THE ART OF FICTION NO. 78
JAMES BALDWIN

This interview was conducted in the two places dearest to James Baldwin's struggle as a writer. We met first in Paris, where he spent the first nine years of a burgeoning career and wrote his first two novels, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Giovanni's Room*, along with his best-known collection of essays, *Notes of a Native Son*. It was in Paris, he says, that he was first able to come to grips with his explosive relationship with himself and America. Our second talks were held at Baldwin's *poutres*-and-stone villa in St. Paul de Vence, where he has made his home for the past ten years. We lunched on an August weekend, together with seasonal guests and his secretary. Saturday, a storm raged amid intolerable heat and humidity, causing Baldwin's minor case of arthritis to pain his writing hand (left) and wrist. Erratic power shortages caused by the storm interrupted the tape machine by our side. During the blackouts we would discuss subjects at random or wait in silence while sipping our drinks.

Returning Sunday at Baldwin's invitation, the sun was shining and we were able to lunch outdoors at a picnic table, shaded by a bower that opened onto property dotted with fruit trees and a spectacular view of the Mediterranean littoral. Baldwin's mood

had brightened considerably since the previous day, and we entered the office and study he refers to as his "torture chamber." Baldwin writes in longhand ("you achieve shorter declarative sentences") on the standard legal pad, although a large, old Adler electric sits on one end of his desk—a rectangular oak plank with rattan chairs on either side. It is piled with writing utensils and drafts of several works in progress: a novel, a play, a scenario, essays on the Atlanta child murders, these last compiled in *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*. His most recent work includes *The Devil Finds Work*, an attack on racial bias and fear in the film industry, and a novel, *Just Above My Head*, which draws on his experiences as a civil-rights activist in the 1960s.

—*Jordan Elgrably,* 1984

INTERVIEWER

Would you tell us how you came to leave the States?

JAMES BALDWIN

I was broke. I got to Paris with forty dollars in my pocket, but I had to get out of New York. My reflexes were tormented by the plight of other people. Reading had taken me away for long periods at a time, yet I still had to deal with the streets and the authorities and the cold. I knew what it meant to be white and I knew what it meant to be a nigger, and I knew what was going to happen to me. My luck was running out. I was going to go to jail, I was going to kill somebody or be killed. My best friend had committed suicide two years earlier, jumping off the George Washington Bridge.

When I arrived in Paris in 1948 I didn't know a word of French. I didn't know anyone and I didn't want to know anyone. Later, when I'd encountered other Americans, I began to avoid them because they had more money than I did and I didn't want

to feel like a freeloader. The forty dollars I came with, I recall, lasted me two or three days. Borrowing money whenever I could—often at the last minute—I moved from one hotel to another, not knowing what was going to happen to me. Then I got sick. To my surprise I wasn't thrown out of the hotel. This Corsican family, for reasons I'll never understand, took care of me. An old, old lady, a great old matriarch, nursed me back to health after three months; she used old folk remedies. And she had to climb five flights of stairs every morning to make sure I was kept alive. I went through this period where I was very much alone, and wanted to be. I wasn't part of any community until I later became the Angry Young Man in New York.

INTERVIEWER

Why did you choose France?

BALDWIN

It wasn't so much a matter of choosing France—it was a matter of getting out of America. I didn't know what was going to happen to me in France but I knew what was going to happen to me in New York. If I had stayed there, I would have gone under, like my friend on the George Washington Bridge.

INTERVIEWER

You say the city beat him to death. You mean that metaphorically.

BALDWIN

Not so metaphorically. Looking for a place to live. Looking for a job. You begin to doubt your judgment, you begin to doubt everything. You become imprecise. And that's when you're beginning to go under. You've been beaten, and it's been deliberate. The whole society has decided to make you *nothing*. And they don't even know they're doing it.

INTERVIEWER

Has writing been a type of salvation?

BALDWIN

I'm not so sure! I'm not sure I've escaped anything. One still lives with it, in many ways. It's happening all around us, every day. It's not happening to me in the same way, because I'm James Baldwin; I'm not riding the subways and I'm not looking for a place to live. But it's still happening. So salvation is a difficult word to use in such a context. I've been compelled in some ways by describing my circumstances to learn to live with them. It's not the same thing as accepting them.

INTERVIEWER

Was there an instant you knew you were going to write, to be a writer rather than anything else?

BALDWIN

Yes. The death of my father. Until my father died I thought I could do something else. I had wanted to be a musician, thought of being a painter, thought of being an actor. This was all before I was nineteen. Given the conditions in this country to be a black writer was impossible. When I was young, people thought you were not so much wicked as sick, they gave up on you. My father didn't think it was possible—he thought I'd get killed, get murdered. He said I was contesting the white man's definitions, which was quite right. But I had also learned from my father what he thought of the white man's definitions. He was a pious, very religious and in some ways a very beautiful man, and in some ways a terrible man. He died when his last child was born and I realized I had to make a jump—a leap. I'd been a preacher for three years, from age fourteen to seventeen. Those were three years that probably turned me to writing.

INTERVIEWER

Were the sermons you delivered from the pulpit very carefully prepared, or were they absolutely off the top of your head?

BALDWIN

I would improvise from the texts, like a jazz musician improvises from a theme. I never wrote a sermon—I studied the texts. I've never written a speech. I can't *read* a speech. It's kind of give-and-take. You have to sense the people you're talking to. You have to respond to what they hear.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have a reader in your mind when you write?

BALDWIN

No, you can't have that.

INTERVIEWER

So it's quite unlike preaching?

BALDWIN

Entirely. The two roles are completely unattached. When you are standing in the pulpit, you must sound as though you know what you're talking about. When you're writing, you're trying to find out something that you don't know. The whole language of writing for me is finding out what you don't want to know, what you don't want to find out. But something forces you to anyway.

INTERVIEWER

Is that one of the reasons you decided to be a writer—to find out about yourself?

BALDWIN

I'm not sure I decided. It was that or nothing, since in my own mind I was the father of my family. That's not quite the way *they*

saw it, but still I was the oldest brother, and I took it very seriously, I had to set an example. I couldn't allow anything to happen to me because what then would happen to them? I could have become a junkie. On the roads I traveled and the streets I ran, anything could have happened to a boy like me—in New York. Sleeping on rooftops and in the subways. Until this day I'm terrified of the public toilet. In any case . . . my father died, and I sat down and figured out what I had to do.

INTERVIEWER

When did you find time to write?

BALDWIN

I was very young then. I could write *and* hold a few jobs. I was for a time a waiter . . . like George Orwell in *Down and Out in Paris and London*. I couldn't do it now. I worked on the Lower East Side and in what we now call SoHo.

INTERVIEWER

Was there anyone to guide you?

BALDWIN

I remember standing on a street corner with the black painter Beauford Delaney down in the Village, waiting for the light to change, and he pointed down and said, "Look." I looked and all I saw was water. And he said, "Look again," which I did, and I saw oil on the water and the city reflected in the puddle. It was a great revelation to me. I can't explain it. He taught me how to see, and how to trust what I saw. Painters have often taught writers how to see. And once you've had that experience, you see differently.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think painters would help a fledgling writer more than another writer might? Did you read a great deal?

BALDWIN

I read everything. I read my way out of the two libraries in Harlem by the time I was thirteen. One does learn a great deal about writing this way. First of all, you learn how little you know. It is true that the more one learns the less one knows. I'm still learning how to write. I don't know what technique is. All I know is that you have to make the reader *see it*. This I learned from Dostoyevsky, from Balzac. I'm sure that my life in France would have been very different had I not met Balzac. Even though I hadn't experienced it yet, I understood something about the concierge, all the French institutions and personalities. The way that country and its society works. How to find my way around in it, not get lost in it, and not feel rejected by it. The French gave me what I could not get in America, which was a sense of "If I can do it, I may do it." I won't generalize, but in the years I grew up in the U.S., I could not do that. I'd already been defined.

INTERVIEWER

Did what you wanted to write about come easily to you from the start?

BALDWIN

I had to be released from a terrible shyness—an illusion that I could hide anything from anybody.

INTERVIEWER

I would think that anyone who could time after time, and without notes, address a congregation would never be shy again.

BALDWIN

I was scared then and I'm scared now. Communication is a two-way street, really, it's a matter of listening to one another. During the civil-rights movement I was in the back of a church in Tallahassee and the pastor, who recognized me, called my name and asked me to say a few words. I was thirty-four and had left the

pulpit seventeen years before. The moment in which I had to stand up and walk down the aisle and stand in that pulpit was the strangest moment in my life up to that time. I managed to get through it and when I walked down from the pulpit and back up the aisle, a little old black lady in the congregation said to a friend of hers, "He's little, but he's loud!"

INTERVIEWER

What was the process whereby you were able to write?

BALDWIN

I had to go through a time of isolation in order to come to terms with who and what I was, as distinguished from all the things I'd been told I was. Right around 1950 I remember feeling that I'd come through *something*, shed a dying skin and was naked again. I wasn't, perhaps, but I certainly felt more at ease with myself. And then I was able to write. Throughout 1948 and 1949 I just tore up paper.

INTERVIEWER

Those years were difficult, and yet you received four writing grants between 1945 and 1956. How much encouragement did they afford you?

BALDWIN

Well, the first one was the most important in terms of morale—the Saxton Fellowship in 1945. I was twenty-one. I was launched into the publishing world, so to speak. And there was the novel, which became *Go Tell It on the Mountain* several years later.

INTERVIEWER

The Saxton was intended to help you finish the novel you were working on?

Historical Background & Necessity for
Civil Rights Movement / Slave & indentured
whites, [illegible] slavery preceded Black
slavery: Black slavery proved to be most profitable.
The small farmer, cotton, tobacco, in the Carolinas
Georgia — could not compete with the planters.
White laborers were ranked beneath Slaves —
due to a completely hypothetical autonomy.
[This is the origin of the psychosis of the poor
whites, one of the antecedents — for example
of Bull Connor —

From 1895, Atlanta Exposition [B.T.
Washington] — the doctrine of Separate But
Equal — | Jim Crow / and Slave Insurrection
| W.W. White : W.E.B. Du Bois

Notes for James Baldwin's lecture "A World I Never Made," delivered in 1984.

BALDWIN

It helped me finish the novel, it kept me *alive*. The novel didn't work, but I started doing book reviews for the *New Leader* at ten and twenty dollars a shot. I had to read everything and had to write all the time, and that's a great apprenticeship. The people I worked with were left-of-center Trotskyites, socialist Trotskyites. I was a young socialist. That was a very nice atmosphere for me; in a sense it saved me from despair. But most of the books I reviewed were Be Kind to Niggers, Be Kind to Jews, while America was going through one of its liberal convulsions. People suddenly discovered they had a Jewish problem, with books like *Gentleman's Agreement*, *Earth and High Heaven*, or they discovered they had niggers, with books like *Kingsblood Royal* and *Quality*.

Thousands of such tracts were published during those years and it seems to me I had to read every single one of them; the color of my skin made me an expert. And so, when I got to Paris, I had to discharge all that, which was really the reason for my essay, "Everybody's Protest Novel." I was convinced then—and I still am—that those sort of books do nothing but bolster up an image. All of this had quite a bit to do with the direction I took as a writer, because it seemed to me that if I took the role of a victim then I was simply reassuring the defenders of the status quo; as long as I was a victim they could pity me and add a few more pennies to my home-relief check. Nothing would change in that way, I felt, and that essay was a beginning of my finding a new vocabulary and another point of view.

INTERVIEWER

If you felt that it was a white man's world, what made you think that there was any point in writing? And why is writing a white man's world?

BALDWIN

Because they own the business. Well, in retrospect, what it came down to was that I would not allow myself to be defined by

other people, white or black. It was beneath me to blame anybody for what happened to me. What happened to me was *my* responsibility. I didn't want any pity. "Leave me alone, I'll figure it out." I was very wounded and I was very dangerous because you become what you hate. It's what happened to my father and I didn't want it to happen to me. His hatred was suppressed and turned against himself. He couldn't let it out—he could only let it out in the house with rage, and I found it happening to myself as well. And after my best friend jumped off the bridge, I knew that I was next. So—Paris. With forty dollars and a one-way ticket.

INTERVIEWER

Once in Paris, you spent a lot of time upstairs at the Café de Flore. Is that where *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Giovanni's Room* were written?

BALDWIN

A lot of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* had to be written there, between there and the Hotel Verneuil, where I stayed for a lot of the time I was in Paris. After ten years of carrying that book around, I finally finished it in Switzerland in three months. I remember playing Bessie Smith all the time while I was in the mountains, and playing her till I fell asleep. The book was very hard to write because I was too young when I started, seventeen; it was really about me and my father. There were things I couldn't deal with technically at first. Most of all, I couldn't deal with *me*. This is where reading Henry James helped me, with his whole idea about the center of consciousness and using a single intelligence to tell the story. He gave me the idea to make the novel happen on John's birthday.

INTERVIEWER

Do you agree with Alberto Moravia, who said that one ought only to write in the first person, because the third projects a bourgeois point of view?

BALDWIN

I don't know about that. The first person is the most terrifying view of all. I tend to be in accord with James, who hated the first-person perspective, which the reader has no reason to trust—why should you need this *I*? How is this person real by dint of that bar blaring across the page?

INTERVIEWER

When did you first conceive of leaving black characters out of *Giovanni's Room*?

BALDWIN

I suppose the only honest answer to that is that *Giovanni's Room* came out of something I had to face. I don't quite know when it came, though it broke off from what later turned into *Another Country*. Giovanni was at a party and on his way to the guillotine. He took all the light in the book, and then the book stopped and nobody in the book would speak to me. I thought I would seal Giovanni off into a short story, but it turned into *Giovanni's Room*. I certainly could not possibly have—not at that point in my life—handled the other great weight, the "Negro problem." The sexual-moral light was a hard thing to deal with. I could not handle both propositions in the same book. There was no room for it. I might do it differently today, but then, to have a black presence in the book at that moment, and in Paris, would have been quite beyond my powers.

INTERVIEWER

Was it David who first appeared in *Giovanni's Room*?

BALDWIN

It was, yes, but that novel has a curious history. I wrote four novels before I published one, before I'd even left America. I don't know what happened to them. When I came over they were in a duffel bag, which I lost, and that's that. But the genesis of

Giovanni's Room is in America. David is the first person I thought of, but that's due to a peculiar case involving a boy named Lucien Carr, who murdered somebody. He was known to some of the people I knew—I didn't know him personally. But I was fascinated by the trial, which also involved a wealthy playboy and his wife in high-level society. From this fascination came the first version of *Giovanni's Room*, something called *Ignorant Armies*, a novel I never finished. The bones of *Giovanni's Room* and *Another Country* were in that.

INTERVIEWER

Wasn't it after your first two novels, which were in many ways extremely personal, that you introduced more of the political and sociological counterpoint (evident in your essays) into *Another Country*?

BALDWIN

From my point of view it does not quite work that way, making attempts to be merely personal or to bring in a larger scope. No one knows how he writes his book. *Go Tell It on the Mountain* was about my relationship to my father and to the church, which is the same thing really. It was an attempt to exorcise something, to find out what happened to my father, what happened to all of us, what had happened to me—to John—and how we were to move from one place to another. Of course it seems rather personal, but the book is not *about* John, the book is not *about* me.

INTERVIEWER

"One writes out of one thing only—one's own experience," you've said.

BALDWIN

Yes, and yet one's own experience is not necessarily one's twenty-four-hour reality. Everything happens to you, which is what Whitman means when he says in his poem "Heroes," "I am

the man, I suffered, I was there." It depends on what you mean by experience.

INTERVIEWER

Nevertheless, it seems that your struggles with social injustices were kept apart as the material for your essays, while your fiction dealt predominantly with your own past.

BALDWIN

If I wanted to survive as a writer I would eventually have had to write a book like *Another Country*. On the other hand, short stories like "Sonny's Blues" or "Previous Condition," which appeared before *Another Country*, were highly personal and yet went further than the immediate dilemmas of the young writer struggling in the Village or of Sonny in "Sonny's Blues."

INTERVIEWER

Ralph Ellison said in his *Paris Review* interview that he writes "*primarily* not concerned with injustice, but with art," whereas one might almost find you a sort of spokesman for blacks.

BALDWIN

I don't consider myself a spokesman—I have always thought it would be rather presumptuous.

INTERVIEWER

Although you are aware of the fact that many people read and are moved by your essays, as well as your speeches and lectures . . .

BALDWIN

Let's go back now. Those essays really date from the time I was in my early twenties, and were written for the *New Leader* and *The Nation* all those years ago. They were an attempt to get me beyond the chaos I mentioned earlier. I lived in Paris long enough to finish my first novel, which was very important for me (or I

wouldn't be here at all). What held me in Paris later—from '55 to '57—was the fact that I was going through a kind of breakup in my private life, yet I knew I had to go back to America. And I went. Once I was in the civil-rights milieu, once I'd met Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X and Medgar Evers and all those other people, the role I had to play was confirmed. I didn't think of myself as a public speaker, or as a spokesman, but I knew I could get a story past the editor's desk. And once you realize that you can do something, it would be difficult to live with yourself if you didn't do it.

INTERVIEWER

When you were much younger, what distinctions did you make between art and protest?

BALDWIN

I thought of them both as literature and still do. I don't see the contradiction which some people point out as inherent, though I can sense what Ralph, among others, means by that. The only way I could play it, once indeed I found myself on that road, was to assume that if I had the talent, and my talent was important, it would simply have to survive whatever life brought. I couldn't sit somewhere honing my talent to a fine edge after I had been to all those places in the South and seen those boys and girls, men and women, black and white, longing for change. It was impossible for me to drop them a visit and then leave.

INTERVIEWER

You were in utter despair after the death of Martin Luther King Jr. Did you find it difficult to write then, or do you work better out of anguish?

BALDWIN

No one works better out of anguish at all; that's an incredible literary conceit. I didn't think I could write at all. I didn't see any

point to it. I was hurt . . . I can't even talk about it. I didn't know how to continue, didn't see my way clear.

INTERVIEWER

How did you eventually find your way out of the pain?

BALDWIN

I think really through my brother, David. I was working on *No Name in the Street* but hadn't touched it after the assassination. He called me and I told him, "I just can't finish this book. I don't know what to do with it." And he came across the ocean. I was here in St. Paul, living in Le Hameau across the road. I was sick, went to four or five hospitals. I was very lucky, because I could've gone mad. You see, I had left America after the funeral and gone to Istanbul. Worked—or tried to—there. Got sick in Istanbul, went to London, got sick in London, and I wanted to die. Collapsed. I was shipped down here, out of the American Hospital in Paris. I'd been in the region in 1949, but I had never dreamt of coming to live in St. Paul. Once I was here, I stayed. I didn't really have anyplace else to go. Well, I could have gone back to America, and I did, to do a *Rap on Race*, which helped me significantly. But principally, David came and he read *No Name in the Street* and sent it on to New York.

INTERVIEWER

In an *Esquire* essay, you once wrote that you've been "schooled in adversity and skilled in compromise." Does that perhaps reflect trying to get your work published?

BALDWIN

No, though it has been such a stormy career. It's a terrible way to make a living. I find writing gets harder as time goes on. I'm speaking of the working process, which demands a certain amount of energy and courage (though I dislike using the word), and a certain amount of recklessness. I don't know, I doubt whether any-

one—myself at least—knows how to *talk* about writing. Perhaps I'm afraid to.

INTERVIEWER

Do you see it as conception, gestation, accouchement?

BALDWIN

I don't think about it that way, no. The whole process of conception—one talks about it after the fact, if one discusses it at all. But you really don't understand it. After the fact I may discuss a work, yet I'm uncertain that what I do say about it afterwards can be taken as gospel.

INTERVIEWER

One critic suggested that James Baldwin's best work was yet to come and would be an autobiographical novel, which *Just Above My Head* was in part.

BALDWIN

He may have a point there. I hope, certainly, that my best work is before me. It depends on what one means by "autobiographical." I certainly have not told my story yet, I know that, though I've revealed fragments.

INTERVIEWER

Are you, or do you remain, very close to your characters?

BALDWIN

I don't know if I feel close to them, now. After a time you find, however, that your characters are lost to you, making it quite impossible for you to judge them. When you've finished a novel it means, "The train stops here, you have to get off here." You never get the book you wanted, you settle for the book you get. I've always felt that when a book ended there was something I didn't see, and usually when I remark the discovery it's too late to do anything about it.

INTERVIEWER

This occurs once it has already been published?

BALDWIN

No, no, it happens when you are right here at the table. The publication date is something else again. It's out of your hands, then. What happens here is that you realize if you try to redo something, you may wreck everything else. But, if a book has brought you from one place to another, so that you see something you didn't see before, you've arrived at another point. This then is one's consolation, and you know that you must now proceed elsewhere.

INTERVIEWER

Are there a lot of your characters walking around here?

BALDWIN

No, they begin walking around before you put them on paper. And after you put them on paper you don't see them anymore. They may be wandering around here. *You* might see them.

INTERVIEWER

So once you've captured a character in your work, it is no longer a phantom?

BALDWIN

Actually, what has happened is that the character has tyrannized you for however long it took, and when the novel is over he or she says Ciao, thanks a lot. *Pointe finale*. Before *Another Country*, Ida talked to me for years. We get on very well now.

INTERVIEWER

How soon after you conceived of Rufus, in *Another Country*, did you know he was going to commit suicide, or was he modeled after your adolescent friend who jumped off the George Washington Bridge in New York?

BALDWIN

Oh, he was taken directly from that friend, yet, oddly enough, he was the last person to arrive in the novel. I'd written the book more than once and I'd felt I'd never get it right. Ida was important, but I wasn't sure I could cope with her. Ida and Vivaldo were the first people I was dealing with, but I couldn't find a way to make you understand Ida. Then Rufus came along and the entire action made sense.

INTERVIEWER

And Richard, the rather idealistic writer?

BALDWIN

This is all far beyond my memory. Well, there was Vivaldo, whose name I didn't know for some time. He was called Daniel at first, and at one point was black. Ida, on the other hand, was always Ida. Richard and Cass were part of the decor. From my point of view, there was nothing in the least idealistic about Richard. He was modeled on several liberal American careerists from then and now. In any case, in order to make the reader see Ida, I had to give her a brother, who turned out to be Rufus. It's fascinating from the point of view of styles, and of accomodations to human pain, that it took me so long—from 1946 to 1960—to accept the fact that my friend was dead. From the moment Rufus was gone, I knew that if you knew what had happened to Ida, you'd equally understand Rufus, and you'd see why Ida throughout the book was so difficult with Vivaldo and everybody else—with herself above all, because she wasn't going to be able to live with the pain. The principal action in the book, for me, is the journey of Ida and Vivaldo toward some kind of coherence.

INTERVIEWER

Is there a big shifting of gears between writing fiction and writing nonfiction?

BALDWIN

Shifting gears, you ask. Every form is difficult, no one is easier than another. They all kick your ass. None of it comes easy.

INTERVIEWER

How many pages do you write in a day?

BALDWIN

I write at night. After the day is over, and supper is over, I begin, and work until about three or four A.M.

INTERVIEWER

That's quite rare, isn't it, because most people write when they're fresh, in the morning.

BALDWIN

I start working when everyone has gone to bed. I've had to do that ever since I was young—I had to wait until the kids were asleep. And then I was working at various jobs during the day. I've always had to write at night. But now that I'm established I do it because I'm alone at night.

INTERVIEWER

When do you know something is the way you want it?

BALDWIN

I do a lot of rewriting. It's very painful. You know it's finished when you can't do anything more to it, though it's never exactly the way you want it. In fact, the hardest thing I ever wrote was that suicide scene in *Another Country*. I always knew that Rufus had to commit suicide very early on, because that was the key to the book. But I kept putting it off. It had to do, of course, with reliving the suicide of my friend who jumped off the bridge. Also, it was very dangerous to do from the technical point of view because this central character dies in the first hundred

pages, with a couple of hundred pages to go. The point up to the suicide is like a long prologue, and it is the only light on Ida. You never go into her mind, but I had to make you see what is happening to this girl by making you feel the blow of her brother's death—the key to her relationship with everybody. She tries to make everybody pay for it. You cannot do that, life is not like that, you only destroy yourself.

INTERVIEWER

Is that the way a book starts for you, though? Something like that?

BALDWIN

Probably that way for everybody—something that irritates you and won't let you go. That's the anguish of it. Do this book, or die. You have to go through that.

INTERVIEWER

Does it purge you in any way?

BALDWIN

I'm not so sure about *that*. For me it's like a journey, and the only thing you know is that if when the book is over, you are prepared to continue—you haven't cheated.

INTERVIEWER

What would cheating be?

BALDWIN

Avoiding. Lying.

INTERVIEWER

So there is a compulsion to get it out?

BALDWIN

Oh yes, to get it out and get it right. The word I'm using is compulsion. And it is true of the essay as well.

INTERVIEWER

But the essay is a little bit simpler, isn't it, because you're angry about something that you can put your finger on . . .

BALDWIN

An essay is not simpler, though it may seem so. An essay is essentially an argument. The writer's point of view in an essay is always absolutely clear. The writer is trying to make the readers see something, trying to convince them of something. In a novel or a play you're trying to *show* them something. The risks, in any case, are exactly the same.

INTERVIEWER

What are your first drafts like?

BALDWIN

They are overwritten. Most of the rewrite, then, is cleaning. Don't describe it, show it. That's what I try to teach all young writers—take it out! Don't describe a purple sunset, make me see that it is purple.

INTERVIEWER

As your experience about writing accrues, what would you say increases with knowledge?

BALDWIN

You learn how little you know. It becomes much more difficult because the hardest thing in the world is simplicity. And the most fearful thing too. It becomes more difficult because you have to strip yourself of all your disguises, some of which you didn't know you had. You want to write a sentence as clean as a bone. That is the goal.

INTERVIEWER

Do you mind what people say about your writing?

BALDWIN

Ultimately not. I minded it when I was younger. You care about the people you care about, what they say. You care about the reviews so that somebody will read the book. So, those things are important, but not of ultimate importance.

INTERVIEWER

The attitudes you found in America that made you go to France—are they still with us, are they exactly the same?

BALDWIN

I always knew I would have to come back. If I were twenty-four now, I don't know if and where I would go. I don't know if I would go to France, I might go to Africa. You must remember when I was twenty-four there was really no Africa to go to, except Liberia. I thought of going to Israel, but I never did, and I was right about that. Now, though, a kid now . . . well, you see, something has happened which no one has really noticed, but it's very important—Europe is no longer a frame of reference, a standard-bearer, the classic model for literature and for civilization. It's not the measuring stick. There are other standards in the world. It's a fascinating time to be living. There's a whole wide world which isn't now as it was when I was younger. When I was a kid the world was white, for all intents and purposes, and now it is struggling to *remain* white—a very different thing.

INTERVIEWER

It's frequently been noted that you are a master of minor characters. How do you respond to that?

BALDWIN

Well, minor characters are the subtext, illustrations of

whatever it is you're trying to convey. I was always struck by the minor characters in Dostoyevsky and Dickens. The minor characters have a certain freedom that the major ones don't. They can make comments, they can move, yet they haven't got the same weight, or intensity.

INTERVIEWER

You mean to say their actions are less accountable?

BALDWIN

Oh no, if you fuck up a minor character you fuck up a major one. They are more a part of the decor—a kind of Greek chorus. They carry the tension in a much more explicit way than the majors.

INTERVIEWER

Excuse me for asking, but might your mother be standing behind you while you're writing; is she perhaps behind many of your characters?

BALDWIN

I wouldn't think so, but to tell you the truth, I wouldn't know. I've got five sisters. And in a funny way, there have been many women in my life, so it wouldn't be my mother.

INTERVIEWER

Have you been through analysis?

BALDWIN

God no, never got "adjusted."

INTERVIEWER

Both you and William Styron (intentionally or not) write about victims and victimization. Styron has said he has never felt like a victim. Have you?

BALDWIN

Well, I refuse to. Perhaps the turning point in one's life is realizing that to be treated like a victim is not necessarily to become one.

INTERVIEWER

Do you believe in a community of writers? Is that of any interest to you?

BALDWIN

No. I've never *seen* one in any case . . . and I don't think any writer ever has.

INTERVIEWER

But weren't William Styron and Richard Wright, say, important to you in formulating your viewpoints?

BALDWIN

Richard was very important to me. He was much older. He was very nice to me. He helped me with my first novel, really. That was 1944–45. I just knocked on his door out in Brooklyn! I introduced myself, and of course he'd no idea who I was. There were no essays then, no fiction—this was 1944. I adored him. I loved him. We were very unlike each other, as writers, probably as people too. And as I grew older, that became more and more apparent. And after that was Paris.

INTERVIEWER

And Styron?

BALDWIN

Well, as I was saying, Bill is a friend of mine who happens to be a writer.

INTERVIEWER

Did you take a position on his book about Nat Turner?

BALDWIN

I did. My position, though, is that I will not tell another writer what to write. If you don't like their alternative, write yours. I admired him for confronting it, and the result. It brought in the whole enormity of the issue of history versus fiction, fiction versus history, and which is which . . . He writes out of reasons similar to mine—about something that hurt him and frightened him. When I was working on *Another Country* and Bill was working on *Nat Turner*, I stayed in his guest house for five months. His hours and mine are very different. I was going to bed at dawn, Bill was just coming up to his study to go to work; his hours going on as mine went off. We saw each other at suppertime.

INTERVIEWER

What kind of conversations would you hold?

BALDWIN

We never spoke about our work, or very rarely. It was a wonderful time in my life, but not at all literary. We sang songs, drank a little too much, and on occasion chatted with the people who were dropping in to see us. We had a certain common inheritance in terms of the music.

INTERVIEWER

What sort of music are you hearing while in the immediate process of writing? Do you experience anything physical or emotional?

BALDWIN

No. I'm very cold—*cold* probably isn't the word I want, *controlled*. Writing for me must be a very controlled exercise, formed by passions and hopes. That is the only reason you get through it,

otherwise you may as well do something else. The act of writing itself is cold.

INTERVIEWER

I'm going to presage my own question. Most of the novelists I've spoken to claim they read exceedingly fewer contemporary novels, but find themselves drawn to plays, history, memoirs, biographies, and poetry. I believe this is true for you as well.

BALDWIN

In my case it is due to the fact that I'm always doing some kind of research. And yes, I read many plays and a lot of poetry as a kind of apprenticeship. You are fascinated, I am fascinated by a certain *optic*—a process of seeing things. Reading Emily Dickinson, for example, and others who are quite far removed from one's ostensible daily concerns, or obligations. They are freer, for that moment, than you are partly because they are dead. They may also be a source of strength. Contemporary novels are part of a universe in which you have a certain role and a certain responsibility. And, of course, an unavoidable curiosity.

INTERVIEWER

You read contemporary novels out of a sense of responsibility?

BALDWIN

In a way. At any rate, few novelists interest me—which has nothing to do with their values. I find most of them too remote for me. The world of John Updike, for instance, does not impinge on my world. On the other hand, the world of John Cheever *did* engage me. Obviously, I'm not making a very significant judgment about Updike. It's entirely subjective, what I'm saying. In the main, the concerns of most white Americans (to use *that* phrase) are boring, and terribly, terribly self-centered. In the worst sense. Everything is contingent, of course, on what you take yourself to be.

INTERVIEWER

Are you suggesting they are less concerned, somehow, with social injustice?

BALDWIN

No, no, you see, I don't want to make that kind of dichotomy. I'm not asking that anybody get on picket lines or take positions. That is entirely a private matter. What I'm saying has to do with the concept of the self, and the nature of self-indulgence that seems to me to be terribly strangling, and so limited it finally becomes sterile.

INTERVIEWER

And yet in your own writing you deal with personal experiences quite often.

BALDWIN

Yes, but—and here I'm in trouble with the language again—it depends upon how you conceive of yourself. It revolves, surely, around the multiplicity of your connections. Obviously you can only deal with your life and work from the vantage point of your self. There isn't any other vantage point, there is no other point of view. I can't say about any of my characters that they are utter fictions. I do have a sense of what nagged my attention where and when; even in the dimmest sense I know how a character impinged on me in reality, in what we call reality, the daily world. And then, of course, imagination has something to do with it. But it has got to be triggered by something, it cannot be triggered by itself.

INTERVIEWER

What is it about Emily Dickinson that moves you?

BALDWIN

Her use of language, certainly. Her solitude, as well, and the style of that solitude. There is something very moving and in the

best sense funny. She isn't solemn. If you really want to know something about solitude, become famous. That is the turn of the screw. That solitude is practically insurmountable. Years ago I thought to be famous would be a kind of ten-day wonder, and then I could go right back to life as usual. But people treat you differently before you realize it. You see it in the wonder and the worry of your intimates. On the other side of that is a great responsibility.

INTERVIEWER

Is one's past cluttered, as a celebrated writer?

BALDWIN

There are many witnesses to my past, people who've disappeared, people who are dead, whom I loved. But I don't feel there are any ghosts, any regrets. I don't feel that kind of melancholy at all. No nostalgia. Everything is always around and before you. Novels that haven't worked, loves, struggles. And yet it all gives you something of immeasurable power.

INTERVIEWER

This brings us to your concern with reality as being history, with seeing the present shaded by everything that occurred in a person's past. James Baldwin has always been bound by his past, and his future. At forty, you said you felt much older than that.

BALDWIN

That is one of those things a person says at forty, at forty especially. It was a great shock to me, forty. And I did feel much older than that. Responding to history, I think a person is in sight of his or her death around the age of forty. You see it coming. You are not in sight of your death at thirty, less so at twenty-five. You are struck by the fact of your mortality, that it is unlikely you'll live another forty years. So time alters you, actually becoming either an enemy or a friend.

INTERVIEWER

You seem very troubled—but not by death?

BALDWIN

Yes, true, but not at all by death. I'm troubled over getting my work done and over all the things I've not learned. It's useless to be troubled by death, because then, of course, you can't live at all.

INTERVIEWER

"Essentially, America has not changed that much," you told *The New York Times* when *Just Above My Head* was being published. Have *you*?

BALDWIN

In some ways I've changed precisely because America has not. I've been forced to change in some ways. I had a certain expectation for my country years ago, which I know I don't have now.

INTERVIEWER

Yes, before 1968, you said, "I love America."

BALDWIN

Long before then. I still do, though that feeling has changed in the face of it. I think that it is a spiritual disaster to pretend that one *doesn't* love one's country. You may disapprove of it, you may be forced to leave it, you may live your whole life as a battle, yet I don't think you can escape it. There isn't any other place to go—you don't pull up your roots and put them down someplace else. At least not in a single lifetime, or, if you do, you'll be aware of precisely what it means, knowing that your real roots are always elsewhere. If you try to pretend you don't see the immediate reality that formed you I think you'll go blind.

INTERVIEWER

As a writer, are there any particular battles you feel you've won?

BALDWIN

The battle of becoming a writer at all! "I'm going to be a great writer when I grow up," I used to tell my mother when I was a little boy. And I'm still going to be a great writer when I grow up.

INTERVIEWER

What do you tell younger writers who come to you with the usual desperate question: How do I become a writer?

BALDWIN

Write. Find a way to keep alive and write. There is nothing else to say. If you are going to be a writer there is nothing I can say to stop you; if you're not going to be a writer nothing I can say will help you. What you really need at the beginning is somebody to let you know that the effort is real.

INTERVIEWER

Can you discern talent in someone?

BALDWIN

Talent is insignificant. I know a lot of talented ruins. Beyond talent lie all the usual words: discipline, love, luck, but, most of all, endurance.

INTERVIEWER

Would you suggest that a young writer from a minority consecrate himself to that minority, or is his first obligation his own self-realization as a writer?

BALDWIN

Your self and your people are indistinguishable from each other, really, in spite of the quarrels you may have, and your people are all people.

INTERVIEWER

Wasn't *Giovanni's Room* partially an attempt to break

down these divisions, pointing out that David could be white, black, or yellow?

BALDWIN

Certainly, for in terms of what happened to him, none of that mattered at all.

INTERVIEWER

Yet, later on, notably in the case of Rufus and *Another Country*, one's race becomes essential to your story.

BALDWIN

Important in that particular novel, yes, but *Another Country* is called that because it is trying to convey the reality of that country. The story would be different if it were in France, or even in England.

INTERVIEWER

What is your present relationship with people like Ralph Ellison, Imamu Baraka [LeRoi Jones], or Eldridge Cleaver?

BALDWIN

I never had a relationship with Cleaver. I was in difficulties because of Cleaver, which I didn't want to talk about then, and don't wish to discuss now. My real difficulty with Cleaver, sadly, was visited on me by the kids who were following him, while he was calling me a faggot and the rest of it. I would come to a town to speak, Cleveland, let's say, and he would've been standing on the very same stage a couple of days earlier. I had to try to undo the damage I considered he was doing. I was handicapped with *Soul on Ice*, because what I might have said in those years about Eldridge would have been taken as an answer to his attack on me. So I never answered it, and I'm not answering it now. Cleaver reminded me of an old Baptist minister I used to work with when I was in the pulpit. I never trusted him at all. As for

Baraka, he and I have had a stormy time too, but we're very good friends now.

INTERVIEWER

Do you read each other's work?

BALDWIN

Yes—at least I read his. And as for Ralph, I haven't seen him in many years.

INTERVIEWER

You haven't corresponded at all?

BALDWIN

No. I gather Ralph did not like what he considered I was doing to myself on the civil-rights road. And so, we haven't seen each other.

INTERVIEWER

If you were both to meet over lunch tomorrow, what might you talk about?

BALDWIN

I'd love to meet him for lunch tomorrow, and share a bottle of bourbon, and probably talk about the last twenty years we haven't seen each other. I have nothing against him in any case. And I love his great book. We disagreed about tactics, I suppose. But I had to go through the civil-rights movement and I don't regret it at all. And those people trusted me. There was something very beautiful about that period, something life-giving for me to be there, to march, to be a part of a sit-in, to see it through my own eyes.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think that now blacks and whites can write about each other, honestly and convincingly?

BALDWIN

Yes, though I have no overwhelming evidence in hand. But I think of the impact of spokespersons like Toni Morrison and other younger writers. I believe what one has to do as a black American is to take white history, or history as written by whites, and claim it all—including Shakespeare.

INTERVIEWER

"What other people write about me is irrelevant," you once wrote in *Essence*. Was that meant to go unqualified; do you not relate to criticism in any way?

BALDWIN

It is never entirely true that you don't give a shit what others say about you, but you must throw it out of your mind. I went through a very trying period, after all, where on one side of town I was an Uncle Tom and on the other the Angry Young Man. It could make one's head spin, the number of labels that have been attached to me. And it was inevitably painful, and surprising, and indeed, bewildering. I *do* care what certain people think about me.

INTERVIEWER

But not literary critics?

BALDWIN

Literary critics cannot be one's concern. Ideally, however, what a critic can do is indicate where you've been excessive or unclear. As far as any sort of public opinion is a question, I would say that one cannot possibly react to any of it. Things may be said which hurt, and you don't like it, but what are you to do? Write a White Paper, or a Black Paper, defending yourself? You can't do that.

INTERVIEWER

You have often left your home in St. Paul, returning to America and going on the road. Do you feel comfortable as a speaker?

BALDWIN

I have never felt comfortable as a speaker, no.

INTERVIEWER

You feel more at ease behind the typewriter?

BALDWIN

Well, certainly, although I used to be a preacher, which helps on the road.

INTERVIEWER

Can you talk a little more about your relationship to Richard Wright, under whose aegis you received your first writing grant?

BALDWIN

As I said before, I just knocked on his door in New York. I was nineteen. And he was very nice. The only trouble was I didn't drink in those years. He drank bourbon. Now, I'm going to save you the trouble of asking me about writers and alcohol: I don't know any writers who don't drink. Everybody I've been close to drinks. But you don't drink while you're working. It's funny, because it is all a reflex, like lighting a cigarette. Your drink is made and then you go off to another place. When you finally get back to the drink it's mainly water. And the cigarette has gone out. Talking about Richard and our early hostile period, which I thought was ridiculously blown out of proportion, I should say that when I thought I was dealing with Richard, I was in fact thinking of Harriet Beecher Stowe and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Richard's *Native Son* was the only contemporary representation there was of a black person in America. One of the reasons I wrote what I did about the book is a technical objection, which I uphold today. I could not accept the performance of the lawyer at the end of the book. I was very explicit about that. I think it was simply absurd to talk about this monster created by the American public, and then expect the public to save it! Altogether, I found it too simpleminded. Insofar as

the American public creates a monster, they are not about to recognize it. You create a monster and destroy it. It is part of the American way of life, if you like. I reserve, in any case, the utmost respect for Richard, especially in light of his posthumous work, which I believe is his greatest novel, *Lawd Today*. Look it up.

INTERVIEWER

Is there any resistance today to black writers in publishing houses?

BALDWIN

There is an enormous resistance, though it differs from Wright's time. When I was young, the joke was "How many niggers you got at your plantation?" Or, more snidely, "How many niggers you got at your publishing house?" And some had one, most had none. That's not true now.

INTERVIEWER

How does it strike you that in many circles James Baldwin is known as a prophetic writer?

BALDWIN

I don't try to be prophetic, as I don't sit down to write literature. It is simply this: a writer has to take all the risks of putting down what he sees. No one can tell him about that. No one can control that reality. It reminds me of something Pablo Picasso was supposed to have said to Gertrude Stein while he was painting her portrait. Gertrude said, "I don't look like that." And Picasso replied, "You will." And he was right.

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