

ASPIRALING WE SHOULD GO

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"Whither are we tending?" To ask this favorite nineteenth century question with any seriousness might evoke the studied reply, "The bomb has not been used since the war." The question suggests that obsessive Victorian image, the spiral, the onward and upward, the cheerfully materialistic native uplift that H. L. Menken had reason to chortle and snort over as late as the 1920s. But the reply suggests a set of obsessive current images--a blowup, and a somewhat weary self-concern. The selfness is, of course, the more interesting. Where we go, however strange we may seem, however exotic or dangerous the country, there is America. We bring along job security, health insurance, bottled water, in short, all of the equipment necessary for a fixed (and well-fixed) nation of nations. Political and military reasons for our presence can seem almost secondary. We are exporting democracy, and, after all, a pure water supply can be the beginning of that wisdom which is democracy. Still there is the notorious American boredom. The place is foreign, perhaps we have been there before, and we truly wish to go back to a home that we have not really left. For a capstone, consider the irony that after the wars the hero must go home--to enjoyment (or is it possession?) of the multiplying gadgets of the mass-producing, automated plastics, electronics, automotive and related industries. The bill is more likely to be paid to an IBM cost-accounting relay system than to a man. If anyone less self-defined than a hero evidences a guilt feeling about all this, or any profound doubt that it is not exactly the good life, he can use a credit card for a short fantastic vacation in an effort to recover his spirits.

No, it is not as easy to spiral as it used to be. The question I began with reveals innocence while its reply masks sourness and dis-ease. The spirit of the age is ambiguous. It does not seem to point directions. Perhaps nearly everyone has to play by ear.

Yet an American selfness that is amusing only when it is not horrible may be evidence that our innocence has grown unusually remote of late. Certainly individuals try to retain sanity by achieving non-involvement. The price seems to be a certain loss of humanity. So much that is American is now untouched by human hands, or by love, or, as it can seem, by any sort of mind.

I am not suggesting merely that fevered causes seem hard to come by. The point goes deeper than a cooling of recent enthusiasms.¹ It is simple

enough to note that national myth, official history, probably exaggerates the dangers and excitements of a heroic past.² We expect some bluff. What matters is that national expression has been somewhat dry, remote and abstract from the beginning. We do not heat easily. Thus, to think very far into some of the central documents--the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Farewell Address, the Second Inaugural--is to contemplate a lucidity of style which suits a grandeur which is no empty gesture.³ Perhaps the true American glory is not the rose after all, but the fact that no other nation has announced such startling laws and programs in such consistently cool tones. Much is explained, of course, by reference to the ubiquitous New Englander, the cold-blooded, cent-minded, inner-directed Puritan in America. But such "new men" as Abraham Lincoln, Mark Twain, Henry Ford and even John F. Kennedy, men well outside the geographical or temporal influence of New England, speak to us in similarly cool tones from within themselves.⁴ It would seem that such men must use the national mode of expression. Perhaps their lucid verbal abstraction is too diverse in origin to trace clearly as a style, but there is no doubt that it exists.

What is the significance of such expression? A brilliant suggestion is that abstraction, dryness of tone, have served to limit our political attention to particulars, so that American politicians can seem without principle (and thus seem evil men) to the more innocent European visitor. But there is a reason. The result of the only major breakdown in American political method produced the Civil War, a war of principle, a war that remains in the national imagination as the most horrible of experiences. Perhaps it is too trivial to "explain" principle by style. Yet Mark Twain suggested that Sir Walter Scott's flashy style was the model for Southern romantic attitudes, hence, the cause of the obviously hopeless war. However that may be, it does seem that Americans are willing to engage in political, social and economic experiments so long as principle is not at issue (especially when the principle is as home-made as a balanced budget or as exotic as socialism). It follows that experiment tends to originate in the national political life where it is subject to all of the messiness of logrolling, sectional interest, personality and the like. Since the only rule is the avoiding of principle, our political life is correctly a despair to any fervent doctrinaire, but that life suits a nation born of revolution and sworn to play by ear. Surely it is obvious that we should have torn ourselves apart long ago if all of the continually extended definitions of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" had become matters of principle. We have had the fortunate instinct to prevent that self-suicide by paying attention to particular choices and techniques--except for the Civil War.⁵

What of the Civil War?

So drastic an event yields up its meanings and legacies slowly in the richness of subsequent history. We are discovering the results of the War in our time. I do not refer to new documents but to a deeper understanding

that comes with time's alteration and redefinition of the total results of the War. At present most students would probably agree that the War was an incomplete, searing effort to define the nation and the national ethos. Certainly some points were settled decisively. The War ended forever the doctrine of confederation; it produced a strong, federal system, a national state. Indirectly but assuredly, it encouraged the speedy development of super-sectional industrial and commercial units; thus it marked the end of the parochial phase of the national myth. But the War did not touch the so-called Negro problem at any vital point. That was never the main intention. Lincoln said clearly, as in the letter to Horace Greely, that the purpose of the War was "to save the Union," i. e., to define a national state in opposition to the fragmenting, sectional impulse of the South. The Negro slave was a secondary issue. Yet slavery did seem inconsistent with the revolutionary doctrine of liberty, so, for somewhat mingled reasons (including the immediate war aim of putting a moral onus on the South, thus undercutting the chances of foreign intervention), and with somewhat dubious legal right (for the Constitution recognized "the peculiar institution"), Lincoln proclaimed that the slave had become a free man. The effort was purely legal. The reality was and has remained something else again. The free man was re-enslaved in effect within fifteen years after Appomattox; and not only in the South, but in the nation. For example, the Negro was forbidden learning by law in much of the pre-war South, but he was forbidden learning in effect in much of the country within a few decades after the War. Here the statistics of mob violence are not as significant as the unquestioned evidence that political, economic, cultural and social bars against the Negro survived the War and have survived down to our time. This historical paradox, this murky incompleteness of the War, is necessarily a major concern in our time. The reason is not that we are more virtuous or less intellectually ambiguous than Abraham Lincoln. The reason is that totalitarian philosophy is one of the great value constructs of the age, and such philosophy indicates in flesh and blood that any minority's destruction is a microcosm of the destruction of humanity. The obvious American minority is the Negro. In general, the issue is whether skin coloration affects the doctrine of liberty. The Civil War continues to reverberate with a self-definition that has become our definition by means of daily, often painful efforts to resolve the issue, pro or con, in terms of such immediate, practical matters as education, housing, jobs.

We are aware, at least by instinct, that this aspect of the Civil War remains dangerous--that a two-headed mob exists just beyond the border of the dry, customary, legal terminology. And probably most people are aware that one hundred years after the Emancipation Proclamation and the relevant Amendments to the Constitution (the chief of which has served, by a kind of cosmic irony, to provide legal protection to the new kind of suprasedgmental corporation which appeared after the War), the Negro is mainly a second-

class citizen. He lives mainly in slums. He can work in the white world, if he is a male, chiefly as a garbage collector, dishwasher, prize fighter, valet, Pullman porter or dining car waiter, jazz performer, and, in limited fields, as a dancer. A Negro woman enters the white world chiefly as a domestic. Any Negro lives with a relatively serious fear of violence and with the constant fact of exclusion. Indeed, the psychological situation of the Negro is analogous in the coldest possible light of objectivity to the psychological situation of a concentration camp inmate.⁶ Caucasians may be aware of the situation, but probably find it as hard to feel into its reality as it may have been for "the good German" to feel into the mind of Adolph Hitler. After all, many a "good German" will say that Hitler was a positive influence until--you name the date--in the spirit in which many Americans can say that a good deal is being done to improve the lot of the Negro. So put, self-illusion is clear enough.

There is always a reason to foster illusion. For example, the Negro presents a historical paradox that is uncomfortable for the white man to face in one lot. For the Negro is slave and free, in and out, sacred and devilish, a force and a drag. The causes and records of this paradox are a study which I do not wish to pose here.⁷ Surely it is important. But I find a question more important, especially when it is phrased as a practical detail, in the dry, somewhat abstract tone of American political talk: When shall we see the Negro among us without the bars that have been in effect for these many years?

The question can seem amusing, or rhetorical, but if it is taken seriously it has to be related to its historical parallels in quite practical terms. Since history is paradoxical but never untrue, a valid parallel may instructively suggest the possible and the impossible future.

We must ask, then, how most American minority groups have gone about gaining recognition before the law and a share in the nation's life. The general pattern can seem perfectly clear. More or less by choice a religious and/or ethnic group arrived in some numbers on these shores. The arrival was in waves, sometimes short but intense (Russia, Poland, Italy), sometimes long and fairly even (England, France). The first waves attained political equality (citizenship, the vote) and began to acquire economic power. Later waves helped to apply the political force (naming the candidate, bloc voting) for the group or personally, and acquired still more economic power. So the leverage was the vote and money, then some kind of useful or practical education (law, surveying, banking), then, usually in the next generation, education in the deeper sense (art, science). The final stage is reached when the group or individual is aware of political equality as a force, when economic power is considerable, and when interest extends in some depth into social and cultural areas.

It will be recognized that we have an idealization rather than a reality, a pattern that is porous with half-truths and contradictions. Consider the fragmentation of religious and/or ethnic groups in time and in a huge land-

space, the interacting of theological, intellectual and ethic strands, the dogma of "shirt sleeves to shirt sleeves in three generations" which implies process but not completion. Many individual cases disprove the general implication of evolutionary development. Nevertheless, so far as it represents a profound American myth, an image of the past as we should like to feel the past, the pattern has the self-creating power of evocation, the force of "a willing suspension of disbelief" which S. T. Coleridge posited as the condition of achieving poetic truth on the level of myth.⁸

The point is that only the Negro does not share this myth. He was usually brought over as a slave, separated from kinsmen to avoid uprisings, defined as a non-human entity in the Constitution, until quite recently innocent of serious political and economic power (except for the brief Reconstruction years) and prevented from developing public cultural ambitions except in areas that tend to convey the thoughtless, instinctual, but happy darky. Just here the power of the myth is proved and reproved, for the Negro has consistently rejected the role of "outsider" by rejecting any serious idea of a mass departure for some African New World. He has insisted on claiming his citizenship and his identity, for the two impulses are identical.⁹

Most deeply, then, and most embarrassingly for the ordinary stance of Caucasian good will, the historic establishment of the Negro problem in America has more to do with identity than with rights. The Negro has to discover a proper way to create himself. For economic and psychological reasons, the Caucasian has made this endeavor as nearly impossible as it can be made. North as well as South, denial of the possibility of the Negro being human has been the chief instrument of repression, and it is all the more powerful for being masked by such emotive standards as sex and class. It is to be expected that standards of this kind reveal far more about the Caucasian than the Negro. Moreover, the possible identities of the Negro have been set; they are paradoxical. The cringing black man, the "good nigma," the sweetly sacrificial Uncle Tom, is one side of the coin. The reverse is the demonic black man, a kind of Satan, who lusts after all white women (especially one's sisters and daughters). Such identities are absurd in most cases--but nothing is wholly meaningless. The identities have the function of indicating covertly the political, economic and social areas the Negro should not be allowed to enter except as a sacrificial or a demonic figure if he is to remain a cheap source of manpower and easy public game for any otherwise privately miserable white man. The disguises--the absurd identities, the covert identifications--are well understood by the psychologist as necessary in the formation of one's private self. The fire-eating Southern gentlemen might well think the War was not lost if he has slaves in effect; that a Negro must be handled firmly because he is dangerous, especially to white womanhood, hence menial work is proper for the beast; yet the "good nigma" proves the correctness of the system by his approval. I suggest that this peculiarly jerky reasoning is a fair representation of the more radical

Caucasian mind. But no one is quite free of that mind. We may reject the idea that all Negro males are natural rapists, but we can see that black is not white. We are likely to accept a Negro who is "nice," that is, almost a white man in manner, coloring, and so forth. Most of us would visualize a God that is colorless vis-a-vis a Devil that is black. How cozy!

But a moment's reflection may suggest that by hook and by crook the Negro has kept an identity that is private, that is none of the white man's business. In the spirituals and work songs we can notice a humanity and a longing--cf. the identification with the enslaved Israelites in Egypt. permitted for the presumed inherent value of the Christian faith--that do not relate to the Caucasian image of the Negro. But, now as then, the Negro must disguise selfness, keep himself to himself, out of fear of offending the Caucasian world.¹⁰

A certain fracture in the Negro's enforced role playing has been evident since the 1954 Supreme Court reversal of the separate but equal doctrine in public life. Since that evidence of justice and reason on the part of the hitherto alien and dangerous world, the Negro has been (as it seems) in an overt and energetically intelligent search for his identity. The search is not without peril, if only because the Negro cannot afford to mistake Caucasian intentions. Hence the solidity, force and surprise in James Meredith's terse statement, after a semester at the University of Mississippi, that "the Negro will not return, but I, James H. Meredith, will return." This statement is surprising for several reasons. First, its solid force presumes the good will of the Caucasian world. Second, it is a claim to identity, to the status of a person. Third, and emphatically, the statement rejects a denial of self, a wish to "pass," to become a Caucasian. Evidently the one hundred years since the Emancipation have not altered the terms of the essential problem. We observe a force and surprise that are similar to Meredith's statement in the continuing, sometimes untroubled school integrations, in attempts to register voters and to end segregation in public places in general.

The point demands nothing less than a blunt comparison. Are you brave or desperate enough to do as much as the Negro to define your identity? Perhaps you might be, ordinary and humble as we are most of the time, if you had a hundred and more years of non-identity for a consciousness. For non-identity is a continual death-in-life; it might seem worth the trouble, simply as a practical matter, to try to come alive.

Yet I do not wish to suggest a process that is simple, quick and romantic, or even to suggest certain results. If history is paradoxical, it is foolish to attempt to predict what may happen or when it might happen. What is clear is that the future will not be the past. Since the Negro has had to live in non-time, given a non-identity, this otherwise expected clarity is hopeful.

Thus, the decision of the Court parallels other tendencies that encourage the Negro's search for identity. The political situation speaks for itself. Aside from the weight of Negro votes in ten or twelve large Northern cities,

weigh a pregnantly cautious remark, incidental to Harvey Gantt's quiet registration at Clemson College, Clemson, South Carolina (the first state to secede): "'Race is no longer the campaign issue it once was,' a hopeful Negro leader in the state said recently. 'All sensible politicians know they need our support to win statewide or national elections.'"¹¹ Still, the most hopeful political situation could not suggest in itself that reason is the exact issue. Politics is not always a reasoned game. That is, reason may be one of the nation's more impressive qualities but it can hardly be a central factor in the Negro situation.

Pointedly, the reasonable action would have been for the Negro to flee these benighted states long ago. I do not mean a flight to the often illusory "freedom" of industrial Northern cities, which is what is happening, but a flight out of the United States to the kind of freeman's state that Abraham Lincoln (for one) thought the best solution in the years just before the Civil War. The fact that the Negro has opted citizenship is embarrassing, yet complimentary, for the citizenship has been so far largely an illusion like the freedom which it implies.

Such uncertainities hardly mean that anyone ought to be so naive as to think that time is unimportant or that experience in hatred is to be expected in this imperfect world. We may cling to the notion that an army makes a man of a boy, or to the notion that hard work is always good for the soul, but no one ought to be wholly stupid. The sooner that race is no more than an amusing theory that one's ignorant ancestors thought important, along with witchcraft, phrenology and similar magic, the better off we shall be--provided we do not require magic. There is plenty of recent and current evidence that men need or will not object to such powerful magics as war and a racial myth. But we should beware of oversimplification. No doubt Hitler's Germany was an atypical nation; possibly South Africa is atypical; the professional Southerner may be an atypical American, also the white man of good will who must find a Christ figure in every Negro. And so forth. These exceptions are sufficient to act as a brake on millennial expectations. The fact remains that time can speed up; the nation's actual and mythical histories suggest in one voice that time has meant change in America. One may say that time tends to collapse. Robert Penn Warren noted a few years ago that the widow of a veteran of the War of 1812 was alive and drawing a federal pension.¹² Mary B. Chestnut, the author of one of the clearest diaries of the South at war, was bored often by an elderly lady who had been a close friend of Martha Washington.¹³ Parallel to the present inquiry, note that Joseph Kennedy was the first Irishman to be allowed to serve as a bank director in Boston.¹⁴ In sum, the collapse and speed-up of time are related in America.

It follows that time will prove the Caucasian ability to live without the magic of white-black racism. It is not at all certain that we can shift; legal and political factors may be a help.¹⁵

We can be somewhat more certain of the public identity the Negro is attempting to define. He does not seem to be searching for Love (Uncle Tom had enough of that). As for Hatred, the Black Muslim movement is a fascinating inversion of white supremacy but it seems to be a fanatical rather than a typical organization. It is perhaps least erroneous to say that the Negro seems to be looking for a public identity that is somewhat more flattering than the present extremes, the "beast-or-toy" extremes of essential non-identity. The evidence suggests the Negro's general acceptance of the idealized pattern of minority experience in America to which I have alluded. We note the organized, non-violent but emphatic Negro efforts in the South to get the vote and to get education under the protection of the law; these efforts, as well as an emphasis on equal job opportunities, occur in the North. All of this is what other minorities are supposed to have done. Yet every detail is out of place. In the North the Negro can gain economic power before he is able to gain political force and social equality; especially in the South, in-group culture may develop long before anything like economic power. Many similar details complicate the pattern, yet the pattern seems to exert a very strong pull.

How, indeed, does one go about defining an identity? Is it better to be recognized first before the law, to get the status and economic rewards of education or to achieve in the arts? There are no ultimate answers beyond locality, opportunity and the person.

I do not suggest that identity is indefinable, merely that it has no particular boundary. Whatever is happening seems to be happening "with all deliberate speed." Perhaps considerably less than ten more Negro generations are destined to endure the Negro's characteristic lot in America. Racial matters are so detached from reason, yet soothing to the mind which needs magic, that any future can be imagined only in terms of psychological chance. The nation's historical tendency is toward reason. Perhaps in this aspect of our history, allowing that chance is directed on the whole by reason at the present time, the outcome may be swift and fortunate. The walls may tumble down in a rush if they are tried, and we may see the naked emperor in the rubble if we look. To expect more would be to sacrifice a hard-earned cynicism. No history justifies that sacrifice.

The literature which the Negro has been producing in the past few years reflects and clarifies the situation which I have been discussing. Foremost, there is no question of the extraordinary quality of this literature. Here as elsewhere, the Negro must be six or seven times as gifted as the non-Negro competition to be seen at all. Hence, the Negro as established or public man of letters is fairly certain to be a considerable quantity.

Two of the more significant writers at the present time are James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison. They are makers of prose, the harsher, cruder harmony. (Perhaps first-rate poetry, something beyond Countee Cullen or even Langston Hughes, requires a cultural serenity which a Negro is not

likely to be allowed.) Baldwin has written several novels, but his most impressive work is the personal essay. Ellison has written a novel, Invisible Man, which advances significantly the art of James Joyce--the stream-of-consciousness technique. There is no doubt that these men are major literary figures in relative youth, and, with all due fear of prediction, I venture that there is every chance that they will loom rather than vanish in the eyes of the future even if neither man writes another word.

Beyond this, I am happy to report that Baldwin and Ellison are quite different men, hence quite different in their work. I have had to refer so much to "the Negro" that I may have created the impression that only the group exists.

Of course, Baldwin and Ellison share a good deal. Both draw profoundly on current Negro life in America. I do not mean they handle their materials journalistically. On the contrary, neither man seems interested at all in the surface report--the exposè--nor in the kind of naturalistic realism associated with, say, James T. Farrell.¹⁶ Since their materials are too intense for such treatment, both men construct aptly what Kenneth Burke calls symbolic action, i. e., they share an evident intention to let the (Caucasian) reader feel what it means to be a Negro.

Invisible Man is a comic nightmare as befits an experience of continual humiliation. Dostoevski's Notes from Underground is an obvious parallel, and as suggestive a title as Invisible Man. In broad outline, Ellison's hero is a young man on an outward or physical journey from the country to the city and on an inward or symbolic journey from innocence to experience. We are familiar with this kind of young man; he is the hero of many novels. But in Ellison's novel, the new circumstances produce the effect of a first report from unknown territory. The young man's knowledge is racial. His adventures are comic. His final knowledge is an indrawn violence. The seeming chaos of the stream-of-consciousness technique is the only appropriate manner of representing the young man's awareness of racism. And, without the heroism of revolution, the young man's experience has to be comic. The implication is that to take the Negro seriously is not possible at the present time. Ellison enforces this implication with a hard, brilliant, objective style.¹⁷

Baldwin deals with unfamiliar territory as well, in a series of autobiographical essays.¹⁸ The same young man is present; there is the same journey from innocence of a sort (Baldwin suggests that a Negro cannot remain innocent for long and survive) to an experience that is not freeing but an enforcement of the fact of one's isolation. That is to say, Baldwin's treatment is analytical whereas Ellison's is pictorial, just as Baldwin's style is convoluted, much given to backtracking, qualifying phrases, while Ellison's is precise and unencumbered. Therefore, Baldwin's hero is not left in the comic pose of Ellison's hero, bathed in the glare of hundreds of electric light bulbs (the power tapped secretly) in an underground hutch in

New York City. Baldwin's hero is, after all, Baldwin, and symbolic experience must occur inside the mind in the autobiographical mode.

For this reason, Baldwin's work seems to be more exterior, more available, seemingly less involved in technique, than Ellison's work. Perhaps the relative extraneousness is an illusion, since both men convey their similar materials by irony and symbol, or if it is not, perhaps it signifies an artistic flaw that will seem to enlarge in time. There is no doubt that Baldwin is a more public figure than Ellison. For the moment, then, Baldwin seems to promise a quicker entry into self than Ellison's hero, so I shall devote the rest of this analysis to a consideration of Baldwin's essays.

Baldwin deals with all sorts of topics, as an essayist should--with the conflict between father and son, with the related discovery of the hypocrisy and delusion that can typify organized religion, with the problems of the writer--but the tonic note is always the life of the Negro in America.

I do not mean that Baldwin cultivates oddity or self-pity, but the opposite. The acquired moral force of having identified oneself permits Baldwin to see us. Thus, his essays are important to everyone because they deal with the human condition, exaggerated as it has been in Negro experience to a level of intensity that is encountered very seldom in any literature. Baldwin can say true things that are shocking because they are said coldly, not as jeremiads, preachments, but as facts that strip the intellectually dishonest mind of its comforting illusions. Here are a few of Baldwin's facts:

Negroes, who have, largely, been produced by miscegenation, [do not] share the white man's helplessly hypocritical attitudes toward the time-honored and universal mingling.

We do not trust educated people and rarely, alas, produce them, for we do not trust the independence of mind which alone makes a genuine education possible.

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.¹⁹

I have chosen these lines pretty much at random. The essays are packed with them. They seem to indicate that Baldwin had won an insight that few whites ever need to win, protected and deluded as we are, and they imply that every Negro has to live close to Baldwin's level of moral intensity, where false is sifted out from true, simply to remain sane. Above all, the lines have a generalizing quality; they concern what we are, and they are advanced as public rather than personal speech.

I do not mean that I especially enjoy such observations. They are not intended to be enjoyed. If we did not really believe that ignorance is bliss, that it is good to leave well enough alone, that involvement in others (or in ourselves) is dangerous because of what it may reveal, there would be no

need for Baldwin to exist. The essays imply that we need to be exposed to reality, but, as important, that we can stand the exposure.

Moreover, Baldwin's moral force has peculiar roots and grows into unexpected shapes. One of Baldwin's obsessive remarks is that Negroes are beautiful, but another obsessive remark is that life as a Negro is morally crippling in direct ratio to its grandeur. One must survive; this means learning early that the benevolence of the Caucasian world can never be assumed, and this enforces the formation of both a self-caricature in accord with Caucasian expectation and the counter-force that commences with self-destruction. Education is no release, even when it is available, since it goes nowhere; love is no release, for the conditions of Negro life distort the instinct to love (even the sexual instinct gets twisted, since the boy finds a heroic figure in the mother who enters the Caucasian world as a domestic, not in the garbage collecting father, unable to protect himself or his children from the ravages of the Caucasian world); politics is no release, for the political life rests on a freedom to vote and to be elected that a Negro does not possess except by circumstance; religion is no release, for one discovers soon enough that Christ was not a black man and that heaven continues the color line. One is left with violence, drugs, television, public relief, and, perhaps, given incredible efforts toward self-definition, with the humanistic life of the mind and of art. Mainly, as in Faulkner's phrase, there is only endurance, but an endurance that cripples with its hopelessness.²⁰ At the very best there is the moral grandeur of refusing to accept hopelessness, but even this refusal is qualified by one's necessarily cunning survival, contempt and hatred.²¹ So the effective choice is to resist in a grandeur of suffering at the bottom of humiliation or to resist in the corruption of the white man's forms of violence.²²

Baldwin is a civilized man, hence, a suffering, humiliated and a grand man, with all of the terrible freedom of the despairing and enslaved young man discovering the world as it is.

This last phrase is most important. It involves the point that Baldwin's essays have appeared in our time and not earlier. Moreover, aside from their aspect as a first report (less expected than sudden communication with Mars to many), they involve no ringing denunciations and no particular moral, political or other solution.²³ This silence can be fearful, especially when one is reading the essays in bulk. It would be comforting if Baldwin proposed any solutions that involved mere technique--the mere force of law, for example.

This silence indicates that Baldwin is after what may be called the practical fundamental things. He is interested in identity, in selfness, and we are well aware that technique is the beginning rather than the end of that kind of search. The failure of the Emancipation and of the Amendments, the resistance to the Court's decision or the merely token obedience, the effective labor and housing restrictions, etc., suggest that technical solutions, however valuable, are not practical or fundamental solutions. And, of course, we are looking at the nation, not only at the South.

It would seem that any Negro would share Baldwin's silence in this respect. Moreover, Baldwin is faced with the special problem of being a writer. His essays are therefore a very private education in public, but an education that we can share if we wish.

The essays advance a general definition of identity--rejection of Caucasian expectations and formulation of a self that is human--in terms of the writer's special need to be free to partake of many personalities and situations. Baldwin's major equipment for this multiple task is a searingly honest mind that imposes itself on language. The centrality and difficulty of the task, and the depth of Baldwin's intellectual honesty, are evident in a few sentences in the first pages of Notes of a Native Son:

One of the difficulties about being a Negro writer (and this is not special pleading, since I don't mean to suggest that he has it worse than anybody else) is that the Negro problem is written about so widely. . . . Of traditional attitudes there are only two--For or Against--and I, personally, find it difficult to say which attitude has caused me the most pain. I am speaking as a writer; from a social point of view I am perfectly aware that the change from ill-will to good-will, however motivated, however imperfect, however expressed, is better than no change at all.²⁴

Baldwin is foremost a writer, which is to say, he is aware that mere propaganda destroys any writer's immortal objectivity. Hence, throughout a series of profoundly revealing studies of the Negro and of the Negro situation, Baldwin never indulges in mob fever, special pleading, self-pity or sentimentality; not because verbal slugging or weeping is disagreeable, but because Baldwin is more interested in achieving the objective, emotionally honest manner of the good writer. Yet the qualifications and the terseness of the style have the aesthetic function of indicating how precarious the manner always is, how much it is a persona. Baldwin does not scream and curse at us (that might be a relief from the tensions of the style), but one feels that he might at any moment. Such restraint under pressure is precisely Baldwin's self-definition.

So we may say that James Baldwin is a writer in the sense that James Meredith is a student, and that Baldwin's authorship is as precarious, as dangerous, as necessary as Meredith's studenthood. There is even a moral equivalent. The threat of non-identity for the writer is the temptation to use the language without precision, to shriek out, to indulge one's chaos instead of mastering the objective disciplines of form and persona toward the end of projecting oneself. The threat for the student involves certainly the chance of physical violence, the literal ending of self, or, later on, the Caucasian world's ability to deny the student's knowledge by refusing to give him the work for which he has prepared, thereby refusing him a proper identity. The

proof that such equivalents are real rather than fanciful lies in the similar tension that Baldwin and Meredith communicate, in their similar tenacity and sweetness, and in their obvious consciousness of the symbolic importance of what they are doing in their various roles.

All of this is the heroism of the ordinary. As Baldwin notes, everybody has the difficulty of forming an identity. Meredith's nervous stomach has been publicized a good deal, so we know that he does not have the iron stomach of the conventional hero. Nor is Baldwin much like the conventional hero. Norman Mailer has gone so far as to suggest that Baldwin is too charming to be effective, that he is quite unable to cuss. True, Mailer refers to Baldwin's early work, the pre-essay work, but Baldwin's manner must still be characterized as controlled tension rather than jolly violence. My feeling is that Mailer is dead wrong, in the time-honored fashion of splendid writers speaking out of turn.²⁵ I suggest that Baldwin's anti-heroic professionalism is a tool of art, a means of creating self with sufficient artistic power to deal objectively with the terrible facts of contemporary Negro life. Further, I suggest that artistic power, not the fact alone, shocks the innocent Caucasian "out of his skin" by forcing him to enter the artistic construct, the feel of being a Negro in America, both in the reading and in remembering the reading. I do not imply by this that Baldwin creates a romantic's trap, so that we identify with him. Even if it were possible, such identity would be cruel. No, Baldwin takes care to appear to stay on the surface of Negro experience and to represent that experience in as ordinary a light as possible. There are no romantic highlights such as lynchings, and Baldwin objects to William Faulkner's identifying the Negro with Christ. Significantly, Baldwin conveys a Negro family's experience in a difficult integration situation as coldly as possible, from the outside view and in a flatly reportorial manner. The technique functions with the materials to suggest that even this can be expected in the ordinary detail of life. There is no question of heroism in the family, merely a recognition of duty.

Through such technique, Baldwin has managed to free himself altogether as artist from the distortion of propaganda--the threat of either self-pity or violence--to which all writers are prone by the nature of their work. He has managed thereby to control materials, to imprint form on vagueness, and, in the resulting paradox of art, the rationally, perhaps coldly fashioned prose is tremendously, almost unbearably moving. It is a great triumph of art simply because it exists, and, perhaps, because of what it does not do to the reader. Virginia Woolf remarks somewhere that after reading the work of a social realist (she is thinking of Arnold Bennett) you feel that you can purge yourself by mailing a check to some useful charity. The implication is that the deeper artist does not let the reader escape that easily. Just so, we are not likely to feel that membership in the NAACP, CORE, or whatever, lets us go free of the felt world that Baldwin presents. On the other side, it is possible to escape from the horrors of certain historic events--

i. e., the Nazi period--by developing an immunity to numbers or by suggesting the peculiarity of the period. Baldwin does not deal in numbers. He presents the inner feeling, the awareness, the emotional climate, the individual. We deny Baldwin's reality at the risk of denying reality itself. The tone insists on the ordinary, typical quality of the individual experience. We hear Baldwin out, instead of escaping, for the same reason and in much the same way that the Wedding Guest was bound to hear out the Ancient Mariner--because our normal reality is at issue and our self is at stake.

Not without fright, then, Baldwin makes the artistic assumption that lines of communication are there. Yet it would be false to imply or to let the reader assume that everything tends in a fairly reasonable way simply because we are getting some apparently genuine communication (at what cost!) from the Negro community. Very little is ever tending in a reasonable way. If we assume in our humanism that it is good to love and evil to hate, that peace is the worthy end of man's striving, that war is the image of man's suicide, then we must face the impact of history: recognizing that evil flourishes, that hatred is rewarded, that war is a suitable career in itself and in its infinite preparation. The point is not that we should turn to the wall and die, envisioning man's inhumanity to man, but that we should be willing (if able) to create as much intellectual honesty as Baldwin has done. The cost can hardly be as high as it has been for Baldwin.

Also, the pattern of such honesty exists in Baldwin's work. We may cherish a minimal optimism in the fact that Baldwin thinks it is worth the painful effort to draw history through autobiography toward the end that we may be instructed. It is true that in the nation's mythical history (which is never paradoxical or untrue), reason is identified with the truth and it is the truth which makes us free. So we may affirm that only America could produce so boldly practical an idealist as Baldwin, but we must add that Baldwin is the result of American production of the Negro. Baldwin does remark, in fact, that the Negro does not exist as such except in America. This leaves small comfort for the ordinary man of good will. Intellectual honesty requires a great deal more "show" than good will can produce.

I have no doubt, then, that Baldwin's great importance, and the ultimate proof of his painfully acquired intellectual freedom, lies in his placing the Negro in a human perspective which reveals that the major effort toward identity must come from the white man, that precisely the white man's lack of selfness produces the Negro. (In that view, James Meredith's statement assumes an additional relevance.)

Of course, in assuming that communication really exists, Baldwin asserts an act of faith in the nation's mythical history. For the essence of that history is the notion that the free and the brave are rational enough to move from error to some degree of the existing or self-evident truth--and, at that, a pragmatic truth which men can obey rather than a mere ideal. In the present case, the democratic assumption of equality before the law is such a

truth, i. e., a human possibility, if only because it is not as hard a model as the injunction to "love thy neighbor as thyself." Naturally, in the end, Baldwin is interested in love--a term which he is not so literal as to indentify with sex. So if Baldwin has any message, probably it parallels W. H. Auden's observation: "We must love one another or die."²⁶ Here, then, is Baldwin on Love, the Negro, the Caucasian, on the Bloody Mess which is Humanity:

Love does not begin and end in the way we seem to think it does. Love is a battle, love is a war; love is a growing up. 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 with you, and sometimes even bleed and die with you, ever since we got here, that is, since both of us, black and white 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. There is no way around this. I am suggesting that these walls--these artificial walls--which have been up so long to protect us from something we fear, must come down. I think that what we really have to do is to create a country in which there are no minorities--for the first time in the history of the world. The one thing that all Americans have in common is that they have no other identity apart from the identity which is being achieved on this continent. . . . The necessity of Americans to achieve an identity is a historical and a present personal fact and this is the connection between you and me.²⁷

The argument is masterful rhetoric. The tightly parallel clauses aesthetically prove the logic, and the logic produces at least a human prospect in its elongated rush and swirl; these humanities rhetorically overcome the rigidity of things-as-they-are. The envisioned meaning of American experience is logical quite as much as it is humanistic, a marriage of persuasion and hope.

In thus arranging for the reader to discover an artistic unity of form and content, Baldwin places the racial nightmare at the center of the age's sickness. Yet the art exists to permit the human voice to break through. Mere art is a technique that will not save mankind. Love fuses technique with hope (except in marriage manuals that treat love as a problem in engineering); love may save mankind. In brief, to deny Baldwin's logic of parallels and imagery of marriage is to deny our common humanity.

I do not mean that Baldwin equates all people with humankind. The satanic principle of the great denial has delighted many people. Baldwin

merely sets forth the issue and defines the choices. We are free to deny if we like. Baldwin does not sentimentalize this matter. If anything, Baldwin suggests that racism is an aspect of that madness which the gods send to whomever they wish to destroy. Thus, in his most recent consideration of this microcosmic sickness of the age, Baldwin cites the wittily fearful prophecy, recreated from the Bible in a song of a slave: "God gave Noah the rainbow sign, / No more water, the fire next time."²⁸

We may or may not take the hint, but doubtless we can be grateful to Baldwin for bothering to pass the hint along--with love. If he did not love us he might enjoy the inhuman idea that we stand a reasonable chance nowadays of roasting in the heat and energy waves of the great denial made visible (if not exactly made flesh) in the reality of the Bomb. Surely it is much easier to drop the Bomb than to attempt the merely human, patchwork solutions. Surely it is simpler to despair than to attempt to love, marry and create the world that can be one's identity.

If there is any spiral, any onward and upward, any uplift that retains the least significance in the age that has achieved a seemingly ultimate barbarism in so much of its structure, probably it is alive in Baldwin's implicit belief that white people are worth bothering with. The tensions of Baldwin's prose style indicate how difficult it is to hold to that belief, yet the clarity of the style indicates that here is one way to achieve a human definition in our dreadful age. We shall have to see whether Baldwin does communicate. For, in the most profound sense, we need him much more desperately than he needs us.

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Footnotes:

¹ Nothing is more charmingly remote than a literary monument of the 1930's, such as John Dos Passos' U. S. A. That novel may seem remote even to Dos Passos, who is now a patriotic writer and a Time-Life staff man.

² The pioneers took up free or almost free land; the real Indians generally had to use spears and arrows against pioneer or army rifles; the heroic industrial feats took place behind high tariff walls. Of course there was danger, disease and commercial failure, but hardly enough of this to inhibit seriously the settlement and exploitation of the nation.

³ Napoleonic content and style are perhaps the ideal reverse of the content and style of these American documents.

⁴ Gertrude Stein recognized this verbal abstraction as a uniquely American quality in such diverse figures as U. S. Grant, Frank Stockton and Henry James. Edmund Wilson, Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War (New York, 1962), 140.

⁵ John Fischer, "Unwritten Rules of American Politics," Harper's, 197 (November 1948), 27-36.

⁶ Bruno Bettelheim, The Informed Heart (Glencoe, Illinois, 1960).

⁷ W. J. Cash, The Mind of the South (New York, 1941). Gunnar Myrdal, An American Dilemma (New York, 1944). Daniel Mannix, Black Cargoes: The Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1518-1865 (New York, 1962). There is, of course, much additional work but these items are suggestive in themselves and can lead to other works.

⁸ S. T. Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, Chapter 14.

⁹ Of course racial groups that are non-Caucasian, other than the Negro, have come to America; but none of these groups has endured the status or the particular treatment of the Negro. I do not wish to imply a bed of roses, only a certain relativity.

¹⁰ All minorities experience some degree of false identity and must endure some role playing. The identities and roles may have some objective validity, but their nature is imposed fantasy that is not likely to be the result of objective observation. Mainly they serve to establish more or less solid bars.

¹¹ "Smart Southern Politics," New Republic, 148:8 (February 23, 1963), 5.

¹² Robert Penn Warren, Segregation (New York, 1956).

¹³ Mary B. Chestnut, A Diary from Dixie (Boston, 1961).

¹⁴ Significantly, Mr. Kennedy had first acquired ownership of the bank.

¹⁵ A relative shift to hatred of other racial or ethnic groups can not be ignored as a possibility, although, as I have indicated, the Negro has endured a unique situation in America that would be difficult to reproduce in terms of some other group.

¹⁶ In Nobody Knows My Name, Baldwin devotes a chilling memorial essay to Richard Wright. Baldwin suggests that Wright came to artistic grief through dependence on the naturalistic mode, and, further, that Wright's private dependence on a merely political attitude toward the Negro resulted in personal exile and chaos.

¹⁷ Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man (New York, 1953).

¹⁸ James Baldwin, Notes of a Native Son (New York, 1955); Nobody Knows My Name (New York, 1961); The Fire Next Time (New York, 1963).

¹⁹ Nobody Knows My Name, 75, 101, 217.

²⁰ The Portable Faulkner (New York, 1946), 756.

²¹ One is reminded of Stephen Dedalus's formula: "Silence, exile, and cunning." James Joyce, "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man," in The Portable Joyce (New York, 1947), 518.

²² Bettelheim, 198.

²³ Baldwin states and implies frequently that better conditions of life would be desirable, but he finds as little ultimate solution here as in the notion of human idealism.

²⁴ Notes of a Native Son, 5.

²⁵ Norman Mailer, Advertisements for Myself, (New York, 1957) 422.

Baldwin's artistic heroism is such that he refused to take the gambit, but he has corrected Mailer's romantic view of the Negro's sexual freedom: cf. Nobody Knows My Name, 216-241.

²⁶ W. H. Auden, "September 1, 1939." Because of Auden's revisions of this poem, many published editions do not contain the line quoted. One which does is Elizabeth Drew and George Conner, eds., Discovering Modern Poetry (New York, 1961) 110.

²⁷ Nobody Knows My Name, 136-137.

²⁸ The Fire Next Time, titlepage.

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