

## READING JAMES BALDWIN'S AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITINGS\*

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### I

James Baldwin wrote his "Autobiographical Notes" when he was thirty-one years old. This autobiographical preface to his *Notes of a Native Son* begins with a reluctance to retell the story of his childhood:

I was born in Harlem thirty-one years ago. I began plotting novels at about the time I learned to read. The story of my childhood is the usual bleak fantasy, and we can dismiss it with the restrained observation that I certainly would not consider living it again.<sup>1</sup>

Note that in this short passage, the first and second sentences are in the past, while in the third sentence, the present tense is used. "Autobiographical Notes" ends with a resolution: "I want to be an honest man and a good writer."<sup>2</sup> Louis Hjelmslev, in talking about the tense zone of different languages, points out that the present in English, a language which has only a preterite and a present, "also covers the area that is covered in other languages by the future."<sup>3</sup> Baldwin's one-line conclusion, expressive of a fervent desire, aptly serves to illustrate Hjelmslev's observation. In other words, although it is grammatically in the present, semantically the sentence

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\*This is the revised version of a paper written in Chinese for the conference on "American Literature and Thoughts," held at the Institute of American Culture, Academia Sinica, November 25-27, 1983.

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1 James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1955), p. 3.

2 Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, p. 8.

3 Louis Hjelmslev, *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language*, trans. Francis J. Whitfield, rev. English ed. (Madison and London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), pp. 53-54; see also Oswald Durot and Tzvetan Todorov, *Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Sciences of Language*, trans. Catherine Porter (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), pp. 317-18.

refers to the future.

In its Greek etymology, the word autobiography suggests the act of writing (*graphie*) one's own (*autos*) life (*bios*). The narration of such a life, then, tends to be retrospective. It is to be seen as a reflexive activity of the author-narrator-protagonist who writes down, presumably in chronological order, his remembrance of the things past. But this is not the case with Baldwin's autobiographical preface. Baldwin does not talk exclusively about his past; much of his autobiographical discourse is oriented towards the future as well as the present. To be more precise, only one third of the text of "Autobiographical Notes" touches upon the past events; the rest seems to have nothing to do with the autobiographer's past life.

How do we account for a phenomenon like this?

Let us first take a look at the process of writing an autobiography. Writing an autobiography, we are told now, must not be seen as a simple and naive process during which a person attempts to relive in written language his memories of his past life. No autobiography, whether long or short, can boast of being a complete representation of the past life of the autobiographer. In writing an autobiography, Charles Rycroft notes,

[t]he autobiographer cannot be just a camera to his own past, but must (cannot but) select his memories in the light of his present conception of himself; and his memories are not just audio-visual tape recordings of the events in his past but are experiences pressing for (or sometimes resisting and eluding) imaginative recollection and carrying with them revivable past conceptions of both the author and his subject. The process of writing an autobiography is . . . not one in which the present "I" records the events in the life of the past "me", but one in which a dialectic takes place between present "I" and past "me", at the end of which both have changed and the author-subject could say truthfully "I wrote it" and "It wrote me".<sup>4</sup>

What Rycroft suggests is that the autobiographizing process actually involves, at the level of perspective, an interaction

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<sup>4</sup> Charles Rycroft, "Viewpoint: Analysis and the Autobiography," *Times Literary Supplement*, 27 May, 1983, p. 541.

between the present "I" (the autobiographer at the moment of writing) and the past "me" (the subject to be written of). This self-confrontation, the confrontation between the contemporary self and the past self, is the most salient generic feature of autobiography.<sup>5</sup> This awareness, this prior knowledge of autobiography as a genre, has significant pragmatic consequences in our reading of Baldwin's autobiographical texts.

In her recent book on autobiography, Janet Varner Gunn compares the act of writing an autobiography with that of reading. For her the autobiographer at the moment of writing is metaphorically "the paradigmatic reader" facing the text at the moment of reading. Gunn writes:

As the reader of his or her life, the autobiographer inhabits the hermeneutic universe where all understanding takes place. The autobiographer serves, by this habitation, as the paradigmatic reader; and the autobiographical text, embodying this reading, becomes, in turn, a model of possibilities and problems of all interpretive activity.<sup>6</sup>

Gunn's words indicate that she sees the autobiographer as an interpreter; as in interpretation, writing an autobiography is not an innocent but a complicated activity. Gunn's critical stance also suggests that she is near akin to Wolfgang Iser in regarding the reading process as an interaction between the reader and the text. In the words of Iser, "[c]enter to the reading of every literary work of art is . . . to be the interaction between its structure and its recipient."<sup>7</sup> He further argues in a panel discussion "In Defense of Readers" that "the study of a literary work should not concern only the actual

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<sup>5</sup> Chang Han-liang, "W. B. Yeats' Autobiographies: Problems in Interpretation, Genre, and Style," unpublished paper (1981), p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> Janet Varner Gunn, *Autobiography: Toward a Poetics of Experience* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), p. 22; see also James Olney, rev. of *Ultimately Fiction: Design in Modern American Literary Biography*, by Dennis W. Petrie, *Autobiographical Occasions and Original Acts: Versions of American Identity from Henry Adams to Nate Shaw*, by Albert E. Stone, and *Autobiography: Toward a Poetics of Experience*, by Janet Varner Gunn, *Genre*, XV (Winter 1982), 482.

<sup>7</sup> Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 107.

text, but also, and in equal measure, the actions involved in responding to the text.”<sup>8</sup> The parallel drawn by Gunn between the reader and the autobiographer may fall short of theoretical justification because, as one critic points out, the former is dealing with the language of *another*, whereas the latter is turning back upon and facing his own discourse.<sup>9</sup> Still the parallel is significant in that it reveals that, not unlike what is happening in the reading process, there is a two-way transmission between the autobiographer and his past life and that the actualization of an autobiography lies primarily on this two-way transmission.

Such phenomena as selection, omission, distortion, addition, revision, forgetting (conscious or unconscious), etc., which are usually associated with the act of reading, can also be observed in the process of writing an autobiography. Hence, Baldwin writes at the beginning of his “Autobiographical Notes”: “The story of my childhood is the usual bleak fantasy, and *we can dismiss it* with the restrained observation that I certainly would not consider living it again” (italics mine). In fact, the most important events recollected in the whole narrative of “Autobiographical Notes” concern Baldwin’s reading and writing experiences during his adolescent years:

In those days my mother was given to the exasperating and mysterious habit of having babies. As they were born, I took them over with one hand and held a book with the other. The children were probably suffered, though they have since been kind enough to deny it, and in this way I read *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *A Tale of Two Cities* over and over again; in this way, in fact, I read just about everything I could get my hands on—except the Bible, probably because it was the only book I was encouraged to read. I must also confess that I wrote—a great deal—and my first professional triumph, in any case, the first effort of mine to be seen in print, occurred at the age of twelve or thereabouts, when a short story I had written about the Spanish revolution won some sort of prize in an extremely short-lived church newspaper. I remember the story

<sup>8</sup> Edward Bloom, ed., “In Defense of Authors and Readers,” *Novel*, 11, No. 1 (Fall 1977), 20.

<sup>9</sup> Candace Lang, “Autobiography in the Aftermath of Romanticism,” *Diacritics*, 12, No. 4 (Winter 1982), 11.

was censored by the lady editor, though I don't remember why, and I was outraged.<sup>10</sup>

A number of questions may be raised here: Why does Baldwin mention only *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *A Tale of Two Cities*? Does he purposely select these two novels and omit the others? Or is it because he is simply unable to recall the other books?

Anyway, when he was about twenty-one, he wrote a novel which won him a Saxton Fellowship. He does not give the title of the novel. Again, why? When he was twenty-two, he "started waiting on tables in a Village restaurant and writing books reviews . . . about the Negro problem."<sup>11</sup> And then he did another book about the store-front churches in Harlem with photographer Theodore Pelatowski. At the age of twenty-four, he went to France where he finished *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. In short, what he tries in this brief autobiographical narrative is to portray Baldwin the artist as an apprentice.

## II

Until 1976 a young Ph.D. still wrote in her dissertation that "[a]utobiography is the least defined and definable of all literary types."<sup>12</sup> In 1979, Paul de Man, doubtful of the value and possibility of generic definition of autobiography, made the following statement:

Empirically as well as theoretically, autobiography lends itself poorly to generic definition; each specific instance seems to be an exception to the norm; the works themselves always seem to shade off into neighboring or even incompatible genres and, perhaps most revealing of all, generic discussions, which can have such powerfully heuristic value in the case of tragedy or of the novel, remain distressingly sterile when autobiography is at stake.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> Gayatri Dasgupta Acharya, "Twentieth Century Autobiography: Its Modes and Achievements," Diss. Tufts University 1976, p. 15.

<sup>13</sup> Paul de Man, "Autobiography as De-facement," *Modern Language Notes*, 94 (December 1979), 920.

But the fate of autobiography as a genre has met with drastic changes in recent years. In fact, as early as 1969, Jean Starobinski, by citing Michel Leiris and Jean-Paul Sartre as examples, called our attention to the fact that in autobiography the characteristics of discourse coexist with those of history. He also suggested that we designate autobiography as “a mixed entity” of discourse-history in terms of Emile Benveniste’s linguistic categories.<sup>14</sup>

The distinction made by Benveniste between history (*histoire, récit*) and discourse (*discours*) as two systems of language is based on his analysis of French verbs, and is applicable to other European languages. These two linguistic categories, according to Benveniste, although quite distinct one from the other, are also mutually complementary.<sup>15</sup> History, in his definition, is “the mode of enunciation which excludes every linguistic autobiographical form” (*le mode d'énonciation qui exclut toute forme linguistique «autobiographique»*). This may explain why the historian never says “I” (*je*), “you” (*tu*), “here” (*ici*), or “now” (*maintenant*), which, in Benveniste’s own words, are “the formal apparel of discourse” (*l'appareil formel du discours*).<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, every discourse, Benveniste further notes, presupposes the existence of a speaker (*un locuteur*) and a listener (*un auditeur*), with the former’s intention to influence the latter. This can be found in different types and levels of oral utterance, ranging from trivial conversation to the harangue of an ornate style. Such genres as correspondence, memoirs, didactic literature, etc. in which we find the opposition of an “I” to a “you” also come under the category of discourse.<sup>17</sup> The formal apparel of discourse, therefore, is indicated in the

<sup>14</sup> Jean Starobinski, “The Style of Autobiography,” in *Literary Style: A Symposium*, ed. Seymour Chatman (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 287-88.

<sup>15</sup> Emile Benveniste, *Problèmes de linguistique générale* (Paris: Édition Gallimard, 1966), 1, 238.

<sup>16</sup> Benveniste, 1, 239.

<sup>17</sup> Benveniste, 1, 242.

"I-you" personal relation. In history, where the normal form of pronoun is the third person, this "I-you" relation does not exist.<sup>18</sup> As for the temporal expression, Benveniste points out, the past tense is used in the historical enunciation, whereas in the discursive enunciation, all tenses except the past are commonly found.<sup>19</sup>

If the third person pronoun rather than the "linguistic autobiographical form" is used in history, how then do we account for the appearance of the first person "I" in history, say, the autobiographical narrative, as in the first sentence of Baldwin's "Autobiographical Notes": "*I* was born in Harlem thirty-one years ago" (italics mine)?

Louis Marin in paraphrasing Benveniste suggests that in history when an "I" is narrating a story, what we hear, in effect, is "the representation of a 'he,' " and that this "he" is by definition "an absent third person," who is "*opposed to no other person.*"<sup>20</sup> The intention to influence the listener, in this case, disappears. Inferentially the "I-you" relation, which characterizes the discursive utterance, also cannot be found. The "I" in the sentence "I was born in Harlem thirty-one years ago" is apparently not the "I" at the moment of autobiographizing. It is but a historical "I." As Candace Lang argues, to efface his presence within the text, the autobiographer tends to give "the 'I' the objective status of a 'he.'" <sup>21</sup> It is then perceivable that in the sentence that begins Baldwin's "Autobiographical Notes," the "I-you" relation fails to exist, since the "I" there is "opposed to no other person," and, accordingly, can be in no way to exert influence upon any listener. This "I," as a matter of fact, is the subject narrated about, and must be distinguished from the "I" in discourse. The subject narrated about, according to Gerald Prince, is the

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<sup>18</sup> Benveniste, I, 239.

<sup>19</sup> Benveniste, I, 245.

<sup>20</sup> Louis Marin, "The Autobiographical Interruption: About Stendhal's *Life of Henry Brulard*," *Modern Language Notes*, 93 (May 1978), 601.

<sup>21</sup> Lang, 14.

third person.<sup>22</sup>

It is obvious then that the beginning one third of Baldwin's autobiographical preface, in which the past tense is frequently used to recall his years of apprenticeship, belongs to history. The remaining two thirds, the most conspicuous feature of which is the ample use of present tense, may be classified as discourse. The following passages are typical discursive enunciations:

One of the difficulties about being a Negro writer (and this is not special pleading, since I don't mean to suggest that he has it worse than anybody else) is that the Negro problem is written about so widely. The book-shelves groan under the weight of information, and everyone therefore considers himself informed. And this information, furthermore, operates usually (generally, popularly) to reinforce traditional attitudes. Of traditional attitudes there are only two—For or Against—and I, personally, find it difficult to say which attitude has caused me the most pain. I am speaking as a writer; from a social point of view I am perfectly aware that the change from ill-will to good-will, however motivated, however imperfect, however expressed, is better than no change at all.<sup>23</sup>

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. This is the only real concern of the artist, to recreate out of the disorder of life that order which is art. The difficulty then, for me, of being a Negro writer was the fact that I was, in effect, prohibited from examining my own experience too closely by the tremendous demands and the very real dangers of my social situation.<sup>24</sup>

I love America more than any other country in the world, and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually. 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 aright. I consider that I have many responsibilities, but none greater than this: to last, as Hemingway says, and get my work done.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Gerald Prince, *Narratology: The Form and Function of Narrative* (Berlin, New York, and Amsterdam: Mouton, 1982), p. 7.

<sup>23</sup> Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, p. 5.

<sup>24</sup> Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, p. 7.

<sup>25</sup> Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, p. 9.



The present tense dominates the temporal expression of these discursive utterances, and the "I-you" dialogical situation is also easily discernible. In other words, these utterances, apart from having a speaker, unexceptionally assume a listener.

"Autobiographical Notes," hence, belongs to the mixed entity of discourse-history as noted by Starobinski. This, however, does not mean that the two linguistic categories are mutually exclusive. In fact, in Baldwin's autobiographical preface discourse is sometimes inserted by history and vice versa. Since autobiography as a genre is characteristically self-referential, referring particularly to the autobiographer's historicity at the moment of writing, it is only natural that in autobiography discourse is usually dominant over history. This is exactly the case with Baldwin's "Autobiographical Notes."

In "Autobiographical Notes" the two systems of language also complement each other. Baldwin relates on the one hand how he read and learned to write in his youthhood in historical utterance; on the other hand, he points out the dilemma and embarrassing plight of a black American writer in discursive utterance. The fact may indicate that in autobiography, the narrative of the past is significant only when it is relevant to the present discourse. In terms of Saussurian semiotics, history, then, is the signifier, and the signified of which is discourse. Or as Paul de Man puts it in a reverse way, "the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life."<sup>26</sup> Here de Man is saying that in autobiography, discourse may sometimes determine the life to be narrated about in history. This may explain why autobiographical discourse tends to refer to the future as well as the present rather than the past.

### III

"Autobiographical Notes" serves, so to speak, as the paradigm of Baldwin's other autobiographical writings. This

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<sup>26</sup> De Man, 920.

description of “Autobiographical Notes” thus may also be applied to the other versions of his autobiographical discourse, which, like the autobiographical preface, follow consistently the experience-idea model arising from Carolyn Wedin Sylvander’s observation of Baldwin’s employment of personal history. Sylvander writes:

In the best of his essays, . . . it is Baldwin’s insightful and honest use of his own history that serves to generate, develop, and sustain his ideas. By taking the reader through the experiences that led to thoughts or feelings, he brings him to a clear understanding of, if not belief in, the ideas.<sup>27</sup>

Sylvander’s remarks may be simplified into the two activities of history and discourse. History, in this case, is merely a means pointing to the end which is discourse.

“Notes of a Native Son” has always been considered one of the best American autobiographies. It is also the most complicated of all Baldwin’s autobiographical writings so far as the mixture of history and discourse is concerned. The part that belongs to history records the author’s recollection of familial and social changes at the time when he was about nineteen.

On the 29th of July, in 1943, my father died. On the same day, a few hours later, his last child was born. Over a month before this, while all our energies were concentrated in waiting for these events, there had been, in Detroit, one of the bloodiest race riots of the century. A few hours after my father’s funeral, while he lay in state in the undertaker’s chapel, a race riot broke out in Harlem. On the morning of the 3rd of August, we drove my father to the graveyard through a wilderness of smashed plate glass.<sup>28</sup>

The date which commences the whole autobiographical discourse indicates the temporal stance of the narrator. Evidently there is a temporal distance between the moment of enunciation (*le moment d'énonciation*) and the moment of occurrence (*le moment de l'événement*) as told in the enunciated

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<sup>27</sup> Carolyn Wedin Sylvander, *James Baldwin* (New York: Frederick Unger Publishing Co., 1980), p. 24.

<sup>28</sup> Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, p. 85.

(*l'énoncé*). Like what we find in other historical utterances, "events are simply there, recorded in a simple series, one after the other, always in their place."<sup>29</sup> There is, moreover, no temporal or spatial complexity at all.

History in "Notes of a Native Son" is also directed towards discourse:

In order really to hate white people, one has to blot so much out of the mind—and the heart—that this hatred itself becomes an exhausting and self-destructive pose. But this does not mean, on the other hand, that love comes easily: the white world is too powerful, too complacent, too ready with gratuitous humiliation, and, above all, too ignorant and too innocent for that. One is absolutely forced to make perpetual qualifications and one's own reactions are always canceling each other out. It is this, really, which has driven so many people mad, both white and black. One is always in the position of having to decide between amputation and gangrene. Amputation is swift but time may prove that the amputation was not necessary—or one may delay the amputation too long. Gangrene is slow, but it is impossible to be sure that one is reading one's symptoms right. The idea of going through life as a cripple is more than one can bear, and equally unbearable is the risk of swelling up slowly, in agony, with poison. And the trouble, finally, is that the risks are real even if the choices do not exist.<sup>30</sup>

The topic of the enunciated indicates that it is a shared knowledge of the interlocutors, that is, the speaker and the listener; hence the existence of the "I-you" relation, even though no personal pronoun is used. In addition to this, there is the consistent use of the present tense. The passage, therefore, comes under the category of discourse. Discourse implies communication; it can never be the linguistic experience of a solitary, solipsistic subject. In discourse, "[e]very 'I' implies immediately a "you"—real, fictive, or even ideal—to whom the speech act is directed. For every emitter there is a receiver."<sup>31</sup>

We may then proceed to ask: Who is this "you" who

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<sup>29</sup> David Carroll, *The Subject in Question: The Languages of Theory and the Strategies of Fiction* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 22.

<sup>30</sup> Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, p. 112.

<sup>31</sup> Carroll, pp. 23-24.

presumably exists as a listener in Baldwin's autobiographical discourse? We have noted that in discourse the "I" usually intends to influence the "you." In other words, the "you" becomes the object approached by the "I." Our question, then, may also be asked in another way: Who is the appealed object of Baldwin's discourse? To put it more explicitly: Who is the intended reader of Baldwin's autobiographical writings?

Early black autobiographies, the slave narratives in particular, were written almost unanimously to appeal to the white audience. "That was the audience that needed to be taught," in the words of Robert F. Sayre.<sup>32</sup> The intended reader and the reader in reality of these autobiographies were then largely white, many of whom were in one way or another either the adherents of the abolition or people who sympathized with the movement. This may be seen in the fact that, notes Stephen Butterfield, "the style and tone [of the slave narratives] are usually managed with the response of the white reader in mind." These early autobiographies may differ one from the other in history, but the polemic in discourse almost without exception aims at attacking the injustice and inhumanity of slavery, which institutionally helps deny the black men as human beings. Even the language of these narratives assumes a white, literate audience before whom the narrators endeavor to "prove that slaves have the intelligence and ambition to profit from freedom."<sup>33</sup>

Black writers' sense of audience underwent historical changes at the turn of the century when W. E. Burghardt DuBois published his *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903). A relatively clear sense of racially mixed audience was revealed in DuBois's comments on the "double-consciousness," the "twoness," of the black man. A majority of Baldwin's auto-

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<sup>32</sup> Robert F. Sayre, "Autobiography and the Making of America," *The Iowa Review*, 9, No. 2 (Spring 1978), 17; rpt. in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. James Olney (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 146-68.

<sup>33</sup> Stephen Butterfield, *Black Autobiography in America* (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1974), p. 13.

biographical discourse were completed around the 1960's at the time when the Civil Rights movement was well under way and when a number of black writers, including Baldwin himself, began to feel the necessity to address blacks more directly than whites.<sup>34</sup> If an autobiographer writes in the light of his present conception of himself, no autobiographer then can be exempt from the force of the moment in which he writes, and the choice of time of composition, more often than not, "implies questions as to conception." This may account for the fact that in autobiography, "[h]ow and what is written depends on the *when* of writing."<sup>35</sup> It is therefore only natural that the polemic posed in Baldwin's autobiographical discourse differs in focus and level from that found in many early slave narratives.

"In order really to hate white people, one has to blot so much out of one's mind—and the heart—that this hatred itself becomes an exhausting and self-destructive pose." Baldwin is here addressing the black community collectively, and his poignant criticism directed towards his people is all too overt. However, when he metaphorically describes the black man as "a cripple," he is then aiming his shaft at the white Americans: "The idea of going through life as a cripple is more than one can bear, and equally unbearable is the risk of swelling up slowly, in agony, with poison." Baldwin's intended reader is apparently racially mixed.

The fact is clear all the more in "Down at the Cross," another version of Baldwin's autobiography, in which he recalls how he confronted his religious crisis during the summer that he became fourteen, how he later met with Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the Black Muslims, and how he felt disappointed to the core with both Christianity and the Black Muslim movement. These experiences which constitute the

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<sup>34</sup> Raymond Hedin, "The Structuring of Emotion in Black American Fiction," *Novel*, 16, No. 1 (Spring 1982), 36.

<sup>35</sup> M. G. Cooke, "Modern Black Autobiography in the Tradition," in *Romanticism: Vistas, Instances, Continuities*, ed. David Thorburn and Geoffrey Hartman (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1973), p. 260.

major portion of history in "Down at the Cross" finally evokes one of the longest discursive enunciations in all of Baldwin's autobiographical texts. Baldwin is distinguished for his insightful use of history, personal, racial, or national, his "ability to turn every recital of his own life into the most urgent symbol of American crisis," in the words of Alfred Kazin.<sup>36</sup> His discourse never fails to refer to historical experiences:

Most Negroes cannot risk assuming that the humanity of white people is more real to them than their color. And this leads, imperceptibly but inevitably, to a state of mind in which, having long ago learned to expect the worst, one finds it very easy to believe the worst.<sup>37</sup>

The paradox—and a fearful paradox it is—is that the American Negro can have no future anywhere, on any continent, as long as he is unwilling to accept his past. To accept one's past—one's history—is not the same thing as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it. An invented past can never be used; it cracks and crumbles under the pressures of life like clay in a season of drought. How can the American Negro's past be used? The unprecedented price demanded—and at this embattled hour of the world's history—is the transcendence of the realities of color, of nations, and of altars.<sup>38</sup>

America, of all the Western nations, has been best placed to prove the uselessness and the obsolescence of the concept of color. But it has not dared to accept this opportunity, or even to conceive of it as an opportunity. White Americans have thought of it as their shame, and have envied the more civilized and elegant European nations that were untroubled by the presence of black men on their shores. This is because white Americans have supposed 'Europe' and 'civilization' to be synonyms—which they are not—and have been distrustful of other standards and other sources of vitality, especially those produced in America itself, and have attempted to behave in all matters as though what was east for Europe was also east for them.<sup>39</sup>

In short, we, the black and the white, deeply need each other here if we are really to become a nation—if we are really, that is, to achieve our identity, our maturity, as men and women. To create one nation has

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<sup>36</sup> Alfred Kazin, *Bright Book of Life: American Novelists and Storytellers from Hemingway to Mailer* (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown and Co., 1973), p. 221.

<sup>37</sup> James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: The Dial Press, 1963), p. 82.

<sup>38</sup> Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, pp. 95-96.

<sup>39</sup> Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, p. 107.

proved to be a hideously difficult task; there is certainly no need now to create two, one black and one white.<sup>40</sup>

These four passages are not exceptional; passages of the same nature can be found throughout "Down at the Cross." Except for the last passage which refers to the future, the referents of the first three are apparently historical experiences.

The intended audience of these discursive utterances comprise the black and the white. Passages one and three appeal primarily to the white, whereas passage two is intended to influence the black. The last passage serves best to show that the perceived audience of Baldwin's autobiographical discourse, the "we" in this case, are racially mixed. Semantically this last passage also refers to the future rather than the present, not to mention the past. Furthermore, we also observe in these discursive enunciations the self-effacement of the "I," a phenomenon which, according to Roger Rosenblatt, is not uncommon in black autobiography.<sup>41</sup>

#### IV

Although this paper deals only with three of Baldwin's autobiographies, the description is theoretically applicable to the other versions of his autobiographical discourse. I have by way of description referred to some contemporary theories on autobiography and called attention to the distinctive features of the genre. This paper, then, is in its nature descriptive and metacritical. It is also the intention of this paper to shun interpretation, which, of course, belongs to another kind of activity and which involves, so to speak, complexity of equal measure.

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<sup>40</sup> Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, p. 111.

<sup>41</sup> Roger Rosenblatt, "Black Autobiography: Life as the Death Weapon," *The Yale Review*, LXV (Summer 1976), 526-27; rpt. in *Autobiography*, ed. Olney, pp. 169-80.

## 讀鮑爾溫的自傳作品

李有成

### 摘要

本文討論了鮑爾溫 (James Baldwin) 兩本書中的三篇自傳作品。其基本論點如下：

一、鮑爾溫的自傳作品和當代許多自傳一樣，也是屬於史達洛賓斯基 (Jean Starobinski) 所謂的陳述與敘事 (discourse-history) 的混雜體，但是在比重上陳述要高於敘事，這主要是因為自傳是一種自我指涉性 (self-referentiality) 很強的文類。

二、自傳的撰寫過程基本上是過去的「我」和現在的「我」之間互動 (interaction) 的過程。因此在鮑爾溫的自傳作品中，我們可以發現，過去的敘事之所以有意義，主要是因為它切合現在的陳述。這也說明了自傳注定是選擇性的、不完整的。

三、由於陳述的比重高，自傳不太可能是個孤獨、唯我的個體的語言經驗，因此是有其基本的訴求對象的。早期的黑人自傳多以白人讀者為訴求的對象，其意指的讀者和實際的讀者也多屬白人。由於情境的改變，鮑爾溫的自傳作品意指的讀者實則已涵蓋了白人與黑人。

從以上的基本論點可以看出，本文大抵涉及兩種批評活動，即描述與後設批評。