

THE NEW YORKER

BOOKS

ANOTHER COUNTRY

James Baldwin's flight from America.

by Claudia Roth Pierpont

FEBRUARY 9, 2009



Baldwin in Harlem, in 1963. Photograph by Steve Schapiro.

Feeling more than usually restless, James Baldwin flew from New York to Paris in the late summer of 1961, and from there to Israel. Then, rather than proceed as he had planned to Africa—a part of the world he was not ready to confront—he decided to visit a friend in Istanbul. Baldwin's arrival at his Turkish friend's door, in the midst of a party, was, as the friend recalled, a great surprise: two rings of the bell, and there stood a small and bedraggled black man with a battered suitcase and enormous eyes. Engin Cezzar was a Turkish actor who had worked with Baldwin in New York, and he excitedly introduced “Jimmy Baldwin, of literary fame, the famous black American novelist” to the roomful of intellectuals and artists. Baldwin, in his element, eventually fell asleep in an actress's lap.

It soon became clear that Baldwin was in terrible shape: exhausted, in poor health, worried that he was losing sight of his aims both as a writer and as a man. He desperately needed to be taken care of, Cezzar said; or, in the more dramatic terms that Baldwin used throughout his life, to be saved. His suitcase contained the manuscript of a long and ambitious novel that he had been working on for years, and that had already brought him to the brink of suicide. Of the many

things that the wandering writer hoped to find—friends, rest, peace of mind—his single overwhelming need, his only real hope of salvation, was to finish the book.

Baldwin had been fleeing from place to place for much of his adult life. He was barely out of his teens when he left his Harlem home for Greenwich Village, in the early forties, and he had escaped altogether at twenty-four, in 1948, buying a one-way ticket to Paris, with no intention of coming back. His father was dead by then, and his mother had eight younger children whom it tortured him to be deserting; he didn't have the courage to tell her he was going until the afternoon he left. There was, of course, no shortage of reasons for a young black man to leave the country in 1948. Devastation was all around: his contemporaries, out on Lenox Avenue, were steadily going to jail or else were on "the needle." His father, a factory worker and a preacher—"he was righteous in the pulpit," Baldwin said, "and a monster in the house"—had died insane, poisoned with racial bitterness. Baldwin had also sought refuge in the church, becoming a boy preacher when he was fourteen, but had soon realized that he was hiding from everything he wanted and feared he could never achieve. He began his first novel, about himself and his father, around the time he left the church, at seventeen. Within a few years, he was publishing regularly in magazines; book reviews, mostly, but finally an essay and even a short story. Still, who really believed that he could make it as a writer? In America?

The answer to both questions came from Richard Wright. Although Baldwin seemed a natural heir to the Harlem Renaissance—he was born right there, in 1924, and Countee Cullen was one of his schoolteachers—the bittersweet poetry of writers like Cullen and Langston Hughes held no appeal for him. It was Wright's unabating fury that hit him hard. Reading "Native Son," Wright's novel about a Negro rapist and murderer, Baldwin was stunned to recognize the world that he saw around him. He knew those far from bittersweet tenements, he knew the rats inside the walls. Equally striking for a young writer, it would seem, was Wright's success: "Native Son," published in 1940, had been greeted as a revelation about the cruelties of a racist culture and its vicious human costs. In the swell of national self-congratulation over the fact that such a book could be published, it became a big best-seller. Wright was the most successful black author in history when Baldwin—twenty years old, hungry and scared—got himself invited to Wright's Brooklyn home, where, over a generously proffered bottle of bourbon, he explained the novel that he was trying to write. Wright, sixteen years Baldwin's senior, was more than sympathetic; he read Baldwin's pages, found him a publisher, and got him a fellowship to give him time to write. Although the publisher ultimately turned the book down, Wright gave Baldwin the confidence to continue, and the wisdom to do it somewhere else.

Wright moved to Paris in 1947 and, the following year, greeted Baldwin at the café Les Deux Magots on the day that he arrived, introducing him to editors of a new publication, called *Zero*, who were eager for his contributions. Baldwin had forty dollars, spoke no French, and knew hardly anyone else. Wright helped him find a room, and while it is true that the two writers were not close friends—Baldwin later noted the difference in their ages, and the fact that he had never even visited the brutal American South where Wright was formed—one can appreciate Wright's shock when Baldwin's first article for *Zero* was an attack on "the protest novel," and, in particular, on "Native Son." The central problem with the book, as Baldwin saw it, was that Wright's criminal hero was "defined by his hatred and his fear," and represented not a man but a social category; as a literary figure, he was no better than Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom. And he was more dangerous, perpetuating the "monstrous legend" of the black killer which Wright had meant to destroy. Wright blew up at Baldwin when they ran into each other at the Brasserie Lipp, but Baldwin did not back down. His article, reprinted later that year in *Partisan Review*, marked the start of his reputation in New York. He went on to publish even harsher attacks—arguing that Wright's work was gratuitously violent, that it ignored the traditions of Negro life, that Wright had become a spokesman rather than an artist—as he struggled to formulate everything that he wanted his own work to be.

Baldwin knew very well the hatred and fear that Wright described. Crucial to his development, he said, was the notion that he was a "bastard of the West," without any natural claim to "Shakespeare, Bach, Rembrandt, to the stones of Paris, to the cathedral at Chartres": to all the things that, as a budding artist and a Western citizen, he treasured most. As a result, he was forced to admit, "I hated and feared white people," which did not mean that he loved blacks: "On the contrary, I despised them, possibly because they failed to produce Rembrandt." He had been encouraged by white teachers, though, and was surrounded by white high-school friends, so that this cultural hatred seemed to remain a fairly abstract notion, and he had assumed that he would never feel his father's rage. Then one day, not long out of school, he

was turned away from a New Jersey diner and, in a kind of trance, deliberately entered a glittering, obviously whites-only restaurant, and sat down. This time, when the waitress refused to serve him, he pretended not to hear in order to draw her closer—"I wanted her to come close enough for me to get her neck between my hands"—and finally hurled a mug of water at her and ran, realizing only when he had come to himself that he had been ready to murder another human being. In some ways, "Native Son" may have hit too hard.

The terrifying experience in the restaurant—terrifying not because of the evil done to him but because of the evil he suddenly felt able to do—helped to give Baldwin his first real understanding of his father, who had grown up in the South, the son of a slave, and who had, like Wright, been witness to unnameable horrors before escaping to the mundane humiliations of the North. Baldwin knew by then that the man whom he called his father was actually his stepfather, having married his mother when James was two years old; but, if this seemed to explain the extra measure of harshness that had been meted out to him, the greater tragedy of the man's embittered life and death remained. On the day of his funeral, in 1943, Baldwin recognized the need to fight this dreadful legacy, if he, too, were not to be consumed. More than a decade before the earliest stirrings of the civil-rights movement, the only way to conceive this fight was from within. "It now had been laid to my charge," he wrote, "to keep my own heart free of hatred and despair."

It takes a fire-breathing religion to blunt the hatred and despair in "Go Tell It on the Mountain" (1953), the autobiographical coming-of-age novel that Baldwin wrote and rewrote for a decade, centering on the battle for the soul of young John Grimes, on the occasion of his fourteenth birthday, in a shouting and swaying Harlem storefront church. For the boy, being saved is a way of winning the love of his preacher father—an impossible task. Still, part of the nobility of this remarkable book derives from Baldwin's reluctance to stain religious faith with too much psychological knowingness. More of the nobility lies in its language, which is touched with the grandeur of the sermons that Baldwin had heard so often in his youth. Then, too, after arriving in Paris, he had become immersed in the works of Henry James and, reading Joyce's "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man," had strongly identified with its self-creating hero. "He would not be like his father or his father's fathers," John Grimes swears. "He would have another life." Baldwin, led by these supreme authorial guides, to whom he felt a perfectly natural claim, set out to turn his shabby Harlem streets and churches into world-class literature. The book's moral and linguistic victories are seamless. Although Baldwin's people speak a simple and irregular "black" grammar, their loosely uttered "ain't's" and "I reckon's" flow without strain into prose of Jamesian complexity, of Biblical richness, as he penetrates their minds.

Baldwin wrote about the strictures of Harlem piety while living the bohemian life in Paris, hanging out in cafés and jazz clubs and gay bars; after having affairs with both men and women in New York, he had slowly come to accept that his desires were exclusively for men. His often frantic social schedule was one reason that the writing of "Go Tell It on the Mountain" dragged on and on. It also began to seem as though he somehow used places up and had to move to others, at least temporarily, in order to write. In the winter of 1951, he had packed the unruly manuscript and gone to stay with his current lover in a small Swiss village, where he completed it in three months, listening to Bessie Smith records to get the native sounds back in his ears. Published two years later, the book was a critical success; Baldwin claimed to have missed out on the National Book Award only because Ralph Ellison had won for "Invisible Man" the year before, and two Negroes in a row was just too much.

But it was Wright whom he still took for the monster he had to slay—or, perhaps, as he sometimes worried, for his father—and the book of essays that Baldwin published in 1955, which included two that were vehemently anti-Wright, was titled, in direct challenge, "Notes of a Native Son." It was not, by intent, a political book. In its first few pages, Baldwin explained that race was something he had to address in order to be free to write about other subjects: the writer's only real task was "to recreate out of the disorder of life that order which is art." The best of these essays are indeed closely personal, but invariably open to a political awareness that endows them with both order and weight. Baldwin's greatest strength, in fact, is the way the personal and the political intertwine, so that it becomes impossible to distinguish between these aspects of a life. The story of his father's funeral is also the story of a riot that broke out in Harlem that day, in the summer of 1943, when a white policeman shot a black soldier and set off a rampage in which white businesses were looted and smashed. "For Harlem had needed something to smash," Baldwin writes. If it had not been so late in the evening and the stores had not been closed, he warned, a lot more blood might have been shed.

In 1955, the injustice of the black experience was no longer news, and if Baldwin's warning drew attention it was overshadowed by the gentler yet more startling statements that made his work unique. In this newly politicized context, there was a larger lesson to be drawn from the hard-won wisdom, offered from his father's grave, that hatred "never failed to destroy the man who hated and this was an immutable law." Addressing a predominantly white audience—many of these essays were originally published in white liberal magazines—he sounds a tone very much like sympathy. Living abroad, he explained, had made him realize how irrevocably he was an American; he confessed that he felt a closer kinship with the white Americans he saw in Paris than with the African blacks, whose culture and experiences he had never shared. The races' mutual obsession, in America, and their long if hidden history of physical commingling had finally made them something like a family. For these reasons, Baldwin revoked the threat of violence with an astonishingly broad reassurance: American Negroes, he claimed, have no desire for vengeance. The relationship of blacks and whites is, after all, "a *blood* relationship, perhaps the most profound reality of the American experience," and cannot be understood until we recognize how much it contains of "the force and anguish and terror of love."

When Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white man on a Montgomery bus, in December, 1955, Baldwin was absorbed with the publication of his second novel, "Giovanni's Room"; he watched from Paris as the civil-rights movement got under way, that spring. His new book had a Paris setting, no black characters, and not a word about race. Even more boldly, it was about homosexual love—or, rather, about the inability of a privileged young American man to come to terms with his sexuality and ultimately to feel any love at all. Brief and intense, the novel is brilliant in its exploration of emotional cowardice but marred by a portentous tone that at times feels cheaply secondhand—more "Bonjour Tristesse" than Gide or Genet. Although Baldwin had been cautioned about the prospects of a book with such a controversial subject, it received good reviews and went into a second printing in six weeks. As a writer, he had won the freedom he desired, and the decision to live abroad seemed fully vindicated. By late 1956, however, the atmosphere in Paris was changing. The Algerian war had made it difficult to ignore France's own racial problems, and newspaper headlines in the kiosks outside the cafés made it even harder to forget the troubles back home. And so the following summer Baldwin embarked on his most adventurous trip, to the land that some in Harlem still called the Old Country: the American South.

He was genuinely afraid. Looking down from the plane as it circled the red earth of Georgia, he could not help thinking that it "had acquired its color from the blood that had dripped down from these trees." It was September, 1957, and he was arriving just as the small number of black children who were entering all-white schools were being harassed by jeering mobs, spat upon, and threatened with much worse. In Charlotte, North Carolina, he interviewed one of these children—a proudly stoic straight-A student—and his mother. ("I wonder sometimes," she says, "what makes white folks so mean.") He also spoke with the principal of the boy's new school, a white man who had dutifully escorted the boy past a blockade of students but announced that he did not believe in racial integration, because it was "contrary to everything he had ever seen or believed." Baldwin, who is elsewhere stinging eloquent about the effects of segregation, confronts this individual with the scope of his sympathies intact. Seeing him as the victim of a sorry heritage, he does not argue but instead commiserates, with a kind of higher moral cunning, about the difficulty of having to mistreat an innocent child. And at these words, Baldwin reports, "a veil fell, and I found myself staring at a man in anguish."

This evidence of dawning white conscience, as it appeared to Baldwin, accorded with the optimistic faith that he found in Atlanta, where he met the twenty-eight-year-old Martin Luther King, Jr., and heard him preach. Baldwin was struck by King's description of bigotry as a disease most harmful to the bigots, and by his solution that, in Baldwin's words, "these people could only be saved by love." This idealistic notion, shared by the two preachers' sons, was a basic tenet, and a basic strength, of the early civil-rights movement. Baldwin went on to visit Birmingham ("a doomed city"), Little Rock, Tuskegee, Montgomery, and Nashville; in 1960, he covered the sit-in movement in Tallahassee. His second volume of essays, "Nobody Knows My Name," published in 1961, was welcomed by white readers as something of a guidebook to the uncharted racial landscape. Although Baldwin laid the so-called "Negro problem" squarely at white America's door, viewing racism as a species of pathology, he nevertheless offered the consoling possibility of redemption through mutual love—no other writer would have described the historic relation of the races in America as "a wedding." And he avowed an enduring belief in "the vitality of the so transgressed Western ideals." The book was on the best-seller list for six

months, and Baldwin was suddenly, as much as Richard Wright had ever been, a spokesman for his race.

The role was a great temptation and a greater danger. Given his ambitions, this was not the sort of success that he most wanted, and the previous few years had been plagued with disappointment at failing to achieve the successes he craved. A play he had adapted from “Giovanni’s Room,” for the Actors Studio, in New York, had yielded nothing except a friendship with the young Turkish actor, Engin Cezzar, whom Baldwin had chosen to play Giovanni; the play, which Baldwin hoped would go to Broadway, never made it past the workshop level. His new novel, “Another Country,” was hopelessly stalled; the characters, he said, refused to talk to him, and the “unpublishable” manuscript was ruining his life. He was drinking too much, getting hardly any sleep, and his love affairs had all gone sour. He wrote about having reached “the point at which many artists lose their minds, or commit suicide, or throw themselves into good works, or try to enter politics.” To fend off all these possibilities, it seems, he accepted a magazine assignment to travel to Israel and Africa, then, out of weariness and fear, took up Cezzar’s long-standing invitation, and found himself at the party in Istanbul. It was a wise move. In this distant city, no one wanted to interview him, no one was pressing him for social prophecy. He knew few people. He couldn’t speak the language. There was time to work. He stayed for two months, and he was at another party—Baldwin would always find another party—calmly writing at a kitchen counter covered with glasses and papers and hors d’oeuvres, when he put down the final words of “Another Country.” The book was dated, with a flourish, “Istanbul, Dec. 10, 1961.”

It is an incongruous image, the black American writer in Istanbul, but Baldwin returned to the city many times during the next ten years, making it a second or third not-quite-home. In “James Baldwin’s Turkish Decade” (Duke; \$24.95), Magdalena J. Zaborowska, a professor of immigrant and African-American literature, sets out to explain not only the enduring attraction the city had for Baldwin but its importance for the rest of his career. For Zaborowska, “Istanbul, Dec. 10, 1961” is not merely a literary sigh of relief and wonderment—Baldwin’s earlier books have no such endnote—but an affirmation of “the centrality of the city and date to the final shape of ‘Another Country’”; she insists on Istanbul as “a location and lens through which we should reassess his work today.” Divided between Europe and Asia, with a Muslim yet highly cosmopolitan population, Istanbul was unlike any place Baldwin had been before and, more to the point, unlike the places that had defined both the color of his skin and his sexuality as shameful problems. Whatever Turkey’s history of prejudice, divisions there did not have an automatic black/white racial cast. And, on the sexual front, Istanbul had long been so notorious that Zaborowska is on the defensive against Americans who snidely assume that Baldwin went there for the baths. In fact, during his first days in the city, he was nearly giddy at the sight of men in the street openly holding hands, and could not accept Cezzar’s explanation that this was a custom without sexual import. At the heart of the matter is the question of racial and sexual freedom—the city’s, the writer’s—and its effect on Baldwin’s ability to reflect and to experiment in ways that he had not been able to do elsewhere.

But was this freedom real? How much of it can be found in Baldwin’s work? Despite a tendency toward jargon—Academia is another country—Zaborowska is a charming companion as she follows Baldwin’s steps through Turkey, brimming with enthusiasm at the sights and at the warmth of her reception by his friends. The Polish-born professor, a blithe exemplar of the “transnational” tradition in which she places Baldwin, is too idealistic and far too honest—the tender air of Henry James’s Maisie hangs about her—to refrain from reporting her shock at some of those friends’ remarks. “Jimmy was not a typical ‘gay,’ ” one explains, “he was a real human being.” In the matter of race, she informs us that she is omitting “Cezzar’s use of the n-word, which he employed a couple of times but then abandoned, perhaps seeing my discomfort.” As she admits, her own evidence refutes the hypothesis that Baldwin’s Istanbul was untainted by the usual prejudice. And then there is the problem that Baldwin never wrote anything about Istanbul. Zaborowska labors to soften this hard fact through elaborate inferences and suggestions of symbolism, and by calling on various authorities for disquisitions on “the experience of place,” or “Cold War Orientalism.” (This is where the jargon really thickens.) But if she ultimately fails to make the case that Istanbul was anything for Baldwin but what he claimed—a refuge in which to write—she makes us feel how necessary such a refuge was as the sixties wore on.

“Another Country” turned out to be a best-seller in the most conventional sense. A sprawling book that brought together Baldwin’s concerns with race and sex, its daring themes—black rage, interracial sex, homosexuality, white guilt, urban malaise—make an imposing backdrop for characters who refuse to come to life. A black jazz musician who

plummets into madness because of an affair with a white woman; a white bisexual saint who cures both men and women in his bed—the social agenda shines through these figures like light through glass. More than anything else, the book reveals Baldwin's immense will and professionalism; like the contemporary best-sellers "Ship of Fools" and "The Group," it suggests a delicate and fine-tuned talent pushed past its narrative limits in pursuit of the "big" work. Baldwin claimed to be going after the sound of jazz musicians in his prose, but aside from some lingo on the order of "Some cat turned her on, and then he split," the language is stale compared with his earlier works—or compared with the burnished eloquence of his next book, which shook the American rafters when it was published, in early 1963.

"The Fire Next Time," Baldwin's most celebrated work, is a pair of essays, totalling little more than a hundred pages. Some of these pages were written in Istanbul, but more significant is the fact that Baldwin had finally gone to Africa. And, after years of worry that the Africans would look down on him, or, worse, that he would look down on them, he had been accepted and impressed. The book also reveals a renewed closeness with his family, whose support now counterbalanced both his public performances and his private loneliness. Eagerly making up for his desertion, Baldwin was a munificent son and brother and a doting uncle, glorying in the role of paterfamilias: his brother David was his closest friend and aide; his sister Gloria managed his money; he bought a large house in Manhattan, well outside Harlem, for his mother and the rest of the clan to share. To hear him tell it, this is what he had intended ever since he'd left. A new and protective pride is evident in the brief introductory "Letter to My Nephew," in which he assures the boy, his brother Wilmer's son James, that he descends from "some of the greatest poets since Homer," and quotes the words of a Negro spiritual; and in the longer essay, "Down at the Cross," when he portrays the black children who had faced down mobs as "the only genuine aristocrats this country has produced." Although Baldwin writes once again of his childhood, his father, and his church, his central subject is the Black Muslim movement then terrifying white America.

With the fire of the title blazing ever nearer, Baldwin praised the truthfulness of Malcolm X but rejected the separatism and violence of the Muslim movement. He offered pity rather than hatred—pity in order to avoid hatred—to the racists who, he firmly believed, despised in blacks the very things they feared in themselves. And, seeking dignity as much as freedom, he counselled black people to desist from doing to others as had been done to them. Most important, Baldwin once again promised a way out: "If we—and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others—do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world."

When did he stop believing it? No matter how many months he hid away in Istanbul or Paris, the sixties were inescapably Baldwin's American decade. In the spring of 1963, thanks to his most recent and entirely unconventional best-seller, he appeared on the cover of *Time*. Although he insisted that he was a writer and not a public spokesman, he had nonetheless undertaken a lecture tour of the South for CORE and soon held a meeting with Attorney General Robert Kennedy; in August, he took part in the March on Washington. It was with the bombing of a Birmingham church barely two weeks later, and the death of four schoolgirls, that he began to voice doubt about the efficacy of nonviolence. The murder of his friend Medgar Evers, and the dangers and humiliations involved in working on a voter-registration drive in Selma, brought a new toughness to his writing: a new willingness to deal in white stereotypes, and a new regard for hate. ("You're going to make yourself sick with hatred," someone warns a young man in Baldwin's 1964 play, "Blues for Mister Charlie." "No, I'm not," he replies, "I'm going to make myself well.") It is ironic that Baldwin was dismissed by the new radical activists and attacked by Eldridge Cleaver as this change was taking place: in an essay titled "Notes on a Native Son," in 1966, Cleaver did to Baldwin something like what Baldwin had done to Richard Wright, attacking him as a sycophant to whites and a traitor to his people. The new macho militants derided Baldwin's homosexuality, even referring to him as Martin Luther Queen. But the end point for Baldwin was the murder of King, in 1968; after that, he confessed, "something has altered in me, something has gone away."

In the era of the Black Panthers, he was politically obsolete. By the early seventies, when Henry Louis Gates, Jr., suggested an article about Baldwin for *Time*, he found the magazine no longer interested. Far worse for Baldwin, he was also seen as artistically exhausted. On this, Zaborowska disagrees. In championing the "Turkish decade," she attempts to defend some of Baldwin's later, nearly forgotten works. She is right to speak up for "No Name in the Street," a deeply

troubled but erratically brilliant book-length essay, published in 1972 and described by Baldwin as being about “the life and death of what we call the civil rights movement.” (And which, during these years, he preferred to call a “slave rebellion.”) Unable to believe anymore that he or anyone else could “reach the conscience of a nation,” he embraced the Panthers as folk heroes, while resignedly turning the other cheek to Cleaver, whom he mildly excused for confusing him with “all those faggots, punks, and sissies, the sight and sound of whom, in prison, must have made him vomit.” As Baldwin knew, hatred unleashed is not easy to control, and here he demonstrates the dire results of giving up the fight.

“No Name in the Street” is a disorderly book, both chronologically and emotionally chaotic; Zaborowska sees its lack of structure as deliberately “experimental,” and she may be right. At its core, Baldwin details his long and fruitless attempt to get a falsely accused friend out of prison; he looks back at the Southern experiences that he had reported on so coolly years before, and exposes the agony that he had felt. At the same time, he wants us to know how far he has come: there is ample mention of the Cadillac limousine and the cook-chauffeur and the private pool; he assures us that the sufferings of the world make even the Beverly Hills Hotel, for him, “another circle of Hell.” And he is undoubtedly suffering. He does his best to denounce Western culture in the terms of the day, as a “mask for power,” and insists that to be rid of Texaco and Coca-Cola one should be prepared to jettison Balzac and Shakespeare. Then, as though he had finally gone too far, he adds, “later, of course, one may welcome them back,” a loss of nerve that he immediately feels he has to justify: “Whoever is part of whatever civilization helplessly loves some aspects of it and some of the people in it.” Struggling to finish the book, Baldwin left Istanbul behind in 1971—the city was now as overfilled with distractions as Paris or New York—and bought a house in the South of France. The book’s concluding dateline, a glaring mixture of restlessness and pride, reads “New York, San Francisco, Hollywood, London, Istanbul, St. Paul de Vence, 1967-1971.”

It is difficult for even the most fervent advocate to defend “Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone,” an oddly depthless novel about a famous black actor, which, on its publication, in 1968, appeared to finish Baldwin as a novelist in the minds of everyone but Baldwin, whose ambitions seemed only to grow. His next two novels, largely about family love, are mixed achievements: “If Beale Street Could Talk” (1974), the brief and affecting story of an unjustly imprisoned Harlem youth, is told from the surprising perspective of his pregnant teen-age girlfriend (who only occasionally sounds like James Baldwin); “Just Above My Head” (1979), a multi-generational melodrama, contains one unforgettable segment, nearly four hundred pages in, about a trio of young black men travelling through the South. There were still signs of the exceptional gift. But the intensity, the coruscating language, the tight coherence of that first novel—where had they gone? The answers to this often asked question have varied: he had stayed away too long, and become detached from his essential subject; he had been corrupted by fame, and the booze didn’t help; or, maybe, he could only really write about himself. Baldwin’s biographer and close friend David Leeming suggested to Baldwin, in the mid-sixties, that “the anarchic aspect” of his daily existence was interfering with his work. But the most widely credited accusation is that his political commitments had deprived him of the necessary concentration, and cost him his creative life.

The case is presented by another of Baldwin’s biographers, James Campbell, who states that in 1963 Baldwin “exchanged art for politics, the patient scrutiny for the hasty judgment, *le mot juste* for *le mot fort*,” and that as a result he “died a little death.” But isn’t it as likely that Baldwin’s dedication to the movement, starting back in the late fifties, allowed him to accomplish as much as he did? That the hope it occasioned helped him to push back a lifetime’s hatred and despair and, no less than the retreat to Paris or Istanbul, made it possible for him to write at all? It is important to note that the flaws of the later books are evident in “Another Country,” and even in “Giovanni’s Room,” both completed before he had marched a step. As for the roads not taken, among black writers who had similar choices: Richard Wright did not return to the United States and continued writing novels, in France, until his death, in 1960, yet his later books have been dismissed as major disappointments; Ralph Ellison took no part in the civil-rights movement, yet did not publish another novel after “Invisible Man.” Every talent has its terms, and, while Baldwin was in no ordinary sense a political writer, something in him required that he rise above himself. “How, indeed, would I be able to keep on working,” he worried, “if I could never be released from the prison of my egocentricity?” As Baldwin noted about his childhood, it may be that the things that helped him and the things that hurt him cannot be divorced.

The final years were often bitter. Campbell recalls Baldwin, in 1984, reading aloud from an essay about Harlem that he’d written in the forties, crying out after every catalogued indignity, “Nothing has changed!” He was already in failing

health, and tremendously overworked. He had begun to teach—the conviviality and uplift seem to have filled the place of politics—while keeping to his usual hectic schedule; he saw no need to cut back on alcohol or cigarettes. Baldwin was only sixty-three when he died, of cancer, in 1987, at his house in France. He was in the midst of several projects: a novel that would have been, in part, about Istanbul; a triple biography of “Medgar, Malcolm, and Martin”; and, of all things, introductions to paperback editions of two novels by Richard Wright. But Baldwin’s final book was “The Price of the Ticket,” a thick volume of his collected essays, summing up nearly forty years, in which his faith in human possibility burns like a candle in the historical dark. The concluding essay, about the myths of masculinity, offers a plea for the recognition that “each of us, helplessly and forever, contains the other—male in female, female in male, white in black and black in white.”

It is shocking to realize that as early as 1951, and based on no evidence whatever, Baldwin saw that our “fantastic racial history” might ultimately be for the good. “Out of what has been our greatest shame,” he wrote in an essay, “we may be able to create one day our greatest opportunity.” He would have been eighty-four had he lived to see Barack Obama elected President. It is an event that he might have imagined more easily in his youth than in his age, but an event to which he surely contributed, through his essays and novels, his teaching and preaching, the outsized faith and energy that he spent so freely in so many ways. During his wanderings, Baldwin warned a friend who had urged him to settle down that “the place in which I’ll fit will not exist until I make it.” It was, of course, impossible to make such a place alone. But, by the grace of those who have kept on working, as he put it, “to make the kingdom new, to make it honorable and worthy of life,” we have at last the beginnings of a country to which James Baldwin could come home. ♦

To get more of *The New Yorker*'s signature mix of politics, culture and the arts: **Subscribe Now**