Witness, Artist, Prophet: Sartre’s Existential Humanism in the Literature of James Baldwin

By

Gordon Miller Wilbourn

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Department of English and Comparative Literature
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Introduction: Rendezvous in Paris

On November 11th, 1948, James Baldwin left for Paris with only forty dollars to his name. He waited until the day of departure to inform his mother and sisters of his flight from Harlem, and then boarded the plane amid their tears and protests with a one-way ticket. The young writer left not because of what he hoped to find in Paris, but what he had to escape in America. In his own words, “I left America because I doubted my ability to survive the fury of the color problem there.” In a later interview, Baldwin put it more bluntly: “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.”

As Baldwin’s plane landed in Paris, four men were drinking coffee at Les Deux Magots, a famous Parisian café known as the favorite meeting spot of many of the city’s intellectual elite. Among the four were Richard Wright, renowned American author of *Native Son* and Baldwin’s literary mentor, and existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, who is less commonly associated with Baldwin. Wright left to meet Baldwin upon his arrival, but the other men kept talking. It is easy to imagine the heat of the conversations in similar cafes between the intellectual giants of Paris in those years—minds like Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir exchanging ideas with writers like Baldwin or Wright, debating politics, talking philosophy, dissecting literature, and sharing stories. Perhaps the meetings occasionally involved more than a few drinks. Perhaps voices were raised, or feelings were hurt, epiphanies reached, and friendships were forged and broken. We

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1 Leeming 55
2 *Collected Essays* 137
4 Ibid.
5 Leeming 57
can be certain that the dialogue between such powerful minds was rich, and that writers, philosophers, and activists were forced to learn from each other.

Baldwin’s participation in Paris’s salon culture is undeniable, but there is less information available than one would prefer as to the specific lessons he learned and taught in those days. Baldwin and Wright’s relationship is well-documented and the subject of much critical discussion. Wright took Baldwin under his wing when the fledgling author was still living in Harlem, and even landed him his first writing fellowship for a project that would eventually become Baldwin’s first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*.\(^6\) He also facilitated Baldwin’s debut in Parisian literary circles and helped his friend find lodging and make a few friends.\(^7\) The more turbulent years of the two writers’ friendship came later, and have been discussed over the course of many pages.

However, considerably less prose explores the relationship between Baldwin and Sartre, two men of widely different backgrounds and literary dispositions, who nevertheless ran in some of the same circles in the Paris of the 1940s and 50s. The record of communication between the novelist and philosopher is slim—apparently the two did not meet on that day of Baldwin’s arrival in Paris—but sources attest to the acquaintance of the two\(^8\) and Baldwin briefly mentions Sartre in his own writing.\(^9\) A close reading of Baldwin’s corpus reveals that whatever their personal association may have been, Sartre’s account of existentialism found its way into Baldwin’s thinking and writing.

Baldwin himself spoke poorly of Sartre in the few instances where he mentioned him: He told Julius Lester in a 1984 interview that he thought Richard Wright “was much, much better

\(^6\) Leeming 49-50
\(^7\) Leeming 57-58
\(^8\) Leeming 68
\(^9\) *Collected Essays* 249
than a lot of the company he kept,” particularly “the French existentialists . . . Simone de Beauvoir [and] Jean-Paul Sartre.” In his essay, “Alas, Poor Richard,” in which he addresses the falling out of himself and Wright, he shares that he “distrusted [Wright’s] association” with Sartre and de Beauvoir. So it seems that although Baldwin was acquainted with Sartre, he largely disapproved of him. He explains his distaste in the same essay: “It has always seemed to me that ideas were somewhat more real to them than people.” As Chapter Two will demonstrate, this sentiment is consistent with the criticism he levels at Wright in “Everybody’s Protest Novel”—that protest literature compromises the complex, paradoxical identity of the individual in favor of simplistic ideas not worthy of art.

Perhaps Baldwin’s fear of being lumped into this posse of French intellectuals accounts for the lack of historical evidence of his dialogue with Sartre. Baldwin valued the personal, experiential nature of his art—which he often called “confession” or “witness”—and denied having bought into any “ideology” that would compromise his artistic integrity. Sartre’s philosophy would certainly have qualified as an “ideology” to Baldwin, even if it is not the ideology worst-suited to Baldwin’s avowed independence, and thus it makes sense that Baldwin would refuse to acknowledge any intellectual dialogue with the philosopher.

Regardless of any speculation on the reasons that the historical record is so bare on the question, this exploration of Baldwin’s dialogue with Sartre is not notable chiefly for its historical significance. Based on the few tidbits offered by historians, the two men’s meeting is confirmed and their association is likely. Thus, intellectual dialogue between the two is

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10 Last Interview 42
11 Collected Essays 249
12 Ibid.
13 Notes 19
14 Last Interview 31; 44
15 Leeming 68
plausible, and plausibility is a strong enough foundation for our purposes. This investigation does not concern itself primarily with unearthing historical fact about this dialogue, but rather seeks to construct a unifying, clarifying lens through which to study Baldwin’s writing, including his formula for self-knowledge and self-realization, his thoughts on the relationship of art and activism, and his diagnosis and prognosis of America’s “racial nightmare.”

**Establishing the Conversation**

This project is not the first to shed light on Baldwin’s intellectual influences abroad, nor is it the first to establish a connection between the writer and existentialism. A brief review of the scholarly literature already existing on topics related to Baldwin’s time abroad and existentialism in his corpus will serve to provide context for the investigation ahead as well as demonstrate the need for a thorough application of the lens of Sartrean existential humanism:

First, Baldwin scholar Douglas Field’s chapter, “Transnational Baldwin” from his book *James Baldwin* thoughtfully surveys Baldwin’s journey to and life within Paris. The chapter traces Baldwin’s developing thoughts on American identity and explores the ways that his sojourn abroad contributed to these thoughts. The chapter also discusses Baldwin’s motivations for leaving the “racial and social nightmare” in America and decision to invest in his growth as an artist at a distance from such turmoil. Field’s essay is particularly useful in its study of Baldwin’s essays on Paris beginning with “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” which attest to his feeling of isolation abroad. Especially relevant is Field’s work in explaining the various dimensions of Baldwin’s sense of isolation in Paris: personal, as evidenced in his “strained”

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16 *Fire Next Time* 105
17 Field 13
18 Ibid.
19 Field 15-21
relationship with Richard Wright and lack of close friendships in the early Paris years⁰; racial, as Baldwin articulates the self-imposed alienation between black Americans who avoid each other to avoid painful thoughts of home¹; and intellectual, as Baldwin deliberately distances himself from “established intellectual and artistic communities” in the city.² The scholar’s exploration of Baldwin’s alienation from groups that include Sartre is useful for evaluating Baldwin’s attitude toward the influence of existentialism in his own work.

Bruce Lapenson’s article, “Race and Existential Commitment in James Baldwin,” serves as a brief, general introduction to existentialist influences in Baldwin’s works, with attention paid to philosophers such as Sartre, Heidegger, and Camus. Lapenson addresses anticipated objections to establishing Baldwin’s existential commitment: Existentialism’s reputation of nihilist, lackadaisical moral attitudes seems incompatible with Baldwin’s strong moral voice.³ He addresses this and similar objections, arguing that they are based on a misunderstanding of existentialist doctrine, before proceeding to call attention to Baldwin’s emphasis on community, his religious decentering, sense of forlornness, and call for eliminating self-delusion in personal and national contexts, all of which he identifies as examples of Baldwin’s existentialism.⁴ Lapenson also begins to gesture at some of the temporal relations which this thesis will explore in greater depth in Baldwin’s existentialism: the belief that the present and future are anchored in the past, and that we as a society have the responsibility and capability to create the future.⁵ Lapenson’s article is useful as an introduction to certain aspects of Baldwin’s existentialism, but

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⁰ Ibid., 17
¹ Ibid., 18-19
² Ibid., 17
³ Lapenson 199
⁴ Ibid., 200-207
⁵ Ibid., 203-208
runs the risk of “cherry-picking” certain quotations and beliefs of Baldwin rather than committing to a comprehensive investigation of their scope and significance.

Radiclani Clytus’s essay, “Paying Dues and Playing the Blues: Baldwin’s Existential Jazz,” is a particularly thoughtful piece of criticism that unites Baldwin’s existentialism with his discussion of music in a few essays, interviews, and the short story, “Sonny’s Blues.” Through various examples, Clytus explores jazz as a vehicle used by Baldwin for reflecting on certain tenets of existentialism. The essay also puts Baldwin in dialogue with other contemporary writers like Ralph Ellison who saw jazz as an illustration of the fact that “black existence is struggle.”

Sartre’s essay, “Existentialism is a Humanism,” is a large part of Clytus’s existential examination of Baldwin, and he illustrates the presence of the philosopher’s concepts of self-creation and rejection of determinism in Baldwin’s oeuvre. Clytus’ most insightful contribution to the conversation around Baldwin’s existentialism is his analysis of “Sonny’s Blues.” He identifies Baldwin’s illustration of existential isolation in the story, through the two brothers’ strained relationship, the challenge of existential awareness and the resulting anguish for the artist, as seen in Sonny’s distressed state, as well as the ability of jazz to accomplish a kind of existential reconciliation between the brothers in the story’s final scene at the jazz club. Clytus’ use of Baldwin’s existentialism as a tool to better understand the author’s reflections on jazz is insightful, and offers a more diligent, applicable answer to Lapenson. It is also instructive as this project attempts to use Baldwin’s dialogue with Sartre as a lens in similar fashion.

The work of Field, Lapenson, and Clytus informs a deeper look into Baldwin’s philosophical dialogue with Sartre. Field’s article gives a broad orientation to the way Baldwin made sense of his expatriation in Paris as well as his relationship to the various communities he

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26 Clytus 72
27 Ibid., 74-75
28 Ibid., 77-81
found there. His explanation of Baldwin’s relationship to Wright as well as his alienation from intellectual and artistic circles in the city suggests Baldwin’s attitudes toward intellectual collaboration and association. Lapenson’s brief article on Baldwin’s existential commitment identifies some starting points for unearthing the author’s Sartrean influence. Clytus’ analysis of “Sonny’s Blues” especially illustrates the revelatory potential of the existential lens when applied to a close reading of Baldwin’s fiction.

**Joining the Conversation**

The place for an intervention exists, however: Whereas Field seeks to paint a more general picture of Baldwin’s sojourn and is largely unconcerned with ideological influence, this project seeks to investigate more deeply the effect of Baldwin’s life in Paris on his writing with particular attention to his existentialist tendencies. Lapenson’s article offers a cursory introduction to Baldwin’s existentialism, but fails to undertake the thorough, systematic approach this project will employ. Finally, Clytus’ essay is an excellent example of the way that an existentialist lens can enhance our reading of Baldwin, and my thesis will strive to emulate his close reading and insightful connections between the works of Baldwin and Sartre as it pursues a unique goal.

The purpose of this project is to investigate the scope and significance of the existentialist influence, particularly as articulated in Sartre’s “Existentialism is a Humanism,” that authors like Lapenson identify in Baldwin’s corpus. Sartre’s vision of existential humanism is a philosophical worldview—an intellectual lens through which one can perceive reality. Baldwin denies having bought into any “ideology,” but is deeply concerned with the way that he as an artist sees the world: in other words, the integrity of his vision. Thus it is crucial to determine how Sartre’s existential humanism becomes a part of Baldwin’s worldview—his artistic **sight**—and the ways
that his *sight* in turn adapts and expands upon the Sartrean lens. Close reading reveals that the result of Baldwin’s adoption of existential humanism is a tripartite vision—including *hindsight*, *insight*, and *foresight*—through which the stages of Baldwin’s own development as an artist become apparent and his beliefs on the nature of art and the state and future of his nation come to light.

**Sartre’s Existential Lens**

A basic understanding of Sartre’s essay, “Existentialism is a Humanism,” is necessary for an understanding of its influence on Baldwin. The summation of my reading of such a pedantic philosophical work is tedious but necessary in order to construct the lens upon which much of this project will rely. One should also note that this is not to say that Baldwin ever wrote with the intention of referencing the essay, nor does it mean that Baldwin draws on none of Sartre’s other works. The conversation ahead fixates on this essay simply because Baldwin’s writing seems to most closely reflect the account of existential humanism set out therein, and because of its concise and easily quotable summation of the philosophy.

Sartre opens the essay by stating his purpose: “to offer a defense of existentialism against several reproaches that have been laid against it.” ²⁹ These are as follows: that the existentialist outlook encourages quietism and despair; that it is unnecessarily morbid and ignores “the brighter side of human nature”; and that it denies “the reality and seriousness of human affairs.” ³⁰ Sartre responds with the claim that existentialism is actually a humanism because it places humans in control of their own fate and enables their self-realization through a process of “seeking, beyond [themselves], an aim” which they choose. ³¹ He clarifies that existentialism is not compatible with the brand of humanism that holds the human is “the end-in-itself” or “the

²⁹ Sartre, 345
³⁰ Ibid., 345-46
³¹ Ibid., 369
Sartre’s existentialism is humanist in that it puts humans at the center, but it does not seek to deify them.

The bulk of the essay explores the humanist implications of the existentialism Sartre articulates. He begins with the primary doctrine of existentialism: “existence comes before essence.” This means that humans are first born and define themselves afterwards; no one has predetermined a meaning or purpose for our lives. This is in contrast to the doctrines of human nature and divine sovereignty, where God creates humans with a certain nature and a certain purpose in mind. Since nothing is predetermined, Sartre writes, the human reality is one of choice. Humans must choose what to do and how to conceive of themselves. Sartre writes, “Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself,” and adds that humans must create themselves by choosing. In other words, “man is condemned to be free.”

The realization of this freedom is central to Sartre’s essay. He argues that people must come to terms with their existential condition—the lack of any predetermined meaning for their lives and the necessity of choice and self-creation—in order to fully understand themselves. He also emphasizes that this type of discovery of the self must happen in community, because one can only have knowledge of oneself in relation to others; the people around us necessarily facilitate the process of learning about ourselves. And, Sartre argues, through self-discovery one “also discovers all the others.” In the philosopher’s own words, “the intimate discovery of myself is at the same time the revelation of the other.” So the process of self-discovery must be enabled by other people and also helps us to understand them.

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32 Ibid.
33 Ibid., 348
34 Ibid., 349
35 Ibid., 353
36 Ibid., 361
The necessity of choice for Sartre means that freedom is an unavoidable reality. He writes of the “complete and profound responsibility” that comes with such liberty.\(^\text{37}\) Because humans must choose, they are also responsible for what their choices mean. In choosing something, they cannot avoid assigning value and meaning to it. And since nothing is predetermined, no concrete morality can serve as a guide for such choices. Sartre tells us, “No rule of general morality can show you what you ought to do.”\(^\text{38}\) The implication of this is that since there is no God “to invent values,” the weight falls on our shoulders.\(^\text{39}\) Accordingly, humans must invent their own morality in the same way that art is accomplished through “creation and invention.”\(^\text{40}\)

Sartre also emphasizes freedom as relational; he argues that one’s freedom “depends entirely upon the freedom of others,” so that one is “obliged to will the liberty of others at the same time as [one’s] own.”\(^\text{41}\) The unavoidable reality of freedom—the fact that humans cannot avoid choice—means that humans cannot use any external factor to explain their actions. To do so would be “a dissimulation of man’s complete liberty of commitment,” Sartre writes, emphasizing humans’ responsibility for their choices.\(^\text{42}\) He argues that to use any excuse “by inventing some deterministic doctrine” is self-deception.\(^\text{43}\) This is because the only determining factor is one’s own will. The culmination of all of these doctrines of Sartre’s existential humanism is as follows: the future is what we make it—that is to say, we can and must make it—and we cannot hide behind hope in God. We are our own only hope.\(^\text{44}\)

\(^{37}\) Ibid. 351
\(^{38}\) Ibid., 356
\(^{39}\) Ibid., 367
\(^{40}\) Ibid. 364
\(^{41}\) Ibid., 366
\(^{42}\) Ibid., 365
\(^{43}\) Ibid.
\(^{44}\) Ibid., 369
Exploring the various doctrines set out in Sartre’s essay is admittedly a tiresome process, but it is necessary to inform our future discussions. The key concepts that will be most important for our purposes are the necessity of self-discovery facilitated by others, revelation of the other as the consequence of self-discovery, and the ability of humans to create the future.

**Baldwin’s Triple Vision**

The first element of Baldwin’s vision is his *hindsight*, which involves an honest, penetrating look at the past in order to understand the self, and the present. My thesis’ first chapter, “Baptism by History,” seeks to answer the question of how Satrean existentialism informs Baldwin’s look backward. Close reading reveals that Baldwin’s *hindsight* expands upon the self-discovery process described by Sartre, where one must come to understand oneself through the facilitation of other people. For Baldwin this is certainly the case, but he adds a historical dimension where one discovers oneself in relationship to one’s ancestors and family history.

“Baptism by History” focuses on Part Three, titled “The Threshing Floor,” of Baldwin’s semi-autobiographical novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. The author narrates a scene in which the protagonist, John Grimes, sees visions of his ancestors—slaves and the children of slaves—and experiences a kind of existential conversion. The understanding John gains from his visions of his family history enables him to reject the oppressive forces tied to his family’s past that his father attempts to impose on him, and allows him to discover himself as an individual with power and agency. This investigation explores Baldwin’s own personal and artistic transformation as facilitated by his existential *hindsight*, since John is largely read as Baldwin, and also begins a study of America’s relationship to its ugly history.
Baldwin’s *hindsight*—his confrontation with the past, and the lessons he learns from it—enables his *insight*. His look backward constitutes the process of self-discovery facilitated by others that Sartre describes, which allows for “the intimate discovery of [himself].” Chapter Two, “The Antisocial Artist,” asks what kind of self-knowledge Baldwin finds through this *insight*, and what bearing it has on his relationship to others. It turns out that Baldwin’s *insight* centers on his identity as a writer and speaks to his beliefs on the relationship between art and activism.

Baldwin most clearly articulates his concept of himself as a writer and artist in non-fiction works, including *The Fire Next Time*, “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” “Many Thousands Gone,” “The Creative Process,” and “The Discovery of What It Means to Be an American,” as well as in a few interviews, including one conducted by Julius Lester and one by Studs Terkel. Baldwin also reflects on his artistic identity in correspondence with Today Show host Hugh Downs. His reflections reveal that Baldwin views his role as an artist as highly individualistic and independent from any cause, ideology, or institution, and sees it as his duty to speak as a “witness” to his own experience rather than as a “spokesman” for other people. They also show that Baldwin believes clear, honest, beauty-finding vision is essential to artistic identity, and that he disagrees with many of his contemporaries on the compatibility of art and activism. This chapter’s investigation is notable for the knowledge it uncovers of Baldwin’s sense of his own identity, but also for the way that the writer’s beliefs on the nature of art and its moral dimension can challenge our own.

The final chapter of this thesis, titled “James Baldwin, M. D.,” examines Baldwin’s *foresight*, his existentially informed look outward at the community and forward at the health and future of the nation. It seeks to answer the question of how Sartre’s existentialism informs

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45 Ibid., 361
Baldwin’s reflections on America, particularly as to its future. The same essays, interviews, and correspondence that inform Chapter Two’s Discussion are relevant in the pursuit of this question, along with “Stranger in the Village” and an interview with James Mossman. This chapter’s exploration reveals that this foresight is grounded in both Baldwin’s hindsight and insight: his understanding of America’s legacy of slavery coalesces with his own self-knowledge to afford a kind of universal, outward understanding. Informed by his understanding of the relationships between black and white people in America and the ways that racism degrades both the oppressors and the oppressed, Baldwin offers a healing, creative vision for the future of America. He becomes something like America’s physician, and gives a diagnosis of America’s problems, offers a “treatment plan,” and finally states a prognosis for the country’s fate. Baldwin adds his theory of tough, active love to the “stern optimism” of Sartre’s existentialism and predicts that although America’s success is far from certain, there is hope that the nation will overcome its pathology around race and learn lessons that promise to be invaluable to the rest of the world.

Last, before proceeding, it is necessary to clarify the application of several crucial and contested terms that are significant to this analysis. Baldwin, throughout his oeuvre, refers to the United States as “America.” Modern scholarship is conscious of the way the term ignores non-US American nations and enforces problematic perceptions of the country’s superiority, and thus many reject it. However, Baldwin used the term as it was generally used at the time, reflecting the colonial attitudes that are found in the writings of progressive and conservative thinkers alike in the mid-twentieth century, as a synonym for “The United States.” I have chosen to adopt Baldwin’s terminology in my own prose rather than divert attention from the primary goals of my arguments by constantly correcting the writer’s use of the term.
Additionally, the terms “determinism” and “determinist theology” are unavoidable. By “determinism” I mean any force that controls a person or a people and thereby diminishes their agency. In the context of Sartre, the term is closely related to delusion and self-delusion, since the philosopher’s entire argument hinges on the assertion that no one determines human identity and action other than humans themselves. When I speak of “determinist theology,” it is important to realize that this does not mean theology as the formal, academic study of God or gods. A “theology” in this sense is a system of thought, often with religious over or undertones, that enforces a certain set of values or justifies certain beliefs. For example, it can be said that the “American theology” enforces white supremacy through a historical narrative that glorifies and justifies the oppression of native peoples and black people. Thus, a “determinist theology” is a way of thinking, often founded upon cultural, religious, or historical narratives, that seeks to define reality in order to accomplish some objective. In Baldwin’s writing, the American theology can be said to be determinist because it seeks to define black people in a way that justifies their oppression. It is the articulation of these theological terms, as produced by the ideological conversation between Baldwin and Sartre that animates crucial segments of the upcoming discussion.
Chapter One: Baptism by History

Sartre writes in his essay, “Existentialism is a Humanism,” that self-discovery is key to a person’s self-realization, and that we discover ourselves always in relation to others. In the philosopher’s own words, “I cannot obtain any truth whatsoever about myself, except through the mediation of another. The other is indispensable to my existence, and equally to any knowledge I can have of myself.”¹ Baldwin’s hindsight, as articulated in his fiction and essays, both affirms and augments Sartre’s formula for self-discovery: We must discover ourselves in the presence of others, yes, and fully confront our lonely, terrible position in the universe. However, Baldwin emphasizes, looking inward is a painful process, and a look inward is necessarily also a look backward. He writes, “before [the writer] can look forward in any meaningful sense, he must first be allowed to take a long look back . . . the past is all that makes the present coherent.”² Baldwin does not relish facing the past, but he knows it is necessary. Indeed, he claims, “One writes out of one thing only—one’s own experience.”³

This chapter poses the question of how Sartre’s existential humanism informs Baldwin’s hindsight, and what we gain from using it as a lens for reading his seminal novel, Go Tell It on the Mountain, which is widely read by scholars as semi-autobiographical.⁴ First I will explore the course of Mountain’s evolution in order to better understand Baldwin’s aims for the novel before proceeding to a close reading of a scene from its third part. I will argue that this prolonged dramatic scene signifies a kind of “existential conversion” beneath the surface of the religious imagery that pervades it. In this scene our protagonist undergoes a personal but community-oriented episode that involves confronting the past and the forlornness of the human condition,

¹ Sartre 361
² Notes 6
³ Ibid., 7
⁴ Leeming 84
and proceeds through rising action and tension to a climactic moment of self-realization, resulting ultimately in a state of existential and intellectual freedom, and a more authentic relationship to the community.

**Searching for Mountain**

Before engaging in a close reading of the scene of existential conversion in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, a brief look at the course of the novel’s evolution will be helpful in understanding Baldwin’s goals in writing it and will begin to reveal the author’s existential hindsight. In his early notes for the novel, Baldwin articulates many of the themes he intends to explore within it. Perhaps the first notable information found within these notes is that Baldwin had in mind “I, John,” as an early title for the work.\(^5\) Through the Sartrean lens, this statement would signify the ultimate, conscious identity of the protagonist once he comes to terms with his place in America and in the context of his particular relationship to history. Thus it seems that John’s existential conversion is the novel’s focus from the start.

Many aspects of Baldwin’s plan for *Mountain* change over the years in which he is writing it, but the importance of John’s familial and racial history seems to have been present early on, from Baldwin’s notes. He writes that John’s history includes “generations and centuries of unfulfilled hatred,” and elaborates that this hatred is “so deep as to be almost wholly inarticulate and even unsuspected.”\(^6\) Baldwin refers to the unresolved emotion present in the psyche of black people that inevitably results from four hundred years of their ancestors’ enslavement. He explains that it runs so deep that it is nearly impossible to recognize. “[B]ecause it has lived under-ground so long” Baldwin writes, this hatred has a special “subtle and distorting power” that pervades John’s experience of reality, making the world “ambiguous and full of

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\(^5\) “Outline” 1
\(^6\) Ibid., 1-2
terror.” Since this force is so subtle and destructive at the same time, it constitutes the primary barrier between John and his self-realization—he must face his history to overcome it.

Baldwin continues in his outline to say that no one is able to “break through the web of centuries of anger and guilt and terror and desire to be united with his own experience.” This, he writes, “might be called the American dilemma.” Here Baldwin identifies the relationship between his own particular experience—or the particular experience of any black person, for that matter—and the shared history of black people in America. Although he and others did not directly experience centuries of slavery, its impact on the world they inhabit is undeniable. The legacy of American slavery, as well as the continued injustice visited on black people, has an alienating effect, Baldwin argues. If one cannot come to terms with the larger history of American racism, then one cannot hope to confront one’s own experience. So, from the beginning, it is clear that this struggle of alienation from the past is central to the novel.

Thus far Baldwin’s notes have mostly addressed themes that are apparent in the novel that ultimately was published. However, a closer look at the major differences that appear between Baldwin’s earlier plans as articulated in his “Outline for Novel” from 1950 and the actual novel offers insight into the objectives the author prioritizes. By assuming that Baldwin’s thematic objectives remain relatively consistent, it is possible to surmise that he changed his plans for the novel’s plot in order to better accomplish his vision for the work. A comparison of the earlier and final version yields a better understanding of this vision.

Baldwin’s notes in 1950 show that the earlier plan for the novel would narrate the involvement of Roy, the protagonist’s step-brother, with a gang, including a robbery for which

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7 Ibid.
8 Ibid., 2
9 Ibid.
he is caught and sentenced to reform school. This version would also describe his romantic involvement with a girl from the neighborhood in which John’s family lives, and ultimately his fathering of an illegitimate child with her. Simultaneous to Roy’s struggles with law and family, John would be losing his faith. Baldwin explains, “For his belief, primitive and powerful, is not strong enough to withstand his own increasing sophistication, the force of the outside world, the force of his own needs.” It appears that Roy serves as a foil to clarify John’s position: As John watches his brother fall prey to the dangers of growing up in Harlem, tension builds to fuel his overcoming these dangers. This is in contrast to the published version of the novel where Gabriel and family history serve to illustrate the danger of John’s position in the world.

After Roy’s return from reform school, the notes describe a conversation between the two brothers where John realizes and says aloud that he “no longer believes.” This “lost salvation” becomes his “first release” according to the notes, and “it explodes something in his spirit, in his mind.” John’s departure from faith acts an existential springboard that catapults him into a brighter, freer future. John finds that “he has never been so close” with Roy. The notes elaborate:

[H]e recognizes dimly, with horror and with exultation, the depths of his alienation and, at the same time, the passion and the power and the hope of his involvement [emphasis added]. John goes back to his books, daring consciously now to dream of the day he will be free of his father and his fathers’ God.

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10 “Outline” 12-15  
11 Ibid.  
12 Ibid., 14  
13 Ibid.,15  
14 Ibid.  
15 Ibid.
John’s comprehension of his alienation leads to his realization of power and hope, and allows him to see the possibility of future freedom, just as Sartre describes in his essay; coming to terms with our position in the universe is difficult, but also places our fate in our own hands.\textsuperscript{16} It is worth noting that this version of the protagonist’s self-realization is much less dramatic than the one ultimately narrated in “The Threshing Floor.”

As has been established, \textit{Go Tell It on the Mountain} takes a course markedly different from this one, but I maintain that the transformation John experiences in \textit{Mountain} holds much same significance as the one described above. The difference is that in the final version, Baldwin ironically decides to couch the conversion experience in the diction and imagery of Christian religion, rather than take the earlier, more explicit approach of breaking John free from the Church. The original plan signifies Baldwin’s adoption of Sartre’s model for self-realization more directly, while the second demonstrates his innovation in emphasizing the importance of confrontation of the past in the process of self-realization.

There are many of the same elements in this early version of the story as are found in the eventual novel: John’s confrontation with the fact of his alienation, a rejection of the determinist forces of Harlem and Gabriel’s religion, mediation of self-discovery by others, and the sense of empowerment that follows from the existential humanist outlook. A reading of the final published novel shows that Baldwin revises his original plan by spending considerably more time and attention on John Grimes’ encounter with his family history. From his early notes it is apparent that Baldwin planned on using the novel to address “the American inability to comprehend or be related to the past,” but only later determined how to best do so.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{16} Sartre, 353; 360
\textsuperscript{17} “Outline” 2
To someone reading Baldwin’s notes from 1950, it is quickly apparent that John is not only the story’s protagonist, but that the author plans to spend the bulk of the novel telling his story. Other characters will occupy some portion of the spotlight, but only insofar as they flesh out and contribute to John’s story. Gabriel and Elizabeth both play important parts, and it seems that Baldwin knows from the start that Gabriel’s past will be largely responsible for John’s torment and an obstacle to his coming to terms with the past. But in the novel eventually published, Gabriel’s own story, beginning years earlier, comes to occupy almost as much space as John’s, and serves to explain the convoluted, bitter relationship between stepfather and son. It follows that at some point, Baldwin drastically revised his plan for the novel.

**Constructive Criticism**

A letter from the Baldwin Papers at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem, signed R. N. Linscott (whom the archive designates an “unknown author”), advises an also unknown third party on how Baldwin might revise an early draft of the novel. Linscott’s letter implies that he does not know Baldwin personally but has somehow acquired and read the draft through the unknown third party. He writes that it is “an honest book” but says that he sees no reason to believe the claim that Baldwin “is an authentic genius and the most promising of all negro writers.” Linscott continues, “Its [sic] my own feeling . . . that he will never make Johnny’s story into a good novel as this is the part thats [sic] all autobiography and self pity.” Stopping here, a reader might thumb her or his nose at Linscott, consider the monumental success the novel enjoyed when published. We may be tempted to object that

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18 Ibid., 1-3
19 Linscott
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
Baldwin’s autobiographical input is exactly what makes the book so personal and powerful—but this would be getting ahead of ourselves.

Further reading reveals the debt Baldwin may in fact owe to Linscott, despite the critic’s harsh tone:

What I wish he would do is reconstitute it entirely, make it the life story of Gabriel Grimes . . . have his life one long desperate battle between sin and repentence . . . Theres [sic] a real novel in Gabriel, the story of a vital, fascinating [sic], complex character; . . . This novel would excite me; the story of Johnny would, I’m afraid, only bore me.\textsuperscript{22}

All the archive offers is the letter, undated, by an author whose name is unfamiliar. Simply by comparing the notes from 1950 (also present in the archive) with the final version of \textit{Mountain}, I must surmise that the letter came to Baldwin prior to his major revision of the novel, and I wager that the letter inspired his changes to a great degree. Baldwin certainly did not turn his novel exclusively into the story of Gabriel, but the final product covers much more outside the story of John than the outline from 1950 would suggest.

Of the novel’s 226 pages in my edition, at least 100 are devoted to the stories of Gabriel and more peripherally of Elizabeth and John’s biological father, Richard.\textsuperscript{23} The novel’s exploration of these characters’ pasts is essential to its presentation of John’s transformation. Perhaps the first version was boring, without the background and foils necessary to bring John’s story to life. Only a thoughtful, complex meditation on the religious forces that so restricted and tormented Gabriel can illuminate the struggle of John as he inherits them from his step-father. And only then does the throwing off of such chains gain a powerful, dramatic effect—when the reader sees how many miles and years backward they stretch. With this revision, the emergence

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{23} \textit{Mountain}
of Baldwin’s innovation on Sartre becomes apparent—that the look inward must necessarily involve a long and painful look backward, even generations beyond one’s birth. Otherwise Mountain may have turned out to be “all autobiography and self pity” after all.24

**Unpacking “The Threshing Floor”**

Having studied Baldwin’s aims for his novel as articulated in his notes and having found them consistent with the Sartrean concept of self-discovery facilitated by others, the stage is set to engage in a close reading of Part Three from Mountain, titled “The Threshing Floor,” in order to see how the author accomplishes and innovates on his original aims. Immediately following the novel’s prolonged narration of the life stories of Gabriel and Elizabeth, the narrator turns to a particularly charismatic evening church service where John finds himself collapsed on the floor of the Temple of the Fire Baptized in a fit of religious fervor, surrounded by the congregants who are likewise overcome with zeal.25 Baldwin uses highly mysterious, obscurely symbolic language throughout “The Threshing Floor,” but the Sartrean lens clarifies the stages of John’s existential conversion as well as the salient symbols involved: First, John finds himself under the power of Gabriel’s determinist religion, then comes to challenge and overcome it. Next he encounters the symbol of the “cloud of witnesses,” which represents the community through which he must come to self-knowledge. The symbol of “the sound” demonstrates the universality of the human condition, and John’s interpretation of “the number” symbolizes his grasp of agency and leads into the culmination of his existential conversion.

As the scene begins, it quickly becomes apparent that John’s conversion is not a typical altar call. Nor is it as simple as an adoption or rejection of the Christian God; Baldwin has

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24 Linscott
25 Throughout the close reading of this scene, it is important to remember that John experiences everything in a state of spiritual hallucination, while he remains prostrate on the floor of the church.
departed from the plan set out in his earlier notes. John finds himself in anguish, suspended between two competing powers—the imposing force of Gabriel’s bitter, guilt-inspiring God, and his own desire for Elisha. Baldwin’s masterful innovation becomes apparent: instead of portraying a flat, simplistic struggle simply to be liberated on the grounds of faith and doubt by rejecting Christianity, John’s struggles against determinist spiritual, paternal, and sexual powers are all intertwined.

Ecclesial and biblical language lend dramatic power to the scene. It takes its shape after the pattern of Christian baptism, where a person must symbolically die before gaining eternal life. Likewise, John is completely overcome by the determinist forces of his father’s religion before he arises to take hold of his own life and agency. This Christian framework is ironic, considering that Baldwin is not describing a Christian conversion, at bottom. He says explicitly on many occasions that he has left the church and abandoned Christianity,\(^{26}\) and his notes for the novel confirm that John’s struggle culminates with religious disillusionment of some kind at least. I will demonstrate that in John’s struggle, the version of Christianity that Gabriel imposes is identified with Sartre’s idea of illusory determinism, which stands in the way of self-realization and personal agency. Elisha, as the object of John’s sexual desire, and as John’s helper in the conversion experience, represents existential freedom.

John struggles to be free from the determinist theology of Gabriel’s God, which attempts to convince John of his own doom. The narrator describes John’s anguish:

> And he knew . . . that his father had thrust him out. His father’s will was stronger than John’s own. His power was greater because he belonged to God. Now, John felt no

\(^{26}\) Leeming 213
hatred, nothing, only a bitter, unbelieving despair: all the prophecies were true, salvation was finished, damnation was real.\textsuperscript{27}

At surface level, John’s struggle is a religious one. Through the existential lens, it frames the Sartrean assertion that existence precedes essence. Gabriel would have it backward, and impose a dark, predetermined essence on his stepson before existence. Gabriel identifies himself with an angry, judgmental God and convinces John of his guilt, which can only be met with damnation. This is why Gabriel’s “will was stronger” than John’s: Up until this point, John has had no way of seeing the world and his situation outside his stepfather’s religious outlook—an outlook full of dark “prophecies” of only fire and brimstone ahead. Salvation is out of reach for John, because Gabriel has a monopoly on religion and determines to hold it out of reach. John is captive to the illusion of determinism as long as he fails to realize that he may (and must) choose his own “essence.”

Just as John’s agency is directly opposed to Gabriel’s imposition of determinist theology, John’s sexual desire for Elisha is directly related to his rebellion against his stepfather. In desiring that which Gabriel’s theology defines as sinful, John begins to assert his own will rather than buying into the determinist illusion. John feels “a sudden yearning tenderness” for Elisha, and “desire, sharp and awful as a reflecting knife, to usurp the body of Elisha, and lie where Elisha lay; to speak in tongues, as Elisha spoke, and, with that authority, to confound his father.”\textsuperscript{28} John feels that the realization of his sexual desire for Elisha would grant him authority over Gabriel. By embracing his own desire and choosing his own “essence,” in this case with regard to sexual preference, John is claiming his agency.

\textsuperscript{27} Mountain 198
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 197
As Gabriel closes in on John in the vision and threatens to “beat the sin out of” him, John begins to defy his father. In this vision, John and Gabriel both see the woman with whom Gabriel had an affair decades earlier (as narrated in Part Two of the novel). Gabriel tries to distract John’s attention, but John ignores him and watches her. Gabriel retorts, “You see that? That’s sin. That’s what the Devil’s son runs after.” He tries to distance himself from his guilt and impose it on John, but John replies, “I seen it. I seen it. I ain’t the Devil’s son for nothing.”

With John’s defiant assertion that he can see through his father’s hypocrisy, he begins to assert his independence. The staging illustrates this first figurative step away: “His father reached for him, but John was faster. He moved backward down the shining street, looking at his father—his father who moved toward him, one hand outstretched in fury.” These movements demonstrate the beginning of John’s realization of his own agency: he is capable of evading Gabriel.

As the confrontation continues, John presses his advantage, leveraging a clearer vision of reality to assert his own independence:

And I heard you—all the nighttime long. I know what you do in the dark, black man, when you think the Devil’s son’s asleep. I heard you, spitting, and groaning, and choking—and I seen you, riding up and down, and going in and out. I ain’t the Devil’s son for nothing.

Here John refuses to be defined by the guilt of Gabriel’s determinist theology, instead pointing out the man’s own sexual sin. He exclaims, “I don’t care about your golden crown . . . about your long white robe. I seen you under the robe, I seen you!” John sees his father’s hypocrisy clearly: Gabriel is dark and dirty behind the illusory crown and white robe, and his accusations

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29 Ibid., 201
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
of John begin to lose their weight. John has seen the woman who represents Gabriel’s sinful past, and by understanding his family history he gains control of himself in the present. This constitutes the climax of John’s confrontation with his father, and it appears Gabriel’s grip on John is slipping—his stepson is beginning to see through the illusion that obscures his own agency.

Cloud of Witnesses

Next comes a vision that illustrates John’s coming to terms with the past. John finds himself in a graveyard, where he discovers “his mother and his father” along with “a cloud of witnesses” behind them. John’s parents represent his link to the past, and the “cloud of witnesses” includes the many ancestors before them. His Aunt Florence and Gabriel’s first, deceased wife, Deborah, are present too. Through the Sartrean lens, this “cloud of witnesses” stands for the relationships that the philosopher insists are essential to self-discovery. John finds that “[h]e was a stranger there—they did not see him pass, they did not know what he was looking for, they could not help him search.” John wants to find Elisha, but cannot. Roy is present, but has been stabbed and is “brown and silent, at his father’s feet.” The sense of alienation and loneliness is acute in this passage: it is through this vision of his family and ancestors that John must discover himself, according to Sartre, but still they cannot grant him agency. He must take it for himself.

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34 Ibid., 202
35 Sartre, 361
36 Mountain 202
37 Ibid.
The Sound

Following John’s realization of his complete isolation, Baldwin constructs a scene heavy with symbolism and cryptic images that are not readily accessible. However, the lens of Sartrean existentialism offers an interpretation. John, collapsed on the floor of his father’s church, begins to hear “a terrible sound” which “he had always heard.”

In some metaphorical sense, this “sound” has been a constant feature of his life. The narrator launches into a lyrical description of this mysterious sound, charged with mystical imagery and biblical language. Apparently, the sound has been present since John “had first drawn breath.” He has heard it “in prayer and in daily speech” as well as “in his father’s anger, and in his mother’s calm insistence.”

Paradoxically, the narrator states that although John has heard the sound his whole life, “his ears were opened” to it only at this moment. So the first clue Baldwin offers as to the nature of the mysterious “sound,” is that it has been a constant feature of the protagonist’s life, but one that he only becomes aware of in the middle of his conversion experience.

The description of the sound begins with quotidian identifications—“when Elisha played the piano it was there”—and moves toward more dramatic ones: The sound was “of rage and weeping which filled the grave . . . from time set free, but bound now in eternity” and spoke to “John’s startled soul.” The narrator tells us that it speaks of “boundless melancholy, of the bitterest patience, and the longest night . . . of love’s bed defiled, and birth dishonored, and most bloody, unspeakable, sudden death . . . the body on the tree.”

Because the sound is described in such dramatic, grandiose language, and is illustrated with such powerful but obscure images, it is

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38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
difficult to be sure of any definite symbolism. The reader is invited into John’s own stream of consciousness, as he sees a series of images with no easily apparent connection to one another. However, upon a closer look, one sees that the images seem to move thematically from particular features of John’s own experience to visions that still describe his life but also resonate universally. The sound “when Elisha played the piano” is John’s own particular experience, but “the strongest chains, the most cruel lash” tie John to the suffering of his ancestors who were enslaved.\textsuperscript{45}

Working within the existential humanist framework, one sees that John’s rising awareness of “the sound” stands for John’s growing realization of his condition in the world—a condition shared by all other humans in its universal aspect but felt uniquely through myriad particular experiences by each person. This realization comes to inform John’s relationship to the “cloud of witnesses” from which he has recently felt so alienated. One might say it is because of their singing—or from “the jangle of Sister McCandless’s tambourine” (203)—that John can face the music of his existential situation, in common with all other humans. This is what Sartre calls “a human universality of \textit{condition}.”\textsuperscript{46} He writes that situations vary for each person, but that certain realities are always present: “the necessity of being in the world, of having to labor and to die there.”\textsuperscript{47} These examples given by Sartre resonate especially strongly considering how the “conditions” experienced by John’s family center around slavery and its legacy. This darkly described realization of his condition through hearing “the sound,” and facilitated by a spiritual encounter with the past sets the stage for John’s achievement of liberty and agency.

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{46} Sartre 362
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.
The Number

After the episode in which John comes to terms with the universality of the human condition through the symbol of the sound, he is seized by another vision. He asserts: "I, John, saw the future, way up in the middle of the air . . . I, John, saw a number, way in the middle of the air." These statements, although cryptic, contain several items that are ripe for interpretation. First, the beginning, "I, John," is significant. Baldwin’s early notes have revealed that this was the intended title for the work in 1950. It is obvious, then, that John’s statement is a moment of importance in the novel. In this climactic moment of John’s self-realization, he asserts his identity. He says that he saw “the future.” This statement is self-empowering and places John in the role of prophet, foreshadowing our later discussion of foresight as the fruit of hindsight and insight. John’s second assertion that he “saw a number, way in the middle of the air” is even more cryptic than his assertion that he “saw the future.” It undeniably recalls certain scenes from the book of Revelation in the New Testament, but the narrator offers no explanation of what John sees in this number. With little to go on from the primary text, Sartre can offer some insight into what an ambiguous sign like this number might mean. He writes that “a man [cannot] find help through some sign being vouchsafed upon earth for his orientation: for [the existentialist] thinks that the man himself interprets the sign as he chooses” (353). So the sign is something a person sees outside himself or herself, but its interpretation is actually an act of invention, since the person is free to (and must) impose upon it some subjective meaning; interpretation of the sign is a person’s projection of her or his own will.

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48 Ibid.
49 Ibid.
50 Ibid.
51 Revelation 13:7; 15:2
Sartre gives an example of a man who found himself in a situation of poverty, had a miserable experience in an orphanage, lived through a failed romance, and finally failed to qualify for the military. Instead of despairing, the man had to interpret his situation: Sartre asks, “It was a sign, but a sign of what?” Sartre answers that he interpreted it “very cleverly for him” as a sign that he was destined by God to join the clergy, where he became a well-respected Jesuit priest. For Sartre, the sign is ambiguous and contains both our responsibility to choose and our opportunity to create our own future. Likewise, John’s vision of the future and of the number are united in that they both represent his own assertion of agency: his sight is empowering, and his interpretation of the number leads into the final stage of John’s existential self-realization.

“Go Through”

After his vision of the number and the future, John experiences “deadly fear” that the terrifying visions he sees “would swallow up his soul.” He “shout[s] for help” to his mother, father, and Roy, but they can do nothing for him. Next he calls on God to have mercy, and “a voice, for the first time in all his terrible journey, spoke to John” saying “Yes,” and encouraging him, “go through. Go through.” The voice’s call for John to “go through” is clearly a call to action; to go is to be active. John replies to the voice, “lift me up. I can’t go through,” still passively submitting to the forces he is tormented by, hoping God to save him. But the voice insists repeatedly that John move for himself. However, John finds himself immobile, feeling overwhelmed by the visions and sensations of Hell. Then “it came to him that he must move;

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52 Sartre 356
53 Ibid.
54 Mountain 204
55 Ibid., 205
56 Ibid.
57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
for there was a light somewhere, and life, and joy, and singing.” After another series of visions, John discovers with joy and relief that he has “gone through” and emerged from the conversion experience unharmed, whole, and empowered. He also finds that “[i]t was Elisha who had spoken”—not God, as John seems to believe at first. Just like the Jesuit, John has searched for a sign and found it in the encouraging voice of Elisha, thereby accomplishing his own salvation. He rejects his father’s dark religion for Elisha, who is also identified with John’s budding homoerotic desire.

As John faces his father after the dramatic night of conversion, he struggles to muster a “living word” and “conquer that great division between his father and himself.” John fails, however: “it did not come, the living word; in the silence, something died in John, and something came alive.” Reconciliation might not be forthcoming for John and Gabriel, but Gabriel has lost his power over John. The thing that “came alive” in John is his own sense of agency—he must look to his own powers now for the way forward. John finds no word to repair his relationship with Gabriel, but he does find the words to define himself: “I’m saved,” John says confidently, “My witness is in Heaven and my record is on high.” Gabriel’s authority does not matter—John is sure of his salvation.

I have referred to the scene as one of existential conversion because of the way it details John’s throwing off of his father’s religion and simultaneous assumption of his own agency and self-knowledge. However, the metaphor of existential baptism is more apt: John has bathed in the waters of his family’s history and has felt keenly the suffering and death of his ancestors. He

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59 Ibid., 206
60 Ibid., 207
61 Ibid., 208
62 Ibid., 197
63 Ibid., 210
64 Ibid.
has found himself completely alone and then made his own way forward, and now has emerged from the waters with a new life and a new vision. John’s story is the story of Baldwin’s hindsight, where an honest, painful encounter with the past is necessary for an empowered, insightful step forward.
Chapter Two: The Antisocial Artist

After Chapter One’s investigation of Baldwin’s journey backward through his first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, we may now shift our focus to Baldwin’s vision inward. Above all, Baldwin’s *hindsight* prepares him for a clear vision of himself—this we have called *insight*. And it is important to remember that in the Sartrean framework, insight is inherently creative; a person simultaneously discovers and creates him or herself. In Sartre’s words, “man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world—and defines himself afterwards . . . Man is nothing else but that which he creates out of himself.”

Second, insight is relational. Sartre asserts: “I cannot obtain any truth whatsoever about myself, except through the mediation of another.” Baldwin ends the “Autobiographical Notes” which preface *Notes of a Native Son* with a basic statement of identity: “I consider that I have many responsibilities, but none greater than this: to last, as Hemingway says, and get my work done. I want to be an honest man and a good writer.” Keeping the elements of insight in mind, this chapter seeks first to answer the question of how Baldwin’s Sartrean insight informs his identity as he seeks to be “an honest man and a good writer,” and second to proceed to explore his relationship to other artists as a vehicle for finally understanding Baldwin’s concept of art.

**Part I: Baldwin’s Artistic Identity**

Baldwin discusses his identity as a writer most directly and in most depth in his non-fiction. Essays such as *The Fire Next Time*, “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” “Many Thousands Gone,” “The Creative Process,” and “The Discovery of What It Means to Be an American,” contain the bulk of Baldwin’s reflections on his artistic identity. Interviews with Julius Lester

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1 Sartre 349
2 Ibid., 361
3 Notes 9
and Studs Terkel are informative as well, in addition to Baldwin’s correspondence with Today Show host Hugh Downs. For Baldwin, the writer is a unique breed of human who writes powerfully from experience, possesses a clear and piercing vision of self and reality, and lives the lonely life of a maverick. One must remember also that for Baldwin, the terms “writer” and “artist” are nearly synonymous: the writer is certainly a type of artist. Through these nuanced roles, Baldwin discovers and defines his identity as a writer, always privileging the integrity of his art over participation in activism. A thorough investigation of Baldwin’s understanding of his role as a writer will ultimately illuminate his insight, set the stage for an exploration of his foresight, and speak to the question of the relationship of art and activism in the literature of Baldwin and his contemporaries.

First, Baldwin asserts that the writer’s art is inextricably linked to his or her past. He writes, “One writes out of one thing only—one’s own experience. Everything depends on how relentlessly one forces from this experience the last drop, sweet or bitter, it can possibly give.”

As the previous chapter demonstrates, hindsight is absolutely essential to the insight of the writer. In his essay, “The Creative Process,” Baldwin states, “whoever cannot tell himself the truth about his past is trapped in it, is immobilized in the prison of his undiscovered self.”

Baldwin’s self-discovery leans heavily on this truthful vision of the past. Accordingly, Baldwin says of his first novel, essentially a work of imaginative autobiography, “Mountain is the book I had to write if I was ever going to write anything else . . . I had to deal with what hurt me most . . . above all, with my father.”

Writing this novel opens the way for Baldwin to write other stories and engage other questions, but only after he has engaged his own experience.

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4 Ibid., 7
5 Collected Essays 672
6 Bennetts 1
Artistic Vision

There is nothing more central to the identity of a writer for Baldwin than vision, and the first element of the writer’s vision is that it is piercing: Baldwin identifies “the business of the writer” which is “to examine attitudes, to go beneath the surface, to tap the source.” Here Baldwin speaks in terms of ability, but in his essay, “The Creative Process,” to be a writer seems to be a heavy responsibility. The writer-artist is almost cursed with vision, Baldwin asserts:

[The artist] cannot allow any consideration to supersede his responsibility to reveal all that he can possibly discover . . . he must always know that the visible reality hides a deeper one, and that all our action and all our achievement rests on things unseen. A society must assume that it is stable, but the artist must know, and he must let us know, that there is nothing stable under heaven. (670)

This kind of vision is unsettling, and the vision seems to be ongoing. The writer must always discover more and cannot settle for illusion. And with this piercing vision comes an uncomfortable knowledge of the unstable nature of society.

In his introduction to *Nobody Knows My Name*, Baldwin reflects: “I know that self-delusion . . . is a price no writer can afford. His subject is himself and the world and it requires every ounce of stamina he can summon to attempt to look on himself and the world as they are.”

We see that the vision of the writer, although perhaps somewhat involuntary, is not easy or automatic. Baldwin seems to describe a tension between the writer’s irresistible impulse to see and the taxing nature of the task. This duty—owed to himself and to his community—is at the core of the Baldwin’s insight. It is also consistent with Sartre’s articulation of the existentialist worldview. He writes, “[A]ny man who takes refuge [from truth] . . . by inventing some

7 Notes 6
8 Collected Essays 135-36
deterministic doctrine is a self-deceiver.”

Baldwin describes this Sartrean necessity for painful introspection in “The Creative Process”: “But the barrier between oneself and one’s knowledge of oneself is high indeed. . . [W]e cannot [learn] unless we are willing to tell the truth about ourselves, and the truth about us is always at variance with what we wish to be.”

This introspection is painful for anyone, but the writer suffers especially because it is a part of his or her identity in a way that it is not for most people. The writer’s vision is useful, even essential to the health of the community, but it is rarely cheery or flattering.

To avoid the pitfall of understanding Baldwin’s concept of the artist only through himself, it is important also to note his evaluation of other artists. Baldwin offers William Styron as an example of another writer whom he admires for engaging in painful insight in an interview with Julius Lester in 1984. Lester, like many in the contemporary black literary establishment, disapproved of William Styron’s work, Confessions of Nat Turner, on the grounds that the white man had no right to try to write from the perspective of a black slave, and for the work’s “inadequate execution.”

Lester remarks that when the novel was published, Baldwin was “the only black writer . . . who liked it.” Baldwin answers that he admires Styron for his courage in following his need “to put himself in the skin of Nat Turner.” To him, the novel represents “a white Southern writer’s attempt to deal with something that was tormenting him and frightening him.” Baldwin continues to praise Styron, explaining that he read the book as “Confessions of Bill Styron,” since it is “his attempt to grapple with something almost no one in his generation is prepared to even look at.”

Baldwin’s opinion is extremely unpopular, at least among black

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9 Sartre 365
10 Collected Essays 671
11 Last Interview 5
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
writers, but Baldwin was never eager to toe the party line. More to the point, Baldwin’s praise of Styron is consistent with his value of honest vision in the writer. He does not praise Styron for perfectly executing a task of impossible empathy, but for daring to look in the first place.

Aside from a clear and honest vision of the world, Baldwin’s writer must have an eye that finds—or perhaps creates—beauty in unlikely places. “This is the only real concern of the artist,” Baldwin writes, “to recreate out of the disorder of life that order which is art.” 

In “The Creative Process,” Baldwin speaks of a discovery that the writer makes through his or her aloneness: “that life is tragic, and, therefore, unutterably beautiful.” This perception of beauty in tragedy is essential to works of Baldwin such as Go Tell It on the Mountain, Another Country, and Giovanni’s Room, where the author narrates stories fraught with catastrophe and heartbreak in gorgeous, lyrical prose. Baldwin also shares that he finds in Europe something essential to this craft: “a sense of the mysterious and inexorable limits of life, a sense, in a word, of tragedy.” Baldwin’s concept of the sense of tragedy seems linked to his existentialism: the “inexorable limits of life” he mentions are parallel to Sartre’s assertion of man’s forlornness and abandonment. These somewhat tragic touchstones are key to an honest, existential perspective. Baldwin’s identity as an artist is dependent upon finding beauty within tragedy: he has lived a life defined by racial and sexual discrimination and has experienced tragedy firsthand and often. Through the process of coming to terms with this tragedy through hindsight, as explored in the previous chapter, Baldwin finds his artistic vision.

For Baldwin, being an artist also means seeing beauty in that which appears ugly at surface level. Baldwin met his role model and lifelong friend Beauford Delaney while he was

\[16 \text{ Notes 7} \]
\[17 \text{ Collected Essays 671} \]
\[18 \text{ Ibid., 142} \]
\[19 \text{ Sartre 353} \]
still living in Harlem as a teenager, while Delaney was living in Greenwich Village. Delaney was a black painter whom David Leeming, Baldwin’s biographer credits for teaching Baldwin “how to see beauty even in the metaphorical and literal gutter.”20 Leeming narrates a lesson the future author learned from the painter: One day Delaney began staring into the gutter as the two waited for a light to change, and urged Baldwin to look. Baldwin replied that he saw only the water flowing past. Delany insisted, “Look again.” Only then did Baldwin notice that the oil swirling on the surface of the water transformed the reflection of the buildings and sky above. Leeming writes, “It was a lesson in complex vision that would remain with James Baldwin the writer.”21 This anecdote expands Baldwin’s concept of the artist’s vision: it is as much about the effort of perception as the apparent beauty of the scene. It may not be going too far to say that for Baldwin, perception even creates beauty. A quotation from Baldwin in a letter to The New York Times Book Review sheds light on this concept: He says of his art, “I am aiming at what Henry James called ‘perception at the pitch of passion.’”22 Baldwin’s passionate, creative perception defines him as an artist.

Baldwin, the Maverick

Aside from his piercing, beauty-finding artistic vision, Baldwin insists that to be an artist he must be a maverick. Baldwin conceives of himself as a maverick because he professes to believe in no ideology, philosophy, or religion, is on no one’s “team,” and experiences profound existential isolation. At the end of the “Autobiographical Notes” that preface Notes of a Native Son, Baldwin states: “I think all theories are suspect, that the finest principles may have to be modified, or may even be pulverized by the demands of life, and that one must find, therefore, one’s own moral center and move through the world hoping that this center will guide one

20 Leeming 34
21 Ibid.
22 “Response to Reviews” 2
Baldwin seems to distrust ideology on the grounds that it is not a reliable compass for leading one’s life—instead one must look within to find a “moral center” by which to move in the world. He is repelled by the idea of guiding his life by any set of rules outside himself. Baldwin’s quotation recalls Sartre’s critique of “fine theories, full of hope but lacking real foundations,” which “are too abstract” and therefore “break down when we come to defining action.” This attitude is certainly consistent with Sartre’s existentialism, but may be traced in part to Baldwin’s religious background as well.

As is narrated dramatically in the semi-autobiographical Mountain, Baldwin grew up in a charismatic Christian environment. As a teenager, Baldwin preached for three years and even became “something of a sensation in several Harlem churches.” However, Baldwin soon experienced a falling out with the Church. He reflected in an interview with Quincy Troupe in 1987, just before his death, that after his experience in the pulpit he became disillusioned with the Church: “I didn’t believe in the Christian Church anymore, not in the way I had . . . they were so self-righteous. They didn’t come with real deep love.” The Church was meant to stand for something wholly good, but turned out to be hypocritical, and Baldwin abandoned his faith both in religion and in any institution or ideology at all. Looking back in another interview, Baldwin remarks, “You see, I am not a member of anything. I joined the Church when I was very, very young, and haven’t joined anything since.” This statement ignores his brief stint as a socialist, but its significance remains: Baldwin’s departure from the Church triggered a lifelong aversion to joining any kind of institution.

23 Notes 9
24 Sartre 360; 366
25 Leeming 25-28
26 Last Interview 95
27 Ibid., 60
28 Leeming 46
Baldwin’s falling out with religion seemed to isolate him more permanently from all groups that claimed to have a lease on truth. Another factor that likely led to this self-isolation is Baldwin’s double alienation from the white and black world as a gay man. He says in an interview with Julius Lester, “I was a maverick . . . in the sense that I depended on neither the white nor the black world . . . What club could I have joined?.” Baldwin’s gay identity made him an outsider to black and white people alike, since both communities largely disapproved of his sexuality, and it seems likely that this contributed to his decision to fashion himself as a maverick. Soon this essay will explore how Baldwin’s distrust of affiliations and institutions influenced his personal philosophy of activism.

Baldwin’s sense of existential isolation is key to his self-avowed identity as a maverick. He describes the feeling of profound loneliness in his essay, “The Creative Process”:

Perhaps the primary distinction of the artist is that he must actively cultivate the state which most men, necessarily must avoid: the state of being alone . . . The aloneness of which I speak is much more like the aloneness of birth or death. It is like the fearful aloneness which one sees in the eyes of someone who is suffering, whom we cannot help.

Or it is like the aloneness of love . . . [emphasis added] 29

Baldwin, the artist, is isolated by several factors. One of these is his vision, which is so piercing that he does not hold to the same assumptions about reality as his peers and is thus isolated from them. The second is his confrontation of his state in the universe, which allows for no comfortable delusion or false hope—this too is isolating. Last, the artist-maverick must purposefully isolate himself to look inward and “conquer the great wilderness of himself.”30 He writes that the artist must continue doing this in order to achieve his or her purpose: “to make the

29 Collected Essays 669
30 Ibid., 669
world a more human dwelling place.”\textsuperscript{31} It is indeed a large responsibility and a lonely existence to be the kind of writer Baldwin describes, and this is perhaps why he says to Studs Terkel, “I don’t think that, seriously speaking, anybody in his right mind would want to be a writer. But you do discover that you are a writer and then you haven’t got any choice. You live that life or you won’t live any.”\textsuperscript{32}

**Part II: Baldwin in Dialogue**

The mid-twentieth century signified a turning point for the definition and development of black American literature. Authors like Richard Wright published works that shed light on the plight of black people in America through social protest novels, which brought patterns of oppression into sharp relief and excited powerful emotional responses in readers. Such novels began to examine black psychology in relation to the oppressive societal forces that dictate and degrade the lives of black Americans. The function of these novels as catalysts for public dialogue and social progress raised important questions for the contemporary literary establishment as well as the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement: Can the protest novel simultaneously exist as both a work of literature and a vehicle for activism? Does one purpose detract from, or enhance the other? Many authors have wrestled with these questions, both in literary criticism and in their own creative works, but the works of writers Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin have transformed the canon forever.

Ellison redefined the protest novel with his seminal work, *Invisible Man*, narrating the protagonist’s intellectual and social exploration of movements like black nationalism and Marxism through his experience as a black man who has become invisible simply because of (particularly white) society’s inability to see him. In contrast to the social realist works of

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{32} Last Interview 20
Richard Wright, *Invisible Man* is written in an open, experimental style typical to the Modernist movement, with a heavy reliance on visionary symbolism. Baldwin wrote his own kind of novel; he sharply criticized the work of Wright for its simplistic portrayal of black psychology, and praised Ellison for his ability to “utilize in language, and brilliantly, some of the ambiguity and irony of Negro life.” In contrast, Baldwin wrote stories of nuanced, individual experiences that also happened to touch on issues of race and sexuality, since these issues were most central to his experience. In fact, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* reads as autobiography as much as fiction, describing experiences very similar to the author’s own childhood as the son of a storefront preacher in Harlem. Both Ellison’s and Baldwin’s works can be read in response to the aforementioned questions concerning the nexus of art and activism, but their deeds and words outside of their novels also address the question. While Baldwin expressed contempt for protest novels and the ill-advised union of art and activism, he was involved in the Civil Rights Movement through essay writing, speech giving, and other forms of advocacy. Conversely, Ellison’s novel engages explicitly with social movements and relevant concepts in the abstract, but he criticizes Baldwin and other authors who openly participate in the activism of the 1950s and 60s for undermining the integrity of their craft. A comparison of these two authors’ works and deeds will provide a useful exploration of the question of literature as art and activism, which remains relevant in the twenty-first century as the roles of author and activist continue to coincide.

**Critical Comparisons**

The scholarly conversation around the art and activism of Baldwin and Ellison—two of the most famous and influential black American authors of the twentieth century—is expansive. Scholar Jerry H. Bryant lays out some of the major contrasts he sees between the authors: “They

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Notes 8; 22-23
differ considerably from each other, certainly. Ellison is symbolic and allegorical, Baldwin impressionistic and metaphorical.”34 He holds, however, that despite their differences, they both “indicate the surfacing of the black culture's complexity, a greater self-awareness, and a more intense determination to embrace their blackness as a high value and as a means for changing the face of America.”35 Bryant’s comparison is apt, especially in its recognition of the two authors’ shared significance to African American literature, but is also inherently problematic in its assessment of “the black culture” as something that has only lately become complex. Perhaps Dr. Bryant has been unable to recognize the complexity of black American thought and culture before reading Baldwin and Ellison, but the black American experience is and has always been every bit as complex as that of any other culture.

Bryant also misses an important contrast between the two authors in Baldwin’s unique concern with psychological complexity and nuanced, individual experience. However, the scholar’s insight into the two authors’ alternate roles paints a fuller picture. He writes, “Ellison is [the freedom movement’s] philosopher, clear, detached, logical. Baldwin is its poet, and brings to the struggle for a higher consciousness a deeply personal touch, a special sensitivity, a set of nerves and responses he displays to the world with a candor that sometimes verges on the embarrassing.”36 Although Bryant’s characterization of him as the movement’s (singular) poet ignores the presence of other similarly gifted authors, he is correct that Baldwin’s sensitivity is one of the qualities that set him apart as a writer. Mountain in particular is full of the micro-perceptions and emotionally fraught scenes that characterize his fiction. The typing of Ellison as the philosopher, although somewhat limiting, is consistent with his treatment of concepts related to existentialism and Marxist dogma concerning the individual as opposed to the collective.

34 Bryant 180
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid., 184
Scholar Douglas Field looks carefully at the political backgrounds of both Ellison and Baldwin to conduct a useful comparison. He notes that both authors have a history of involvement in Marxist circles, and tries to determine the ways in which this history has influenced their work and legacy. Field describes Baldwin’s background in Marxist circles as “a political aesthetic that has been either disavowed or airbrushed out of biographical portraits where Baldwin is frequently described as a political lone wolf, a position he helped to maintain.”

According to Field, Baldwin’s previous affiliations are significant, and exert a formative influence on his work even as he disavows any explicit ideologies. For example, Field argues, “his emphasis on the individual . . . connects him to the avant-garde Left” which is typically focused on notions of individualism. Field’s criticism raises an important question for all scholars of Baldwin: How credible is the author’s insistence of his own intellectual independence? His claim to have no ideology at all is hardly realistic, and this thesis demonstrates the immense intellectual influence of Sartre on Baldwin. It is more important to consider Baldwin’s motivation in making such a dubious statement, which speaks to his thoughts on the relationship between art and activism in literature. Baldwin’s disavowal of allegiance and ideology makes most sense as a statement about the integrity of his art, which he strove to keep at arm’s length from his activism.

Also notable in Field’s article is his note that Ellison attempted to censor his “radical past.” Field tells us that Ellison was heavily involved in Communist circles from 1937 to 1947, but that he used all of the rhetorical skill at his disposal to distance himself from these associations later in life, particularly his writing for Communist publications like New Masses.

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37 Field 836
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid., 834
40 Ibid.
Field offers a useful question with which to begin an analysis of Ellison’s relationship to activism: What caused the author’s later disillusionment following his early, prolonged involvement in leftist circles? Scholar Carol Polsgrove tells us that Ellison, prior to World War II, was “a passionate Marxist and probably a member of the party.”[^41] But apparently he “emerged from the war despairing and disillusioned.”[^42] According to Polsgrove, Ellison felt that the Communist Party had committed an unforgivable betrayal by putting the political interests of the Soviet Union ahead of the welfare of black Americans in asking them to support the war once the United States and the Soviet Union found themselves fighting on the same side.[^43] This only added to Ellison’s perception of other shortcomings of the party: “its rigidity, its lack of support for individual artistic vision.”[^44] So, by the end of the war, Ellison left the party. And although his letters indicate that he still considered himself a Marxist, he began writing *Invisible Man* out of his bitterness toward the Communist Party. He told Richard Wright, a close personal friend as well as literary mentor, in a letter in 1945, “[W]e can, with a few well chosen, well written words, smash all that crummy filth to hell.”[^45]

Next it is important to more closely examine this shift in Ellison’s allegiance. He does not leave Marxism behind—in fact, he tells Wright that Marxism is still his only hope (Polsgrove 69)[^46]—but he abandons his political ties to any affiliated parties. To put it another way, Ellison holds to the Marxist ideology but rejects the ways it has been implemented as ineffectual and perverse. Instead of the political activities of his youth, Ellison devotes himself completely to literature as activism. In one interview in 1955, Ellison claims that there is “no dichotomy

[^41]: Polsgrove 66
[^42]: Ibid., 68
[^43]: Ibid.
[^44]: Ibid.
[^45]: Letter to Richard Wright
[^46]: Polsgrove 69
between art and protest.” In his essay, “Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity,” Ellison lays out his view of the relationship between activism and literature, saying that literature’s purpose is as “an ethical instrument,” and that white American writers largely neglected this essential element of their calling in the twentieth century. In another interview Ellison states that, as issues of race and colonialism have come to a head, the “possibilities for art have increased rather than lessened.” So the comparison to Baldwin is stark: Ellison finds that literature is essentially ethical, and that to neglect activism in his fiction would be to betray his gift as a writer. Ellison’s contrast will act to greater inform the investigation as it proceeds to a closer look at Baldwin’s objection to activism in art.

**Reluctant Activism**

A distinction that many critics miss as they puzzle over Baldwin’s claims of intellectual independence is that he seemed to view his novels and essays as two widely different modes of work. It might not be overstating things to say that Baldwin would not consider his essays art at all, while the novel, with its carefully constructed characters and sensitively portrayed psychological profiles, was the height of his artistic work (with appropriate recognition to his plays and unpublished screenplays as well). Novels like *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Another Country* are engaged with the unique experiences of psychologically complex characters and do not address concepts like racism, sexuality, or American identity from a position at all like the philosophical, Jeremiad framework of Baldwin’s essays.

From what Baldwin wrote to Hugh Downs, host of *The Today Show* in the 1960s, in a letter on May 11, 1966, it seems that he saw these essays as a necessary but unfortunate distraction from his work as an artist: “I did not like, I donot [sic] like, the role I played, and

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47 *Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison* 212  
48 Shadow 10-11  
49 *Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison* 224
continue to play; I had not anticipated it, nor did I feel myself particularly qualified for it. I did not like to hear myself saying the things I said. “\textsuperscript{50}” From his own words it is apparent that Baldwin found explicit advocacy for moral causes exhausting; he yearned for a life as a writer. He continues:

I was profoundly demoralized. And I’m certainly bitter to the extent that I felt, very strongly, that I would certainly not be the first black man to watch his gifts engulfed in the sewers of the Social Cause – where my youth had vanished already. And I determined . . . precisely for the health of the Social Cause, not to allow this to happen.\textsuperscript{51}

While Baldwin does not explicitly refer to essays in this letter, it ends as he informs Downs that he is “coming away” from activist efforts for the purpose of writing a novel. Baldwin saw that his gifts were wasted in moralizing about the state of America, but also saw it as necessary to do so. Thus the man who only ever wanted to be an artist—who imagined his role as a writer as similar to that of a jazz musician\textsuperscript{52}—found himself in the reluctant position of public intellectual.

But the roles should not overlap, in Baldwin’s opinion. According to the author’s philosophy, separation between art and activism is best for art and best for activism.

This investigation has explored Baldwin’s existentially informed identity and has compared his artistic ethic with that of Ralph Ellison. It has been established that Baldwin only reluctantly engaged in activism, and that he saw his art in a separate sphere from efforts for social progress. However, a deeper look into Baldwin’s views on the ethical nature of art is required to understand why he keeps activism at such a distance from his literature. This will yield a better understanding of Baldwin’s conception of the nature of art and will amount to the culmination of my evaluation of the writer’s Sartrean insight. Baldwin’s critique of Wright in the

\textsuperscript{50} Letter to Hugh Downs 1
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 2
\textsuperscript{52} “Baldwin’s Response” 2
first part of *Notes of a Native Son* will begin this final section of the chapter, and a few other essays and interviews will inform the discussion as well.

**Part III: Baldwin’s Anti-Activist Art**

Baldwin addresses his disinterest in activism thoughtfully in the “Autobiographical Notes” that preface *Notes of a Native Son*. He writes:

[Social activity] is all, indeed, that has made possible the Negro’s progress. Nevertheless, social affairs are not generally speaking the writer’s prime 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 their clarity . . .

Here Baldwin affirms the value of activism as an effort to achieve social progress while at the same time excusing himself from it. He claims that his role as a writer makes “social affairs” irrelevant to him, and cites his need to see clearly as his reasoning. It is notable that this justification depends on the integrity of the artist’s vision—Baldwin believes that his artistic vision is not suited to activism.

In “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” Baldwin levels a critique at works of protest literature such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, as well as those who try to convince authors that they must emulate these kinds of works. His objection is in the same vein as his statement of exemption from activism above. Baldwin writes that his—or the artist’s—devotion to truth is the same as his devotion to the human being: it comes with the responsibility to see clearly and honestly. However, when protest literature reduces the human being to “merely a member of a Society or a Group or a deplorable conundrum to be explained by Science,” it strays from the truth.

Baldwin warns of the danger of “denying” or “evading” the complexity of the human being and

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53 Notes 6  
54 Notes 15
thereby denying the “complexity of ourselves.”\textsuperscript{55} He continues: “It is [the] power of revelation which is the business of the novelist, this journey toward a more vast reality.”\textsuperscript{56} Baldwin’s objection to activist literature is directly tied to his sense of identity as an artist: to simplify one’s view of the world would be to compromise the gift of artistic vision. Baldwin sees profound, complex revelation as his responsibility, and resents the claim that he “must make formal declaration that he is involved in, and affected by, the lives of other people” and “say something improving about this somewhat self-evident fact.”\textsuperscript{57} Activist literature, to put it bluntly, is simply below his pay grade.

**Native Son’s Failure**

Baldwin’s critique of Wright’s *Native Son*, set out in this essay as well as “Many Thousands Gone,” takes his objection to the union of activism and literature a step further. He argues that writing protest literature is not simply a matter of putting “the good of society” before “niceties of style or characterization,” as many claim.\textsuperscript{58} It is not just an error of style to reduce a human being to a stereotype or a myth—it amounts to dehumanization. One cannot simply determine to write aesthetically inferior literature in order to accomplish a greater social good. Baldwin says that this sentiment is dependent upon a false presumption, which he corrects: “literature and sociology are not one and the same.”\textsuperscript{59} He argues that this confusion signifies Americans’ error of allowing their “passion for categorization, life neatly fitted into pegs” to pass over from science and other fields grounded in utilitarianism into art, which is infinitely

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 15-16  
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 16  
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 18  
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 19
more ambiguous and complex.⁶⁰ The result is “an unforeseen, paradoxical distress; confusion, a breakdown of meaning.”⁶¹

Baldwin believes that Americans betray literature and its merit by trying to impose categorization and definition upon it. He writes, “Those categories which were meant to define and control the world for us have boomeranged us into chaos; in which limbo we whirl, clutching at the straws of our definitions.”⁶² The attempt to better comprehend and control meaning by simplifying and quantifying it has undermined our grasp of reality, Baldwin seems to argue. The human being is “resolutely indefinable, unpredictable” and contains a “web of ambiguity, paradox, this hunger, danger, darkness.”⁶³ Most of society is afraid to face this chaotic, complex human identity, and thus tries to avoid it through definition and illusion.

This “terror of the human being” pervades protest literature, Baldwin argues, and results in “the determination to cut him down to size.”⁶⁴ He claims that Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Native Son, and other such novels all buy into this fear, regardless of their authors’ good intentions. As a result of this fear, “the necessity to find a lie more palatable than the truth has been handed down and memorized and persists yet with a terrible power.”⁶⁵ The conspiracy of American society to uphold this lie in order to avoid the painful experience of insight manifests itself in the construction of a determinist American theology that justifies oppression by defining black people as inferior. Baldwin writes, “It is the peculiar triumph of society—and its loss—that it is able to convince those people to whom it has given inferior status of the reality of this decree.”⁶⁶

Baldwin argues that Richard Wright, in creating Bigger Thomas as a symbol for “the monster

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⁶⁰ Ibid.
⁶¹ Ibid.
⁶² Ibid.
⁶³ Ibid., 15
⁶⁴ Ibid., 16
⁶⁵ Ibid.
⁶⁶ Ibid. 20
created by the American republic,” has confessed to the belief “that Negro life is in fact as
debased and impoverished as our theology claims.”67 In Baldwin’s view, Native Son does not
challenge racial oppression, but actually perpetuates it by affirming the narratives that justify it.
Baldwin states that Wright’s novel is “a continuation, a complement of that monstrous legend it
was written to destroy.”68

Throughout this critique of protest literature, Baldwin refers to the racist American
theology as a cage that is used to trap people in a reality that oppresses black people and
dehumanizes both black and white people. He writes, “escape is not effected through a bitter
railing against this trap.”69 To attempt to escape the cage is to accept it, Baldwin argues, and
thereby make it real. If we do so, “we take our shape” both “within and against” it.70 To write a
character who lives within the cage is to affirm its reality, which is ultimately the same as
affirming the theological implication “that black is the color of damnation.” This is the tragedy
of Bigger, Baldwin writes: “not that he is cold or black or hungry, not even that he is American,
black, but that he has accepted a theology that denies him life.”71

Baldwin urges that art should take a different approach. If Americans would only face the
complexity of the human being without trying to define or control it, Baldwin promises that
within it we could “find at once ourselves and the power that will free us from ourselves.”72 He
writes, “our humanity is our burden, our life; we need not battle for it; we need only to do what is
infinitely more difficult—that is, accept it.”73 Baldwin’s insight rejects the utilitarian lens of
protest literature, and determines to look thoughtfully and faithfully inward and write about his

67 Ibid., 41
68 Ibid., 22
69 Ibid., 20
70 Ibid.
71 Ibid., 22
72 Ibid.
73 Ibid., 23
own experience. His insight also identifies a profound moral possibility for art, which is ironically realized only when the activist tendencies of protest literature are prohibited: art can facilitate our understanding of the self and the other through complex, honest, beauty-finding vision. This is the fruit of Baldwin’s Sartrean insight.
Chapter Three: James Baldwin, M. D.

This investigation has demonstrated that Baldwin’s hindsight—his critical engagement with the past—is crucial to his insight—the profound realization and exploration of his identity—and that both kinds of sight depend on his relationships with other people, especially family and loved ones. Now we take the last step of our exploration to find the ways that Baldwin’s inward and backward vision allow him to look outward and, through his understanding of others, evaluate the health and future of the community. This foresight brings Baldwin’s self-identified roles as both prophet and witness into light, in contrast to his more private roles of maverick and antisocial artist, explored in the last chapter. The texts that most readily demonstrate Baldwin’s forward and outward-looking engagement with America include *The Fire Next Time*, *Notes of a Native Son*, and “The Creative Process,” as well as his correspondence with Today Show Hugh Downs and a handful of interviews.

Baldwin’s foresight is rooted in Sartre’s belief that inward discovery is inseparable from outward understanding. Sartre writes that “[when] we are attaining to ourselves in the presence of the other . . . we are just as certain of the other as we are of ourselves.”¹ He continues, “I cannot obtain any truth whatsoever about myself, except through the mediation of another . . . Under these conditions, the intimate discovery of myself is at the same time the revelation of the other.”² Likewise, Baldwin’s knowledge of himself has come only through the facilitation of others, and this intimate personal understanding also affords him a kind of universal understanding that connects him to all other people. It turns out that the piercing look inward opens the way for a perceptive look outward as well.

¹ Sartre 361
² Ibid.
**Prophetic Foresight**

Baldwin’s subject is America, and his *foresight* allows him to diagnose the state of the nation, through an understanding of the complex, convoluted relationship between black and white people and the way that the country’s history contributes to its pathology. Baldwin’s *foresight* is inherently creative, in that he not only extrapolates the possible, alternate futures of the country based on its current state, but also plays a part in inventing one. Thus based on his diagnosis, he is able to suggest (and play his own part in implementing) “treatment.” Baldwin prescribes revelatory love as central to America’s path forward and urges that the nation must seek to neutralize forces that seek to define and control black (and white) people. Finally, Baldwin’s *foresight* yields a sternly optimistic prognosis for America, drawing on Sartre’s existentialism, which emphasizes the “complete and profound responsibility” of the individual.3 Baldwin’s prophetic message is as follows: the price to be paid is high, the odds are long, but the future is yet unmade, and Americans have the power to create it.

It is perhaps best to begin with Baldwin’s articulation of his roles as witness and prophet. These terms are largely interchangeable, and Baldwin most often refers to himself as witness rather than prophet. The notable difference in the way I define the terms is that the witness testifies primarily to present and past experience, whereas the prophet uses experience to see and give warnings of the future. In a 1984 interview with Julius Lester, Baldwin discusses his role as a witness rather than a spokesperson. He reflects that when he was in the church, “you were supposed to bear witness to the truth. Now, later on, you wonder what in the world truth is, but you do know what a lie is.”4 So Baldwin sees exposing the various lies in which the community believes as central to his role as witness. Baldwin clarifies that he is a witness instead of a

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3 Sartre 351
4 *Last Interview* 44
spokesperson because he never attempts to speak for others, but is instead a witness “to whence I came, where I am. Witness to what I’ve seen and the possibilities that I think I see.”\(^5\) A few elements construct Baldwin’s as witness role: the witness is an individual agent and cannot speak for others, the witness testifies to the truth (or untruth) that they see, and the witness’s experience is connected to their sense of the present and the future. The first two elements are important, but the last concerns Baldwin’s *foresight* most directly. He suggests that his prophetic vision of the future’s potentialities depends on his experience thus far.

Baldwin defends his vision of America’s future in response to one of Lester’s next questions: “I won’t say I believe, because I know that we can be better than we are . . . We can also be infinitely worse, but I know that the world we live in now is not necessarily the best world we can make.”\(^6\) This is not a frivolous statement of optimism that assures a bright future ahead, but rather one that is carefully measured and far from certain. Baldwin’s optimism is rooted in his experience of profound suffering and his knowledge of the dismal state of things in his country. He claims to know that the situation can improve, if for no other reason that it is already so poor. Baldwin makes a similar statement in a 1963 interview with Dr. Kenneth Clark, “I can’t be a pessimist, because I’m alive.”\(^7\) In order to utter such a statement, the speaker must have experienced such extreme adversity that life is no longer one of his assumptions. This is a dark place indeed from which to draw one’s optimism. Baldwin continues, “I’m forced to believe that we can survive whatever we must survive.”\(^8\) This is a small piece of the creative element in Baldwin’s *foresight*: Baldwin’s beliefs are stubborn and insist upon an ability to affect the future, even if that only means surviving what seems to be un-survivable. So Baldwin’s prophetic *sight*

\(^5\) Ibid. 43-44  
\(^6\) Ibid., 45  
\(^7\) *Conversations* 45  
\(^8\) Ibid.
into the future is rooted in his role as a witness to his experience, and it is optimistic by necessity.

Baldwin elaborates on this measured optimism, tying it to what he calls a “sense of tragedy.” The last chapter explored the way that Baldwin’s sense of tragedy related to the beauty he saw in the world and produced in art. In this chapter, a different definition is useful. A sense of tragedy is “the ability to look on things as they are and survive your losses, or even not survive them—to know that your losses are coming.” He continues, “To know that they are coming is the only possible insurance you have, a faint insurance, that you will survive them.” Baldwin’s sense of tragedy involves a certain amount of pessimism even as it undergirds his measured optimism—it entails knowing that adversity will come, but taking the steps one can to survive it.

In a letter replying to Hugh Downs, host of the Today Show in the 1960s, Baldwin reflects on the way that his sense of tragedy and somewhat pessimistic optimism play into his reluctant role as prophet. He writes, “my ‘doom-mongering’ . . . was based on the hope that to describe a danger was to be enabled to avert it.” Baldwin is conscious of the morbidity of his predictions, and he sees in them a creative element—or at least he hopes they entail an ability to affect the future. And his reluctance to make such dismal predictions is evident in his words: “I did not like, I donot [sic] like, the role I played, and continue to play.” He continues, “I have grown older and sadder . . . because my prophecies were, before my eyes, fulfilled.” Baldwin understands his role as a writer as prophetic and it seems that occupying such a role takes a toll.

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9 Last Interview 32
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
12 Letter to Hugh Downs 1
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.

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And even though he hopes that his gift of prophecy will enable him to affect the future, this is often not the case.

**Diagnosing America**

The first stage of Baldwin’s foresight is his look outward at the health of the nation. Through the universal understanding he has gained through his own self-discovery, the writer is able to understand the relationships and legacies that contribute to the national psychosis. There are a few root causes of this large scale illness, which Baldwin identifies: First, that the wealth and success of the country is built on the enslavement and murder of countless black people. Second, that Americans “have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it.”\(^\text{15}\) In short, the second element is America’s inability and unwillingness to face up to its crimes. America’s lack of confrontation with its dark history comes at a price: to prevent this painful realization, the nation must define and control black people in a way that justifies their oppression and keeps the hands of white people clean. This leads to the continued dehumanization of both black and white people, since the original crime is continued and morally degrades the perpetrator just as it oppresses the victims. The coming discussion will expand each of these elements, which make up what Baldwin calls the American dilemma.

The first and most obvious cause of America’s state—what Baldwin calls the “American dilemma”—is its guilt for “the Negro’s past.”\(^\text{16}\) In Baldwin’s words: “rope, fire, torture, castration, infanticide, rape; death and humiliation.”\(^\text{17}\) Hundreds of years of slavery and many more of racial oppression leave a permanent mark on the nation’s conscience and irreparably damage the relationship between black and white people. Such a fracture inevitably damages the

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\(^{15}\) *Fire Next Time* 5

\(^{16}\) Ibid. 98

\(^{17}\) Ibid.
nation’s health and demands accounting. Baldwin emphasizes that the price is high, and no nation could escape unscathed after such abhorrent crimes. At the end of his essay “Down at the Cross,” he speaks of this price in terms of revenge: “historical vengeance, a cosmic vengeance, based on the law that we recognize when we say, ‘Whatever goes up must come down.’”\(^\text{18}\) This first element of enormous guilt is severe enough, but Baldwin writes that America’s attitude toward it is all the more damning.

America’s crimes in conjunction with its willful ignorance and pretended innocence constitute the greatest part of its guilt, in Baldwin’s mind. “[I]t is not permissible that the authors of devastation should also be innocent,” he writes, “It is the innocence which constitutes the crime.”\(^\text{19}\) The relationship between America’s crimes and its pretended innocence parallels the relationship between its past and present sins. Thus, Baldwin charges white America with refusing to atone for its past sins; its innocence is actually its guilt. White America doubles its sin by refusing to face and fully accept responsibility for the past, and prevents itself from putting meaningful distance between itself and its guilty history. Baldwin puts it another way: “It is a sentimental error, therefore, to believe that the past is dead; it means nothing to say that it is all forgotten . . . It is not a question of memory.”\(^\text{20}\) Memory—America’s own acknowledgement of the past—does not have any bearing on its reality, Baldwin argues. The effects are present regardless of America’s memory, but instead America suppresses knowledge of them. Baldwin speaks of this “remarkable ability” on the part of Americans “to alchemize all bitter truths into an innocuous but piquant confection and to transform their moral contradictions, or public

\(\text{18} \) Ibid., 104
\(\text{19} \) Ibid., 5-6
\(\text{20} \) Notes 30
discussion of such contradictions, into proud decoration.”\textsuperscript{21} This insistence on avoiding such “bitter truths” is what Baldwin identifies as the root of America’s problems.

The author argues that in order to avoid the sins of their past, Americans must avoid seeing black people. He agrees with a sentiment of Ralph Ellison that “[t]o be a Negro in this country is really . . . never to be looked at.”\textsuperscript{22} Baldwin writes that white people cannot stand to see black people because they have identify them so strongly with “all the agony, and pain, and the danger, and the passion, and the torment . . . of which everyone in this country is terrified.”\textsuperscript{23} So white Americans separate themselves from black Americans based on their own fear. This separation incurs a price that is separate from the price for their original sin of slavery. Baldwin writes, “Consider the extraordinary price, the absolutely prohibitive price, the South has paid to keep the Negro in his place” and continues to reflect on “what a terrible price the country has paid for this effort to keep a distance between themselves and black people”\textsuperscript{24} The need not to see results from white Americans’ fear of confronting their own guilt, but their efforts to avoid this guilt only increase it.

Baldwin explains that this attempt at separation does violence to the American psyche, because it is unnatural. Baldwin refers to the “terrible depth of involvement” between black and white people, whether people are willing to admit it or not, which makes such a separation so disastrous for America.\textsuperscript{25} Baldwin emphasizes that it is the complexity and depth of the relationship that exists between black and white people that makes white people’s crimes so painful:

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 32  
\textsuperscript{22} Last Interview 8  
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
It is not simply the relationship of oppressed to oppressor, of master to slave, nor is it motivated merely by hatred; it is also, literally and morally, a blood relationship, perhaps the most profound reality of the American experience, and we cannot begin to unlock it until we accept how very much it contains of the force and anguish and terror of love [emphasis added].

America’s problem is not as simple as one of simple hatred—the element of love contributes to America’s pain and fear because of the cognitive dissonance it induces. White and black Americans are family, regardless of the ghastly history that has made them so, and this fact makes the state of their relationship all the more tragic. White Americans do not know what to do when confronted by a black face that simultaneously excites so many conflicting emotions within themselves, so they live in constant fear, both of black people and of themselves.

Baldwin discusses the impact of this relationship on the American psychology. He sees the identity of white people as completely tied up in their relationship to and thoughts about black people. In his own words: “What we really feel about [a black person] is involved with all that we feel about everything, about everyone, about ourselves.” Thus, anything that white people do to black people is also something that they do to themselves. Baldwin writes, “in our estrangement from [black people] is the depth of our estrangement from ourselves.” America is sick because it contributes to this inward turmoil every day, with every act of oppression and every refusal to confront reality and history; the nation finds itself in an identity crisis. Baldwin asserts, “Our dehumanization of the Negro then is indivisible from our dehumanization of

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26 Notes 42
27 Ibid., 25
28 Ibid.
ourselves: the loss of our own identity is the price we pay for our annulment of his.” Thus, Baldwin’s diagnosis identifies America’s disease as self-inflicted.

Baldwin’s diagnosis of the American dilemma involves a deeper look at what is involved in the self-estrangement and mutual dehumanization he describes. In order to hold black people in a place safely removed from the national conscience, America does its best to define them in a way that justifies their marginalized place by identifying them with darkness and damnation. Baldwin testifies to this in his essay “My Dungeon Shook,” published as a part of The Fire Next Time. He writes, “The details and symbols of your life have been deliberately constructed to make you believe what white people say about you.” Baldwin argues the American psychosis ensures that not only white people believe in the degrading definitions that America imposes on black people, but that black people must accept them too, in order to achieve the justification of oppression he describes. He gives this warning and offers an encouragement: “[W]hat they believe, as well as what they do and cause you to endure, does not testify to your inferiority but to their inhumanity and fear.” Through this advice Baldwin the artistic physician speaks to the heart of America’s illness: it is comprised of fear and inhumanity of a people completely overcome by self-delusion.

Baldwin discusses the ways that Americans define and control black people in terms of a “theology” that enforces negative views of black people. The American theology relegates black people to a place of justified oppression while sparing white people of guilt through a historical narrative that glorifies white supremacy. Baldwin refers to this “collection of myths to which white Americans cling” including the lies “that their ancestors were all freedom-loving heroes [and] . . . that Americans have always dealt honorably with Mexicans and Indians and all other

29 Ibid., 26
30 Fire Next Time 8
31 Ibid.
neighbors . . .”  

Baldwin emphasizes that these myths are used to define black people not only in white minds, but in black minds too, which is an even greater tragedy. He writes, “The American image of the Negro lives also in the Negro’s heart; and when he has surrendered to this image life has no other possible reality.”  

So it becomes apparent that America’s sickness is founded not only in oppression and denial, but in delusion. These beliefs about black people shape reality regardless of their immateriality.

**Healing the Nation**

Baldwin’s foresight is not only perceptive, but it is creative. The author sees outward and forward, and he responds to what he sees. With an understanding of the historical and present factors that contribute to the future, Baldwin possesses insight into the ways that the future might be influenced. He is a prophet, providing warnings so that Americans might hear and alter their trajectory, but also as a doctor who diagnoses the country’s illness, prescribes treatment, and offers a prognosis, although an uncertain one. As Baldwin has evaluated America’s illness as the result of essentially two factors—its guilt and its feigned innocence—his solution seeks to address the two. And it is only by breaking through the second that America may truly face the first.

Baldwin makes it clear that an honest look inward is the only path toward untangling the convolutions of the American conscience. Only a painfully honest assessment of the history and present state of our society will allow the nation to move forward. As one might expect, Baldwin suggests that the artist is absolutely crucial to this process of self-discovery. Just as he had to look inward in order to become himself and claim his identity as an artist, Baldwin and other writers must force Americans to take equally painful looks at themselves. Baldwin describes his

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32 Ibid., 101
33 Notes 38
responsibility to do so: “My responsibility to them is to try to tell the truth as I see it—not so much about my private life, as about their private lives.” This truth will hopefully trigger processes of self-discovery. Sartre writes, “the intimate discovery of myself is at the same time the revelation of the other,” and Baldwin elaborates on the role of art in this process. He defines art as “a kind of confession” in which a person’s inward discovery turns outward with a snowball effect. Baldwin writes, “if you can examine and face your life, you can discover the terms with which you are connected to other lives, and they can discover, too, the terms with which they are connected to other people.” So, according to Baldwin, the artist facilitates the nation’s self-discovery through offering his or her artistic confession, which changes the self-perception of those who encounter it.

Considering that the type of self-discovery that Baldwin believes the artist must facilitate for the good of the nation is uncomfortable, to say the least, he asserts that the artist must necessarily work against those who are responsible for stability and maintenance of the status quo. Baldwin writes that the nation guards itself from self-examination in any meaningful sense by creating an “illusion of safety,” which the artist is charged with disrupting. In his words from an interview with Studs Terkel, “Artists are here to disturb the peace.” This is not the only place Baldwin articulates this idea about the artist’s role in America’s mental health. Baldwin writes in his essay “The Creative Process” that “all societies have battled” with the artist, whom he calls “that incorrigible disturber of the peace.” He also elaborates on the “illusion of safety” that he mentions in the interview: “The entire purpose of society is to create an bulwark against

34 Last Interview 29
35 Sartre 61
36 Last Interview 31
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
40 Collected Essays 669
the inner and outer chaos.”[^41] The chaos Baldwin refers to—the result of a nation’s centuries of guilt mixed with fear and love and hatred—is indeed formidable but must be faced, and the artist is charged with a crucial role in the process of releasing, facing, and finally coming to terms with it.

Baldwin is conscious that he seems to make “grandiloquent claims” about the artist, but stands by his point.[^42] He is clearly exhausted by the responsibility he feels to society and the minor effect he sees from his work. Baldwin remarks in a letter to Hugh Downs that he feels like “a broken record” and that an unnamed friend warned him about the danger of self-destruction through “the horrible frustration of pointless repetition.”[^43] Nevertheless, he firmly asserts what he calls the “peculiar nature” of the artist’s social responsibility: “the he must never cease warring with [society], for its sake and for his own.”[^44] In this quotation there is perhaps a hint of patriotism or at least fondness for America amid the larger note of protest. Baldwin writes that despite appearances, “the war of an artist with his society is a lover’s war” since the artist does their best to “reveal the beloved to himself” and thereby to “make freedom real.”[^45] Baldwin’s reflections on the artist’s role in society show that he charges artists with the primary role in healing the nation. Now it is time to examine what Baldwin identifies as an essential element in this process: love.

**Tough Love**

For Baldwin, love has a particular meaning beyond many popular usages. Love seems to be the vehicle to freedom for America, both from its history and from the illusion that holds it back from understanding itself and realizing its potential. An understanding of Baldwin’s

[^41]: Ibid., 669-70
[^42]: Ibid.
[^43]: Letter to Hugh Downs 2
[^44]: Collected Essays 670
[^45]: Ibid., 672
concept of love will clarify its role in the process he suggests for the healing of America. In an interview of Baldwin and novelist Colin MacInnes in 1965, James Mossman asks Baldwin about his beliefs, and Baldwin replies, “I believe in love.”\textsuperscript{46} He continues, “I don’t mean anything passive. I mean something active.”\textsuperscript{47} This qualification comes in the context of the other two men’s questions concerning the use of love as a reason for more passive kinds of resistance in the Civil Rights Movement—Baldwin sees love as anything but passive. He says that love is “something more like a fire, something like the wind, something which can change you. I mean energy.”\textsuperscript{48}

Baldwin’s articulation certainly comes across as mystical, but he asserts its bearing on the health and future of the nation: “I mean a passionate belief, a passionate knowledge of what a human being can do, and become, what a human being can do to change the world in which he finds himself.”\textsuperscript{49} Thus, love empowers Baldwin’s creative foresight; it is the power that assures him of humans’ ability to invent the future. Naturally, this is an essential element of the process by which Baldwin hopes America may avert its destruction and realize its original potential as a nation. It is crucial to understanding the role of love in Baldwin’s work to also understand the relationship he articulates between black and white people. In the famous letter to his nephew titled “My Dungeon Shook,” he refers to white men as the “lost, younger brothers” of black people.\textsuperscript{50} He writes, “we, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it . . . we can make America what America must become.”\textsuperscript{51} Love for Baldwin is empowering, especially as it concerns the pursuit of freedom in

\textsuperscript{46} Conversations 48
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{50} Fire Next Time 9
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 10
America. Love is not the process by which white people will bestow freedom on black people, but the process by which black people will take their own freedom.

According to Baldwin, love directly opposes the illusions that trap Americans within a prison of self-delusion and moral bankruptcy. For this reason, it is “so desperately sought and so cunningly avoided.” He writes, “Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within.” Love for Baldwin is not patient or kind, but forcefully honest and revelatory. And in America’s context, love is associated with fear. Baldwin clarifies that he is describing love in his essay not “in the personal sense” but “as a state of being, or a state of grace.” He is adamant that it is not “in the infantile American sense of being made happy” but in a more “tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth.” Baldwin’s “tough love” is powerful and destroys illusion, and for this reason it is the necessary path to freedom.

Love is a power that black people must wield to find freedom regardless of white people’s moral failure, Baldwin asserts. This touches upon a large strand of Sartrean existentialism. Although the philosopher does not include love as a concept of any significance in his essay “Existentialism is a Humanism,” its emphasis on the centrality of freedom seems to inform Baldwin’s idea of love. Sartre writes, “we discover that [our freedom] depends entirely on the freedom of others and that the freedom of others depends entirely upon our own.” This echoes Sartre’s idea that self-discovery is inherently relational—that the discovery of ourselves is necessarily also the discovery of others. Sartre continues to state, “I cannot make liberty my aim unless I make that of others equally my aim.” This is exactly the nature of the American

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52 Ibid., 95
53 Ibid.
54 Ibid.
55 Ibid.
56 Sartre 366
57 Ibid.
dilemma that Baldwin spends so much of his life describing: white Americans have stolen the freedom of black Americans, refuse to realize it, and refuse to give it back, and thus have forfeited their own freedom. The freedom of black and white people are one and the same. Baldwin’s solution—his treatment for the illness of the nation—is that black Americans as well as the “relatively conscious” white Americans use love to realize the freedom of all.\(^5^8\) He identifies white people’s “profound need” to be seen and understood truly, and to be “released from the tyranny of [their] mirror” which reflects a false image.\(^5^9\) And this need can only be met by the revelatory power of love.

Baldwin outlines the part white people must play in the process of realizing the nation’s freedom provocatively: “The only way [the white man] can be released from the Negro’s tyrannical power over him is to consent, in effect, to become black himself.”\(^6^0\) The “tyrannical power” Baldwin refers to signifies the imprisonment of white people in their own delusions; white people are captive to the lies they tell themselves. Baldwin continues: “[The white man must] become a part of that suffering and dancing country that he now watches wistfully from the heights of his lonely power” (96). This elaboration may sound equally mystical, but the essential element is the prescribed attempt of white people to engage with and understand the people whom they have oppressed and ignored for so long. The last chapter briefly discusses Baldwin’s unpopular praise of Styron for the attempt he made to put himself in the shoes of a black person in *Confessions of Nat Turner*, and this may be exactly what Baldwin has in mind. White people, if they want freedom from their spiritual imprisonment, must find some way of overcoming the gulf of alienation they have created between themselves and those they oppress.

\(^5^8\) *Fire Next Time* 105
\(^5^9\) Ibid., 95
\(^6^0\) Ibid., 96
**Hard Hope**

Baldwin’s *foresight* is notable for its diagnosis of the “American dilemma” as well as its recommendation for solving it. However, Baldwin’s “stern optimism,” which he holds in common with Sartre, is the final, essential piece of the puzzle. A close study of Baldwin’s essays shows that he recognizes the enormous price that Americans must pay for their historic guilt and present feigned innocence as well as the possibility of failure as Americans struggle to work through their racial pathology. Nevertheless, he holds a kind of optimism by necessity, and one that emphasizes the agency of black and white Americans in shaping the future. Finally, Baldwin predicts that if Americans do succeed in realizing the country’s potential, the nation will have learned a unique, powerful message that could be invaluable to countless societies around the world struggling with similar issues.

Baldwin has emphasized that the price white Americans must pay for historic enslavement and oppression of black people is high. Baldwin writes in *The Fire Next Time*, “A bill is coming in that I fear America is not prepared to pay.” He emphasizes two truths about this “bill”—first that it is inevitable, and second that Americans are unprepared for it both out of ignorance and because of its enormity. In an 1961 interview with Studs Terkel, Baldwin elaborates: “The human fact is this: that one cannot escape anything one has done. One has got to pay for it. You either pay for it willingly or pay for it unwillingly.”

A historian or sociologist might speak more specifically about the economic, political, or psychological dimensions of the “price”, but Baldwin sees it in cosmic terms. “Whatever goes up must come down,” he asserts. Baldwin’s implication is that past generations have never footed the bill for their crimes against

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61 *Fire Next Time* 103
62 *Last Interview* 16-17
63 *Fire Next Time* 105
black people—progress has been slow and has rarely been accomplished by the urging of white slave owners or their descendants. Thus the price remains and must be paid.

Given that America must pay such a high price, Baldwin is realistic about the possibility of its failure to pay and move forward. And there are multiple ways to fail. For example, Baldwin warns in *The Fire Next Time*: “The Negroes of this country . . . are very well placed indeed to precipitate chaos and ring down the curtain on the American dream.” 64 This is one possibility for America’s demise if it cannot become a truly free country. Later in the work, Baldwin writes that “the presence of the Negro in this country can bring about its destruction” due to white Americans’ lack of contact with reality.65 Specifically, the fact that “white Americans have never, in all their long history, been able to look on [the black man] as a man like themselves.”66 This possibility for American failure to overcome its history is consistent with Baldwin’s claims elsewhere about the widespread failure of people to look inward with honesty and thereby and gain the ability to see others clearly.

Today Show host Hugh Downs perhaps puts Baldwin’s sentiment best in a letter praising *The Fire Next Time*: “the ball could be fumbled. There is historic precedent for the tragic consequences of blindness.”67 Earlier in the letter he has confessed his hope in Baldwin’s vision, but qualifies it with the above statement. He continues, “[America] is a long, long way from the time of maturity that could make true justice spontaneous and inevitable.”68 If America cannot reach this maturity, Baldwin makes its fate clear with a quotation from an antebellum spiritual: “God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time!”69 This is the kind of

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64 Ibid., 88
65 Ibid., 92
66 Ibid., 92-93
67 Downs 5
68 Ibid.
69 *Fire Next Time* 106
cosmic vengeance that Baldwin mentions earlier: regardless of his ambivalent reflections on religion, Baldwin seems to believe that universal forces will accomplish the destruction of America (in some sense) if it cannot come to terms with its past.

**Stubborn Sight**

The key to Baldwin’s *foresight* is that it is inherently creative; looking at the future involves shaping it. Baldwin refers to this belief that “to describe a danger [is] to be enabled to avert it” in his reply to Downs.  

Baldwin sees this role of helping shape the course of his country’s future as essential to his role as witness and writer, as many of his reflections have shown. He describes his creative *foresight* more directly in a talk on his novel *Just Above My Head* in 1979:

> You write in order to change the world, knowing perfectly well that you probably can't, but also knowing that literature is indispensable to the world. . . The world changes according to the way people see it, and if you alter, even by a millimeter, the way a person looks or people look at reality, then you can change it.

The statement is not hopeful to the point of naïveté—he certainly sees the possibility of failure—but it does explain the connection Baldwin makes between his own vision expressed through writing and his effect on the world. As an artist, he has direct access to the perception of all those who read his works. When he shares his vision, he can affect the vision of others and thus change reality.

Baldwin’s optimism comes not only from the creative element of his *foresight*, but also from stubbornness and necessity. The future health of the nation is not by any means to be taken for granted, but Baldwin is adamant that he and others will accomplish it. In his words:

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70 Letter to Hugh Downs 1
71 Romano 1
“Everything now, we must assume, is in our hands; we have no right to assume otherwise.”\textsuperscript{72} The writer’s path forward is founded on the collective agency of those committed to solving the “American dilemma,” and motivated by the millions of people whose futures depend upon this effort. Baldwin writes of the universal call to be “responsible to life.”\textsuperscript{73} He writes, “One must negotiate this passage as nobly as possible, for the sake of those who are coming after us.”\textsuperscript{74} Baldwin’s foresight falls on the future of America precisely because he cannot help but look beyond himself—to the wellbeing of those yet to come.

According to Baldwin, his and America’s responsibility is to black people, “who must now share the fate of a nation who has never accepted them, to which they were brought in chains.”\textsuperscript{75} His response to this reality is one of hoping by necessity: “Well, if this is so, one has no choice but to change that fate, and at no matter what risk—eviction, imprisonment, torture, death.”\textsuperscript{76} He urges that one must work, “for the sake of one’s children, in order to minimize the bill that they must pay.”\textsuperscript{77} So the price which is handed down across generations is both the greatest threat to the American future and Baldwin’s reason for insisting upon changing it—he believes it is unacceptable to continue passing the price down to America’s children.

Baldwin’s optimism about changing America’s future is inseparable from his sense of responsibility for doing so. He does not care if it seems impossible, and argues that black people are capable of such unlikely tasks. Besides, it is necessary and that is what matters for Baldwin. He writes, “in our time, as in every time, the impossible is the least that one can demand.”\textsuperscript{78} He describes himself as “emboldened” by the evidence history offers, “and American Negro history

\textsuperscript{72} Fire Next Time 105
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 92
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 104
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid.
in particular, for it testifies to nothing less than the perpetual achievement of the impossible.”  

Ironically, the enormity of oppression endured by black people magnifies their successes in Baldwin’s perspective, and provides the unlikely fuel for Baldwin’s optimism. In “My Dungeon Shook,” Baldwin cites a long record of black people who “in the teeth of the most terrifying odds, achieved an unassailable and monumental dignity.”  

He assures his nephew: “great men have done great things here, and will again, and we can make America what America must become.”  

Impossible deeds justify Baldwin’s seemingly impossible hope.

Baldwin’s optimism—creative, stubborn, and held by necessity—is grounded in his existentialism. Sartre argues that although some ostensibly criticize existentialists for their pessimism, “what people reproach us is . . . after all . . . the sternness of our optimism.”  This is due to the “abandonment” that the philosopher articulates: Since “there is no determinism” and “man is condemned to be free,” the future is uncertain. No God has decided on any course of events, which means that people must make choices to create the future. In the philosopher’s words, “there is a future to be fashioned.”  

Thus Sartrean existentialism inherently places creative power over the future in the hands of people, and Baldwin’s work reflects this belief as well.

Sartre also emphasizes the responsibility to choose and thereby create the future, which Baldwin articulates above. The philosopher writes, “in choosing for himself [man] chooses for all men.”  He stresses that this comes with a sense of “complete and profound responsibility” both because God will not choose in a person’s place, and because by choosing for oneself, one

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79 Ibid.
80 Ibid., 10
81 Ibid.
82 Sartre 359
83 Ibid., 353
84 Ibid., 354
85 Ibid., 350
is “creating a certain image of man as [one] would have him to be.”

Just as Baldwin’s responsibility is felt in community, so is Sartre’s. Sartre continues, “in thus willing freedom, we discover that it depends entirely upon the freedom of others . . . I am obliged to will the liberty of others at the same time as my own.” This Sartrean commitment to the freedom of others is present in Baldwin’s insistence on freeing new generations from America’s self-imposed imprisonment. Both men agree that the future is in their own hands in regard to capability as well as responsibility.

Although success is not certain for Baldwin, he articulates an optimistic outlook that is grounded in the creativity of his foresight, a sense of responsibility to others, and the necessity that the future be brighter than the past. Baldwin is also conscious of the stakes involved in America’s attempt to realize its potential. He writes:

If we—and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others—do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world.

Baldwin’s hope is both measured and expansive: success depends on the continued determination of a dutiful few, and the ability of black and white people to embrace tough, revelatory love in order to somehow “create the consciousness” of the rest of the nation.

Baldwin’s sense of urgency is pronounced, as well as his stubborn hope that America’s success could “change the history of the world.”

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86 Ibid., 350-51
87 Ibid., 366
88 Fire Next Time 105
Off to Schomburg!

This thesis has investigated the intellectual influence of Jean-Paul Sartre on James Baldwin, with specific regard to the ideas set out in Sartre’s essay “Existentialism is a Humanism.” I have used the influence of Sartrean existential humanism in the corpus of Baldwin as a lens to better understand his artistic vision, which includes hindsight, insight, and foresight. Baldwin’s triple vision coopts and improves upon Sartre’s existentialism and enables him to confront and comprehend the past, gain a profound understanding of his identity, and finally to see America and its future in a new light. Exploring this vision offers a deeper understanding of Baldwin’s artistic identity as well as his thoughts on the racial morass that the writer called the “American dilemma.”

My project is relevant for students of Baldwin and his contemporaries especially considering the conflicting philosophies of art and activism held by participants in the Civil Rights Movement that are explored in this piece. It is also valuable for its comparison of the works of Baldwin, Ellison, and Wright and their dialogue concerning the merit of protest literature and the appropriate social activities of a writer. My discussion of Baldwin’s famous critique of Wright’s *Native Son* is only the latest take out of many pages of criticism and controversy.

The questions that this thesis has pursued concerning Baldwin’s expatriation and the interchange of ideas between the intellectual giants of mid-twentieth century Paris offer several points of interest. Baldwin’s activities and essays concerning the African community in Paris is related to certain subjects within the study of the trans-Atlantic black diaspora and its literature. Baldwin’s continued journeys back and forth across the Atlantic throughout his life can be read
within the theme of American artists’ and intellectuals’ frequent expatriation in Europe at his time.

This exploration of Baldwin’s existentialism matters for anyone who would study the literary reception of Sartre or existentialism as a whole, as it explores the way such concepts augment Baldwin’s artistic vision to large effect. My thesis may also interest students of the Parisian intellectual scene of the mid-twentieth century, as Baldwin occupied a notable (if standoffish) role in this community and wrote much about it in his fiction and non-fiction alike. This piece of writing touches on many niche areas of academic interest, but its greatest significance is found in the reading it yields of Baldwin’s concept of art, arrived at through the tool of Satrean tri-vision.

I have adopted this Satrean lens in this study of Baldwin because of the ways that it enhances my understanding of the artist and his art. Chapter One, “Baptism by History,” demonstrates the way that the young writer overcomes the determinist forces imposed by a racist society and his stepfather’s oppressive religion in order to realize his full potential through his Satrean hindsight. The chapter also demonstrates how history informs Baldwin’s understanding of himself, other black and white people, and the nation as a whole. Beyond direct study of Baldwin, the writer’s hindsight offers advice for those who wish and work for progress around race in America: Baldwin advises that progress begins with an honest, painful look at the past.

The investigation of Chapter Two, “The Antisocial Artist,” helps clarify several of the author’s seemingly contradictory roles. It reveals the way that Baldwin’s existentialist vision prevents him from “buying in” to any cause, no matter how noble, as well as the way it determines his vision of art. This chapter’s analysis of Baldwin’s insight also speaks to important questions concerning the relationship of art and activism, which are as relevant now as ever.
Last, Baldwin’s reflections on art’s ability to change reality by expanding perceptions (rather than by touting a political agenda) are particularly valuable.

Finally, the significance of Chapter Three’s examination of Baldwin’s foresight is apparent. First, it signifies the culmination of Baldwin’s tripartite vision as his engagement with the past and inward understanding enable him to occupy the role of prophet and physician for America. The dual perceptive and creative nature of Baldwin’s vision comes into sharpest relief in this chapter, as he demonstrates his stubborn belief that intuition into America’s pathology gives those who hold it the ability to cure it.

Our investigation allows us to better understand Baldwin’s insights on American life, yes, but more importantly it opens our ears to Baldwin’s insistence that we develop our own vision, and look honestly and clearly at ourselves, each other, and the world around—in doing so, he tells us, we just might be able to improve things. Baldwin offers us not the proof of our success, but the necessity of it. The writer’s articulation of love as the relational, human ability to forcefully affect change through revelation is a fresh perspective and can offer inspiration for activist and writer alike. His optimism, grounded in a “sense of tragedy” and dependent on our own agency, offers the best fuel available for any who, like him, wish to “end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country” or otherwise to try and make the world “a more human dwelling place” in his words. This brand of optimism avoids the mystical hope sometimes offered by religion, which puts salvation in the hands of a deity and relieves us of responsibility. Instead, Baldwin tells us, the future is “in our hands.”

Baldwin’s concept of art is unique because it challenges our concept of what it means for art to be moral. His definition of the moral role of the artist as distinct from the moral role of the

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89 Fire Next Time 104-105
90 “The Creative Process” 669
91 Ibid.
activist or philosopher is important: the artist’s role is not to present aesthetically pleasing versions of a political agenda, and Baldwin argues that buying into ideology, even a seemingly noble one, promises to compromise the artist’s integrity. The artist’s role is to present their own individual experience, with all of its ambiguity, complexity, paradox, and imperfection—what Baldwin would call its humanity—and offer it to someone else. This presentation of the artist’s uncompromised vision of the world has the capacity to expand and alter the perception of the viewer or reader, not because it gets everything “right,” but because it is honest and the reader, in their effort to understand, must engage in empathy and share, at least for a moment, the vision of the artist. One cannot avoid an altered view of the world after engaging so closely with the vision of the artist. As Baldwin tells us, if you can change someone’s perception of the world “by even a millimeter,” you can change reality.

The question of Sartre’s influence on Baldwin has proven useful, and the tool it has yielded—the lens of Sartrean trivision—is applicable elsewhere. A side-by-side analysis of the influence of Sartre’s existential humanism on both Wright and Baldwin would inform the ongoing discussion of the historic falling out between the two, and could serve to clarify whether Baldwin was right to suggest that Sartre’s ideology overpowered Wright’s own natural inclinations as a writer. Most importantly, the Sartrean lens we have constructed—and particularly the concepts of existential hindsight and insight—is of particular use now that the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, located in Harlem, has opened the Baldwin Papers to the public. There are many, many new pages of letters and notes to be read and interpreted, and we have the opportunity to see the Baldwin’s hindsight and insight in action within private reflections of the writer that have only just now become available.
Bibliography

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