

SUFFERING DOESN'T HAVE A COLOR

Another Country,¹ James Baldwin's sensational evocation of racial and sexual turbulence, has sometimes been lost sight of in the heat of critical defense or attack. The novel deals with a group of people — chiefly Americans — in a chaos of values which have hardened into ideas, traditions and institutions enslaving a nation and a world of men and women who try desperately to prove to themselves and their neighbors that they are free, happy, and normal. Baldwin's novel casts on these people a discomfiting ray of light which reveals them for lost souls, whose Harlem slums, Manhattan canyons and nuclear warheads are measures of their lostness. Realism, or empiricism, is the germinating principle of Baldwin's method: he discards preconceptions and works only from what his senses, his emotion, and his intellect show him to be true from his own experience. Philosophical naturalism furnishes the cosmic environment: the persons in the novel are guided by no light except what their own intelligence and insight can provide. If they are lost souls, they are lost not because they have strayed from God or because God has abandoned them; they are lost because they failed to realize that in a Godless universe human beings must accept the burden of creating their own values. However, the novel is profoundly humanistic in its compassion for human suffering and in its faith that in spite of difficulties it is possible to create values that can endure. These enduring values are expressed in *Another Country* chiefly in the love of one human being for another. The novel makes no pretense that love comes easily or that it is easy to make love endure. Yet, the narrative moves from chaos to order, and order is most fully represented in the love of the white man and the negro girl who becomes its chief personae.

¹ Quotations from *Another Country* and other references to the novel will be documented in this article with the page number within parentheses of the original edition, Dial Press, New York, 1962.

The social theme of *Another Country* has political and economic implications not fully developed into an explicit program, though the critical attitudes are clear. The American system is represented at its worst by the impassive towers of New York. The city is "murderous", "brutal", "tense", "hostile." (4; 104) "It's getting uglier all the time," Cass said. 'A perfect example of free enterprise gone mad.' " (231) In a moment of honest outrage, her husband exclaims, "... this whole city's gone to hell." (244) Such remarks should not be interpreted as reflecting Baldwin's lack of patriotism: on the contrary, they reflect the rebellious patriotism of a critic who loves his country too well to be satisfied with materialism. Baldwin does not outline a corrective social program, except to imply, as radical reformers like Thomas Paine have implied, that nothing short of the reform of individual human souls can correct the evil. On the social front, attacks on free enterprise, or on Individualism gone amuck, imply the need for more and more intelligent, planning.

Another Country is a racial novel, but it is much more, the racial theme becoming part of a larger theme which integrates the world of whites and blacks. " 'They're colored and I'm white but the same things have happened, really the *same* things, and how can I make them know that?' " (113) The human world is one world in its suffering, and it is only a mistaken notion of how to relieve suffering that leads one group of sufferers to exploit another. Baldwin's novel is one of the first to examine with equal skill the adult worlds of black and white and to see both together clear and whole, one world in fact. In a caste society the whole structure of the society can be seen only from the bottom up. Looking down from the top, the observer is apt to be too busy fortifying his own position to do justice to those underneath him, and while his novels — those of Faulkner, for example — may be brilliant interpretations of the world they portray, that world is bound to be narrowed; no matter how loudly Faulkner protests that negro virtues are superior to white virtues, he continues to assume that white southerners who share his views deserve credit for their enlightenment, and that the great issue in the South is the white man's need to atone; to meet this need it becomes almost a virtue to continue to discriminate against colored people so that, in their own good time white people can save their souls by mak-

ing up their own minds, freely, to give negroes their just deserts. Baldwin proclaims a single standard for negroes and whites.

Baldwin's two earlier novels prepared for the third. *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) told eloquently the story of a fourteen-year old negro boy's attempt to find a citadel of order in the jungle of Harlem slums. *Giovanni's Room* (1956) was the story of two white boys and their spiritual disaster in the international jungle of Paris. In his third novel, Baldwin combines the worlds of black and white, and he is at home in both. Black Rufus, as part of his racial and social heritage hates Eric, the white boy from Alabama, and Leona, the blonde southern cracker, and he makes both of them pay for their love for him. At the same time he needs and loves them both, and he destroys himself when he destroys Leona. Baldwin's point is that it is important to put an end to exploitation and discrimination not for abstract principles, not for any abstract devotion to idealism, but for the concrete reason that human beings cannot exploit human beings without destroying themselves. Baldwin asserts again that the only significant difference between negro and white is in the color of their skins, a difference which has often proved to be stronger ground for attraction than for repulsion. All other differences are artificial, imposed by unjust social conventions, and those conventions must yield for the health of both races.

Another Country's narrative unfolds by means of the lives of a half dozen main characters drawn against the backdrop of New York City, Paris, and a beach house in southern France. In Book One, Baldwin takes the calculated great risk of killing off at the end of the second chapter the character through whose consciousness the story has been unfolding. This character — the young negro jazz drummer Rufus Scott — has become so completely the center of the reader's interest that the shock of his death brings an involuntary and dismayed assessment of the bulky sheaf of pages that remain. How can the novel continue after its heart has been destroyed? Yet it does continue successfully. Rufus is a sacrificial figure — what is often called a Christ figure (what a blessing that his name is not Joseph Christianson, thus underlining the analogy and implying that Christianity has a monopoly on martyrdom). His death is needed for the purification of the lives of several people who knew him well — his sister Ida, his best

friend Vivaldo Moore (an "Irish wop" — 24), his lover Eric (a boy from Alabama who fled to Paris to escape from the tyranny of Rufus's desire to make white people, particularly southern white people, suffer for the injustices his race has had to endure), and Cass, the wife of Vivaldo's teacher Richard Silenski who stopped writing serious fiction to make money writing mysteries. At the beginning of the novel, on the Saturday before Thanksgiving about ten years after the end of World War II, or around 1955 (cf. 93: Cass and Richard were married twelve years before, during the war), Rufus has destroyed Leone, the southern white girl who loved him, and after being "in hiding... for nearly a month" (5), he has come back to the Greenwich Village neighborhood to which he matriculated from the uptown slums. In flashbacks the reader is informed of his love affair with Leone and of his close friendship with Vivaldo, who once risked his life to help Rufus in a barroom brawl. He goes to Vivaldo's room, where he tries unsuccessfully to purge his guilt, foreseeing his death: "'I don't want to die,' he heard himself say, and he began to cry." (53) The two friends go out for food, Vivaldo meets a thoroughly unpleasant woman who has been taking care of his sexual needs, Rufus leaves them and wanders up to the George Washington Bridge from whose girders he flings himself, carried down tossed by the wind: "'... all right, you motherfucking God almighty bastard, I'm coming to you.'" (88) In chapter three, the novel's center of interest shifts to Vivaldo, whose loveless life and whose tolerance of negroes have been established, and to Ida, Rufus's beautiful, talented and spunky younger sister, and these two carry the central interest from there on.

There is small danger that *Another Country* will ever be charged with sentimental optimism in spite of its affirmations of hope. The book leaves no doubt of the vast wasteland of contemporary society, where green cases of love are rare. To begin with, there is the overpowering hatred (inverted love of life) of Rufus Scott, whose suffering as a negro second-class citizen blackens his view and then destroys him. The lives of "successful" white people are desperately unhappy. The success story of Richard Silenski, for example is ironic. In the prosperity which has come to him through the sale of his mystery novel, *The Strangled Man*, he has achieved the material success so near the heart of American

values. But in doing so he had mounted the treadmill of money grubbing; he must write a bigger and better mystery next year and another the year after that. There is small comfort in the fact that he has gained a kind of integrity in acknowledging that he lacks the capacity to write a serious novel: his limitations may resign him to his career but they cannot blind him to his failure with his wife, or content her with the small share she now has in his life. A still sadder specimen is Steve Ellis, the TV mogul: he has an unlimited expense account, and he is envied by thousands of people who dream that he has found the pot of gold at rainbow's end. But the hollowness of his triumph is revealed in a magnificently ironic scene where this graceless, tubby, perspiring, self-congratulatory little pawn of Advertising and Big Business is put through the paces of a fast dance by Ida, whose movements are fluid grace. He represents the loveless grind of a society bent on piling up evidence of material wealth, and he shows his own tragic search for other and more real values in his frantic pursuit of Ida even after he has lost the capacity to love. All the evil in the novel — racial exploitation, patronage, hatred and fear of one's neighbors — comes from *cupiditas*: the love of money is still the root of all evil. Generations of unhappy people continue to accept unquestioningly the materialistic value system of their fathers, and to wonder secretly what is the terrible cancer which is destroying them.

Against this backdrop Baldwin asserts again a series of fundamental principles. As a realist and empiricist, he recognizes man's ignorance and states the need for self-discovery and for discovery of the world in which he lives. Rufus points out that even the most elemental knowledge has been denied him: "His body was controlled by laws he did not understand." (54) Only truth can liberate: "For the meaning of revelation is that what is revealed is true, and must be borne." (206) There are many revelations in *Another Country*, most of them dramatized through the discoveries of the leading characters. Rufus learns that Leona loved him unselfishly even though she was white, and that therefore he cannot destroy her without destroying himself. He learns that Vivaldo, a white man, loves him unselfishly as a friend. These are painful truths for him, for he didn't wish to believe in the goodness of any white person. There is revelation for Vivaldo and

Cass in their discovery of the full horror of the conditions under which negroes have to live. Vivaldo made the discovery years before the time of the novel, for he had grown up on the fringe of Harlem. Cass makes the discovery when she first visits Harlem at the time of Rufus's funeral. Ida, like her brother, discovers grudgingly that white people like Vivaldo and Cass can be her friends, and that their suffering can equal her own. " 'Sweetheart, suffering doesn't *have* a color,' " (417) Vivaldo protests when she insists too loudly on the negro's monopoly. Ida resists the revelation until she is forced to accept it, and her acceptance frees her from the prison of counter-discrimination in which she has lived. There is an ugly revelation for Cass when she learns that Richard's shallow success as a writer of mysteries has spoiled the myth (which he pretended to believe) that he was worthy of her love. Richard and Steve Ellis try to believe that money and the power that comes from wealth can bring happiness; *Another Country* reveals that loveless frustration is the product of success of that kind. Salvation for individuals and for mankind can come only through turning back to the human road to happiness; "... it was only love which could accomplish the miracle of making a life bearable — only love, and love itself mostly failed." (404) Although Vivaldo learned, unwillingly, that men can be lovers as well as friends, a revelation of another sort reinforces his basic heterosexual drive, so that Baldwin's final argument is a defense of conventional love. When Eric explodes the myth that heterosexuality is spiritual because it produces children: " 'If all the children who get here every year were brought here by love, wow! baby, what a bright world this would *be!*' " (338), Vivaldo quietly induces him to concede, " 'But if you *do* love the person you make the kids with, it must be something fantastic.' " (341) Before Richard destroys Cass's illusions about him, the Silenski family, with the lovable children Michael and Paul, is an example of the sort of order Vivaldo yearns for. In spite of *Another Country's* much-publicized apologia for homosexuals, the novel makes the point that such love cannot lead to the permanent relationship upon which a truly orderly life hinges. Eric foresees the time when Yves will leave him for a younger man, while Vivaldo looks forward to family life with children to secure the relationship. Ida and Vivaldo, not Yves and Eric, are the novel's chief protagonists. In a universe without absolute moral laws,

social expediency and human happiness plead the case for married love. These revelations and others in *Another Country* are made not through a dispensation from Omnipotence, but through the labor and anguish of empirical discovery. In this way, as well as in the vividness of his local color, Baldwin is a Realist.

Baldwin's naturalism is expressed in an open disavowal of orthodox theology. This is evident even though he can for a moment admire the serenity of a devoutly religious person: his evangelist who displays "the authority... of someone who has found his place and made his peace with it" (119) is a tribute to the vocation accepted by the boy in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. Nevertheless, Baldwin is no orthodox evangelist, even though social evangelism is included in his purpose. Rufus has only resentment for "the white God." (22) He associates God with white supremacy and uses upon God his venomous epithet "mother-fucking," elsewhere reserved for white supremacists. Remembering his meeting in New York with Leona's racist brother, he thinks, "Had they been down home, his blood and the blood of his enemy would have rushed out to mingle together over the uncaring earth, under the uncaring sky." (79) His sister Ida, too, has renounced the religion she used to have: "I used to have religion... A long time ago, when I was a little girl." Vivaldo answers, "You still *do* have religion." (145-6) But the religion he has in mind is not institutionalized but personal, not dogmatic but ethical. A third member of the Scott Family, the father of Rufus and Ida, a man who lost both his son and his father to white supremacy (his father was "beaten to death with a hammer by a railroad guard" — 416) expresses a similar irreverence: "... if I ever get anywhere near that white devil you call God, I'll tear my son and my father out of his white hide!" (416) This is Ahab with a difference, for Melville's victim really believed in the existence of the God his imagination had created. Not God only, but Jesus also is handled with irreverence: "What a pain in the ass old Jesus Christ had turned out to be, and it probably wasn't even the poor, doomed, loving hop-headed old Jew's fault." (308) Besides such explicit statements of naturalism, the entire novel hinges on the premise that only human beings can solve human problems. As in nearly all the most celebrated American fiction of our time, there is no sympathy with the thought that God will reach down to solve our problems for us.

Baldwin's humanism is shown in his compassion, but also in his belief and the belief of his central characters that it is possible for human lives to be significant. The potential is there, even though seldom realized. It can be realized only when people are honest: " 'you've got to be truthful about the life you *have.*' " (336) Honesty demands confiding in the people you love, as Eric confides in Cass, and Ida confides in Vivaldo. It also means accepting the responsibility for choosing lasting love over fly-by-night skirmishes: only in this way can human beings create the illusion of order, so important for their happiness; and Eric faces the tragic knowledge that, doomed as he is, he will probably never have a permanent union. Vivaldo is the book's most eloquent advocate for the sense of order. He demands it in the fiction he is writing, and he demands it in his life: "Order. Order. *Set thine house in order.* ... When people no longer knew that a mystery could only be approached through form, people became — what the people of this time and place had become, what he had become. They perished within their clay tenements, in isolation, passively, or actively together, in mobs, thirsting and seeking for, and eventually reeking of blood." (302) It is to escape from chaos that Vivaldo demands integrity for himself: "Down there, down there, lived raw, unformed substance for the creation of Vivaldo, and only he, Vivaldo, alone, could master it." (306) In this demand and in his acknowledgement of its requirements in his love for Ida, Vivaldo becomes Baldwin's twentieth century Everyman, whose vision comes painfully but does come. Vivaldo's life holds hope for salvation by traveling down the ancient avenues of love and sacrifice. *Love one another* means insight into the life of one's neighbor, whose secret world is that other country that everyone must try to comprehend.

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