JAMES BALDWIN:
PREACHER VS. WRITER

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Talking at the Gates: A Life of James Baldwin
By James Campbell
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SOL STEIN, WHO WENT TO DEWITT CLINTON HIGH IN THE BRONX with James Baldwin, and edited one of his best books, his first essay collection, *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), told Campbell, "As time went on [Baldwin] allowed the preacher in him to overtake the writer." This is one of the two fundamental conflicts in Baldwin's life. The other one, which Campbell says "dominated" his life to the very end—he died in France in 1987 at the age of 63—was the struggle between his life as a writer and his life as a lover. Campbell explores these two related struggles in his fair-minded, revealing, and evocative biography, which was first published in 1991, and re-issued in 2002. This latest edition has a new introduction which comments on the explosion of interest in Baldwin's life and works that came in the wake of the Black Lives Matter Movement, and Raoul Peck's 2016 documentary on Baldwin, *I Am Not Your Negro*. It also includes a chronological list of Baldwin's books and essays (including op-ed pieces), and a fascinating, previously unpublished 1988 interview with Norman Mailer.

Campbell met Mailer a few times, and reviewed some of his books for the British periodical *Times Literary Supplement*, where he was an editor for decades, but he knew Baldwin much better and saw him many times over a ten-year period, beginning in 1978. He also met and interviewed many of Baldwin's relatives, friends, editors, and rivals, and uses his interviews with

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them to great effect, although he conducted fewer than David Leeming, who knew Baldwin for 25 years, and was his assistant for four. Leeming wrote Baldwin's authorized biography in 1994, and discusses fully his romantic life, something about which Campbell has much less to say.

Where Campbell's biography is most accomplished is in its careful expositions and evaluations of Baldwin's work, and how it grew out of his life on the streets of Harlem and his stint as an electrifying teenage preacher at the Fireside Pentecostal Assembly. He is insightful on Baldwin's work in the *Nation, New Leader, Commentary*, and *Partisan Review* where he earned his chops with a series of elegant review-essays. Baldwin never attended college, but he was as well-read in classic literature as anyone of his generation. "Baldwin had read *everything*," according to Mary McCarthy, who met him when he was 20, adding that "he had what is called taste—quick, Olympian recognitions that were free of prejudice." This included French literature, a language in which Baldwin became fluent. Campbell reports that Baldwin imbibed Flaubert, Camus, Gide, and Balzac's *Comédie humaine,* which "taught him about the place of French institutions from the universality of bureaucracy to the role of the concierge." His extensive reading—Hemingway and Henry Miller on Paris life were also devoured—attracted him to France and helped him settle in Paris where he lived off and on for years.

Campbell, himself a Francophile, has written two other books with French connections. *Exiled in Paris: Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Samuel Beckett, and Others on the Left Bank* (1995) examines the English-speaking literary scene in postwar Paris, and was "shaped from a rib" taken from his biography, and it, in turn, provided material for *This is the Beat Generation* (1999). Baldwin figures in all three, which can loosely be called Campbell's trilogy. He also was chiefly responsible for gaining the release of Baldwin's FBI record, a huge, decades-long legal effort that demonstrated without a doubt that J. Edgar Hoover unfairly singled out Baldwin for extensive surveillance not only because he was Black, and had been briefly involved in the early 1960s with the pro-Castro "Fair Play for Cuba Committee" (as was Mailer), but because he was gay. The FBI was not alone in mistreating Baldwin because of his sexual preferences, quite a few Black writers also demeaned him. He was called an "arty upstart," and "the colored darling of avante garde [sic] magazines." Worse, he was given the nickname "Martin Luther Queen." If Baldwin had been unfairly vilified by a white adversary, Campbell states, he "would probably have responded with a volley of su-

perarticulate fury; confronted by black opposition, he was just as likely to break down in tears." This abuse was one of the key factors that prompted Baldwin to go abroad for long periods.

Campbell is at his best when describing the conflicting pressures on Baldwin in the 1960s and 70s, when he was, on the one hand, a leading spokesperson for the Black civil rights cause and, on the other, a major novelist in the American social realist tradition. He could lay fair claim to both. But during the mid-sixties,

> whenever a way of escape opened, he went down it. And when he found time to take a deep breath, he privately renewed his purpose: not to sacrifice all his energy to the movement, but to contain some in his art. The books of stories [*Going to Meet the Man*, 1965] had been published, there was a new novel, a long one, in the typewriter [*Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, 1968]. But with the mood outside his study so tempestuous, when he wanted to work he found it necessary to leave the country. Paris, London, Helsinki, Rome, and Istanbul were among the places where he turned up between the summers of 1964 and 1965.

Baldwin's writing gained and lost from the push-pull of his stature in the movement. He was immensely proud of speaking out and protesting against the Jim Crow laws of that time—"I will always consider myself among the greatly privileged," he declared many years after his first trip to the American South in support of Black protestors, "because, however inadequately, I was there." But as Campbell learned firsthand, this role rasped against his equally strong literary ambitions. In 1979, Baldwin spoke at Edinburgh University at Campbell's invitation, and subsequently Baldwin invited him to pay a visit in St-Paul de Vence, about ten miles from Nice, where Baldwin had a home. While there, a close friend of Baldwin's told Campbell, "Jimmy was touched that you called him an American writer in your magazine, not a black writer. That meant something to him." In point of fact, he had referred to him as "one of the greatest American writers." Campbell was entranced by Baldwin's writing voice. "It was," he wrote in his introduction, "a unique tone among many in the cacophony of discordant timbres and inventive scales that comprise the great modernist symphony of twentieth-century American prose and poetry."

Baldwin wrote six novels. Campbell finds all but his first two, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) and *Giovanni's Room* (1956) to be badly flawed. *Another Country* (1962), notable for its bold presentation of interracial love affairs and bisexuality, and its depiction of the gritty streets of Harlem and Greenwich Village, reminds Campbell of Balzac's novels, but he points to its "startlingly clumsy" prose, sentimentalized characters, and "poor control of form." *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (1968), a retrospective narrative, looks back on the conflict between Leo Proudhammer, a New York City actor who dies of a heart attack on stage, and his older brother, Caleb. Campbell says that "almost everything that can go wrong with a novel has gone wrong here," including lack of a firm structure, and uninventive language. His fifth novel, *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974), is told by a nineteen-year old Black woman, Tish, who works in a New York City perfume shop, a choice Campbell calls a "bold step." The problem is that she sounds as sophisticated as Baldwin, which deprives her of her own identity. Campbell asks rhetorically, "Was Baldwin so bent on reminding white people that they had no idea how blacks thought and felt that he had lost sight of it himself?" Missing is what Baldwin could have delivered: "the intelligence of Harlem street talk . . . its ironic wit, its poetic double-edge, its full-speed ahead rhetorical 'rapping.'"

Campbell succinctly lays out the problems of his final novel, *Just Above My Head* (1979): "too many bloodless characters, too neatly divided into goodies and baddies; too strong a dependence on color as an indicator of virtue." The novel's rambling plot—generally a weakness for Baldwin—and the book's length, 600 pages, are also problematic. Yet, Campbell finds residual merit in the novel because it looks at the related issues of American history and "the variable treachery of individual memory." In this last major work, Baldwin wrestles somewhat successfully with the question that all autobiographical writers ponder: "If one's memory is not to be trusted—and apparently his was not—then how does one prepare to face one's own experience, and how, in the end, is it to be recorded?"

I agree with Campbell on the considerable merits of his first novel, the semi-autobiographical *Go Tell It on the Mountain,* specifically, its "compact jeweled prose" and the Jamesian aplomb with which Baldwin ranges over seventy years of family history. The deftness with which he explores and links spiritual and sexual themes also adds to its luster. It is regularly included on lists of the best novels of the twentieth century. *Giovanni's Room*

is not as accomplished, as Campbell notes, and suffers from too many and too perfumed (to use Mailer's adjective for Baldwin's prose) poetic flights, but its early bold examination of gay themes demonstrates his courage.

Campbell is much more admiring of Baldwin's nonfiction, especially his first three collections: *Notes of a Native Son* (1955); *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961); and *The Fire Next Time* (1963). Perhaps the most important set of remarks Campbell makes in the biography concerns the relative merits of Baldwin's fiction and his essays. Baldwin's interest in literary form, as revealed in his letters to friends and editors, was focused entirely on the novel, short stories and plays. He considered many of his essays to be "magazine work," undertaken largely for money, and the esthetic problems surrounding them were, to his mind, non-existent. As Campbell points out, "it is the essay and not the novel—especially not the social realist type of novel that Baldwin was writing—that provides the space for the play of intellect, and the intellect, not the imagination, was Baldwin's strong suit . . . [his] quicksilver intelligence was the quality about him that most impressed his friends in Paris," just as it impressed Mary McCarthy when she met him in 1944. "The essay form," Campbell continues, "enabled Baldwin to write as he spoke, to unfold his experience by discursive methods, until he came upon the meaning at the core." His skill at recalling moments of his past and ruminating on them, and his willingness to address difficult questions of race, memory, and the experience of Black Americans was revealed in the three books named above, which are the core of his artistic achievement.

The Fire Next Time, a long essay, built around Baldwin's meeting with the leader of the Nation of Islam, Elijah Muhammad, was first published in the *New Yorker* in 1962. Campbell notes that it is "probably his masterpiece." Rereading it two decades later for his biography, Campbell, always admirably frank in revealing his reservations, finds it somewhat soft on the leader, and says it gives a "foretaste of the sentimentality that flowed from Baldwin's pen whenever he wrote about other blacks." Nevertheless, it made Baldwin an international figure and was no doubt instrumental in the decision of *Time* to put him on the cover on May 17, 1963. Besides his account of his meeting with Elijah Muhammad, Baldwin, in 20,000 words, ranges over his childhood in the ghetto, his pulpit eloquence, his Oedipal struggle with his father, and his defection from fundamentalism to humanism.

"The essay," Campbell says in summation, "comes closest to representing his ideas *in toto*"—

> not in a schematic way, but in the form of a mature and exemplary worldview. Baldwin's essay reads like the conversation of a genius; his critique of American society ranges over the poor state of American bread as a reflection of the national soul, the importance in life of the acceptance of death, the illusion of the "Russian menace," the reality of the Negro's past—"rope, fire, torture"—and the healing power of love and reconciliation.

I'll leave off here with one final quotation from Campbell's astute, engrossing, critical, deeply felt and indispensable biography, one that gives hints of the richness of his portrait of that complex, indispensable American writer, James Baldwin:

> He was magnetic, compulsively sociable, elaborately extroverted, darkly introverted, depressive, magnificently generous, self-absorbed, incorrigibly self-dramatizing, funny, furious, bubbling with good intentions, seldom hesitating over a breach of promise—and capable of demonstrating all those traits between lunch and dinner, and again between dinner and the final Johnny Walker Black Label at 4 AM.