

James Baldwin

James Baldwin

Living in Fire

Bill V. Mullen

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For Max and Shayari

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1

Baptism by Fire: Childhood and Youth, 1924–42

I know, in any case, that the most crucial time in my own development came when I was forced to recognize that I was a kind of bastard of the West.

James Baldwin, "Autobiographical Notes," 1955¹

I see myself ... not as I am, which is, I suppose, to see simply a rather odd looking black boy with a certain excess of nervous energy, with great uneasiness, a certain charm, and much panic and dishonesty and foolishness—but as a man—or often as a woman—in another situation entirely.

James Baldwin, early unpublished essay²

A ghetto can be improved in one way only: out of existence.

James Baldwin, "Fifth Avenue: Uptown," 1960³

James Baldwin's birth, childhood, and upbringing embody enduring themes of African-American history that animate his writing in intimate and personal ways. Baldwin was born James Arthur Jones on August 2, 1924, in New York's Harlem Hospital on 135th Street, the heart of Harlem. His mother, Emma Berdis Jones, arrived impoverished in New York City in the early 1920s from Deal Island, Maryland, once a slave-holding state. Baldwin would use her life as the model for the character Elizabeth in his first novel, *Go Tell It On the Mountain*. The book dramatized the plight of southern black migrants to the North during what historians call the "Great African-American Migration" during World War I, a momentous event in American history which created black Meccas like Harlem.

Baldwin's paternity provided him with another deeply personal theme. He never knew his birth father nor his name. For Baldwin, this was symbolic

of problems of African-American identity descending from slavery, a system which hid or masked family ancestry, and tore black children from both their parents and homeland. This theme would resonate in later symbolic book titles by Baldwin like *Nobody Knows My Name* and *No Name in the Street*. When Baldwin was three, Emma married David Baldwin, a factory worker whose mother had been a slave. David was once before married, with a son, Samuel, about twelve at the time. James Baldwin took his name from the stepfather, but as a child felt the stigma of being an adopted “bastard,” a fact which gave literal dimension to Baldwin’s claim that as the descendants of slaves he was himself a “bastard” of Western modernity built from capitalism and slavery.

David Baldwin and Emma Berdis Jones had many children to whom Baldwin would be the eldest, and often caregiver. As Baldwin put it, his mother was “given to the exasperating and mysterious habit of having babies. As they were born, I took them over with one hand and held a book with the other.”⁴ Baldwin’s siblings included a brother George, born in January 1928; Barbara, born in 1929; Wilmer, born in 1930; David, his closest lifelong sibling, born in 1931; Gloria, born in 1933; Ruth, born in 1935; Elizabeth, born in 1937; and Paula Maria, born in 1943, ironically on the day his stepfather David Baldwin died, a coincidence that became the springboard for one of Baldwin’s most famous essays, “Notes of a Native Son.”

The combination of multiple children, Depression-era conditions in Harlem—where unemployment in the 1930s reached 50 percent—his father’s low-wage job, and the oppressive ceiling of racism in America enabled Baldwin to see his family life and upbringing as allegories for the systemic, historic oppression and struggles of African-Americans. About David Baldwin, himself a migrant from the slave port city of New Orleans, Baldwin later said, “My father left the South to save his life. They were hanging niggers from trees in uniforms in 1919 and my father left the South therefore. Millions of us left the South therefore. And came to Chicago where we perish like rats, in New York where you perish like rats.”⁵ Baldwin refers here to what has been dubbed by historians the “Red Summer” of 1919 when African-American soldiers and workers were beaten and killed on the streets of cities like East St. Louis or on the “killing

floor” of Chicago slaughter houses by white workers after filling their jobs during World War I. It was these events which inspired the Caribbean poet Claude McKay to urge African-Americans to die “fighting back” in his famous Harlem Renaissance Shakespearian sonnet, “If We Must Die.”⁶

Baldwin’s schoolteacher, Orilla Miller, also remembers visiting the Baldwin family railroad apartment where Emma was forced to cook, clean, and perform all the labor by hand for her husband and nine children without help, a cruelty deepened by her job as a domestic worker in white people’s homes at a time when that work was one of the only jobs available to black women. Baldwin’s acute sensitivity to his mother’s devotion to her children, as well as her own personal suffering, was rewarded by deep loyalty to her throughout his life, and constant efforts to improve her material conditions when he began to earn money as a writer. Ironically, she survived him by twelve years, living in the relative comfort and stability of a New York apartment he purchased for her and his siblings while alive.

But it was the particular hardships—and his harsh reactions to them—of his stepfather’s life that provided Baldwin with the most powerful and lasting early lessons about race, poverty, and masculinity, lessons which would shape many elements of his life, including his own sexuality. Baldwin knew intuitively, and came to know it experientially from the example of his family, that racism and capitalism combined to try and crush the life from what W.E.B. Du Bois called defiantly the “souls of Black folk.”⁷ David Baldwin developed an authoritarian personality within the home that was meant to exercise power in the only sphere of his life he could control, yet poverty and immiseration constantly outran his efforts to hold back the tide of suffering, racism, and self-abnegation. For the young James Baldwin, his father’s entrapment and rage were tragic microcosms of the life of black people and black families. As he later told the poet Nikki Giovanni, “You know when you’re called a nigger you look at your father because you think your father can rule the world—every kid thinks that—and then you discover that your father cannot do anything about it. So you begin to despise your father and you realize, Oh, that’s what a nigger is.’ But it’s not your father’s fault and it’s not your fault.”⁸ Baldwin also said of his father, “it seemed to me that the most terrible thing that happened, and he was a very proud man, was that he couldn’t feed his children ... He

had no power. He was always at the mercy of some other man, some other man who was always white.”⁹

Baldwin here demonstrates a recurrent insight in his writing on U.S. and Western racism and capitalism, reversing the “causation” of personal suffering from victim to system, from subaltern to oppressor, from exploited to exploiter. Baldwin often singled out the word “nigger” as the invention of a exploitative system that needed to scapegoat black suffering as a means of avoiding guilt, responsibility, and blame for social inequality. As he later put it in a 1963 documentary film *Take This Hammer*, “We have invented the nigger. I didn’t invent him. White people invented him ... he’s unnecessary to me, so he must be necessary to you. I’m going to give you your problem back: You’re the nigger, baby, it isn’t me.”¹⁰ In other instances, Baldwin specifically blamed ruling elites—from southern plantation owners to factory bosses to government officials—for creating racist terms and ideas in order to keep blacks and Whites divided from each other. The idea of the “nigger,” then, Baldwin understood to be a longstanding American idea to make one group feel superior to another, to maintain divide and rule for the powerful. From his stepfather, too, who eventually descended into mental illness, Baldwin developed the resilient insight that “you can only be destroyed by believing that you really are what the white world calls a NIGGER.”¹¹

A critical dimension of Baldwin’s life as a child and in his intellectual, artistic, and spiritual development was his stepfather’s work as a Pentecostal storefront preacher, and the latter’s zealous, fundamentalist religious devotion. Under David Baldwin’s stern directive influence, young James attended Abyssinian Baptist Church on 138th Street in Harlem, and later joined the Mount Calvary of the Pentecostal Faith Church on Harlem’s Lenox Avenue. As a result of these experiences, Baldwin underwent a religious conversion and became a young minister at Fireside Pentecostal Assembly in Harlem. From the age of 14 to 17, he preached there regularly.

For Baldwin, the black church and religiosity represented both the excitement and ecstasy of worship, music, poetry, and communion. The Bible and scripture, as we will see, were also dominant influences on his mature oratory and literary styles. Most importantly, the black church and religion came to represent for Baldwin what Marx called the “sigh of the

oppressed” in a heartless world. As Baldwin wrote in his 1948 essay, “The Harlem Ghetto”:

There are probably more churches in Harlem than in any other ghetto in this city and they are going full blast every night and some of them are filled with praying people every day. This, supposedly, exemplifies the Negro’s essential simplicity and good-will; but it is actually a fairly emotional business ... religion operates here as a complete and exquisite fantasy revenge: white people own the earth and commit all manner of abomination and injustice on it; the bad will be punished and the good rewarded, for God is not sleeping, the judgement is not far off.¹²

The most vivid account of Baldwin’s youthful time as a minister and religious convert is actually fictional: his thinly veiled autobiographical novel *Go Tell It On the Mountain*, published in 1953, and the book that set him fully on the path of his literary career. The novel’s title refers to the Negro spiritual of the same name gathered and published by the first African-American collector of the genre, John Wesley Work, Jr. The spirituals—sacred and secular songs sung first by slaves as what W.E.B. Du Bois called “sorrow songs” of work and woe—became canonized and popularized through groups like the Fisk University Jubilee Singers who toured the world singing them in concert in the late nineteenth century. The lyrics of “Go Tell It On the Mountain” assume the voices of angels announcing the birth of Jesus Christ: “Down in a lowly manger | The humble Christ was born | And God sent us salvation | That blessed Christmas morn.” In Baldwin’s novel, the young protagonist, John Grimes, appears fated from the first page of the book to fulfill his historical destiny as a preacher meant to carry forth the word of God:

Everyone had always said that John would be a preacher when he grew up, just like his father. It had been said so often that John, without ever thinking about it, had come to believe it himself. Not until the morning of his fourteenth birthday did he really begin to think about it, and by then it was already too late.¹³

Baldwin cleverly embeds tension and irony in this opening paragraph that foreshadows the multiple personal and emotional struggles of his protagonist. John's decision to become a preacher is not his own but something "everyone" said would happen. The passage suggests community and paternal pressure as a guiding hand on an unconscious child. Ironically, John's own ability to think and choose for himself arrives "too late" after he embarks on his short-lived preaching career. The paragraph tells us of an enormous conflict between father and son, community and individual, fate and free will.

Indeed, the writing of *Go Tell It On the Mountain* was the first and most important literary aspiration of young James Baldwin's career, a personal obsession and ambition that began when he was all of 17 years old, and coincided with the year he left the church for good, and moved from Harlem to Greenwich Village in New York. The book then is about a break with the church as much as an immersion in it, and about the trauma of both as impetus for Baldwin's literary career. These creative conflicts and tensions are foretold in Baldwin's numerous drafts and notes on the book.

The novel's original title was *Crying Holy*, a phrase Baldwin used in reference to black church music (gospel mainly) in his later essay "Letter from a Region of My Mind." The passage refers to the "visceral" power of the church and its gospel and spiritual traditions: "There is no music like that music, no drama like the drama of the saints rejoicing, the sinners moaning, the tambourines racing, and all those voices coming together and crying holy unto the Lord."¹⁴ The draft title is one of the first indicators of the enormous impress of black music on Baldwin's life, a story well documented by the likes of scholars like Ed Pavlić, who note that for Baldwin African-American music—jazz, blues, spirituals, gospel—were guiding lights and metaphors for black creativity, improvisation, joy, suffering. In many cases, they were also direct literary templates for his own work, as in the important novella "Sonny's Blues," to be discussed later.

But early notes and drafts of the book also foreground the fictional representation of young James Baldwin's real emotional and spiritual battles with his stepfather, the Pentecostal preacher who "fated" him to preach. "At seventeen," he wrote in one draft note for the book, "Johnnie Rogers [later changed to John Grimes] realizes that he has always hated his father.

His father is Deacon Rogers. The head-deacon of a fanatically strict church ... He forces his children to lead incredibly secluded and narrow lives to their detriment.”¹⁵ Baldwin’s childhood sympathies for his real-life mother, Emma Berdis, are also embedded in the drafts: “The mother is a meek, frightened woman completely under her husband’s domination.” She “sympathizes with her children but is unable to help them. Her love for her husband (though she is not much more to him than a convenient piece of furniture, by whom he feeds his ego, begets children, and satisfies his bodily craving) her fear of the wrath of God, her captivity to convention, make her a pallid and unimportant person in the household.”¹⁶

The original plot line for the book also underscores the tenacity and fatalism of Baldwin’s real-life psychological struggle with his father. About the young protagonist Johnnie, he writes, “His frustrated, bored and repressed life makes him increasingly neurotic and bitter. His hatred for his father must always be concealed. He is always being told that he is lost, that he must get saved.”¹⁷ Significantly, Baldwin also wrote his own roiling sexuality, longings, and confusions into the story of paternal repression. “None of the children have been given anything resembling adequate sexual instruction, so that at fourteen, Johnnie’s body is still a good deal of a mystery to him. A homosexual lures him into a hallway and attempts a perversion of sexual intercourse with him. Johnnie flees in terror. Now he feels irredeemably lost and unclear.”¹⁸ Johnnie then lurches towards heterosexual conformity, attempting sex with Sylvia, a young woman whose Christian faith combined with his own “morbid, neurotic, emotionally repressed state and feeling of guilt” results in a “stormy conversion to religion.”¹⁹

Here sexual crisis, anxiety, repression, and identity ambiguity are the impetus for faith, not the love of God. The hallway episode Baldwin later recounted in autobiographical form in his essay “Freaks and the Idea of American Manhood.” Baldwin later said of himself, “I didn’t have any human value. And that was why I joined the church.”²⁰ Baldwin’s oft-stated reflections on the gender and sexual fluidity of his own youthful urgings—embodied in the epigraph to this chapter about his self-imaging as both male and female—was, in the earliest incarnations of what became *Go Tell It On the Mountain*, among the most vital of themes. Indeed, the Oedipal

conflict, inflected by Johnnie's queer desire, is the center of the draft notes for *Crying Holy*. When the paternal Deacon slaps him for desiring sex, "For the first time Johnnie thinks of killing his father"—and does, putting cyanide in his communion cup. In a melodramatic plot twist, Johnnie's brother, Roy, is blamed for the killing, and dies in the electric chair. Johnnie meanwhile stays silent, a "dead drunk in a harlot's room."²¹

Almost all of these plot imaginings would be revised out of the final text of *Go Tell It On the Mountain*, which we will discuss in more detail in Chapter 2. However, the early draft notes for the book are important for indicating the prominence of queer sexuality in young Baldwin's life and writing. Another draft chapter, for example, set on Charles Street in Greenwich Village, includes scenes of male cruising, interracial sex, and titles—"The Prisoner" containing intimations of some of Baldwin's later, more explicit writings on homosexuality, like "The Male Prison," his 1961 essay on the gay French author André Gide. The early draft notes also indicate how David Baldwin's masculinity and authority were clear challenges to the identity formation of a sexually indeterminate young Baldwin, and how the weight of sin in Christianity outweighed salvation in his mind. Finally, the book's themes of brotherly love—and betrayal—and feminist compassion for African-American women in oppressed circumstances, would redound in later Baldwin books and plays, like *Blues for Mister Charlie*, *Just Above My Head*, and *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*—as would one final theme—taking responsibility for the death of someone, a centerpiece of the 1956 novel *Giovanni's Room*.

* * *

Baldwin once described his formal education as a reprieve and escape from the oppressive religiosity and conformity of his home life. "School," he wrote, "was a kind of refuge from home. From my father." "I read my way through two libraries by the time I was thirteen," he once said,²² and "I read myself out of Harlem."²³ Books, and school learning, provided Baldwin with a secular alternative to his dogged scriptural training. Among the earliest important influences on Baldwin was Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*—the first serious book Baldwin read—and the work of Henry James and Charles Dickens, who helped commit Baldwin to a

mode of literary realism. His public school education was also buttressed by important contemporary events. He was born in the midst of the Harlem Renaissance, a flowering of literary, visual, and cultural production by black artists, many of whom like Baldwin's family had arrived in New York City from the South. The Harlem Renaissance was also an international affair: one of its inspirations was the contemporary "Irish Renaissance" in the arts that produced the likes of James Joyce and W.B. Yeats; another, Caribbean migration to the U.S., which produced important Harlem-based writers like the Jamaican Claude McKay, cited earlier.

Eventually, Baldwin would be directly touched by architects of the Renaissance: his junior high-school French teacher Countee Cullen was a breakthrough poet of the Renaissance, and its poetic star, Langston Hughes, was one of the first African-American writers to call Baldwin to a career in letters. Thus even though Baldwin was too young to experience it as an artist, and later diminished the Renaissance as something that "was not destined to last very long," we can perceive his Harlem Renaissance "roots" as another element shaping his life as an intellectual and writer.

A second major influence on his education was the impress of leftist political thought on a young, impressionable, searching mind. Baldwin was five when the stock market crashed and millions of Americans were thrown out of work. His family's already dire poverty deepened. As he later recalls of that period, "I learned something every poor kid does. All you have to figure out is how you are going to outwit those forces which are determined to destroy you."²⁴ He also wrote of this period, "I knew that people were suffering and dying all around me and it wasn't their fault."²⁵ Many people with a similar consciousness turned to the left, joining the Communist Party and other socialist organizations active in New York City. Baldwin himself was eleven when the "Popular Front" period was decreed by the Communist International in Moscow, and the fight against fascism in the Western world was conjoined to an emphasis on fighting racism: "Black and White Unite and Fight" became a widely used slogan in left circles. Indeed, Harlem from the early 1920s to the period of World War II was a literal hotbed of leftist activity and thought that by the 1930s created an accessible culture for a curious, sharp-minded boy like Baldwin seeking to develop an analysis of racism and economic inequality. After

all, by Baldwin's own account, it was his first encounter with the police as a ten year old that began to educate him in the sociology of his own life. "[T]hey both beat me up," he recalls, "They knocked me down, and left me lying flat on my back in that empty parking lot. I never forgot. I still remember lights of that cop car going by and then I understood something. That's when hatred begins."²⁶ We might then see Baldwin's youthful education and political training as a self-conscious struggle to blast the Harlem ghetto "out of existence" as he once put it. That would mean both learning to expose through his writing the ghetto's inequalities to a wider world, and by doing so end them, and to actually leave that place behind.

Baldwin's formal public education began at Public School 124 (P.S. 124) in Harlem. The school was significant for having the first black principal in the city's history, Gertrude Ayers. As Baldwin recalls, the black teachers there were "laconic about politics but single-minded about the future of Black students."²⁷ Even during his time as an elementary school student, Baldwin attempted to assist his family financially by shining shoes and selling shopping bags with his brother George to supplement his parents' meager incomes as factory worker and paid domestic.²⁸ A flashpoint in Baldwin's early political education occurred while he was an elementary school student: in 1935, when he was ten, Lino Rivera, a Puerto Rican youth of 16, was arrested and accused of shoplifting at the S.H. Kress department store on 135th Street, not far from his home (Harlem was, as Baldwin recalled it, not an "all-black" community during his youth; East Harlem earned the name "Spanish Harlem" after the turn of the century for the massive Puerto Rican migration there after the U.S. annexed, occupied, and colonized the island in 1898). Rivera's arrest triggered rumors that he had been beaten to death in the store's basement, possibly by police. The rumors sparked a massive uprising in Harlem, with the police and locally owned businesses viewed as symbols of Harlem oppression and disenfranchisement the targets. Baldwin would later refer to the 1935 (and later 1943) Harlem riots as inspirations for his important essay "The Harlem Ghetto." In it, Baldwin described black urban rebellions as what Martin Luther King, Jr. once called the "language of the unheard."