
Outdated Gomorrahs

James Baldwin: *Just Above My Head*; Dial Press; New York.

by Allan C. Brownfeld

In an essay written in *Partisan Review* in 1949, when he was twenty-four, Baldwin declared his determination to reject the path of protest which a black writer in America was expected to pursue. Rather than depict the black man as "merely a member of a Society or Group" who has been condemned by whites to poverty and ignorance, Baldwin expressed his desire to understand black men as "something resolutely undefinable, unpredictable." He decided, in effect, to write about men, not about racial symbols. He went so far as to criticize such novels as Richard Wright's *Native Son* which, he argued, was crippled by hatred and fear. Its failure, he wrote, came from "its rejection of life, the human being . . . in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended." All of which indicates that James Baldwin has, for many years, been struggling to find a proper literary identity.

Slowly, however, James Baldwin changed his view. He was, it is reported, stricken by Eldridge Cleaver's criticism in *Soul on Ice*, when Cleaver denounced the characters in Baldwin's novels for engaging in various sexual activities "in a vacuum," without a proper awareness of race, of politics, of economics. Other black nationalists and black radicals joined in the attack.

Apparently, James Baldwin could not remain indifferent to such intellectually refined charges, and he reacted. In *No Name in the Streets*, written in 1972, he rejected the creed of nonviolence and wrote favorably of the guerrilla tactics

Mr. Brownfeld, a Washington, D.C. journalist, is on the staff of the Lincoln Review.

of the Black Panthers. He came to view Cleaver's attack as a "necessary warning." Finally, in *Just Above My Head*, Baldwin portrays the black communal life and culture which he had found absent from the "protest" novels of the past. It is clearly a "black" book, in which whites exist only as remote demons; it is a love song—as Hall Montana, its narrator, says to his brother,

"He suddenly seems a much more universal writer . . . There is incest, prostitution, rape, endless horror and an equal dose of fervent passion."

—Playboy

"It must be said that Mr. Baldwin writes about homosexual love with something like genius."

—John Leonard
New York Times

Arthur. Dead in his 39th year, Arthur was a gospel singer and a homosexual.

The novel pictures the lives of the Montana and Miller families, from Harlem of the 1940's and 1950's to the present time. Julia, a precocious nine-year-old preacher, is exploited by her greedy, weak father and feared by her weak, timid brother. Jimmy, her resentful seven-year-old brother, is largely ignored. Julia and Hall will eventually fall in love, as will Jimmy and Arthur. The events are less a story than a recitation of happenings: the Trumpets of Zion quartet must tour the South; Julia must leave the ministry and endure abuse from her father; the Korean War, the Black Muslims and the civil-rights movement appear. Throughout, Hall insists that Arthur remains "the apple of my eye. I worried about cops and billy clubs and pushers, jails, rooftops, basements, the river, the morgue: I moved like an advance scout in wicked and hostile territory, my whole life was a strategy and a prayer; I knew I could not live without my brother."

Many of James Baldwin's critics have charged that he has squandered his talent on his obsession with sex. In *Just*

Above My Head, there are many pages routinely devoted to explicit accounts of both homosexual and heterosexual encounters. This time, however, the sexual monotony has an equal partner in Baldwin's humdrum, cliché attacks on whites and America, that citadel of hostile and pale-faced enemies. Mixed in, nevertheless, is the complex feeling which any human being feels for his

native land. "I don't think anybody can really hate his country, I don't think that's possible," Baldwin writes, "but you can certainly despise the road your country travels, and the people they elect to lead them on that road. If I had been a white man, I would have been ashamed, really, to send a black man anywhere to fight for me. But shame is individual, not collective, and collectively speaking, white people have no shame. They have the shortest memories of any people in the world—which explains, no doubt, why they have no shame." And, at some points, he seems to understand that racism—fear of those who are different—is not simply an affliction of whites, but a dilemma facing all men: "They believed that they hated white people, and that's no wonder. They were far from the hard apprehension that they simply could not endure being despised, far from the knowledge that almost everybody is, could not conceive that the world, or at least the world we know, could be so tremendously populated by people who despise each other because each despises himself . . . Thus, they imagined that they hated white people be-

cause they were not black, and could not imagine that they terrified white people because white people are not white . . .”

Baldwin has been living in self-imposed exile in the south of France for many years. His comparison of Birmingham, Alabama, to Sodom and Gomorrah could hardly come from one who has observed the dramatic changes in race relations in the American South in recent years. Birmingham now has a black mayor. So does Atlanta. George Wallace now says that he was wrong, that segregation should indeed have come to an end. In *Just Above My Head*, Baldwin has one of his characters say, “You better not wait . . . They ain’t going to change their laws for us—it just ain’t in them. They change their laws when their laws make *them* uncomfortable . . .” That this was written by a man fully aware of the 1954 Supreme Court decision outlawing segregation, of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, of school busing and affirmative action, makes Baldwin’s standard bitterness look spurious. It turns into platitude, which a writer of his standing can’t afford without impairing that standing.

There is some glimmer of hope, however, and it is squeezed between the official messages. Arthur is told by his mother, “I’m glad you don’t have to ride in no Jim Crow car, like me and your daddy had to do. But, Jim Crow car or no Jim Crow car, we still had to raise you—it was a good thing they changed the law, but we couldn’t wait for that . . . So you go on down and test them waters . . .”

It is, of course, *always* difficult to have to take responsibility for one’s own future. But once the legal barriers have been removed, once the schools and training programs are open, once strenuous efforts are made to compensate for the discrimination of the past—then to blame white society for *any* failure makes little sense; somehow others must now take responsibility for anything. Resisting or renouncing

these responsibilities seems to be the gist of today’s race relations in America, and it still waits for a great black novelist to render it justice. James Baldwin seems to recognize the tension which an end to legalized racism brings, but he has failed to confront it, preferring to rely upon the symbolism and rhetoric of the past.

That Baldwin is very much an American can hardly be questioned. Beyond the racial consciousness and sexual obsession remains a sense of place and an experience shared. Julia, upon returning from Africa, tells Hall about her new awareness: “You’re blind, that’s the first thing you realize is that you’re blind. Later you begin to see—something. And, then, you begin to see why you couldn’t see. But at first—damn, you know more about the Mississippi cracker, even though you hate him and you know he hates you. And then . . . you see how people try to hold on to what they know, no matter how ugly it is. It’s better than nothing!”

As absurd as it sounds, it would apparently come as a great surprise to Baldwin to learn that tens of thousands of black Americans have moved into

the middle class, that a greater percentage of black Americans are now studying in institutions of higher learning than are white Englishmen, Frenchmen or Germans, that black Americans now hold some of the nation’s highest offices. He would be equally surprised to learn that, according to our latest polling data, the questions which most trouble black Americans are precisely the questions which most trouble white Americans: the quality of education, inflation, crime in the streets. We have made tremendous strides toward creating a free and open society in which an individual’s race will be incidental. Reading Baldwin, however, would leave the reader unaware of any of these simple facts, which renders his message sloppy, to say the least. He no longer seems to be certain where he belongs in today’s black world and this confused book is the evidence. In his 1949 *Partisan Review* essay, Baldwin wrote: “I want to be an honest man and a good writer.” Either he no longer knows exactly how he feels, or he has become so deluded over the years of racial posturing and politics that he seems like an anachronism for the 1980’s. □

Alienation à la Howard Elman

Ernest Hebert: *The Dogs of March*; Viking Press; New York.

by Christina Murphy

A 20th-century American novel can be expected to take a dim view of pastoral themes. The vision of nature as idyllic and natural man as morally triumphant are perspectives lost to the modern age, however strongly they formed the framework of 19th-century American idealism. In a world bounded by technology and pockmarked with complexity, nature seems to the modern

Dr. Murphy is Professor of English at Mississippi Industrial College.

novelist not a sanctuary for idealism but one more value savaged by the misperceptions of our age. Natural man, primitive and instinctive, is not heroic, but merely out of step with the times. However nobly or despicably he fights the economic and societal pressures that threaten his survival, he is an insignificant warrior doomed to either violent destruction or the painful self-awakening of compromise.

Ernest Hebert’s *The Dogs of March*, a first novel, does not deviate from the pattern of modern novels which see in the defeat of primitivism a moral lesson of values lost and dreams exchanged. Were it not for Hebert’s technical skills and the depth of his character portray-