had, they would have tarred and feathered me and ridden me out of town. But they didn't dare do this because of my connections with the Workshop."¹⁵ The only place Leo is accepted with relative ease is at the local pizza house, where a great sense of camaraderie is established between the Sicilian proprietors and the Italian-born Jerry. This, however, only serves to accentuate Leo's sense of isolation. He envies the carefree relationship Jerry is able to enjoy with the Sicilians: "For Jerry's relationship with these Sicilians was very unlike my relationship with the Negroes in the town. I envied Jerry. Perhaps I hated him a little bit, too."¹⁶ Leo's feelings of alienation from his own race are illustrated in the episode at the pizza house in which Leo's party of white friends get together with two Negro workers. Leo and his group are already seated when the Negroes enter. Immediately, Leo feels guilty at being seen with three white people - two of whom are women - by members of his own race. He senses a gulf between himself and his fellow Negroes, in marked contrast with the warmth and naturalness of the rapport between Jerry and the Sicilians: "There we sat, under the eyes of the observant and bewildered Sicilians, studiously

¹⁵Ibid., p. 104.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 119.

ignoring each other...."¹⁷ The situation changes when Leo buys the Negroes a round of drinks: "If we had not broken through to each other, at least we had managed to accept each other's presence."¹⁸ Eventually, the two Negroes join Leo's party, and Leo feels "incredibly happy not to have been rejected."¹⁹ Baldwin's dialogue during this black/white encounter is, for the most part, highly stilted and unreal - perhaps the author's indication that black and white are so unused to communicating, that when an opportunity to do so presents itself the participants are unable to behave with any degree of naturalness. Baldwin is showing us that black/white meetings operate within a framework of so many myths and taboos that perfect spontaneity is impossible. It is Leo, however, upon whom the burden of interracial tension is greatest. When the party moves on to the black quarter of town, he is very much aware of having crossed over a "border." He, much more than the other two Negroes, Fowler and Matthew, appears nervous about their reception at Lucy's Place. He is very sensitive to the reactions of the Negroes there when he enters still holding Madeleine's hand:

Some of the women looked at me with a terrible contempt. Some of the men looked at me as though I were a fool, but just possibly - looking at Madeleine with a cool, speculative, lewd contempt - a lucky fool. Their eyes said they wouldn't mind, maybe taking my place in Madeleine's bed....I knew some of them wouldn't scruple to suggest this. If a white woman would sleep with one black man, then obviously she had no self respect, and would sleep with an entire black regiment....It seemed to me that their estimate of Madeleine revealed their estimate of themselves, and this revealed estimate frightened me as being, perhaps after all, at bottom, my own. But - they saw what they saw. They had been formed by the images made of them by those who had the deepest necessity to despise them. The bitterly contemptuous uses to which they had been put by others

¹⁷Ibid., p. 130.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 131.

¹⁹Ibid., pp. 131-132.

was the beginning of their history, the key to their lives, and the very cornerstone of their identities: exactly like those who had first maligned them, they saw what their history had taught them to see.²⁰

Baldwin is here saying that the white man's definitions of the Negro and of interracial relationships have entered the unconscious of the black man to such a degree that he is only capable of the same kind of narrow-minded value judgments as the white man. The Negroes who see Leo and Madeleine together assume they are enjoying a lustful, sexual and "dirty" association; they see Madeleine as an immoral woman because she is prepared to sleep with a Negro - these are precisely the sentiments a white racist would have on watching the same scene. Leo is so acutely aware of what is going on in the minds of his fellow Negroes that he finds himself frightened to dance with Madeleine before them: "I was afraid to dance. This realization came as a shock, for I had never been afraid to dance before. But I had never danced with a white woman."²¹ The episode at Lucy's Place is a dramatic counterpart to the white theatrical party Leo attended with Barbara. The situation is now reversed, however; instead of the focus being on Leo, as the outsider, it is now on the white woman seen with him, and the judgment comes not from whites but from Negroes. The underlying irony is, of course, that there is no difference in the prejudiced verdicts of the observers in each case. Leo, himself, is a victim of racial myths and social conditioning, so much so that when he goes to Madeleine's apartment and starts to make love to her, he sees the act as freakish and abnormal. He assumes Madeleine agreed to make love out of

²⁰Ibid., p. 146.

²¹Ibid., p. 148.

racial curiosity, and that she sees in him some wild animal. Suddenly Leo feels afraid, and dirty: "I wanted to be held and cleansed and emptied."²² He is almost afraid to look at the white woman for fear of what he will see in her eyes. Baldwin at this point, however, ruins a psychologically plausible situation by injecting lines of ludicrous melodrama into Leo's reflections at this juncture: "Then I opened my eyes and looked at her, her clothes half off, and all the white flesh waiting, and I wondered if she, while I had been trampling through a meadow, had been crawling through a jungle, dreading the hot breath and awaiting the great stroke of King Kong."²³

Baldwin's account of Leo's relationship with Barbara initially bears many similarities to that between Rufus and Leona in Another Country. Barbara, like Leona, is from the South. Unlike Leona, however, she is from a rich Kentucky family. It seems at first that Leo and Barbara will become trapped within the racist myth which denies that love between black and white can ever exist, just as Rufus and Leona found themselves trapped. Baldwin is at pains to emphasize the pressures with which the couple have to live, particularly after Jerry leaves them. Leo has no illusions about their life together: "I loved Barbara. I knew it then, and I really know it now; but what, I asked myself, was I to do with her? Love, honour, and protect. But these were not among my possibilities."²⁴ Leo recognizes that one day his colour may stand in the way of Barbara's advancement, and that her success is much more likely than his own: "I

^{22, 23}

Ibid., p. 153.

²⁴Ibid., p. 208.

did not see any future for us; I did not see any future for myself at all. Barbara was young and talented and pretty, and single-minded. There was nothing to prevent her from scaling the heights. Her eminence was but a matter of time. And what could she then do with her sad, dark lover, a boy trapped in the wrong time, the wrong place, and with the wrong ambitions trapped in the wrong skin?...Because I was certain that Barbara could not stay with me, I dared not be committed to Barbara."²⁵ Barbara, too, is aware that in order to have any sort of life together they must sacrifice most of the things other people take for granted, such as marriage, a home, and children. Their relationship can survive only by a ruthless pursuit of their individual careers, and by being apart for much of the time. Their happiest moments together are when they can momentarily turn their backs upon the world which condemns their love, as, for example, in their brief, romantic idyll on the mountainside. Barbara has the strength and perception necessary to accept the conditions of her love for Leo without bitterness. She says, "If we were different people, and very, very lucky, we might beat the first hurdle, the black-white thing. If we weren't who we are, we could always just leave this - unfriendly - country, and go somewhere else. But we're as we are. I knew when I thought about it, that we couldn't beat the two of them together. I don't think you'd care much that your wife was white - but a wife who was both white and rich! It would be horrible. We'd soon stop loving each other."²⁶ Barbara is remarkably aware of the dangers of the childhood influences she was exposed to. When she first sleeps with

²⁵Ibid., p. 274.

²⁶Ibid., p. 213.

Leo, she admits that she had questioned her motives in being interested physically in a Negro. Was she still being influenced by her Southern upbringing, for example, which taught her that the black man is a rapist, "and not only is he a rapist, but he only rapes white women. And not only that, but he's got something in his underwear big and black and always hard and it will change you forever if it touches you."²⁷ Barbara refuses to "experiment," however, and waits until she is perfectly sure of her feelings before confessing her love to Leo. The couple have to learn to live with the entrenched prejudices, of her parents and his; constant lascivious questioning by reporters about their private lives after they have become celebrities; and physical menaces from angry townspeople when they are young and unprotected by their fame. The first time they walk to the San-Marquands together without Jerry they are subjected to the racist hostility of the white townspeople. Leo reflects that "it is easier to walk such a gauntlet alone. It is very hard for two, especially if they care about each other, especially if one is black and one is white, especially if one is male and one is female."²⁸ For Leo and Barbara there is no way out of this trap, except to separate. They make the same discovery that Rufus and Leona did, that "fear and love cannot long remain in the same bed together...we were discovering that love alone was not enough - alone, we were doomed."²⁹ While they lived in the house alone together the couple were in constant fear of attack by an outraged white mob. Leo, like Rufus Scott, felt no comfort or security even in the arms of the woman who loved him. He and Barbara ultimately become great stage successes - but

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid., p. 216.

²⁹Ibid., p. 269.

at the price of their life together.

Baldwin's portrait of Barbara is one of his most sympathetic studies of a white person, and towards the close of Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone we are shown, in the form of a social confrontation between Barbara's family and Leo and Black Christopher, the power of the influences she had to struggle against. The meeting takes place in Leo's plush New York apartment, where he is now living with a young revolutionary, always called Black Christopher. Barbara's parents, her brother, his wife, and their friend arrive to view the famous Leo Proudhammer. Restraints are apparent from the outset; Barbara and Leo normally kiss in greeting, but this time they don't. Barbara's mother gushes friendliness and racial tolerance. It is only after a few drinks that the polished and artificial veneer begins to crumble, and the atmosphere exudes racial conflict. In many ways it is an amusing scene, as Mrs. King becomes progressively more and more drunk, lapping up the fame which surrounds her, while her son and his friend make their true feelings regarding Negroes perfectly clear. The interaction of Black Christopher and the Kentuckians is the most humorous, and the most vindictive part of the episode. Christopher, very urbane and controlled, goes into the attack in a mocking voice:

I'm not blaming you....You had a good thing going for you. You'd done already killed off most of the Indians and you'd robbed them of their land and now you had all these blacks working for you for nothing and you didn't want no black cat from Walla Walla being able to talk to no black cat from Boola Boola. If they could have talked to each other, they might have figured out a way of chopping off your heads, and getting rid of you....So you gave us Jesus. And told us it was the Lord's will that we should be toting the barges and lifting the bales while you all sat on your big, fat

white behinds and got rich.³⁰

Barbara's mother tries to ease the situation by proving how racially tolerant her family really were: "You don't have to talk to us this way. You don't know how many colored friends we have down where we come from.... We don't care about the color of a person's skin - we never have done!"³¹ Her display of "understanding" sickens Leo, who comprehends perfectly well the hypocrisy of the scene in which they are all participating. His anger is finally aroused by the impertinent questioning and ignorant assumptions of Barbara's brother and his friend. They try to use Leo as an example of how any Negro in America is able to "make it" with sufficient determination: "'And you made it, all right didn't you?' Bennett asked. 'Why I bet you make more money than I do - I know you make more money than I do....And I bet you didn't do it sitting around, feeling sorry for yourself, did you?'"³² The white men insist that anybody can get ahead if they try hard enough. Leo's patience finally snaps, and he retorts, "'You can't imagine my life, and I won't discuss it. I don't make as much money as you think I do, and I don't work as often as I would if I were white. Those are just the facts. The point is that the Negroes of this country are treated as none of you would dream of treating a dog or a cat....If you don't want to believe it, well, that's your problem.'"³³ An angry silence follows Leo's assertions. Baldwin is here underlining a favourite theme of his essays - that the white man will much rather live with his comfortable, familiar illusions than face the truth about Negro life in

³⁰Ibid., p. 355.

³¹Ibid., p. 356.

³²Ibid.

³³Ibid., p. 358.

America, and until they do face that truth there can be no hope of liberation for either whites or blacks; both are enslaved by the prevailing myths and illusions.

The presence of Black Christopher in this novel is, I think, a natural progression from Baldwin's stand at the end of Blues for Mister Charlie, in which a union of Bible and gun is advocated and accepted as a means to achieve the Negro's humanity. In Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone all hope of non-violent measures, in liberation through the power of love, seems to have been abandoned. Christopher indicates a growing pessimism within Baldwin about the "solution" of the Negro troubles, or of the White Problem as he prefers to call it. Baldwin's rejection of the Bible and the doctrine of love is further suggested by his treatment of Caleb. Leo's older brother is seen at first as a rebel against white power, in the same mould as other of Baldwin's angry heroes such as Rufus Scott and Richard Henry. As a result of his wartime experiences, however, Caleb "gets religion," and finally becomes a minister. As a youth, Caleb is Leo's hero. He is hard and embittered as a result of his experiences in the streets of Harlem, and in gaol, punished for an offence he did not commit. Caleb's experiences in the Army while overseas correspond directly to a passage from The Fire Next Time, in which Baldwin wrote: "You must put yourself in the skin of a man who is wearing a uniform of his country, is a candidate for death in its defense, and who is called a "nigger" by his comrades-in-arms and his officers; who is almost always given the hardest, ugliest, most menial work to do; who

knows that the white G.I. has informed the Europeans that he is subhuman... and who watches German prisoners of war being treated by Americans with more human dignity than he has ever received at their hands. And who, at the same time, as a human being, is far freer in a strange land than he has ever been at home."³⁴ But in the midst of fighting and death, and when his own death seems very imminent, and when he is most aware of his hatred of white men, Caleb sensed that "there was a God somewhere."³⁵ But he cannot longer command his brother's admiration. In Leo's eyes - and in Baldwin's, I believe - Caleb is shirking the real issues which face his race, hiding within the comforting veil of religion, another illusion as far as Leo is concerned: "'I wouldn't be like you and tell all these lies to all these ignorant people, all these unhappy people....That God you talk about, that miserable white cock-sucker - look at His handiwork, look!...I curse your God, Caleb, I curse Him, from the bottom of my heart, I curse Him'"³⁶ Caleb is depicted in the latter portion of the novel as a cold, unsympathetic character. He has none of the charm or force of Meridian Henry, and there is no suggestion that he has any of the answers for his people. No, at the novel's conclusion, Leo, after much wavering, comes down on the side of militant Black Christopher, who says, "Look, I'm a young cat. I've already been under the feet of horses, and I've already been beaten by chains. Well. You must want me to keep going under the feet of horses?" When Leo says he doesn't, Christopher draws the moral: "Then I think you got to agree that we need us some guns.

³⁴The Fire Next Time, p. 76.

³⁵Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, p. 309.

³⁶Ibid., p. 326.

Right?" Although he does agree, Leo demurs a little: "But we're outnumbered, you know." And Christopher has the last word, replying, "Shit. So were the early Christians."³⁷

Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone is in some respects the most autobiographical of Baldwin's novels. As Brian Lee has put it, "Baldwin creates a frightening picture in the novel of the making of Public Man - a man not unlike James Baldwin."³⁸ Leo's problems by no means diminish with his growing fame. The Negro who "makes it" is as remote - perhaps more so - from the rest of humanity as those who don't. It is a dilemma which Baldwin described in Nobody Knows My Name, in which he suggests that when a Negro succeeds in rising above his obscurity, the price he pays is too great since "all he can possibly find himself exposed to is the grim emptiness of the white world...and the even more ghastly emptiness of black people who wish they were white."³⁹ He adds "I am suggesting that one of the prices an American Negro pays - or can pay - for what is called his 'acceptance' is a profound, almost ineradicable self-hatred. This corrupts every aspect of his living, he is never at peace again...."⁴⁰ Leo Proudhammer's self-hatred comes to the surface during his stay in hospital. As he lies in bed recovering from his heart attack, pondering on the course of his life thus far, feelings of anguish and self-contempt which he had kept hidden for so long now overwhelm him: "I wanted to die - to drop my black carcass some place

³⁷Ibid., p. 370.

³⁸Brian Lee, op.cit., p. 179.

³⁹"Alas, Poor Richard," Nobody Knows My Name, p. 163.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 170.

and never be humiliated by it any more....I put my hands to my woolly head, that vile plantation, as though I would tear it from my skull. And I knew that I had felt this, in some way, all my life."⁴¹

At one point in his career, Leo remembers, he comes to despise his fellow countrymen - both black and white - so much that he wants to flee the country. It is the same crisis which faced Baldwin in the 1940's when he made his escape to Paris, because he saw himself being destroyed by the race conflict in America. But Leo doesn't run away: "I wanted to get out of the country. I had had it among all these deadly and dangerous people, who made their own lives, and all the lives they touched so flat and stale and joyless....My countrymen impressed me, simply as being, on the whole, the emptiest and most unattractive people in the world. It seemed a great waste of one's only lifetime to be condemned to their chattering, vicious, pathetic, hysterically dishonest company....I was part of these people, no matter how bitterly I judged them. I would never be able to leave this country. I could only leave it briefly, like a drowning man coming up for air. I had the choice of perishing with these doomed people, or of fleeing them, denying them, and, in that effort, perishing....For these people would not change, they could not."⁴² In this passage is evidence of the unseverable bond Baldwin believes exists between black and white; they are unable to escape one another, their destinies are irrevocably linked, even in doom. The cynical, hope-denying tone of this particular passage typifies the whole of Baldwin's

⁴¹Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, p. 52.

⁴²Ibid., pp. 254-255.

last novel. There is now no talk, no hint even, of the white man's liberation through the redeeming figure of the Negro. That sort of mystical philosophy has been left behind, it seems. Baldwin leaves us in the realms of black nationalism and violence. Yet, one senses this is not the real Baldwin. It is simply a token gesture. Baldwin like Leo is a "fat cat" now. Black Christopher puts Leo's public image into perspective for him:

...these cats out here getting their asses whipped all the time, Leo. You get your ass whipped, at least it gets into the papers. But don't nobody care what happens to these kids - nobody. And all these laws and speeches don't mean shit....It's the spirit of the people, baby, the spirit of the people, they don't want us and they don't like us, and you see that spirit in the face of every cop....We can't afford to trust the white people in this country - we'd have to be crazy if we did. But, naturally, a whole lot of black cats think you might be one of them, and, in a way, you know, you stand to lose just as much as white people stand to lose.⁴³

This is Leo's dilemma - but perhaps it is also James Baldwin's.

⁴³Ibid., p. 367.

CONCLUSION

My study of James Baldwin's work has focused upon the presence of a distinctive pattern in the author's treatment of black/white relations. This pattern, as illustrated in the course of my discussion, comprises three interacting themes. My critical analyses of Baldwin's essays, and of Another Country, Blues for Mister Charlie, and Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone distinguish regular use of at least two or more of these themes. The essays, in particular, stress the interaction of all three themes: the psychic union of black and white; Negro definition by white society; and the psychological impact of such definition. It has also been possible to observe a change in Baldwin's attitude toward racial conflict, a movement away from his soaring belief in the power of love between men to achieve racial harmony and justice, to the weary cynicism and advocacy of militant action against whites found in Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone.

It has been demonstrated that in much of his writing Baldwin is at pains to show the impossibility of total divorce between black and white. Their futures are joined because of their past. In denying the Negro his humanity, the white man has destroyed his own, and will continue to do so until he has the courage to face the reality of both his past and his current treatment of the black man. Baldwin sees white Americans as being trapped by fear of their history. Racial harmony may only be brought about

by a confrontation of that history: "...it is because we have an opportunity that no other nation has of moving beyond the Old World concepts of race and class and caste, to create, finally, what we must have had in mind when we first began speaking of the New World. But the price of this is a long look backwards whence we came and an unflinching assessment of the record."¹ In Nothing Personal, Baldwin writes that "to be locked in the past means, in effect, that one has no past since one can never assess it, or use it: and if one cannot use the past, one cannot function in the present, and so one can never be free. I take this to be... the American situation in relief, the root of our unadmitted sorrow, and the very key to our crisis."²

Baldwin's explorations of black/white relations lead him to a diagnosis of America's racial sickness which is centred upon the white man's deliberate avoidance of his past, and upon his continuing rejection of the Negro as an individual. "I know you didn't own a plantation or rape my grandmother, but I wasn't bought at auction either, and you still treat me as if I had been," Baldwin once told a reporter.³ In Nobody Knows My Name he writes, "Negroes want to be treated like men....The idea seems to threaten profound, barely conscious assumptions."⁴ The white man's conceptualization of the Negro as an inferior being has altered little since the days of slavery. Negroes today are given humiliation, insult and embarrassment as a daily diet, and without regard to individual merit. Baldwin's heroes through their suffering and alienation become aware that

¹Baldwin, "Creative Dilemma," Saturday Review, 47, February 8, 1964, p. 58.

²Richard Avedon, and James Baldwin, Nothing Personal (New York, Atheneum Publishers, 1964), pages unnumbered.

³Baldwin, "The Doom and Glory of Knowing Who You Are," Life, May 24, 1963, p. 86.

⁴"Fifth Avenue Uptown: A Letter from Harlem," Nobody Knows My Name, p. 63.

they are faceless, invisible, to their white oppressors. Simply to exist, Baldwin says, the Negro must consider whites much more intensely than they consider him, and he is forced into tactical strategies in his dealings with them: "This is, indeed, one of the causes of the bottomless anger of black men: that they have been forced to learn far more about whites than whites have ever found it necessary to learn about them."⁵ Characters such as Richard Henry and Leo Proudhammer, however, refuse to allow themselves to remain faceless, without individual identity. They insist on the right to self-definition, one of the most vital powers for the Negro to wrestle away from whites. Cleaver tells the story of Stokely Carmichael reciting the tale of Alice and Humpty Dumpty from Alice Through the Looking Glass in his public speeches. The recitation went as follows:

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "Whether you can make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "who is to be master, that's all."

Stokely used the tale to underline the importance in the struggle for Black Power of the right to self-definition.⁶ Baldwin, like Carmichael, stresses that black people are the victims of white America's definitions. White people have defined blacks as inferior, as "niggers," and as second-class citizens. The results of such stereotyped definition have been traumatic for Negroes. Malcolm X once said with a great deal of bitterness and

⁵Baldwin, "The Negro at Home and Abroad," The Reporter, V, November 27, 1951, p. 36.

⁶Eldridge Cleaver, Post Prison Writings and Speeches (New York, Random House Inc., 1968), p. 54.

truth, "The worst crime the white man has committed has been to teach us to hate ourselves." As Charles Silberman has indicated in his book, Crisis in Black and White, a key part of the "Negro Problem" in America today lies in what has happened to the Negro's personality as a result of white oppression. The black man is threatened nearly all his waking life by self-hatred, and a sense of impotence and inferiority which destroys ambition, as illustrated by the fate of Rufus Scott in Another Country. Baldwin emphasizes throughout his work that to be a Negro in America is to live with anger - if not all the time - most of the time. Silberman has written: "Well intentioned whites are surprised by the depth of Negro anger and frequently talk as if it were something new; they read James Baldwin with a shock, not knowing that Richard Wright was saying the same things twenty-five and thirty years ago. Negro anger is not new; it has always been there. What is new is simply the Negro's willingness to express it and his ability to command white attention when he does."⁷ Anger, bitterness, and a feeling of possessing a split personality - these are all deeply embedded in the Negro characters of Baldwin's writings. Again Silberman puts the problem succinctly when he observes that the Negro's history left him with a dilemma that "cuts far deeper than whether or not to eat watermelon or listen to Negro jazz. In contrast to European immigrants who brought rich cultures and long histories with them, the Negro has been completely stripped of his past and severed from any culture save that of the United States....Yet America has steadfastly refused to

⁷Charles E. Silberman, Crisis in Black and White (New York, Random House Inc., 1964), p. 58.

accept its own product. Hence every Negro must grapple with the universal 'who am I?' in a way no white man can ever know."⁸ The quest for identity has been a pivotal point in Negro literature from the time of Frederick Douglass to the present. Baldwin's heroes constantly seek to establish an identity of their own making in defiance of the white man's code - some such as Rufus Scott and Richard Henry are destroyed in that attempt.

For many years Baldwin's hope for the achievement of harmony between white and black had its basis in a somewhat mystical philosophy of salvation through love. Up until the mid 1960's Baldwin had expressed great conviction in the power of love among men. In Nothing Personal he makes reference to the "miracle of love," and claims, "I have always felt that a human being could only be saved by another human being. I am aware that we do not save each other very often. But I am also aware that we save each other some of the time." During an interview in 1965 he said, "I believe in love....I believe we can save each other. In fact, I think we must save each other. I don't depend on anyone else to do it....I don't mean anything passive. I mean something active, something more like a fire, like in the wind, something which can change you. I mean energy. I mean a passionate belief, a passionate knowledge of what a human being can do to change the world in which he finds himself."⁹ While emphasizing the need for love among men, Baldwin also underlined the responsibility to recognize and acknowledge one's kinship with other men - whether white

⁸Ibid., p. 109.

⁹Baldwin, "Race, Hate, Sex and Colour," Encounter, 25, July 1965, p. 56.

or black. Baldwin has written that "all lives are connected to other lives,"¹⁰ and that "the moment we cease to hold each other, the moment we break faith with one another, the sea engulfs us and the light goes out."¹¹ In an interview with Black Muslim leader, Elijah Muhammad, which he describes in The Fire Next Time, Baldwin told his host, "I love a few people and they love me and some of them are white, and isn't love more important than color?"¹² Love and its power was a predominant keynote, contributing to the prevailing tone in Baldwin's writings - even amid the fiery warnings of doom in The Fire Next Time - up until Blues for Mister Charlie, completed at the end of 1963, and his final major work before Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone. Particularly in the last work there is a visible hardening of attitude towards racial conflict. If there is not a complete denial of love, there is certainly a worried scepticism about its effectiveness in combatting racism. We can find in Blues for Mister Charlie - whose conclusion ends with the ambivalent suggestion that the Negro's course of action against white power will now lie with "the Bible and the gun," - and in Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone no reference to a harmonious union of "the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must like lovers, insist on, or create the consciousness of the others," in order to end "the racial nightmare,"¹³ which Baldwin emphasized in his essays. Instead, we are presented with the stark reality that Negroes can wait no longer to be treated as human beings by white society, and if violence is required

¹²The Fire Next Time, p. 98.

¹³Ibid., p. 141.

to achieve their humanity, Negroes - whatever their social standing - must be prepared to lend support to that effort, says Baldwin in his last novel. In Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone the energy of love is cast aside in favour of the power of the gun.

The recurring patterns discernable in Baldwin's studies of black/white relations, and the author's changing mood from a belief in the possibility of peaceful co-existence of the two races to advocacy of militant action against whites lend to his work a compelling psychological realism. Underlying all Baldwin's work - even beneath the weary cynicism which characterizes the tone of his last novel - there is an anguished plea for recognition and acceptance of the black man's humanity; a plea, in effect, for a complete reappraisal of white values. Writing of his experiences while staying in a small Swiss village during his exile from America at the beginning of his literary career, Baldwin noted: "The time has come to realize that the interracial drama acted out on the American continent has not only created a new black man, it has created a new white man, too. No road whatever will lead Americans back to the simplicity of this European village where white men still have the luxury of looking on me as a stranger. I am not, really, a stranger any longer for any American alive....This world is white no longer, and it will never be white again."¹⁴ Through his descriptive studies of interracial relations, Baldwin makes a plea for the re-ordering of these relations, so that the Negro may be allowed to recover his lost identity. In the last analysis, Baldwin

¹⁴"Stranger in the Village," Notes of a Native Son, pp. 148-149.

is saying what writers from Frederick Douglass down through W.E.B. DuBois to LeRoi Jones have said - that what Negroes need more than anything else is to be treated like men, so that they can believe in their own consciousness that they are men in control of their own destinies.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

A. PRIMARY SOURCES

- Baldwin, James. Another Country. New York: Dell Publishing Co. Inc., 1962.
- _____. "At the Root of the Negro Problem." Time, 81 (May 24, 1963), pp. 24-25.
- _____. Blues for Mister Charlie. New York: Dial Press, 1964.
- _____. "Creative Dilemma." Saturday Review, 47 (February 9, 1964), pp. 58-59.
- _____. Going to Meet the Man. New York: Dell Publishing Co. Inc., 1966.
- _____. Go Tell It on the Mountain. New York: Dell Publishing Co. Inc., 1965.
- _____. "How Can We Get Black People to Cool It?" Esquire, 70 (July, 1968), pp. 52-54.
- _____. Nobody Knows My Name. New York: Dell Publishing Co. Inc., 1963.
- _____. Notes of a Native Son. New York: Bantam Books Inc., 1964.
- _____, and Avedon, Richard. Nothing Personal. New York: Atheneum Publishers, 1964.
- Baldwin, James, MacInnes, Colin; and Mossman, James. "Race, Hate, Sex and Colour." Encounter, 25 (July, 1965), pp. 55-59.
- Baldwin, James. Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone. New York: Dell Publishing Co. Inc., 1969.
- _____. "The Dangerous Road Before Martin Luther King." Harper's Magazine, 222 (February 1961), pp. 35-37.
- _____. The Fire Next Time. New York: Dell Publishing Co. Inc., 1963.

B. SECONDARY SOURCES

- Angelou, Maya. I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings. New York: Random House Inc., 1969.
- Bigsby, C.W.E. Confrontation and Commitment. University of Missouri Press, 1967.
- _____. The Black American Writer, Vol. I. Baltimore: Penguin Books Inc., 1971.
- Bone, Robert. The Negro Novel in America. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958.
- Buckley, W.F. "Call to Colour Blindness." National Review, 17 (April 6, 1965), pp. 273-274.
- Ciardi, J. "Black Man in America." Saturday Review, 46 (July 6, 1963), pp. 16-18.
- Cleaver, Eldridge. Post Prison Writings and Speeches. New York: Random House Inc., 1968.
- Eckman, Fern Marja. The Furious Passage of James Baldwin. New York: M. Evans & Company Inc., 1967.
- Fiedler, Leslie. "Caliban or Hamlet: An American Paradox." Encounter, 26, no. 4 (April, 1966), pp. 23-26.
- Finkelstein, Sidney. Existentialism and Alienation in American Literature. New York: International Publishers Co. Inc., 1965.
- Genet, Jean. The Blacks. New York: Grove Press Inc., 1960.
- Grass, John. "Day of Wrath." New Statesman, 66 (July 19, 1969), pp. 79-80.
- Grier, W.H. and Cobbs, Price M. Black Rage. New York: Basic Books Inc., 1968.
- Harper, Howard. Desperate Faith. University of North Carolina Press, 1967.
- Hassan, Ihab. "The Novel of Outrage - a Minority Voice in Postwar American Fiction." The American Scholar, 34, no. 2 (Spring, 1965), pp. 240-245.

- Hernton, Calvin C. Sex and Racism in America. New York: Grove Press Inc., 1966.
- Hicks, Granville. "From Harlem with Hatred." Saturday Review, 51 (June 1, 1968), pp. 23-24.
- Howard, Jane. "The Doom and Glory of Knowing Who You Are." Life, 54 (May 24, 1963), pp. 82-86.
- Klein, Marcus. After Alienation. Cleveland: The World Publishing Co., 1965.
- Malcolm X. The Autobiography of Malcolm X. New York: Grove Press Inc., 1966.
- Margolies, Edward. Native Sons. New York: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1968.
- Podhoretz, Norman. Doings and Undoings. New York: Noonday Press, 1964.
- Schwartz, Barry N. and Disch, Robert. White Racism. New York: Dell Publishing Co. Inc., 1970.
- Silberman, Charles. Crisis in Black and White. New York: Random House Inc., 1964.
- Toynbee, Philip. "Don't Go Tell It on the Mountain." The Atlantic Monthly, 222, (July, 1968), pp. 91-92.
- Wright, Richard. Native Son. New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1940.