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David Eck

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# James Baldwin: A Supplement and a Testament

BY DAVID A. ECK

Capturing the essence of an entire life might be impossible. James Baldwin's life is no place to start trying. Instead it epitomizes the challenges a biographer faces. David Leeming's biography, *James Baldwin: A Biography*, is extensive, so extensive that it is at times confusing. It's not that Leeming's biography should have avoided the digressions who Baldwin meant and on what continent. Instead James Baldwin's life was too eventful and his works too varied and numerous for there to be a concise description.

Leeming's biography goes through his eventful life chronologically, deconstructing Baldwin's writings along the way. The novels, short stories, plays and essays are all intimately tied up with life experiences. So it's natural that Leeming thinks Baldwin's biography has to be extracted from his writings (xv). James Campbell's biography, *Talking at the Gates*, also relies heavily on Baldwin's writings, which is why the two biographies do not depart dramatically from each other. Although Leeming's narrative is more systematic than Campbell's. Leeming's biography is more systematic because it aims to capture the entirety of James Baldwin's life.

David Leeming's attempt to define who James Baldwin was is partly a result of his intimate twenty year friendship with him, an intimacy that privileged Leeming to all of Baldwin's personal papers. *James Baldwin: A Biography* also draws on interviews with friends and family, earlier biographies like Campbell's, and material collected by the PBS documentary "The Price of the Ticket." One example of Leeming's special insight into Baldwin's inner world regards the complicated relationship he had with Langston Hughes.

Baldwin and Hughes had differing political affiliations and conflicting ideas of artistic form. Leeming's biography documents the correspondence and public criticism exchanged between the two. Then Leeming tells the reader of running into Langston Hughes with Baldwin at a restaurant. The dinner conversation was long and relaxed, covering topics from Jenny Lou's (the restaurant) to the more general "Negro ambience," and finally race and art, to which Baldwin and Hughes still disagreed on. After Hughes left, Baldwin talked about his feelings concerning his fellow black artist: a great poet, but one who ignores the inner life by sentimentalizing issues" (157). Leeming's narration paints a delicate balance between admiration and disagreement.

Another revealing story was Baldwin's reaction to a sociologist. The sociologist repeatedly asked Baldwin about the number of siblings he had. He refused to acknowledge the term siblings, insisting on brothers and sisters. Eventually the argument came to a pitch when "[Baldwin] brought [his] hands down with tremendous force on my right arm and David's left arm and literally screamed...These are my brothers; not my siblings, motherfucker!" (247). Other personal stories included in *James Baldwin: A Biography* range from Baldwin berating friends and acquaintances, especially white liberals, concerning social and sexual issues to lighthearted stories, like the night in the woods with Kay Boyle.

The "city boy" Baldwin was afraid of walking through the forest at night. So during his stay at the MacDowell colony in New Hampshire Kay Boyle walked him home. One Boyle mentioned she too was uncomfortable walking at night, so Baldwin walked her home. But then how was "Jimmy" going to get home? "After much laughter...Jimmy had another drink and waited for dawn...Kay was always to remember him as he was that night in the New Hampshire woods, dancing about in the snow in his fox-fur hat, laughing and singing" (173).

These personal glimpses of James Baldwin cannot be underestimated considering the underlying philosophy of Baldwin's works, which was at its very core personal. By anchoring much of his creative work in life experiences Baldwin brought the reader into his most intimate recesses. *Go Tell It on the Mountain* epitomizes this style, setting Baldwin's stepfather into historical and cultural perspective, enabling him to treat the subject metaphorically. Eleanor Traylor has called this style "the Baldwin narrator-witness" (Leeming 89). The relationship between David Baldwin Sr. and his stepson James Baldwin is well documented by Leeming: abusive, Baldwin Sr. more than anyone else impressed upon James how love can be masked in hatred. Baldwin eventually realized that much of the hatred stemmed from the stepfather's impotence in the face of his white coworkers (Leeming 5-6).

In *The Fire Next Time*, a collection of two nonfiction essays, he writes: "One ought to earn one's death by confronting with passion the conundrum of life" (Leeming 214). The theme recurs throughout Baldwin's works:

One must say Yes to life and embrace it wherever it is found—and it is found in terrible places....For nothing is fixed, forever and forever, it is not fixed; the earth is always shifting, the light is always changing, the sea does not cease to grind down rock...the moment we cease to hold each other...the sea engulfs us and the light goes out (Leeming 227).

Leeming also quotes Baldwin as "often" saying "To escape death and love [is] to be dead already" (265). This sentiment is so simple and straightforward that it sounds dangerously clichéd and romantic, which is why echoing the sentiment, is one thing, but living it is a whole 'nother matter. Baldwin uses his stepfather to exemplify how someone can avoid coming to grips with the reality of life, and instead lets oneself be hollowed out by hatred: David Baldwin Sr. eventually went insane.

"Jimmy's" life, on the other hand, was a testament to what he preached. The closest stable home he had was in the last few years of his life in St. Paul de Vence. Baldwin went through lover after lover: "Baldwin was ever nostalgic about past lovers, willing to risk current ones in order to strike it up again" (Leeming 375). The sheer number of friends and lovers is so extensive the reader has little chance of keeping track, a weakness inherent in both David Leeming and James Campbell's biographies. The teenage lovers that James had in his latter years, whom Leeming had to use aliases to protect their identity, epitomized this problem. Repeatedly coming across the names "Jay," "Bill," "Joe," and "Skip" was more frustrating than it was illuminating.

Leeming vividly portrayed how Baldwin's life was by no means routine. The early years as a writer were marked by poverty and many late nights drinking at clubs, making friends and lovers of all genders, races and ages. Despite the biography's positive tone, Leeming makes it clear that James' life was not a romantic fairy tale. Instead it was always difficult. Baldwin had to realize that a certain extent of his loneliness was insurmountable and he would have to be happy with it.

There were four suicide attempts. The most serious was the first attempt in a French hotel room. James had just gotten out of a French prison, where he had lost his identity as a black American. Guards recognized him as an American, instead of a black American. The loss of identity was too much and after being acquitted he hung himself from a waterpipe with a bed sheet. The waterpipe broke, however, and Baldwin was bathed in "holy" water.

Not only did Baldwin attempt suicide on multiple occasions, but Leeming at length describes the many troubled relationships of his life. When James was first coming to grips with his sexuality he repeatedly found himself in abusive relationships with "ambiguously" gay men (Leeming 46). Leeming believes that Baldwin ultimately confronted this issue when a lover, Arnold, left him. Even though James had been trying to leave Arnold the confrontation led to his third suicide attempt—he contemplated drowning himself in the ocean. Baldwin was also distressed by an ever recurring dream of a stable domestic family. There was an engagement to a woman in France and also the complicated relationship with Cynthia Packard. Coming near the end of his life Baldwin said it was the closest thing he had to a marriage (365).

The emotional swings in his personal life, as well as the shifting political situation in America affected Baldwin's works. Both Leeming and Campbell acknowledge an evolution in his writings and plays. One of the most significant changes came with the novel *Nobody Knows My Name*. *The Fire Next Time* forcefully and optimistically testifies to the power of love, a value which James firmly held throughout his life. Yet Leeming believes *Nobody Knows My Name* signified the death of his early idealism about love and success (119). The death of that idealism brought on writings that were more critical and vociferous attacks on the oppressive American society. He moved onto the path of "good works" and "politics."

The title essay of *Nobody Knows My Name* was written after James' first trip to the American South. Despite his job as a journalist, the question that Baldwin was inter-

ested in more than any other was “What did racism do to the inner lives of people?” (140). Things that most journalists would not seriously consider, such as shaking hands, could be telling for Baldwin. In one interview a white supremacist was visibly discomfited by shaking hands with Baldwin, which he saw as an instance of racism’s connection to sexual insecurities (Leeming 140). There was also a white bigot who, late at night, began making sexual advances on James, furthering cementing the connection (Leeming 141).

It was at the end of this “Journey” that Leeming believes Baldwin discovered the mission of his life: the lonely existence of a witness. A witness to America’s self-denial in an effort to open America’s eyes to itself (146). Leeming thinks that from this point on, whatever Baldwin was doing “in a pulpit, in someone’s bed” he would always have that commitment in mind (147).

James Campbell, on the other hand, thinks defining Baldwin is impossible. Instead there can only be a host of sketches and perceptions that aim towards a definition (Author’s Note). To support his case Campbell emphasizes inconsistencies between in Baldwin’s beliefs and writings. One example is the Baldwin’s perception of the Negritude movement. In the ‘50s it was one of “disgust,” but after a 1962 visit to Africa Baldwin would not entertain any such thoughts.

Campbell also notes changes in Baldwin’s works. Later in his life there were fewer essays and more interviews. Baldwin began writing more about the act of writing itself. Campbell sees these developments as evidence James losing faith in writing (184). Leeming’s definition cites vivid experiences in the American South, while Campbell looks at the substance of Baldwin’s career. Campbell’s perspective is more distant than Leeming’s.

James Campbell met Baldwin through a correspondence. Campbell was soliciting articles for a literary magazine, the *New Edinburgh Review*. *New Edinburgh Review* was a small and relatively unknown literary magazine, which meant Baldwin was underpaid. Campbell is intrigued by why Baldwin agreed to write for the *Review*. He believes the Baldwin wanted get back in touch with his early days as a writer in Paris, the pre-1957 Baldwin that had a “customary good spirit”. This “customary good spirit” is the “early idealism” that Leeming spoke of. So for Leeming it wasn’t until 1957 that Baldwin had fully matured, whereas Campbell sees it as a point of decay.

Accordingly Leeming and Campbell have contrasting views of *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, one of Baldwin’s later works. Leeming believes the long essay is to “post-civil rights” America as *The Fire Next Time* was to its America in the heyday of the movement (361). Campbell dismisses it as padded and sloppy (266). Campbell’s criticism is flat-footed. His depiction of Baldwin as paranoid of the American publishing houses for passing on *Evidence* was not convincing. Campbell also criticizes Baldwin for believing that Wayne Williams was not guilty, going on to say that James lacked the ability to do the necessary investigation to figure out whether Williams was or was not innocent.

What Campbell’s criticism misses is that, as Baldwin stated multiple times in the book, he’s not concerned with whether Williams is physically innocent or not. That is beside the larger point that he is making. Baldwin is concerned with issues such as the role of the government in the black community. What does it mean if the government only takes an active interest when the black community becomes a problem for the status quo? To underline this question Baldwin, in detail, describes Ms. Bell’s struggle to get the city government’s attention. Having black officials in the city government is useful in appeasing public demands, silencing individuals like Ms. Bell. Baldwin also notes how Ms. Bell’s insistence that she was always part of the middle class (121). *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* sketches a complex picture of modern race prejudices demonstrated by token city officials and the middle-class Ms. Bell.

The essay was broad in scope, but so was *The Fire Next Time*. The difference in reception is a result of *Evidence*’s more systematic critique of America in a time of calm. *Evidence* only mentions in passing the necessity of love and this time in order to break through the consumerism of Mr. Clean instead of just racism. *The Fire Next Time*, on the other hand, was oriented towards Baldwin’s own life, which strengthened its focus. The autobiographical essays depicted how love had unmasked racism in Baldwin’s own life.

At the same time *The Fire* was broad in its scope, critiquing the American system as a whole. Baldwin writes of the fictional creation of the Communist menace, which also relate to America’s ulterior motives behind the 1954 *Brown* decision. But these criticisms were only given in passed and released in a time of political turmoil. The change in political climate and Baldwin’s emphasis in content was decisive in the starkly different book receptions.

Leeming was not blind to Campbell’s indictments, having himself on one occasion accused Baldwin of anarchy and paranoia. In response Baldwin wrote a letter in which he declared “He could not afford to be tamed. The writer’s job was to confront life in all its complications.” Regarding the paranoia, in the same letter, Baldwin proclaimed they “are trying to kill me,” while writing the letter “Odette, [Baldwin’s] father’s daughter, was sitting with his mother, telling her—the way Beauford told his friends—about the people who were after her. And his mother had had to face the insanity of her husband” (276). This letter taken with James nearly being killed by a magician in Turkey is why Leeming “understood the larger metaphorical meaning of that near killing.” So Leeming “never accused Jimmy of anarchy or of paranoia again” (276).

James Baldwin was a real person with fears, not just an idyllic “customary good spirit,” which is why Campbell’s argument that his career declined after 1957 is not true. Leeming’s biography skillfully contests Campbell. Yet whether Baldwin is indefinable, on a mission to witness the realities of American oppression, or neither, is still a valid question. James Baldwin had distinct, but equally important, identities. Leeming himself identifies three psyches (305), which seems to undermine the idea of a single identity defining Baldwin.

Leeming's perception rests in his own intimate relations with Baldwin, especially leading up to his death. Despite cancer spreading from this throat to his stomach and liver, his strength progressively disintegrating, Baldwin never stopped making plans for future projects. It is the conclusion of Baldwin's life that solidifies Leeming's vision of it as first and foremost a witness. Whether one agrees or disagrees with this vision doesn't greatly affect the contribution that Leeming's autobiography makes. It is a well executed professional autobiography that is interspersed with brief glances at what had before only been private moments of James Baldwin's life.

It seems that the weakest point of the biography was in fact its professional quality, which treated his life so extensively that much of the tone and rhythm were lost. Watching video footage of James Baldwin is a must before reading a biography. The PBS documentary not only allows the viewer to hear the tone of Baldwin's voice, but it is also set to music, which David Leeming and James Campbell both believe was crucial to Baldwin's life. The PBS documentary is certainly no substitute for the biography, though, for much is necessarily left out and the people interviewed are predictably positive, not giving the viewer the sense of each relationship's complexity.

What would it take for a biography to do justice for James Baldwin's life? What is the best way to communicate what it meant for James Baldwin to be James Baldwin? It would have to be radically creative for a biography. The ideal biography would mirror James Baldwin's own use of metaphors to understand people and events in his life—it would do to James Baldwin's life as a whole what he himself did for parts. Such an biography is not actually possible: no one knew Baldwin as a whole because he was a lonely man. What would be ideal is a collection of literary sketches from friends and family. Baldwin himself privileged this outer perspective: "...those who love you (and those who do not love you) see you far better than you will ever see yourself" (Leeming 363).

Yet we do not need friends and family accounts to see Baldwin from without. Each time someone reads one of his novels, essays or short stories they are automatically an outside pair of eyes. If someone wants to understand James Baldwin, then it's most important to read his works. And also to see video footage of him walking, talking and lecturing with his infamously buggy eyes. A biography, even as insightful and thorough as David Leeming's is, can only be a supplement and a testament to James Baldwin's own works and the life that shaped them.

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