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## The Problem of Identity in Selected Early Essays of James Baldwin

James Baldwin's major non-fictional works, including the ten essays comprising *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), show an increasing and painful awareness of the problems inherent in the quest for personal and artistic identity. The crises in Baldwin's life, most often communicated in his works as artistic, religious, and sexual, have given rise to a single-minded dedication to the search for discovery of the self, even to the present day with his recent return to America. Perceiving that one's identity must be created in one's experience, Baldwin continually demonstrates his knowledge of the triple burden of Black, artist, and bisexual in an American cultural environment inimical to each, and thereby informs his writing with an irony that intensifies his search. Each of his major works at bottom attests to the quest for identity which most Baldwin critics either have ignored, in the attempt to place him in the stream of Black protest literature, on the one hand, or minimized, on the other hand, because of their antagonism toward the duality which they find associated with the identity search.

Robert Bone was one of the first to point out the twin emotions of shame and rage in Baldwin's works, and to note that: "The flight from self, the quest for identity, and the sophisticated acceptance of one's 'blackness' are the themes that flow from this emotion."<sup>1</sup> Several Black scholars and other students of contemporary Black literature have pointed to a duality in Baldwin's work. Stephen Spender<sup>2</sup> and Edward Margolies<sup>3</sup> are chief among these critics who see that the quest for public acclaim and personal selfhood obscures Baldwin's search for artistic identity. These critics speak of a split between Baldwin the artist and Baldwin the propagandist—the transmitter of social messages and object lessons. Other critics like George Kent,<sup>4</sup> Howard N. Harper, Jr.,<sup>5</sup> Calvin C. Hernton,<sup>6</sup> and Charles Newman<sup>7</sup> see as significant the unmistakably strong influence on Baldwin's work of certain French existentialists whose vision of the human condition and how to deal with it transcends the traditional literary/sociological categories of artist and propagandist. Still others like Harper, Granville Hicks,<sup>8</sup> Julian Mayfield,<sup>9</sup> and Mike Thelwell<sup>10</sup> insist correctly, I believe, that Baldwin's "is not the strident voice of a flaming radical [but] . . . an eloquent plea from a native artist seriously concerned with the fate of [his] country."<sup>11</sup> Further, he is seen by this group of critics as a writer concerned with defining "the nature of the writer's responsibility"<sup>12</sup> and "the functions and the problems of the name of letters in contemporary society."<sup>13</sup> This approach, taken by too

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few critics since the period following the publication of *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961), has been followed by those who perceive Baldwin's work primarily as an engagement of inner self with outer world.

Mayfield, elsewhere a harsh critic of Baldwin's fiction, writes persuasively in the *New Republic* review of *Nobody Knows My Name* that Baldwin is "a man possessed by the necessity of coming to grips with himself and his country,"<sup>14</sup> a possession which suggests a seeking after wholeness rather than the duality or split asserted by critics. According to Baldwin in his most recent collection of serious essays, *No Name in the Street*, his primary aim is, and always has been, "to achieve . . . a viable, organic connection between [his] public stance and [his] private life,"<sup>15</sup> an aim which he claims has eluded most Americans. The attempted integration of the self, then, is the characteristic, pervasive, and crucial act resisting at every turn efforts to polarize Baldwin.

With respect to the emphasis of this paper, the essays will serve as focal points through which are refracted the issues about which Baldwin writes, and his treatment of seemingly disparate views of the human condition. Any attempt to study Baldwin's early essays in the terms already defined must concentrate on establishing certain identity patterns or themes which are introduced in the earliest and recur throughout the collected works. Likewise, undergirding and uniting these emphases is the belief that James Baldwin has been, is now, and will continue to be intent, above all, on communicating artistically his felt perception of himself, his culture, and his fellow human beings. It will be shown that Baldwin's "self" is emerging and ever-changing, and that he is, at the present moment, "making himself up."

The earliest essays in *Notes of a Native Son* seem to provide the form and style in which questions of identity are best discussed. The style of these essays is obviously more self-revelatory, more intensely personal, than that of the novels. In choosing the nonfictional form as his major genre of expression, Baldwin writes and reveals himself at the same time, thus meeting at once his artistic and therapeutic needs. As a result, the essays are not academic, since he cannot, as an artist or a Black man, afford the luxury of engaging in mere academic, impersonal exercise. I believe that Colin MacInnes' assessment of the strength of Baldwin's essay voice is correct: ". . . because I see—or hear—James Baldwin as a voice, a presence, a singer almost, that I feel the mode of direct address—to us in his own person, and not through invented 'characters'—expresses his talent and his message best."<sup>16</sup> For Baldwin, then, the essays are a "working out" of his identity crisis in ways that are unavailable to him in the novels.

Baldwin's earliest expressed desire to be an honest man and a good writer<sup>17</sup> is, in David Levin's view, "the central metaphor through which to express, in his autobiographical writings, his spiritual quest and his evangelical plea to our society."<sup>18</sup> In these terms, Baldwin's journey has led down two roads simultaneously—the personal and the public. Likewise, Harper amplifies Levin's view in referring to the "dual personality" that Baldwin has become; he is, explains Harper,

. . . both a fiery prophet of the racial apocalypse and a sensitive explorer of man's inmost nature. In his role as Negro spokesman he has been forced into an activism in which he does not deeply believe. In his role as artist he is concerned with a problem more basic, more complex, and perhaps even more urgent than the problem of civil rights, a problem of which civil rights is only a part.<sup>19</sup>

Levin and Harper offer a promising perspective which I shall explore by a detailed examination of the personal-artistic quest as treated in Baldwin's autobiographical essays in the first volume.

What is striking about Baldwin's essays is the pervasiveness of considerable personal experience in a literary genre that generally is impersonal. Newman argues convincingly that Baldwin, like his stylistic mentor Henry James, "has used the essay not as exposition in lieu of a work of larger intent, but as a testing ground for his fiction."<sup>20</sup> The first essays are concerned with identity and may be seen to establish the direction in which all of Baldwin's subsequent essays point. Stated broadly, the essays are grouped thematically under questions of artistic, personal, and national identity. In each group, Baldwin is half Negro, half American, an incomplete fusion. The very pre-supposition of human identity—the autobiographical "I" which he establishes and with which he speaks—often is ironically called into question by the overwhelming inhumanity or dehumanization pervading and dominating the American cultural environment. Considered from the triple perspective, then, each essay emphasizes some aspect of the Black man's struggle for identity and analyzes the misconceptions and hatreds separating the Black and White races. Most of these essays in some way record the difficulties not only in recognizing, understanding, or accepting one's identity, but more crucially, in *being*. In a sense, the essays are therapeutic vehicles for Baldwin, by which he can work through to his own concept of himself.

The essays of Part One in which Baldwin carefully examines the role of the literary artist and his own relationship to art as a Black man reveal some of these difficulties. If the two important essays in this section, "Everybody's Protest Novel" and "Many Thousands Gone"—widely and, surprisingly, misinterpreted—are measured in relation to Baldwin's clearly-stated assumption in the "Autobiographical Notes," then it becomes apparent that he did, very early in his literary career, lay out for himself a psycho-ideological construct on which he has been building ever since. This construct or pattern encompasses all the identity elements outlined by Erik Erikson and Abraham Maslow.<sup>21</sup>

Simply stated, the "Autobiographical Notes" is Baldwin's *Credo*; the two "artistic" essays are his *Apologia*. In the initial piece, he establishes his identity first as a human being, born in Harlem, and, in the second sentence, as a writer. The order to identity here is very important, for Baldwin seems to insist in this *Credo* on being confronted as an artist, on artistic terms. He claims as paramount the relationship between the experience of one's life and one's creation of art. In much the same way that Ralph Ellison articulates his artistic vision,<sup>22</sup> Baldwin announces:

One writes out of one thing only—one's own experiences. Everything depends on how relentlessly one forces from this experience the last drop, sweet or bitter, it can possibly

give. *This is the only real concern of the artist, to recreate out of the disorder of life that order which is art.*<sup>23</sup>

About the meaning of Baldwin's vision there should be no confusion. He determines to examine closely his own experience through his art. Furthermore, he is forthright in his statements regarding himself as a Black artist. *This* Black artist, he explains, believes as do some other artists—Black and White—that

. . . social affairs are not generally speaking the writer's concern, whether they ought to be or not; it is absolutely necessary that he establish between himself and these affairs a distance which will allow, at least, for clarity, so that before he can look forward in any meaningful sense, he must first be allowed to take a long look back.<sup>24</sup>

Baldwin nowhere attempts in this essay to ignore his Blackness. Certainly he does reveal a certain ambivalence regarding his relationship as Negro man to the stream of Western culture,<sup>25</sup> but at the same time he gives credence to and affirms the "sweet and bitter" influences that have shaped his life and art—Dickens, Stowe, Mather, Mayor LaGuardia, his father, storefront churches, a Saxton Fellowship, Richard Wright, the King James Bible. Neither does he base his artistic motivation upon the desire, as Irving Howe claims,<sup>26</sup> to escape his Blackness. Rather, he resembles the existentialist Outsider in wanting to transcend or obliterate any and all structures, constructs, categories, whether these are imposed on his art by White men or set up, defensively, by Blacks.<sup>27</sup> Although Baldwin's professed hatred and fear of the world includes Black people, this confession that "he despised them, possibly because they failed to produce Rembrandt"<sup>28</sup> *cannot*, must not be construed as blanket ethnic self-hatred. In the context of the "Autobiographical Notes," it is a painful admission of a limitation and an inability, thus far, fully to affirm the self or to accept his Being. This admitted hatred of Black men is now an avowal; the statement, coming as it does at the beginning of Baldwin's journey, is a tentative point on the continuum, a position that, as Lerone Bennett contends, could easily be taken by "any Negro who has not emancipated himself, as Baldwin was doing."<sup>29</sup> The implication is that once the Black searcher is emancipated, the position no longer is defensible or necessary.

Evidently, Baldwin wishes to reduce the importance of his Negroness, not because of the shame which he certainly has been forced to feel but rather because in maximizing the essential fact, he is that much further removed from his perceived identity as human being and artist. Perhaps he sees that being a Black man in America tends to prevent the achievement of "that psychological and emotional distance necessary to artistic creation."<sup>30</sup> Or perhaps he wants to work through it to his *own* concept of Black artist. Erikson suggests that, in their growing awareness of the relation of positive and negative identity elements, Black writers like Baldwin and Ellison question seriously the possibility of the usable past *or* the present cultural environment to overcome the negative image imposed on Black men. As creative individuals, these writers "must accept the negative identity as the very base line of recovery. . . . But

[they] continue to write and write strongly for [literature] even in acknowledging the depth of nothingness can contribute to something akin to a collective recovery."<sup>31</sup>

Baldwin announces early in his career, "I am speaking as a writer."<sup>32</sup> He has "chosen" to become an artist. His vehicles for self-actualization are the essay and the novel, not the sociological polemic or the psychological study or the political platform. This distinction is made clearly in the "Autobiographical Notes"; once made, transition from *Credo* to *Apologia* is natural and inevitable.

Only after defining his Being in terms of a general artistic vision does Baldwin begin to examine the deeper questions inherent in a Black vision of art. This "progression" of thought from the "Autobiographical Notes" to the two essays on Black art is crucial to any objective assessment of James Baldwin's identity quest. What Howe and others find so unconscionable in Baldwin's rejection of Black protest literature championed by Wright's school is precisely what I find so just and necessary in the maintenance of his particular artistic vision.

Novel" and "Many Thousands Gone" are: What do I wish to make of myself? and what do I have to work with?<sup>33</sup> What can I be? What is *my* particular mission as a Black writer? How does my mission differ from that of Black writers who have preceded me? Since I am a Black man with Black experiences gained in a Black/White world, what values emanating from my experience can I affirm in my art? Which ones must I negate or reject? In light of these burning issues, it should be apparent that Baldwin's revolt against Wright and the protest school is as much the result of his emerging personal vision of Black aesthetic identity as it is a repudiation of the literature produced by this school.

Baldwin's primary objection to protest literature is that it confines the Black man within his own skin. Whereas the aim of the American protest novel is "to bring greater freedom to the oppressed,"<sup>34</sup> Baldwin finds that the aim fails because such novels reject human Being and human life, deny its beauty, and insist on an existence for their heroes that is impossible for them to transcend.<sup>35</sup> The "novels of Negro oppression," written by Blacks and Whites alike, fail furthermore because they ignore the fact that oppressor and oppressed are bound inextricably in American culture.<sup>36</sup> This linking together in cultural reality, for which Baldwin employs the metaphor of a cage, *can* lead simultaneously to the discovery of identity for the oppressed and a recognition, by the oppressor, of the Black man's humanity. However, in Baldwin's view, the cage of reality of the American cultural environment is locked more securely with each appearance of that kind of novel which articulates an essentially naturalistic, behavioristic, sometimes Marxian, vision of men like Uncle Tom and Bigger Thomas. That the Black man is merely or only the product of his socio-political predicament, that literary art should seek to publish this news, is anathematic to James Baldwin.

In short, Baldwin argues in "Everybody's Protest Novel" that the American novel should have properly little to do with social experience *per se*. On the contrary, it has much to do with

. . . something resolutely indefinable, unpredictable. In overlooking, denying, evading this complexity—which is nothing more than the disquieting complexity of ourselves—we are diminished and we perish; only within this web of ambiguity, paradox, this hunger, darkness, danger, can we find at once ourselves and the power that will free us from ourselves. It is *this power of revelation which is the business of the novelist*, this journey toward a more vast reality which must take precedence over all other claims.<sup>37</sup>

As in the "Autobiographical Notes," so Baldwin repeats here the burden of Black humanity in America, which he knows cannot be ignored or escaped. So also does he fix his concern, irrevocably, with Black and White humanity which encompasses the complexities of human experience. In the context of this essay, moreover, Baldwin admits the difficulties but states emphatically that the burden of the past must be accepted nonetheless.<sup>38</sup> Certainly, if his *Credo* is to be considered as a statement of artistic belief and artistic intent, then the subsequent rejection of the traditional protest genre is consistent.<sup>39</sup> The Truth he seeks lies elsewhere, to be uncovered and proclaimed. One begins to suspect that the content and referent of Baldwin's emerging vision of Truth is moral rather than social.

Those portions of "Many Thousands Gone" dealing with his conscious revolt against protest literature are extensions of the thought presented in "Everybody's Protest Novel," which is antedated by two years. The charges herein are far more explicit; Baldwin has become more confident in the rightness of his own vision and in his ability to refuse the mantle of Wright's tutelage. The essay, then, defines more fully than "Everybody's Protest Novel," Baldwin's position, in contradiction to Wright's. What is new—though perhaps not so much new as more carefully thought through, more forthrightly articulated—is his relating of *Notes of a Native Son* to the traditional depiction in American fiction of "an unremarkable youth in battle with the force of circumstance. . . . In this case the force of circumstance which cannot be overcome. . . ." <sup>40</sup> Noting that Bigger Thomas is only *one* part of an infinitely more complex reality than Wright is willing, or able, to perceive, Baldwin points to a fundamental deficiency in Wright's vision:

What is missing in Bigger's situation and in the representation of his psychology—which makes his situation false and his psychology incapable to development—is any revelatory apprehension of Bigger as one of the Negro's realities or as one of the Negro's roles. This failure is part of the previously noted failure to convey any sense of Negro life as a continuing and complex group reality.<sup>41</sup>

So Baldwin finds both Bigger Thomas and his novel trapped, not in the cage of reality, but in a distorted American image of Black life of which the question of Blacks' basic humanity, the depth of their relationships to each other, and their complex relationships to White Americans, is moot or not even perceived.<sup>42</sup>

A further contention that Baldwin presents in this essay is particularly germane to the problem of identity. Using Wright and Bigger as a framework—again for purposes of contradiction—Baldwin distinguishes between his life as a human being and his life as a Black man. The one, he believes, is his real life; the other a social and mythical life, imposed or

projected. There is always a conflict between the two lives, Baldwin insists, but while the conflict never can be resolved, one must make perpetually that "paradoxical adjustment . . . [to] the dark and dangerous and unloved stranger [that] is part of himself forever."<sup>43</sup> In other words, one has not only to recognize but also accept "his private Bigger Thomas living in the skull, . . ."<sup>44</sup> Unless this is done, no Black man can begin to be free. By making these distinctions, Baldwin further defines his identity and distances himself from Wright whose naturalistic assumptions do not lead toward the same goal, artistically, that Baldwin has begun to seek. Exactly what workable formulas will serve him best are not yet apparent to him; what is clear at this juncture, however, is that Baldwin's conception of the relationship between one's social experience and literary art is markedly different from his mentor's. If Wright's failure as an artist was indeed the failure to examine the roots of the "gratuitous and compulsive" violence with which he suffused his work, then Baldwin has already determined to avoid failing in that way.

Judging the content and emphases of the essays in Part One of *Notes of a Native Son*, we note Baldwin's resolute determination to share in the panorama of common humanity through his art. He does not yet go as far as Ellison's "willed affirmation" of his Being,<sup>45</sup> but he does show signs in these first essays of engaging the question of human-ness (humanity). His is an inclusive vision of human beings and of literary art, excluding nothing which would bear on the spectrum of humanity. The ambivalent attitudes that Baldwin holds—Black protest literature versus personal art, Black versus White—seem to form some kind of motif of tension or conflict. It is necessary to establish this tensional pattern in the other essays and to determine what significance it has for James Baldwin's total identity quest.

Those essays of Part Two in which Baldwin exposes his youth further illustrate, in an intensely painful fashion, his difficulties in recognizing, understanding, and accepting his own identity. Although written in a language more subjective than the essays on artistic identity, they reinforce nonetheless the growing impression that Baldwin's pilgrimage is directed consciously toward every aspect of his Being. These essays reveal what Newman calls Baldwin's obsession with dualities and paradox.<sup>46</sup> "The Harlem Ghetto" establishes in fairly objective, dispassionate terms, the Black world into which the title piece, "Notes of a Native Son," shows Baldwin to have been born. This world assures that Negro boys and girls "by the age of puberty, [are] irreparably scarred by the conditions of . . . life. All over Harlem, they [are] growing into stunted maturity, trying desperately to find a place to stand . . ."<sup>47</sup> Existence in the explosive Harlem ghetto is marked by an aura of waiting, of bitter expectancy which never achieves positive or meaningful fruition for its young.<sup>48</sup> Baldwin introduces the motif of waiting—for tenement repairs, for better jobs, for welfare payments, for death—in terms of the familiar metaphor of Winter,<sup>49</sup> noting the stoic resignation of older, tired Blacks that "it is coming and it will be hard; there is nothing anyone can do about it."<sup>50</sup> But for the young who find daily identification with Jewish

merchants and Judeo-Christian religion unavoidable and who share "a furious, bewildered rage, the rage of people who cannot find solid ground beneath their feet,"<sup>51</sup> the bitter resignation often is transformed into self- or other-directed destruction.

In "The Harlem Ghetto," Baldwin is unequivocal in stating his convictions regarding the totally negative results on Black lives of the oppressive cultural environment, touching at points the same nerve that the psychologists and social scientists touch. He explains:

I am not one of the people who believe that oppression imbues people with wisdom or insight or sweet charity, though the survival of the Negro in this country would simply not have been all he felt. . . . the wonder is not that so many are ruined but that so many survive. The Negro's outlets are desperately constructed. In his dilemma he turns first upon himself and then upon whatever most represents to him his own emasculation.<sup>52</sup>

Similarly in "Many Thousands Gone" which deals as much with the Black man's human identity as it does with the artistic limitations of this humanity in Wright, Baldwin analyzes the predicament in strikingly psychosocial terms. Employing the first person plural to fix his shared humanity in American culture—in which the Black American also is part of the national "we"—Baldwin details the problem in the following passages:

The ways in which the Negro has affected the American psychology are betrayed in our popular culture and in our morality; in our estrangement from him in the depth of our estrangement from ourselves.<sup>53</sup>

Introducing imagery of light-shadow-darkness which is developed early and recurs in clusters throughout the essay, he sees

The Negro in America, gloomingly referred to as that shadow which lies athwart our national life, who is far more than that. He is a series of shadows, self-created, intertwining, which now we helplessly battle. One may say that the Negro in America does not really exist except in the darkness of our minds.<sup>54</sup>

Baldwin's idea of the American Black man as a series of self-created shadows gains import when we consider his own personal identity search as Black man and artist in terms of creating and "remaking" the self.<sup>55</sup> Again, Baldwin insists on placing the problem in its human contexts when he observes the Blacks' dehumanization at the hands of American Whites, or, finally,

The American image of the Negro which lives also in the Negro's heart; and when he has surrendered to this image life has no other possible reality. Then he, like the white enemy with whom he will be locked one day in mortal struggle, has no means save this of asserting his identity.<sup>56</sup>

It would seem from these quotations that James Baldwin claims that the Negro is like everyone else in America. This charge is levelled, wrongly I believe, by several critics, including Dachine Rainer and Marcus Klein.<sup>57</sup> If it is so, then the claim denies Baldwin's Negroness as a personal reality. It appears, however, that instead of psychologically repudiating his Blackness in this essay, he rather *affirms* his own existential condition and that of his Black fellows. The problems of Black identity for Baldwin go



far beyond the facile matter of one's nationality; they concern deeply the collective Black impression of alienation from the human condition.

Several of Baldwin's recurrent themes are introduced in this essay, including the negative influence of the Black man's past in America, the dehumanizing effects of an oppressive culture, and the loss of and search for identity by the Black and White American alike. Baldwin views identity in the earliest essays as something to be achieved, created, or shaped, but the initial, positive statement in "Autobiographical Notes" of his own identity recognition *and* acceptance of himself as Black man, "a kind of bastard of the West,"<sup>58</sup> is both explicit and crucial. This realization is expressed in the same kind of language used by DuBois, J. Saunders Redding,<sup>59</sup> and Malcolm X. Although, he admits, "the most difficult (and most rewarding) thing in my life has been the fact that I was born a Negro and forced, therefore, to effect some kind of truce with this reality,"<sup>60</sup> nevertheless he affirms his Black being within the context of the fabric of American culture. Thus, the *fact* of his Blackness precedes all other considerations of human or American identity; this fact even relegates to secondary and even tertiary position what Newman calls Baldwin's "love-hate affair with religion, sex, color, America"<sup>61</sup> in all the essays and novels predating *Another Country*.

The title essay centers as much in Baldwin's examination of the paternal pattern and its impact upon his life as in his discovery of his relationship as Black man first to an essentially White social environment and second to himself. The "truce" with the reality of his Blackness is effected in this essay in terms which both parallel and illuminate the four-part identity-crisis event, namely, recognition, understanding or perception, acceptance, and identification or authentic relationship.

The death of David Baldwin with which the title essay begins and through which James Baldwin orders the entire piece, marks the culmination of his young manhood. It has not been sufficiently noted that the dominant motif of the essay is disease. Physical and psychic sickness infuse the Harlem ghetto of Baldwin's childhood and eats away the life of David Baldwin. The relative dispassion with which Baldwin details the effects of oppressive ghetto life in "The Harlem Ghetto" becomes in this intensely personal and probing essay a passionate, yet ordered, autobiographical case history. He manages to maintain throughout a psychic distance from his father's growing sickness—a kind of objectivity that permits him first to describe, then to analyze, and finally to empathize and reconcile for himself the terrors of the "dread, chronic disease"<sup>62</sup> that annihilates once and for all his father's identity but has only begun to obscure his own. However, the paternal pattern is firmly established, by Baldwin's own admission; this pattern provides, on the one hand, the framework for the painful, finally rewarding probe of his own emerging identity, and it signals the escape from this pattern on the other.

David Baldwin, a man "locked up in his terrors,"<sup>63</sup> was to his children "ingrown, like a toe-nail."<sup>64</sup> By employing this image, Baldwin manages to convey both the inward movement of a frustrated existence on itself

and the potential poisoning of such an existence, for if the toe-nail is not cut out and the poison to the bloodstream is not checked, the foot withers and dies. A corollary of the disease imagery likewise is provided early in Baldwin's description of his father as "the most bitter man I have ever met."<sup>65</sup> The bitterness pre-existent in the ghetto infected David Baldwin, turning him slowly into a frightening Black figure, gripped by "an intolerable bitterness of spirit"<sup>66</sup> which Baldwin admits, at age nineteen, overflowed and became his own. In much the same way that Marlow perceives Kurtz initially as a voice, a presence,<sup>67</sup> so Baldwin characterizes his father in terms of a thundering voice full of rage, often issuing "bitter warnings [out] of proudly pursed lips . . ." <sup>68</sup>

David Baldwin was driven to remoteness from which he never returned. Baldwin particularizes his father's decline by extending carefully the disease imagery from him to the cultural environment that bred him. Ironically, he establishes the condition of bitterness and suppressed rage in which his father lived as paradigmatic of the ghetto's constant condition; that condition is imposed, often unwittingly, on the Black man by the White world. The impression of waiting, of bitter expectancy that characterizes "The Harlem Ghetto" here is confirmed in an ingenious extension of the disease motif: Harlem "seemed to be infected by waiting."<sup>69</sup> The waiting characteristic of the ghetto prefigures the family's waiting at the bedside for David Baldwin's death, precipitated, according to Baldwin, because "the disease of his mind allowed the disease of his body [tuberculosis] to destroy him."<sup>70</sup>

The funeral more than the other events—even more than the Harlem riot of 1943 that followed—provides the testing of the son's identity in relation to it. Sitting in the crowded church, Baldwin alternates between dream digressions, in which he remembers his father, and analyses of the real impact of his father upon his own life. One reminiscence is especially significant as the only point in the entire essay that healing, or the possibility of it, is allowed. In Baldwin's mind, the existence of Harlem "testified to the potency of the poison [of hatred and oppression] while remaining silent as to the efficacy of whatever antidote, irresistibly raising the question of whether or not an antidote was desirable."<sup>71</sup> But the remembrance of a time in childhood when his father was not so cruel but anxious to "heal" is recounted in terms of his "[soothing] my crying and [applying] the stinging iodine."<sup>72</sup> Immediately following this remembrance is the famous scene, briefly presented, of the son's break from the father's vocation and way of life; this was, according to Baldwin, the only time the two ever actually *spoke* to each other: "My father asked me abruptly, 'You'd rather write than preach, wouldn't you?' I was astonished at his question—because it was a real question. I answered 'Yes.' That was all we said."<sup>73</sup>

Toward the end of the essay, Baldwin again makes firm the connection between Harlem's sickness and his father's by employing the imagery of disease—this time in terms of amputation and gangrene. Because "Harlem had needed something to smash. To smash something is the ghetto's chronic need,"<sup>74</sup> the 1943 riots were precipitated. This assertion

leads the reader to recall the eighteen-year-old youth in a segregated Trenton cafeteria, driven to the point of smashing, crushing rage.<sup>75</sup> It also reminds one that David Baldwin did not enjoy the "luxury" of such rage; his revolt against the conditions of his existence was almost always self-directed and hence destructive.<sup>76</sup> But the assertion also points forward to Baldwin's own conviction of the necessity of *all* Blacks to make perpetual decisions, not between a disease and a cure, but rather between two aspects of the same disease. The ingrown toe-nail of the opening—taken then as a description of the father—now is expanded and used as the cause of all Black misery. Gangrene is pre-existent in the ghetto, while amputation—the cut—really is symbolic of it. It is explained that his father died of gangrene; however, the perpetual choice is an empty one since the "idea of going through life as a cripple is [as] unbearable [as] the risk of swelling up slowly, in agony, with poison."<sup>77</sup>

It seems that precisely because Baldwin allows (invents, perhaps) for himself an alternative *other* than the two he claims for Black men generally, he is able to begin to order his own existence and to take the first step in his identity-pilgrimage. In this crucial autobiographical essay, he clearly establishes and defines his existence in opposition to his father, but that is not to say that his own emerging identity is achieved at the expense of the annihilation of his father's. At one point in the essay, Baldwin proudly associates his African heritage with his father;<sup>78</sup> the passage reveals, however, both the father's and son's ambivalence toward the real worth of their heritage. Again, Baldwin analyzes the legacy left to him by his father, dwelling not so much on the aspects of shame, rage, and hatred as on the newly-interpreted meaning of his father's "texts and songs" which reveal to him that "nothing is ever escaped."<sup>79</sup> Indeed, David Baldwin's legacy of hatred is supplanted by the more powerful admonition. In Baldwin's view, the two overriding ideas, seemingly opposed, of total acceptance and total refusal to accept any injustice of life and men which either life or men impose on one's life, signal not the break with his father but rather Baldwin's symbolic linking in understanding between dead father and newly-born son. Unless one doubts his concluding insistence on the folly of holding onto anything that does not matter, there seems to be no other possible interpretation of the words, "The dead man mattered, the new life mattered; blackness and whiteness did not matter; . . ."<sup>80</sup>

As has been shown, in "Notes of a Native Son" and in the other essays in the "personal identity" group, Baldwin touches on certain aspects of the "Negro's real relation to the white American";<sup>81</sup> but the focus of the title essay is on the relationship to his father and his own emerging identity. Baldwin's exploration of relationships—to himself, his father and family, fellow Blacks, White men, Europeans abroad—continues as central emphases throughout the volume, in the essays that are largely personal as well as in those that are more outwardly focused. The essays grouped under the rubric of "national identity" speak to the issue of Baldwin's place as Black American in the European social fabric. Two of these, "Stranger in the Village" (1953) and "A Question of Identity"

(1954) provide him with perspectives with which to interpret further the American racial problem in terms of identity. In the first of these two essays, Baldwin demonstrates his ability to move from the personal situation—the fact of his being a visitor in a small Swiss village—to the universal condition of men. The “small” experience of innocent racism in this foreign Catholic village serves as the base on which Baldwin erects a large, sturdy, pyramidal structure; thematically, one point of the inverted pyramid is the rage of the “disesteemed” around the world, and the other is the search for and maintenance of one’s own identity, once discovered.

Baldwin’s first visit to the tiny village of Loeche-les-Bains was in the Fall of 1951, after he “had run away from his native land to escape not only the Negro condition, but the condition of being Negro.”<sup>82</sup> Here he had completed *Go Tell It on the Mountain*; then he returned in 1953, broke, starving, and feeling himself to be on the verge of a breakdown. He completed “Stranger in the Village” in virtual isolation and depressive melancholy. In spite of his former residence, he still was regarded as an oddity, a non-person; he was the first and only Black man that most of these natives had seen. Thus, Baldwin early in the essay establishes his identity as a stranger in relation to the inhabitants of the “white wilderness,” alienated from them because of his color in a way that no other foreign stranger could be. The remote alpine village, then, is paradigmatic of the White West “onto which,” Baldwin says, “I have been so strangely grafted.”<sup>83</sup> Employing a strategic pose of self-examination, the Black “bastard of the West” distances himself, as Black man, from the glories of Chartres, Shakespeare, Rembrandt, and the Empire State Building, all of which—for purposes for Baldwin’s dialectic here—he neither feels nor wants to share any part of.<sup>84</sup> His presence in the village also illuminates for him the meaning of the Black/White situation in his native land.

Baldwin’s conclusion in “A Question of Identity” that only from the Europe of present reality can the American discover his own country and thereby his identity signals the end of his alienation from himself. In talking with Harold Isaacs in 1959 concerning his emerging convictions regarding national identity, he insisted that the protracted and painful process brought him anew to the old conclusion: You have to go far away to find out that you never do get far away. . . . I couldn’t get to *know* France. The key to my experience was *here*, in America. Everything I could deal with was here.<sup>85</sup> The terms with which Baldwin expresses this insight are reminiscent of the Biblical admonition that one must lose his life in order to find it.<sup>86</sup> Inherent in his first expatriate experience was the *necessity* almost simultaneously of losing and finding his own identity. What became ineluctably clear to him, as the result of European exile, was the unalterable fact of his Negro-ness and his Americanness. More important, acceptance of both these identities formed the basis for his next collection of essays, *Nobody Knows My Name*.

Thus, an examination of the content, style, and preoccupations of the essays in *Notes of a Native Son* establishes the direction in which the young essayist is moving, at the same time at which it reveals Baldwin’s

continuing journey or pilgrimage. The continual "process of rejection and negation" that Theodore Gross sees as occupying Baldwin's thought and writing to the present day<sup>87</sup> might be seen more accurately in the earliest essays as his conscious development of a tensional motif of acceptance and negation, resulting often in ambivalence or vacillation. By examining the later essays chronologically and thematically, it will be possible to determine if this pattern obtains.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Robert A. Bone, *The Negro Novel in America* (Revised ed.; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), p. 218.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Spender, "James Baldwin: Voice of a Revolution," *Partisan Review*, XXX (1963), 256-60.

<sup>3</sup> Edward Margolies, *Native Sons: A Critical Study of Twentieth-Century Negro American Authors* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1968).

<sup>4</sup> George Kent, *Blackness and the Adventure of Western Culture* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1972).

<sup>5</sup> Howard N. Harper, Jr. *Desperate Faith: A Study of Bellow, Salinger, Mailer, Baldwin and Updike* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1967).

<sup>6</sup> Calvin C. Hernton, "Blood of the Lamb: The Ordeal of James Baldwin," in *White Papers for White Americans* (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1966), 105-47.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Newman, "The Lesson of the Master: Henry James and James Baldwin," *Yale Review*, LVI, 1 (October, 1966), 45-59.

<sup>8</sup> Granville Hicks, "Commitment Without Compromise," review of *Nobody Knows My Name*, by James Baldwin, in the *Saturday Review*, July 1, 1961, p. 9.

<sup>9</sup> Julian Mayfield, "A Love Affair With the United States," review of *Nobody Knows My Name*, by James Baldwin, in *The New Republic*, August 7, 1961, p. 25.

<sup>10</sup> Mike Thelwell, "Another Country: Baldwin's New York Novel," in *The Black American Writer: Fiction*, Vol. I, ed. by C.W.E. Bigsby (Baltimore: Penguin Books, Inc., 1969), pp. 181-98.

<sup>11</sup> Mayfield, "A Love Affair," p. 25.

<sup>12</sup> Hicks, "Commitment Without Compromise," p. 9.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Mayfield, "A Love Affair," p. 25.

<sup>15</sup> James Baldwin, *No Name in the Street* (New York: The Dial Press, 1972), pp. 53-54. (Baldwin's most recent nonfictional work, which he calls "an essay," is *The Devil Finds Work*, published in 1976. It deals with the condition of the modern American film.)

<sup>16</sup> Colin MacInnes, "Dark Angel: The Writing of James Baldwin," in *Five Black Writers: Essays on Wright, Ellison, Baldwin, Hughes and LeRoi Jones*, ed. by Donald F. Gibson (New York: New York University Press, 1970), p. 121.

<sup>17</sup> James Baldwin, "Autobiographical Notes," in *Notes of a Native Son* (New York: The Dial Press, 1955), p. 12.

<sup>18</sup> David Levin, "Baldwin's Autobiographical Essays: The Problem of Negro Identity," in *Black and White in American Culture: An Anthology from the Massachusetts Review*, ed. by Jules Chametsky and Sidney Kaplan (New York: The Viking Press, 1971), p. 373.

<sup>19</sup> Harper, *Desperate Faith*, pp. 137-38.

<sup>20</sup> Newman, "The Lesson of the Master," p. 59. [Newman is particularly instructive with respect to their dialectical art, their relationship to their respective cultures, and the psychological and literary consequences of their 'mysterious' childhoods—self-imposed exile on the one hand, and the novels or dramas of 'manners' on the other. Both men as essayists wrestle with the problem of their opaque culture and their identity within it. (*Ibid.*, pp. 45-47).]

<sup>21</sup> See Erik H. Erikson, "The Problem of Ego Identity," *JAPA* Volume 4, Number 1 (January, 1956), 67; "Psychosocial Identity," in *International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, Volume 7, ed. by David L. Sills (New York: The Macmillan Company and The Free Press, 1968), 61; "Race and the Wider Identity," in *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1968), 296-97; also see Abraham Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, Second ed. (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1968).

[Other researchers who provide insights into the problem of Black identity are Abram Kardiner and Lionel Ovesey, Kenneth B. Clark, Joseph White, and Alvin Poussaint.]

<sup>22</sup> See Ralph W. Ellison, "Hidden Name and Complex Fate," in *For Our Time: Twenty-Four Essays by Eight Contemporary Americans*, ed. by Barry Gross (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1970), pp. 45-46; see also Ellison's "The World and the Jug," *Ibid.*, pp. 63-71, 79-81.

<sup>23</sup> Baldwin, "Autobiographical Notes," p. 11. (Italics mine)

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>25</sup> Baldwin discusses this theme more fully in one essay from *Nobody Knows My Name*, his second published volume of essays—"The Discovery of What It Means to Be an American."

<sup>26</sup> In a bristling essay on Baldwin and Ellison, Howe charges Baldwin with "transcending the sterile categories of 'Negro-ness'" in his avowed attempt to go further than Wright's vision of the Black artist. [See Irving Howe, *A World More Attractive: A View of Modern Literature and Politics* (New York: Horizon Press, 1963), p. 99.]

<sup>27</sup> In this connection, Howe poses the question, "What, then, was the experience of a man with a black skin, what could it be in this country? How could a Negro put pen to paper, how could he so much as think or breathe, without some impulsion to protest, . . ." [*Ibid.*, pp. 99-100]. Obviously, Baldwin had anticipated this line of critical attack in the "Autobiographical Notes" when he stated that he would allow neither the "tremendous demands or the very real dangers" of his social situation to prevent the ordering and examining of his experience in his own ways. [Baldwin, "Autobiographical Notes," p. 11.]

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Lerone Bennett, Jr. *Confrontation: Black and White* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Company, Inc., 1965), p. 210.

<sup>30</sup> Ellison, "The World and the Jug," p. 65.

<sup>31</sup> Erikson, "Race and the Wider Identity," p. 25.

<sup>32</sup> Baldwin, "Autobiographical Notes," p. 9.

<sup>33</sup> Erikson suggests that this phrasing is more precise and pertinent than the generally facile phrasing, "Who am I?" Erikson, "Race and the Wider Identity," p. 314.

<sup>34</sup> Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," in *Notes of a Native Son*, p. 18.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>36</sup> Note the interesting similarities here in Baldwin's position on the relationship between oppressor and oppressed and Malcolm X's, and the fact that Baldwin began his literary embracing this belief while Malcolm ended his political career holding to it. Another parallel is to Frantz Fanon's observations in *Black Skin, White Masks: The Experiences of a Black Man in a White World*, Translated by Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1967), pp. 150-88.

<sup>37</sup> Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," p. 15. (Italics mine)

<sup>38</sup> Baldwin, "Autobiographical Notes," p. 22.

<sup>39</sup> What might not be consistent, and for what later critics have taken Baldwin seriously to task, is his *apparent* gradual assumption in the essays and novels, of the role of Black protestor and spokesman. This "inconsistency" seems to me to be confronted and resolved by Baldwin in his 1972 collection, *No Name in the Street*.

<sup>40</sup> Baldwin, "Many Thousands Gone," in *Notes of a Native Son*, p. 30.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> See Ellison, "The World and the Jug," p. 80.

<sup>46</sup> Newman, "Lesson of the Master," p. 45.

<sup>47</sup> Baldwin, "The Harlem Ghetto," in *Notes of a Native Son*, p. 64.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>49</sup> In "Notes of a Native Son," the motif of waiting, as characteristic of the Harlem ghetto, is linked effectively to the family's waiting for David Baldwin's death and to the people's waiting for the inevitable explosion of the August 1943 riots.

<sup>50</sup> Baldwin, "The Harlem Ghetto," p. 64.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Baldwin, "Many Thousands Gone," p. 23.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24.

<sup>55</sup> A later and fuller discussion of this idea is found in the 1961 essay from *Nobody Knows My Name*, "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy," p. 232.

<sup>56</sup> Baldwin, "Many Thousands Gone," p. 27.

<sup>57</sup> See Dachine Rainer, "Rage Into Order," *Commonweal*, Volume LXIII, No. 15

(January 13, 1956), 385; and Marcus Klein, *After Alienation: American Novels in Mid-Century* (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1962).

<sup>58</sup> Baldwin, "Autobiographical Notes," p. 10.

<sup>59</sup> See Redding's depiction of the problem of Black identity in terms of physical and psychological alienation in *On Being a Negro in America* (New York: Bantam Books, 1964).

<sup>60</sup> Baldwin, "Autobiographical Notes," p. 9.

<sup>61</sup> Newman, "Lesson of the Master," p. 53.

<sup>62</sup> Baldwin, "Notes of a Native Son," in *Notes of a Native Son*, p. 64.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>67</sup> Joseph Conrad, "Heart of Darkness," in *The Portable Conrad*, ed. by Morton D. Zabel (New York: The Viking Press, 1968), pp. 557-59, 579.

<sup>68</sup> Baldwin, "Notes of a Native Son," p. 79.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 77-78.

<sup>76</sup> The only exception that one might take to this point is the harsh and irrational treatment of his family, which can be seen as other-directed rage, albeit misplaced.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 86-87.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

<sup>82</sup> Fern Eckman, *The Furious Passage of James Baldwin* (New York: M. Evans and Company, 1967), p. 119.

<sup>83</sup> Baldwin, "Stranger in the Village," in *Notes of a Native Son*, pp. 147-48.

<sup>84</sup> Note the use of the same strategy in the "Autobiographical Notes."<sup>3</sup> [Supra, pp. 18-19, n. 58]. The problem of his place in American and human culture that Baldwin introduces here is not resolved in this essay, although it is analyzed at length. Seemingly a resolution is arrived at in a few of the essays in *Nobody Knows My Name*, and in several published interviews following its publication. It will be interesting to trace Baldwin's thought regarding this question of his place in the stream of culture (human and American) from *No Name in the Street* to the present return to New York.

<sup>85</sup> Harold R. Isaacs, *The New World of Negro Americans* (New York: The John Day Company, 1963), pp. 268-69.

<sup>86</sup> The Gospel of Matthew, 10:39

<sup>87</sup> Theodore L. Gross, *The Heroic Ideal in American Literature* (New York: The Free Press, 1971), p. 168.