James Baldwin’s Complex Humanism in the Early Essays and *Go Tell It on the Mountain*

Eui Young Kim

Between 1949 and 1951, James Baldwin launched his career by publishing a series of essays critiquing Richard Wright’s *Native Son*. Published a decade earlier, *Native Son* was hailed by many as the greatest novel written by an African American to date. It tells the story of Bigger Thomas, an African American youth living in Chicago’s South Side ghetto, by tracing his disastrous career: his employment as a chauffeur in an affluent white home, his inadvertent murder of the young daughter of the house, his increasingly cold-blooded attempts at covering over his crime, and his eventual arrest and trial. The novel’s significance lay in its expressive power. Irving Howe, one of Wright’s staunch supporters, characterizes the novel as “a crude but overwhelming book, in which the central figure is not so much a distinctive human being as an elemental force through which to release the rage black men had not dared to express” (“James Baldwin,” 96). It was a book that needed to be written, and its authority went unchallenged for most of the forties. By the time James Baldwin arrived on the literary scene, however, *Native Son* had become a precedent that needed to be transcended or circumvented.

Baldwin’s essays “Everybody’s Protest Novel” (1949) and “Many Thousands Gone” (1951) raise a fundamentally aesthetic question: He writes not so much against everybody’s protest as against everybody’s protest novel. The protest novel, Baldwin argues, begins by accepting racial categorization and ends by confirming such categories as the only reality. He points out that *Native Son* tends to victimize Bigger as someone who reacts to forces beyond his comprehension, unable to interact on the human level with his family, friends, and lover. His alienation and anger is foregrounded by Wright’s decision to focalize the novel through Bigger, who is “not so much a distinctive human being as an elemental force.” The novel may succeed in exposing the damage caused by racism but provides a rather curtailed picture of the life in the ghetto. Baldwin writes,

What this means for the novel is that a necessary dimension has been cut away; this dimension being the relationship that Negroes bear to one another, that depth of involvement and unspoken recognition of shared experience which creates a way of life... it is this climate, common to most Negro protest novels, which has led us all to believe that in Negro life there exists no tradition, no field of manners, no possibility of ritual or intercourse, such as may, for example, sustain the Jew even after he has left his father’s house. But the fact is not that the Negro has no tradition but that there has as yet arrived no sensibility sufficiently profound and tough to make this tradition articulate. (27)

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1) All page numbers of Baldwin’s essays in this paper refer to the Library of America edition, *James Baldwin: Collected Essays.*
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