Also by Colm Tóibín

FICTION

The South

The Heather Blazing

The Story of the Night

The Blackwater Lightship

The Master

Mothers and Sons

Brooklyn

The Empty Family

NON-FICTION

Bad Blood:
A Walk Along the Irish Border

Homage to Barcelona

The Sign of the Cross:
Travels in Catholic Europe

Lady Gregory's Toothbrush

PLAY

Beauty in a Broken Place

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Love in a Dark Time

GAY LIVES FROM WILDE TO ALMODÓVAR

PICADOR

a slightly higher class Old Ladies Home,' she wrote. In 1971 she directed a seminar at Harvard on 'Letters': 'Just *letters* – as an art form or something. I'm hoping to select a nicely incongruous assortment of people – Mrs Carlyle, Chekhov, my Aunt Grace, Keats, a letter found in the street, etc etc.' The letter was, she said, 'the dying form of communication'. Most of her letters read like performances, bursts of energy, full of delight at the quirky and the exotic; full of 'fun' (she tended to put 'fun' in inverted commas – '"fun"', she wrote in her elegy to Lowell, 'it always seemed to leave you at a loss.') But others break down into pure confession, and are heartbreaking in their honesty. 'I am sorry for people who can't write letters,' Bishop wrote. 'But I suspect that you and I love to write them because it's kind of like working without really doing it.'

One Art: The Selected Letters of Elizabeth Bishop edited by Robert Giroux, Chatto

Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It by Brett Millier, University of California Press

JAMES BALDWIN:

THE FLESH AND THE DEVIL

On the first of February 2001 in the Alice Tully Hall in the Lincoln Centre in New York eight writers came to pay homage to James Baldwin. The event was booked out and there were people standing outside desperately looking for tickets. The audience was strange; in general in New York an audience is either young or old (in the Lincoln Centre mainly old), black or white (in the Lincoln Centre, almost exclusively white), gay or straight (in the Lincoln Centre it was often hard to tell). The audience for James Baldwin that evening, however, could not be so easily categorised: it was, I suppose, half black, half white; half young, half old; three-quarters straight, a quarter gay. But many of those who had come carried with them, in their faces and their body language, a sense that there were more important things than age or race or sexuality. Also, there was a large number of young black men who had come alone, who carried a book and an aura of seriousness and intensity. There was a good number of writers. Some of Baldwin's family was there.

The speeches made it clear that James Baldwin's legacy is both powerful and fluid, allowing it to fit whatever category each reader requires, allowing it to influence each reader in a way which tells us as much about the reader as it does about Baldwin.

And what it tells us about Baldwin has to do with his contradictions, the large set of opposites which made up his personality. He was, for some of his life, a pure artist, using Jamesian techniques and cadences. He was also an agitator and a propagandist, political and engaged. He was steeped in the world of his childhood in Harlem. He also loved the bohemian world of Greenwich Village and Paris. He was a loner. He was also a deeply gregarious and social being. He was the most eloquent man in the America of his time. His legacy is also one of failure. It is hard to decide what part of him came first. Was the colour of his skin more important than his sexuality? Was his religious upbringing more important than his reading of the American masters? Were his sadness and anger more important than his love of laughter, his delight in the world? Did his prose style, as the novelist Russell Banks claimed that evening, take its bearings from Emerson, or was it, according to the writer Hilton Als who also spoke, 'a high-faggot style', or did it originate, as John Edgar Wideman claimed, from a mixture of the King James Bible and African-American speech? Was it full of the clarity, eloquence and intelligence that Chinua Achebe suggested? And was Baldwin's involvement with the Civil Rights movement a cautionary tale for other writers, as Hilton Als insisted, or

was it one of the reasons we should most admire him, as Amiri Baraka argued? Is his best book the book that has not yet appeared – a volume of his letters – as Hilton Als proposed, or are his essays his finest work, as many now believe, or are his early novels his enduring legacy, books which 'blew my mind', as Chinua Achebe said that evening?

For all of the speakers, and indeed for the audience, the relationship to Baldwin's work remains intense. The complexity of Baldwin's character, the power of his prose-style and the abiding importance of his subjects make him a writer to confront and argue with as well as a writer to admire. Out of his arguments with himself, he made his essays, and this gives them a riveting honesty and edge. In his novels, he sought to explore the parts of the self which most of us seek to conceal. And he was also concerned with style, with how you write a sentence, how you control the music and rhythms of prose.

James Baldwin was born in Harlem in 1924. He was the eldest of a large family. His father died when he was nineteen. 'On the same day,' Baldwin wrote in *Notes of a Native Son*, 'a few hours later, his last child was born. Over a month before this, while all our energies were concentrated in waiting for these events, there had been, in Detroit, one of the bloodiest race riots of the century. A few hours after my father's funeral, while he lay in state in the undertaker's chapel, a race riot broke out in Harlem . . . As we

drove him to the graveyard, the spoils of injustice, anarchy, discontent and hatred were all around us.'

Baldwin began with a very great subject: the drama of his own life matching or echoing against the public drama. He also began with certain influences. When he was thirty-one years old, he listed them in *Notes of a Native Son*: 'the King James Bible, the rhetoric of the store-front church, something ironic and violent and perpetually understated in Negro speech – and something of Dicken's love for bravura.'

However, he added something of his own to his inherited subject and the influences he listed. It was something so all-pervasive in his work, both his essays and his fiction, that he may not have even noticed it, and certainly did not want to write about it. He used and adapted the tone of the great masters of English eloquence: Bacon, Sir Thomas Browne, Hazlitt, Emerson and Henry James. He brought, he wrote, 'a special attitude' to 'Shakespeare, Bach, Rembrandt, to the stones of Paris, to the cathedral of Chartres, and to the Empire State Building . . . These were not really my creations; they did not contain my history; I might search in vain forever for any reflection of myself. I was an interloper; this was not my heritage. At the same time I had no other heritage which I could possibly hope to use – I had certainly been unfitted for the jungle and the tribe. I would have to appropriate those white centuries, I would have to make them mine.'

By appropriating the heritage of English prose, Baldwin learned not only a style but also a cast of mind. The cast of mind used qualification, the aside

and the further sub-clauses as a way to suggest that the truth was brittle and easily undermined. His prose played with the explicit and the implicit, the bald statement and the skeptical gloss. His style could be high and grave and reflect the glittering mind; his thought was embodied beautifully in his style, as though fresh language had led him to fresh thought. From Henry James, he also learned a great deal about character and consciousness in fiction, the use of the single point of view, the use of nuance and shade.

He had, early in his career, what Eliot said about James, 'a mind so fine that it could not be penetrated by an idea'; and the rest of the time he did not have this luxury, as public events, and indeed private ones, pressed in on his imagination, forbade him the sort of freedom he naturally sought. He was both freed and cornered by his heritage, freed from being a dandy and freed into finding a subject, and then cornered into being a spokesman or an exile, cornered into anger.

In his speech that evening in the Lincoln Centre, Chinua Achebe spoke of an uncanny connection between his work and that of Baldwin. In *Things Fall Apart*, the portrait of the father's anger and powerlessness is very close to the portrait of the father in Baldwin's essays and his fiction. That this father who died when Baldwin was nineteen was not really his father – he never knew the name of his real father – made his regret at not knowing him and not liking him all the greater.

> Hansome, proud, and ingrown, 'like a toenail', somebody said. But he looked to me, as I grew older, like pictures I had seen of African tribal chieftains: he really should have been naked, with war paint on and barbaric mementos, standing among spears. He could be chilling in the pulpit and indescribably cruel in his personal life and he was certainly the most bitter man I have ever met . . . When he died I had been away from home for a little over a year . . . I had discovered the weight of white people in the world. I saw that this had been for my ancestors and now would be for me an awful thing to live with and that the bitterness which had helped to kill my father could also kill me.

Baldwin's bitterness was fired by working in a defence plant in New Jersey during the war, and learning that 'bars, bowling alleys, diners, places to live' were closed to him. There was something about him that made him insist on going into these places, suffer rejection, forcing them to refuse to serve him. He described his last night there when, having been refused in a diner, he went into 'an enormous, glittering and fashionable restaurant in which I knew not even the intercession of the Virgin would cause me to be served'. He sat at a table until a waitress came and said: 'We don't serve Negroes here.' He noted the fear and the apology in her voice. 'I wanted her to come close enough for me to get her neck between my hands.' Instead, he threw a half-full watermug at her and missed and ran. Later, he realised that he

> had been ready to commit murder. I saw nothing very clearly, but I did see this: that my life, my *real* life, was in danger, and not from anything other people might do but from the hatred I carried in my own heart.

Baldwin published this in 1955 when he was thirty-one. His tone in these early essays was not simply political; he was not demanding legislation or urgent government action. He did not present himself as innocent and the others as guilty. He sought to do something more truthful and difficult. He sought to show that the damage had entered his soul from where it could not be easily dislodged, and he sought also to show that the soul of America itself was a great stained soul. He shook his head at the possibility that anything other than mass conversion could change things. He had not been a child preacher for nothing.

How he moved from raw anger to becoming one of the finest prose-stylists of the age remains fascinating. He moved downtown after his father died and began to hang out in Greenwich Village. 'There were very few black people in the Village in those years,' he wrote in 1985,

> and of that handful, I was decidedly, the most improbable . . . I was eager, vulnerable and lonely . . . I am sure that I was afraid that I already seemed and sounded too much like a woman. In my childhood, at least until my adolescence, my playmates had called me a sissy . . . On every street corner, I was called a faggot.

He found odd jobs and then lost them, washing dishes, working as an elevator boy. He drank, he had casual affairs, he suffered a number of nervous crises. The five years between the death of his father and his leaving New York remained for him nightmare years where he came within a breath of self-destruction.

The colour of his skin caused him, in both his essays and his fiction, to create a version of America which was passionate and original; his homosexuality caused a similar attempt to describe and dramatise the sexual politics of his time. 'The American *ideal*, then, of sexuality appears to be rooted in the American idea of masculinity,' he wrote in 1985,

> This ideal had created cowboys and Indians, good guys and bad guys, punks and studs, tough guys and softies, butch and faggot, black and white. It is an ideal so paralytically infantile that it is virtually forbidden – as an unpatriotic act – that the American boy evolve into the complexity of manhood.

In an essay on Richard Wright, published in 1951, Baldwin wrote:

> And there is, I should think no Negro living in America who has not felt briefly and for long periods, with anguish sharp or dull, in varying degrees or 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 cruelest 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.

In 1962, Baldwin published *Another Country* which dealt with masculinity and race and rage and the fate of a young musician from Harlem who had dared to live in Greenwich Village. Rufus, who is the central character in *Another Country*, has felt hatred and been brushed by its wings, but Baldwin was too subtle and alert to the danger of making him merely an angry black man, or a victim. In an essay in 1960 called 'Notes for a Hypothetical Novel' he had mused on the white people he met in downtown New York in his early twenties:

> In the beginning, I thought that the white world was very different from the world I was moving out of and I turned out to be entirely wrong. It seemed different. It seemed safer, at least the white people seemed safer. It seemed cleaner, it seemed more polite, and, of course, it seemed much richer from the material point of view. But I didn't meet anyone in that world who didn't suffer from the same affliction that all the people I had fled from suffered from and that was that they didn't know who they were. They wanted to be someone that they were not.

Baldwin knew to make his hero bad as well as brilliant, to place a violent and self-destructive charm at the core of him and to make his white friends uneasy

and complex figures too, unable to protect themselves. The first eighty pages of the book are astonishing, as we watch Rufus move towards his doom. In 1960 in an essay Baldwin had alluded to the 'body of sexual myths . . . around the figure of the American Negro' who 'is penalised for the guilty imagination of the white people who invest him with their hates and longings, and is the principal target of their sexual longings.' Rufus is aware of this and suspicious of his own attractions. He will grow to hate the white woman who wants him. He will grow to despise and distrust his white friends. He will walk the city, destitute and forlorn. He will do what Baldwin's friend Eugene Worth did in 1946, he will finally jump to his death off the George Washington Bridge. 'There are no antecedents for [Rufus],' Baldwin later said.

> He was in the novel because I don't think anyone had ever watched the disintegration of a black boy from that particular point of view. Rufus was partly responsible for his doom, and in presenting him as partly responsible, I was attempting to break out of the whole sentimental image of the afflicted nigger driven that way (to suicide) by white people.

Rufus is a tragic hero caught between the time when men such as him had no freedom, and the time to come. The city has opened its doors to him, not enough for him to feel free, but just enough for him to feel danger and threat. He is like someone who has been released from solitary confinement into the wider prison.

Two years after the suicide of Eugene Worth, Baldwin left New York and moved to Paris. 'I didn't know what was going to happen to me in Paris,' he told the *Paris Review*, 'but I knew what was going to happen to me in New York. If I had stayed there, I would have gone under, like my friend on the George Washington Bridge.'

'I left America,' he wrote in 1959, 'because I doubted my ability to survive the fury of the colour problem here . . . I wanted to prevent myself from becoming *merely* a Negro; or even merely a Negro writer.' The fate of Eugene Worth continued to haunt him. He wrote in 1961: 'I felt then, and, to tell the truth, I feel now that he would not have died in such a way and certainly not so soon, if he had not been black.' In that year Baldwin also wrote: 'My revenge, I decided very early, would be to achieve a power which outlasts kingdoms . . . To become a Negro man, let alone a Negro artist, one has to make oneself up as one went along.'

He invented for himself two role models. One was the painter Beauford Delaney whom Baldwin first visited in his studio in Greenwich Village when Baldwin was sixteen and was still a child preacher. 'Beauford was the first walking, living proof, for me, that a black man could be an artist.' Four years later, Baldwin met Richard Wright, who was sixteen years older than him and, at that time, the most famous black writer in

America. Wright encouraged Baldwin, read his work and recommended him for a grant. And, just as important, Wright offered him an example by going to live in Paris in 1946. (Beauford Delaney also moved there in 1952.) When Baldwin arrived in Paris in November 1948, he found Richard Wright sitting at a table in Saint-Germain. Wright found him somewhere to stay and introduced him to the world of expatriate bohemia in Paris.

Over the next six years, which were spent mostly in Paris, James Baldwin produced two novels, *Go Tell It On The Mountain* and *Giovanni's Room*, some of his best stories, and his first book of essays, *Notes of a Native Son*, made up of pieces mainly published in *Partisan Review*, *Commentary* and *Harper's*.

It would be easy to argue that *Go Tell It On The Mountain* and *Giovanni's Room* were written by different people, one the young writer whose imagination was fired by his childhood and its discontents, who had observed the older generation in his family, had come to understand them better than he did himself, so that he could draw them with raw sympathy in a language which was richly charged. In his first novel, Baldwin was concerned with their sensuality, their flesh as both a badge of glorious self and a source of shame and sinfulness. He tried to capture them in the most beautiful sentences, and tried to fill their relationships, their privacies, their motives and their thought processes with nuance and qualification, with subtlety and well-wrought cadence. Henry James had come to Harlem. The

novel was finished in 1952, accepted by Knopf and published the following year.

The arrival of Baldwin the essayist and novelist was greeted with joy and relief by the New York editors he wrote for. Someone had arrived who could write wonderful prose, who had a sense of politics and the destiny of his people, who was both wise and smart, who was from Harlem but had developed other perspectives, and whose first novel, in its treatment of religion and a Harlem only barely understood south of one hundred and twenty-fifth street, was compared to William James and William Faulkner. In 1950, Baldwin in Paris had read James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, whose story was not lost on him. The need to do battle with religion and his own oppressed nation, some of whose members were unhappy with his novel and his attitudes; the need to go into exile; the need to create a voice and mode of perception for a sensitive, literary young man; these became Baldwin's needs as much as Joyce's. 'What I mainly learned [in France],' he later said, 'was about my own country, my own past, and about my own language. Joyce accepted silence, exile and cunning as a system which would sustain his life, and I've had to accept it too – incidentally, silence is the hardest part to understand.'

Baldwin's editors and reviewers would have been happy had he gone on now to recreate the conscience of his race in book after book. But two things were to interest him and these would interrupt what looked in 1955, with the publication of *Notes of a Native Son*,

to be a brilliant career. The first was his own homosexuality and the second was the Civil Rights Movement.

In 1951 Baldwin published an early story 'The Outing', which remains one of his best stories. The church community which appears in *Go Tell It On The Mountain* go on an outing on a boat up the Hudson River. The story concentrates on a number of adolescent boys who are part of the church. It ends as follows:

> All during the trip home David seemed preoccupied. When he finally sought out Johnnie he found him sitting by himself on the top deck, shivering a little in the night air. He sat down beside him. After a moment Johnnie moved and put his head on David's shoulder. David put his arms around him. But now where there had been peace there was only panic and where there had been safety, danger, like a flower, opened.

This was dangerous territory in 1951. By this time Baldwin had fallen in love with a Swiss man living in Paris, Lucien Happersberger, and, despite the fact that Happersberger soon got married, Baldwin would remain involved with him, in various ways, for the rest of his life. The relationship between the two men and between Baldwin and a number of close women friends, and the general air of sexual ambivalence and

dishonesty in Greenwich Village and Paris gave Baldwin the atmosphere for *Giovanni's Room*. 'Specifically,' David Leeming wrote in his biography,

> it reflects his own wrestling with sexual ambivalence. Like David [in the novel], he had been engaged or nearly engaged. He, too . . . had tried to convince himself of his essential heterosexuality. But unlike David, he had willingly accepted the reality represented by Giovanni's room when it came to him in the person of Lucien, to whom he dedicated the novel. Ironically, it was Lucien who married and who, several times over the years, rejected the room to which Jimmy called him and who, in Jimmy's eyes, became David to his Giovanni.

For his editors in New York, publishing a black writer was fascinating, but publishing a black homosexual writer was impossible. And there were no black characters at all in Baldwin's second novel. There was nothing about 'the Negro problem'. Thirty years later, in a *Paris Review* interview, Baldwin said: 'The sexual-moral light was a hard thing to deal with. I could not handle both propositions in the same book.' Knopf turned the book down. Baldwin's agent advised him to burn it. 'When I turned the book in,' Baldwin later said,

> I was told I shouldn't have written it. I was told to bear in mind that I was a young Negro writer with a certain audience and I wasn't supposed to alienate the

> audience. And if I published the book, it would wreck my career. They wouldn't publish the book, they said, as a favour to me.

In London, however, Michael Joseph agreed to publish *Giovanni's Room* and, later, in New York, a small publisher, the Dial Press, offered to bring the book out. It first appeared in 1956.

Both *Go Tell It On The Mountain* and *Giovanni's Room* were declarations of independence for Baldwin. In the first, he dramatised the destiny of a black family in Harlem, but he refused to allow that destiny to be shaped by an obvious plot in which being black could only lead to mayhem and tragedy. It is as much a landmark in American writing as Joyce's *Dubliners* was in Ireland. *Dubliners* refused to allow its characters to have their destiny shaped directly by Irish history or the land wars or the British presence in Irish writing. Both Joyce's characters and Baldwin's characters suffer because of what is within them.

In placing the very nature of his characters, their inner demons, at the centre, Baldwin refused to write a parable of race relations. His theory for this refusal appeared some years before *Go Tell It On The Mountain*, in two essays – 'Everybody's Protest Novel' (1949) and 'Many Thousands Gone' (1951). Both were essentially attacks on Richard Wright's novel *Native Son*.

> All of Bigger's [the black hero who commits a murder at the end of the book] life is controlled, defined by

> his hatred and his fear. And later his fear drives him to murder and his hatred to rape . . . Below the surface of this novel there lies, as it seems to me, a continuation, a complement of that monstrous legend it was written to destroy.

In prose which was rich and allusive, Baldwin characterised *Native Son* as a protest novel whose

> climate of anarchy and unmotivated and unapprehended disaster . . . has led us all to believe that in Negro life there exists no tradition, no field of manners, no possibility of ritual and intercourse . . . But the fact is not that the Negro has no tradition but that there has as yet arrived no sensibility sufficiently profound and tough to make this tradition articulate.

In writing *Giovanni's Room*, Baldwin further emphasised that he was profound and tough enough to declare his further independence from what others might have called his heritage, his natural subject matter. For a black man to decide to write a novel with mainly gay white characters, set in France, was a brave political act. To place a murder, however, at the centre of his gay plot was to do to homosexuals what he had attacked Wright for doing to black people – adding impetus to the popular notion that they were alarming. Needless to say, there was no one to point this out at the time.

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Baldwin at his best has two voices. One is the third-person narrative of his first novel and the opening chapters of *Another Country*. The prose is dense; there is a fierce concentration on the single consciousness; the tone is relentless. The second voice is his own first-person voice, the voice of his essays. This voice is earnest, it deals in difficult truths and it has an urgent edge to it, but it manages to be personal and private, a tone which whispers and insinuates rather than hectors.

The power of this second voice makes the first-person voices Baldwin created for his fictional characters in *Giovanni's Room*, *Tell Me How Long The Train's Been Gone* (1968), 'If Beale Street Could Talk' (1974), 'Just Above My Head' (1978) and some of the stories in *Going To Meet The Man* (1964) seem paler, less urgent and less complex. In spite of this, *Giovanni's Room* remains a powerful book because of the stark simplicity of its drama and the intensity of its vision. It deals, in the end, with the same subject as *Go Tell It On The Mountain*. Indeed, it is difficult to think of two books which deal with this subject with the same level of seriousness and urgency. The subject is the flesh itself and sexual longing, and how close to treachery lies desire, how the truth of the body differs from the lies of the mind. Like other gay writers, Baldwin could take nothing for granted. Sexual desire itself led him to being told that he should burn his book, the colour of his skin having created an original need to watch every word. His intelligence, the energy of his wit and his longing

for love hit up against history and the hardness of the world, hit up against the prejudices which people had about a man who was black and a man who was gay. Everything in his fiction is bathed in the sadness which resulted.

His religious background and his own sexuality gave him the flesh and the devil as a great subject. Also, his position as the eldest of his family, the surrogate father to his siblings, his position as the outsider – the writer, the homosexual, the one with the missing father – all this may explain his other great subject: the extraordinary intensity in the love between siblings in his work. This love in his fiction is all the more fierce and concentrated because it involves the sibling as witness to the other's self-destruction, the other's pain.

In an interview in 1970 he said:

> My family saved me . . . I mean that they kept me so busy caring for them, keeping them from the rats, roaches, falling plaster, and all the banality of poverty that I had no time to go jumping off the roof, or to become a junkie or an alcoholic. It's either/or in the ghetto . . . The welfare of my family has always driven me, always controlled me. I wanted to become rich and famous so no one could ever evict my family again . . . The greatest things in my life are my brothers and sisters, and my nieces and nephews.

From his first story 'The Rockpile', in which the brothers John and Roy appear, to *Go Tell It On The Mountain*, from the story 'Sonny's Blues' to *Tell Me*

How Long The Train's Been Gone, the love between brothers in Baldwin is elemental, like a Greek tragedy in its sense of foreboding, like 'the cup of trembling' at the end of 'Sonny's Blues', where one brother is weak and the other strong enough merely to suffer the powerlessness of one who is forced to watch. Thus Caleb in *Tell Me How Long The Train's Been Gone* is doomed, but the drama enacted in the novel is the drama of his doom as witnessed by his younger brother, the narrator, who feels for him an attachment which is fiercer than love because it knows that loss and the possibility of a tragic fate are included in the bargain. So too in *Another Country*, Ida, one of Baldwin's greatest creations, enters the novel, as Antigone enters the play, because of her love for her brother Rufus. She, too, becomes a witness to his doom. The piercing emotion surrounding family attachment in Baldwin's fiction is overwhelming; it is something so deeply felt and, in much of the fiction (including books which fail in other ways), so carefully manipulated and controlled that it is central to the achievement of his fiction, one of the reasons why he continues to be read with such intensity.

Soon after the publication of *Giovanni's Room* in 1957, James Baldwin travelled to the South to write about race. In the winter of 1959 his essay 'Nobody Knows My Name' appeared in the *Partisan Review*. 'In the fall of last year,' he wrote,

> my plane hovered over the rust-red earth of Georgia. I was past thirty, and I had never seen this land before. I pressed my face against the window, watching the earth come closer; soon we were just above the tops of trees. I could not suppress the thought that this earth had acquired its colour 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, or my own age, hanging from a tree, while white men watched and cut his sex from him with a knife.

Baldwin had written that his influences included 'something ironic and violent and perpetually understated in Negro speech'. Now the irony and the understatement were all gone; there was just the violence and some melodrama and a genuine sense of grief and fear and foreboding. Charlotte in North Carolina, 'a town of 165,000, was in a ferment when I was there because, of its 50,000 Negroes, four had been assigned to previously all-white schools, one to each school.' Baldwin moved in the essays of these years between the language of reportage and the language of the novelist and the preacher:

> It was on the outskirts of Atlanta that I first felt how the Southern landscape – the trees, the silence, the liquid heat, and the fact that one always seems to be travelling great distances – seems designed for violence, seems, almost to demand it. What passions cannot be

unleashed on a dark road on a Southern night! Everything seems so sensual, so languid, and so private. Desire can be acted out here; over this fence, behind that tree, in the darkness, there; and no one will see, no one will ever know. Only the night is watching and the night was made for desire.

It is important to imagine the impact this first journey had on Baldwin, the terror he felt and the dread, and the sense too that, no matter how freely he lived in Paris and New York, his destiny and the destiny of his country was being worked out in bitter dramatic confrontation in the South. Something in his own personality, a crucial aspect of his own talent for the darkly dramatic and the histrionic, met its match in the South.

As a novelist, he should have turned and run, because a large amount of serious imaginative energy was about to be taken up by the Civil Rights Movement over ten years and more. Baldwin never again wrote a fully successful novel. There may have been other reasons for that: the fame and money which his early writing brought him allowed him to spend time in places other than a solitary room. Also, he experimented with form in his next novel *Another Country* (1962) by killing off his main character after eighty pages. This work bears all the marks of a book written sporadically over a long period of time in many different places. The novel begins by showing us Baldwin the novelist at his most focused and intense, and it ends by suggesting that his mind was elsewhere.

It is easy to feel that he should have gone back to Paris and spent the rest of his life creating fictions in a peaceful environment, that he should have followed events as they unfolded by reading about them in the *Herald Tribune* while sipping a drink at the Deux Magots. Richard Wright remained in Paris. Neither Ralph Ellison nor Langston Hughes took part in the Civil Rights Movement (and Ellison took a dim view of Baldwin's involvement), just as writers like Brian Friel and Seamus Heaney avoided active involvement in the public life of Northern Ireland after 1972. ('Forgive my timid, circumspect involvement,' Heaney was later to write.) But Baldwin's imagination remained passionately connected to the world of his family and the destiny of his country. He lacked guile and watchfulness; the ruthlessness he had displayed in going to live in Paris and publishing *Giovanni's Room* was no use to him now. It was inevitable that someone with his curiosity and moral seriousness would want to become involved; and inevitable that someone with his sensitivity and temperament would find what was happening all-absorbing and frightening and, finally, disabling.

Baldwin's passionate involvement in the Civil Rights Movement did not make him feel at home and easy among his own people. The Civil Rights Movement was even more hostile to homosexuals than the wider society. Among the leaders of the movement there were two men who were clearly (as opposed to openly) gay. One was Baldwin; the other was Bayard Rustin. Rustin, who was more than ten

years older than Baldwin, was a communist until 1941 and thereafter became a Quaker. In the war, he was imprisoned as a conscientious objector. As early as 1942 he was beaten up by the police for refusing to comply with segregation laws. He served twenty-two days on a chain gang in North Carolina in 1947 for his part in the first Freedom Ride organised by CORE and wrote a graphic and chilling account of the experience. Altogether, he was arrested twenty-four times. He adhered always to the principle of non-violence and this brought him close to Martin Luther King. He was well-read and funny and King came to enjoy his company. He had helped organise the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955.

In 1960, as Martin Luther King threatened to picket the Democratic Convention, he was threatened in turn by Adam Clayton Powell, the black congressman for Harlem, that if King didn't call off the picket, Powell would tell the press that he was having an affair with Rustin. Rustin was at that time King's special assistant and director of the New York Office of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. King did not stand up for Rustin, he responded by distancing himself from Rustin until Rustin resigned.

Three years later when Rustin was deputy-director of the March on Washington, he was denounced in the Senate by Strom Thurmond for being a communist, a draft dodger and a homosexual. Thurmond inserted a copy of Rustin's police booking in the 1950s for indecent behaviour with other men into the Senate record. Before the March on Washington, when the FBI put a

wire tap on Martin Luther King, they heard the following conversation. Someone said, 'I hope Bayard don't take a drink before the march' and Dr King replied: 'Yes, and grab one little brother. 'Cause he will grab one when he has a drink.' Rustin received much of the credit for the success of the March on Washington. In *Pillars of Fire: America in the King Years 1963–1965*, Taylor Branch wrote: 'Overnight, Rustin became if not a household name at least a quotable and respectable source for racial journalism, his former defects as a vagabond ex-communist homosexual overlooked or forgotten.' But his former defects continued to interest both King, who was worried about the damage they could to the movement, and the FBI.

The extensive FBI file on James Baldwin included the sentence: 'It has been heard that Baldwin may be a homosexual and he appeared as if he may be one.' Neither Rustin nor Baldwin was invited to speak at the end of the March on Washington. Religious elements in the movement were deeply suspicious of them. While Martin Luther King was not personally bothered by Rustin's homosexuality, some of his colleagues were. One of King's colleagues, Stanley Levinson, suggested that Baldwin and Bayard 'were better qualified to lead a homosexual movement than a civil rights movement'.

In these few years, from his famously stormy and emotional meeting with Robert Kennedy in May 1963 and his appearing on the cover of *Time* magazine the next day, Baldwin gave lectures and made speeches and went on television and travelled and organised

boycotts. He wrote almost nothing. The one play and one story he wrote both seem to have been written in the white heat of the violence and fierce debate of those years. He was not writing the protest work for which he had attacked Richard Wright; he was going further. His work was directly political and, in the case of the story 'Going To Meet The Man' almost inflammatory. It is written from the point of view of a white sheriff who in the first lines of the story makes his sexual interest in black women clear, and then goes on to muse on the black boy he has arrested, and the lynching, described in lengthy and unbearable detail, which his father took him to when he was a child. Thinking of the lynching excites him and he wakes his wife and says: 'Come on, sugar, I'm going to do you like a nigger, just like a nigger, come on, sugar, and love me like you'd love a nigger.'

The story contained everything that Baldwin had so passionately preached against; it offered us the sheriff's humanity as a pure racial cliché, a demonstration of Baldwin's views on race and sex and the South and violence, without any of the subtlety of those views. Clearly, this was not a time for Jamesian distance from the burning world.

In this world, Baldwin himself was under pressure. He was not a Civil Rights strategist, such as Bayard Rustin, in daily contact with the organisation. He did not have roots in any special faction. And slowly, the brotherhood was absorbing the implications not only of *Giovanni's Room*, but also of *Another Country*, which had been a best-seller, and had shown Rufus, its

black hero, as violent and self-destructive, and in the words of the Black Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver, 'a pathetic wretch who indulged in the white man's pastime of committing suicide, who let a bisexual homosexual [sic] fuck him in the ass, and who took a Southern Jezebel for his woman.'

For the young men who were ready to join the Black Panthers, Baldwin as much as Martin Luther King was part of the problem, Eldridge Cleaver, in *Soul on Ice*, published in 1968, had no difficulty identifying Baldwin's problem:

> It seems that many Negro homosexuals . . . are outraged and frustrated because in their sickness they are unable to have a baby by a white man. The cross they have to bear is that, already bending over and touching their toes for the white man, the fruit of their miscegenation is not the little half-white offspring of their dreams but an increase in the unwinding of their nerves – though they redouble their efforts and intake of the white man's sperm.

Having praised Richard Wright and Norman Mailer, Cleaver wrote:

> I, for one, do not think homosexuality is the latest advance over heterosexuality on the scale of human evolution. Homosexuality is a sickness, just as are baby-rape or wanting to become the head of General Motors.

The language and tone of *Going To Meet The Man* and *Soul on Ice* are part of the frenzy of the time. Baldwin and Cleaver were merely two of the many raised voices. The surprising thing is how warmly and wisely Baldwin wrote about Cleaver in *No Name In The Street*, written between 1967 and 1971:

> I was very much impressed by Eldridge . . . I knew he'd written about me in *Soul on Ice*, but I hadn't yet read it. Naturally, when I did read it, I didn't like what he had to say about me at all. But, eventually – especially as I admired the book and felt him to be valuable and rare – I thought I could see why he felt impelled to issue what was in fact a warning: he was being a zealous watchman on the city wall, and I do not say that with a sneer. He seemed to feel that I was a dangerously odd, badly twisted, and fragile reed, of too much use to the Establishment to be trusted by blacks . . . Well, I certainly hope I know more about myself, and the intention of my work than that, but I *am* an odd quantity. So is Eldridge; so are we all.

However, in an interview with the *Paris Review* in 1984, Baldwin said, 'my real difficulty with Cleaver, sadly, was visited on me by the kids who were following him, while he was calling me a faggot and the rest of it.'

Nonetheless, Baldwin became friends with various members of the Black Panthers. And part of the reason for his refusal to trade insults with Eldridge Cleaver may be that from the late 1960s Baldwin lived

mostly in Istanbul or St Paul-de-Vence where he bought a large house on ten acres. Much of *No Name in the Street* was written away from the struggle, and this may explain the tolerance, if not the rambling and undisciplined tone.

In the autumn of 1960, while James Baldwin was working on *Another Country*, William Styron invited Baldwin to move into the cottage beside his house in Connecticut. Baldwin, as Styron later wrote, was the grandson of a slave; Styron was the grandson of a slave owner. Obviously, there was a great deal to discuss.

> Night after night, Jimmy and I talked, drinking whisky through the hours until the chill dawn, and I understood that I was in the company of as marvellous an intelligence as I was ever likely to encounter . . . Jimmy was a social animal of nearly manic gusto and there were some loud and festive times.

When Styron's white liberal friends expressed incredulity when Baldwin told them what was going to happen, 'Jimmy's face would become a mask of imperturbable certitude. 'Baby,' he would say softly and glare back with vast glowering eyes, 'yes, baby. I mean *burn*. We will *burn your cities down*.'

Both Baldwin and Styron agreed 'that the writer should be free to demolish the barrier of colour, to cross the forbidden line and write from the point of view of someone with a different skin.' Baldwin had already

published *Giovanni's Room*; now it was Styron's turn. When in 1967 he published *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, which was written in the first person, using the voice of a black slave, and was greeted with rage and indignation by most black writers and intellectuals, Baldwin supported him. His statement – 'He has begun the common history – *ours*' – was unlikely to have made Baldwin any friends among the Black Panthers.

Baldwin remained independent in these difficult years, toeing no party line. Although during his time in America in the 1960s there were long nights spent drinking whisky and 'being a social animal of nearly manic gusto', what he remembered most from those years were the murders of people he knew, people he had marched with and worked with. These years for him were punctuated not as much by the publication of his books as by the terrible toll which those who led the movement had to pay. The long period of dullness and quietness required to write a novel had no chance against the heart-breaking urgency of the daily news. Not long after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Baldwin was sent the proofs of *Tell Me How Long The Train's Been Gone*, but failed to return them, according to James Campbell in *Talking at the Gates: A Life of James Baldwin*. When the head of the Dial Press went to Baldwin's house to discuss changes, 'Jimmy said, "Do what you like".'

Baldwin spent much of the last twenty years of his life in France, where he died in 1987 with his brother David and Lucien Happersberger, whom he had known for almost forty years, at his bedside. 'To save

myself,' he told an interviewer in 1970, 'I finally had to leave for good . . . One makes decisions in funny ways; you make a decision without knowing you've made it. I suppose my decision was made when Malcolm X was killed, when Martin Luther King was killed, when Medgar Evans and John and Bobby and Fred Hampton were killed. I loved Medgar. I loved Martin and Malcolm. We all worked together and kept the faith together. Now they are all dead. When you think about it, it is incredible. I'm the last witness – everybody else is dead. I couldn't stay in America. I had to leave.'

In the end, he was not a political thinker, or even a novelist like Styron or Mailer whose works were fired by politics. He was interested in the soul's dark intimate spaces much more than in the body politic. He was closer as an artist to Ingmar Bergman, whom he admired and wrote about, than to any of his American contemporaries. His essays are riveting because he insists on being personal, on forcing the public and the political to submit to his voice and the test of his experience and his observation. He was interested in the self, in the hidden and dramatic areas in his own being, and was prepared to explore difficult truths about his own core self in his fiction. Because he was black, he had to battle in his fiction for the right of his protagonists to choose, or half-choose, their destinies. He knew about guilt and rage and bitter privacies in a way that none of his American novelist contemporaries did. And this was not simply because he was black and homosexual, it arose also from the very

nature of his talent, from the tone of his sensibility. 'All art,' he wrote, 'is a kind of confession, more or less oblique. All artists, if they are to survive, are forced, at last, to tell the whole story, to vomit the anguish up.'

THOM GUNN:

THE ENERGY OF THE PRESENT

'FAME IS DIFFICULT for a writer to deal with,' Thom Gunn writes in his essay on Allen Ginsberg's poetry.

> It dries you up, or it makes you think you are infallible, or your writing becomes puffed out with self-esteem. (Victor Hugo thought himself superior to both Jesus and Shakespeare.) It is a complication that the imagination can well do without.

It is the spring of 1993. Gunn is on the list of those who will read at a literary festival in a huge old market building in the centre of San Francisco, which has been his home town since the late Fifties. His first book in eleven years, *The Man with Night Sweats*, has just been published. The main auditorium holds thousands who are here to see their favourite writers. People sit on the floor because all the chairs are taken up. All eyes are on Armistead Maupin as he reads from his new book and answers questions about sexual politics. Crowds stare in